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Understanding the Role of Educator: Leveraging Social-Emotional Learning in Service of Equity and Inclusion in K-12 Public Schools

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Understanding the Role of Educator: Leveraging Social-Emotional Learning in Service of Equity

and Inclusion in K-12 Public Schools

A Dissertation Submitted by

Jeanne Baskin

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree

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**Dissertation Final Approval Form Division
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This dissertation, titled:

Understanding the Role of Educator: Leveraging Social-Emotional Learning in Service of Equity and Inclusion in K-12 Public Schools

is submitted for final approval by <u>Jeanne Baskin</u> under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Counseling and Psychology Division and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Degree at Lesley University.

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To my participants, thank you for extending your wisdom to expand the knowledge of a topic so critical to the success of our next generations.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Dr. Roger Weissberg (1951-2021), a founding member of CASEL and courageous visionary contributing to helping make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. May he rest in peace knowing the next generation of leaders, policy makers, and educators will continue to pave the way to a better future for all youth.

ABSTRACT

Following a comprehensive literature review on the topic of social-emotional learning (SEL), a noticeable gap revealed insufficient research to ensure all students gain access to the benefits of SEL, particularly racially diverse students from under-resourced backgrounds. As a result, this qualitative research study used narrative inquiry to explore the beliefs, viewpoints, and lived experiences of educators working in a K-12 public school setting related to social-emotional learning and equity in education. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to invite 14 participants to share in a semi-structured interview conducted virtually. Data from participant interviews were investigated through thematic analysis to bring themes and subthemes within the transcripts to the surface.

Through a transformative learning lens, significant findings from the study unveiled considerations for what educators required for Adult SEL skills and mindset, resources, and professional learning to foster more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all youth. Participants advocated for educators to strengthen their adult SEL competencies and adopt a flexible mindset to reflect upon current practices, overcome obstacles, and embrace change. Participants also expressed how implementing systemic SEL involves stakeholder buy-in, consistently using an SEL curriculum, and weaving SEL efforts into the school culture to enhance academic learning and more equitable and inclusive practices.

Through a critical lens, participants shared how a candid evaluation of current policies and procedures could shift educators' mindsets to view SEL as a tool for fostering the competencies necessary to manage issues related to trauma and student behavior effectively. Participants also discussed how SEL naturally augments equity and inclusivity efforts by creating a sense of belonging and encouraging students' identities and cultural assets to be seen,

heard, and valued. Finally, participants acknowledged that implementing a transformative approach to SEL required conditions to support its efficacy, including effective school leadership, increased family engagement, and authentic measures prioritizing teacher well-being. Ultimately, the implications of this study revealed how transformative social-emotional learning can help build equity and culturally responsive teaching to promote inclusive learning environments and ensure all students benefit from social-emotional learning.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

School leaders and educators harbor the enormous responsibility of paving the way to meet students' ever-evolving needs. As school communities face even more significant challenges to address during the COVID-19 pandemic, the hope is that this unprecedented time will spark an invitation to revolutionize how we educate kids to be the next leaders, innovators, and game-changers. Creating and sustaining this kind of change in education will need to reach deeper into the hearts and minds of our next generation. It will require collective actions amongst school leaders, educators, parents, caregivers, and communities to thoughtfully and courageously consider whether current systems, policies, and practices prepare all children to become whole beings ready to contribute to our world in more meaningful, impactful, and just ways.

At the forefront of this shift is the notion that students' success can no longer be solely measured by academic achievement alone. As the instructional demands push toward more rigorous college and career readiness standards, social-emotional competencies become even more critical for youth (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). School communities are now actively implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) into their school culture and climate fabric to help support children's social, emotional, and academic development. SEL is an intentional effort to help adults and children acquire the necessary abilities and mindsets to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, demonstrate kindness, empathy, and respect, appreciate the perspectives of others, build meaningful and healthy relationships, and learn to use responsible problem solving and reasoning skills (Elias et al., 1997). Social-emotional learning is a systematic approach or teaching method that helps support the development of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) five

core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible-decision making (CASEL, 2005).

The development of these SEL competencies, in turn, provides children with a foundation for improved academic performance, more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades (Greenberg et al., 2003). Essentially, teaching the whole child requires bringing together the academic half with the social-emotional half. These two halves help close the gap that prevents students from thriving (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Without interrogating the institutional and systemic barriers that prevent equity and inclusion in education, these two halves remain separated by the cracks caused by these disparities.

Research Problem

While SEL research indicates rich benefits for students both on the academic and social-emotional front, experts in the field of SEL have been exploring how to advance the concept of SEL to be more equitable and trauma-informed (CASEL, 2020a). CASEL and a broad range of stakeholders (2020a) insist that attention to students' social, emotional, and academic development is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many students and adults may have experienced tremendous stress and compounded trauma. They advocate for a deeper understanding of how stress and trauma affect the brain and body and urge school communities to adopt a more comprehensive, holistic, and multi-dimensional response. Essentially, by infusing SEL with a strength-based, culturally sensitive trauma-informed approach, schools can create a foundation for supporting whole-child development. Furthermore, Simmons (2019) argues that a more equitable approach is called for if we want to create learning environments that are safer and more supportive, and inclusive for all students. The author

encourages schools to leverage SEL to address racial inequities and educator and student implicit biases while promoting culturally relevant SEL practices and encouraging student voice and agency. In doing so, we stand a better chance at reforming education and combating racism and inequities in teaching practices. Cultivating systemic change in education will require school communities to transform how they individually and collectively teach, model, and shape the social-emotional skill sets in children and adults.

According to Schlund et al. (2020), transformative SEL may be the wave of the future, offering adults a vehicle to examine how their social-emotional competencies and school policies and procedures may affect equitable practice in education. Transformative SEL is anchored in the concept of justice-oriented citizenship. Critical examination of root causes of racial and economic inequities is explored and combated through individual and collective action in youth and adults (Jagers et al., 2019). To leverage SEL to create more equitable and thriving classrooms, all adults must actively foster learning environments that promote student engagement, voice, agency, and a sense of belonging. Transformative SEL can offer school communities ways to share this responsibility by viewing students as experts in their own lived experience, capable of working together to co-create equitable solutions (Jagers, 2016).

To cultivate this type of learning, districts must nurture supportive relationships and equitable learning environments that encourage democratic classrooms and schools with shared power amongst students and adults (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). However, Jones et al. (2019) proclaim that to understand the positive effects of SEL better, future research efforts must interrogate the quality of educator pre-service and professional development. These efforts must also consider to what degree these training lead to high-quality SEL implementation and more equitable learning experiences and outcomes for all youth.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study is to examine how K-12 schools can leverage social-emotional learning (SEL) to develop the whole child and create more equitable and inclusive learning environments so all youth get what they need to succeed. Rethinking our approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) will require thoughtful consideration and co-constructing from all stakeholders in a school community. For social-emotional learning to become a vehicle for reconstructing education, school communities will need to cultivate a shared vision for how best to embed a trauma-informed, equity-driven, and culturally relevant SEL approach into the infrastructure of all learning environments. This study will explore and consider the current research associated with social-emotional learning and its benefits, the evolving theories and inquiries related to transformative SEL, and the individual, institutional, and systemic impact on its effectiveness for all children.

Researcher Reflection

During my 20-year career as an educator, I worked in a diverse, multicultural district as a speech-language pathologist and social-emotional learning specialist in an urbanized rural town. The student body's needs were extraordinary and intense, with many having experienced trauma and living in disadvantaged situations. Undoubtedly, this required a proficient knowledge base on the part of the educator to understand cultural and social identities, trauma, and systemic disparities. Nevertheless, in my 20-year tenure in this district, there were only two occasions when my district offered professional development training to address social-emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), collaborative-problem solving, and trauma-informed practices. Remarkably, at no point did these professional learning opportunities tackle equity, race, or trauma-informed practices that highlighted structural racism and economic

disparities. Deep inside, I knew school communities needed more training and resources to improve how they educated our next generation's minds and hearts. This knowing catapulted me on a new path in search of more viable solutions. As a result, I left my career as an educator in pursuit of making a more significant impact on the lives of children in the area of social-emotional learning (SEL).

It was not until I entered my doctoral program that the magnitude of that mission would be revealed. My doctoral experience has awoken me to the world of social justice, propelling me towards an impactful and life-changing personal and professional transformation. Absorbing it all on a deep level, my metaphorical onion peeled at a rapid rate, each exposure leaving me to face a fork in the road-the fate of my passage in the hands of humility and courage. It unveiled those idealistic beliefs and attitudes that had formulated my perception of the world. It widened my lens to acknowledge the oppressive systems I had not seen before. It helped me become more aware of my power and privilege and what to do with them.

This transformation has stretched me in many ways, expanding my worldview and cultivating my desire to investigate how school communities could leverage a transformative approach to SEL to ensure all students gain equitable access to its benefits. It is clear now that school communities must consider students and their families' social and cultural identities and the privileges and marginalization associated with them for all students to access the benefits of social-emotional learning. We can promote youth voice and agency that amplifies their strengths and cultural assets to co-create democratic classrooms and societies with this approach. Like any other transformation, this development is ongoing and requires a continued commitment to raising consciousness with a curious mind and an open heart. Knowing this has inspired my mission to continue to actively reconstruct and expand my worldview while helping others to do

the same in pursuit of creating more caring, inclusive, and just schools. As I continue this journey, my desire to contribute to the field of social-emotional learning has ignited. This study hopes to contribute to the creation of brave and trusting spaces for educators and leaders to change the educational landscape and enact systemic change through collective action.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that supports this study is grounded in a constructivist epistemological stance and is rooted in a theoretical context that combines transformative learning theory, critical theory, and CASEL's Theory of Action to employ a systemic evaluation of social-emotional learning.

Piaget's constructivist theory (1977) and Vygotsky's social learning theory (1978) are relevant to this study. The researcher believes that knowledge claims, lived experiences, and learning is iterative processes that happen within oneself and can be influenced by one's culture and community. This epistemological stance acts as the foundation that believes transformation through a meaning-making process within oneself and others is deemed possible for school communities. Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1978) is the core meta-theoretical underpinning for this study. This theory will explore how educators can build awareness of the components necessary to leverage social-emotional learning in the service of equity and inclusion in education. Critical theory is also embedded in this study to understand better how this transformative experience can adopt a critical consciousness lens to reveal root causes that may impact the development of a child's social-emotional competency. Finally, CASEL's Theory of Action, focus area two, strengthening adult SEL competencies and capacity to promote SEL for students, will act as the theoretical vehicle to drive the research methodology for this study. Jointly, this theoretical framework will use transformative learning theory with a

critical lens to explore the social forces that influence student learning outcomes and how Adult SEL competencies can impact how students experience social-emotional learning in schools. The theoretical construct and key integrated theories will be further unpacked in chapter two.

In summary, this research design is embedded in an epistemological stance of constructivism that believes individuals can shift their mindsets and widen their world view through a meaning-making process to co-construct new realities with others. When rooted in Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Vygotsky's social learning theory, this meaning-making process can be shaped and supported through learning opportunities and lived experiences within oneself and amongst others. By adopting a critical lens, this transformative experience can interrogate systems of power and oppression that impact equity and inclusion in schools. It can then explore how fostering social-emotional learning skills in youth and adults can support the co-creation of more democratic and just learning environments.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are 1) What Adult SEL skills and mindsets, professional learning, resources, and conditions do K-12 educators need to leverage SEL in service of equity and inclusion in education? 2) What do educators perceive to be the barriers and possibilities in place to ensure all youth gain access to the benefits of social-emotional learning? Ultimately, these questions seek to help better understand what educators require to implement a transformative approach to SEL to advance whole child development where all youth get what they need to succeed in school and life.

Key Terms

Critical Consciousness- refers to the process through which one applies critical thinking skills to examine current situations and realities to create, implement, and evaluate solutions to individual and collective problems.

Critical Theory-a philosophical approach to culture, and especially to literature, that seeks to confront the social, historical, and ideological forces and structures that produce and constrain it.

Critical Race Theory- states that U.S. social institutions (e.g., the criminal justice system, education system, labor market, housing market, and healthcare system) are laced with racism embedded in laws, regulations, rules, and procedures that lead to differential outcomes by race.

Culturally Responsive Teaching- is a pedagogy grounded in teachers' displaying cultural competence and connecting course content to their students' cultural contexts.

Deficit Thinking- involves the act of blaming a student, a student's family, or a student's culture for academic or behavioral difficulties that occur at school.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)- is a term used to describe policies and programs that promote the representation and participation of different groups of people, including people of different ages, races and ethnicities, abilities and disabilities, genders, religions, cultures, and sexual orientations.

Equity in Education- is a measure of achievement and opportunity in education to ensure each student receives the resources they need to perform at a sufficient level. Educational equity is based on the premise of fairness and inclusion.

Implicit Bias- the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)- is a research-based framework for implementing a school-wide multitiered system of behavioral supports geared at preventing and reducing unexpected behaviors while increasing positive social and academic performance outcomes.

Restorative Practices- a more equitable and respectful approach to discipline rooted in creating a culture of connectivity, repairing harm, fostering prosocial skills, and restoring the school culture's health and safety.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)- is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to; develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Transformative (SEL)- is a process through which students and teachers 1) build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation for similarities and differences, 2) learn to examine root causes of inequity critically, and 3) develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems. It is a form of SEL anchored in the notion of justice-oriented citizenship and intended to promote equity and excellence among children, young people, and adults.

Research Design Summary

This study utilizes narrative inquiry to better understand what educators require to advance and leverage Adult SEL skills, mindsets, and critical consciousness needed to actualize a transformative approach to social-emotional learning in education. We can listen to educators' stories to glean what is required to help them overcome the obstacles and barriers that perpetuate disparities in education and their communities through narrative inquiry. Through a purposive sampling strategy, 14 participants were invited to share in a semi-structured interview conducted

virtually. All data sets were analyzed using thematic analysis to unearth themes and patterns across participants. Additionally, several validity measures were utilized to ensure my ability to accurately and thoroughly collect and analyze the data, including researcher reflexivity, member checking, and descriptive writing to produce a detailed and vivid account of the participants' shared narratives.

The following two chapters outline the components associated with this research study. Chapter two is a comprehensive literature review, and chapter three describes the research methodology and design. Included in chapter two is an introduction to SEL history and a summary of the search criteria. The review then explores the theoretical underpinnings that support the conceptualization of a transformative approach to SEL. Next, it investigates the evolutionary history of social-emotional learning and its associated benefits. Finally, the review considers the individual, institutional, and systemic barriers that may impact SEL effectiveness for all youth. Chapter three begins with a self-reflexive statement identifying my positionality and the epistemological framework that guides this study. Next, the chapter outlines the data generation and pilot study used to inform this study, which includes the sampling strategy, selection criteria, participants involved, and interview process included in this research study. Then, data analysis procedures are explained. Lastly, issues related to validity, ethical considerations, and potential limitations are acknowledged and addressed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1994, the Fetzer Institute hosted a conference for various educators, researchers, and advocates with diverse interests and concerns about meeting the whole child's needs in education. Out of the rich discussions that ensued, the term social and emotional learning (SEL) surfaced (Elbertson et al., 2008). Underscoring this initiative was the conviction that prevention efforts that addressed social-emotional development would more effectively resolve the root causes of individual, categorical problems such as bullying, or drug and alcohol abuse and likely factors associated with academic difficulties (Kress & Elias, 2006). Additionally, advocates debated that achieving academic success would continue to collapse if schools only concentrated on academic instruction and management (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Out of this 1994 convention formed the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This non-profit organization brought together leading experts and researchers in education and psychology to establish high-quality, evidence-based SEL as a vital part of preschool through high school education. For over twenty-five years, CASEL has been paving the way to support schools and districts worldwide in implementing SEL with integrity, efficacy, and sustainability.

For school communities to effectively integrate SEL into practice, a universally understood definition is required. Although several definitions exist, CASEL has established SEL's primary definition for schools and districts to ground their conceptualization and understanding of the nature of its meaning in theory and practice. CASEL (2005) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to develop healthy identities, understand and manage emotions, set and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. In July 2020, CASEL expanded its definition to include an equity lens. It states that SEL advances educational equity and quality through genuine school-family-community partnerships that create learning environments and experiences that uphold trusting and mutual relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and continuing assessment. They advocate that SEL helps address various forms of inequity and inspire youth and adults to co-create succeeding schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities (CASEL, 2020b).

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the current theoretical frameworks and empirical research associated with social-emotional learning (SEL). The review begins with exploring the theoretical underpinnings that support the conceptualization of a transformative approach to SEL. It will then investigate the evolutionary history of social-emotional learning and report the research that purports its associated benefits. Finally, the review will consider whether or not the current SEL research provides sufficient evidence to ensure that all students have equal access to thrive in a safer, more caring, and inclusive learning environment. Figure 2.1 is a concept map outlining the components associated with this literature review. The concept map highlights the various topics explored in this review and points to the possibilities of a transformative approach to SEL to support equity and inclusivity in K-12 public schools.

Figure 1

Literature Review Concept Map
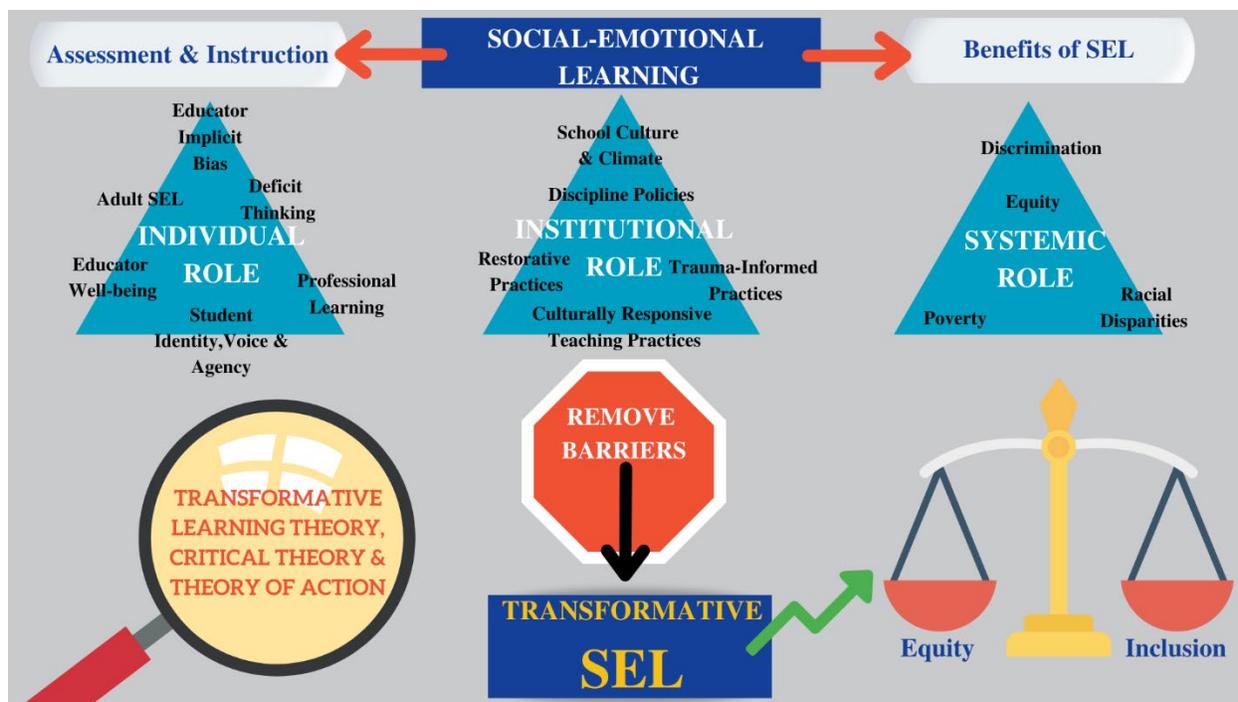
Literature Review Search Criteria

The search criteria for this literature review occurred in three phases. Phase one was to conduct a broad view search of studies, meta-analyses, reports, articles, previous literature reviews, dissertations, and books using EBSCO's scholarly search engine, Google Scholar, Research Gate, and DeepDyve. The purpose of this inquiry phase was to build a theoretical framework and glean important information on the benefits and impact of social and emotional learning on youth. Roughly 54 pieces of literature were collected and analyzed to frame and conceptualize SEL and its benefits. Second, an extensive evaluative process ensued, examining all relevant citations of the searched literature to cross-examine them for pertinent citations. These bodies of research were then critically analyzed to determine the main themes to further review. Lastly, in phase three, a selection criterion was implemented to investigate the

association of the individual, institutional, and systemic roles that influence SEL's effectiveness for all children. An additional search was conducted to build out each of the three main themes using the phrase social and emotional learning in conjunction with the following terms: educator well-being, professional learning, school culture and climate, trauma-informed practices, critical consciousness, culturally responsive teaching practices, exclusionary discipline, restorative practices, student voice, implicit bias, deficit thinking, equity, socioeconomic status, and structural racism. From previous relevant citations and this search, roughly 147 additional references were collected for the next portion of the empirical review. I hope that the reader will understand and conceptualize the circumstances that deeply interconnect with the success of social-emotional learning for all learners through this comprehensive literature review.

Theoretical Framework

This section will outline the theoretical framework that grounds this literature review and proposed research study. The essential areas of knowledge that informed this study are Mezirow's transformative learning theory, critical theory, and the CASEL 5 Framework and Theory of Action. The purpose of this segment is to make explicit their connections and how they inform the theory developed for this study. The section begins by defining Mezirow's transformative learning theory to share how educators can cultivate awareness and build the agency needed to leverage social-emotional learning in the service of equity and inclusion in education. Next, critical theory is explored and will reveal the individual, institutional, and systemic barriers that may impact a child's access and development of social-emotional competencies. Finally, the CASEL 5 Framework and Theory of Action is outlined to conceptualize SEL and highlight the importance of strengthening adult SEL skills, mindsets, and capacity to promote SEL for students. Jointly, this theoretical framework will explore the social

forces that influence student learning outcomes and how transformative learning and Adult SEL competencies can impact how students experience social-emotional learning in schools.

Transformative Learning Theory

The concept of *transformative learning* was first introduced by sociologist Jack Mezirow (1978), which eventually evolved into the Theory of Transformative Learning, defined as provoking change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2000). Mezirow (1997) contended that adults' lived experiences develop a body of frames of reference for defining their worldview. Essentially, these frames of reference become the norms or set of codes we use to understand our experiences. These codes may be political, social, cultural, educational, economic, or psychological. Once established, we use these assumptions to automatically respond to life's happenings while rejecting ideas that fail to fit. When conditions warrant a change, transformative learners use a self-reflective process through habits of mind and point of view to move toward a more inclusive world view (Mezirow, 1997). We do this by critically reflecting upon a particular experience and engaging in discourse with others to transform the meaning structure of the experience (Cohen, & Heinecke, 2018).

bell hooks (1994), author of *Teaching to Transgress*, emphasizes that teachers must dedicate themselves to a process of self-reflexivity if they are to teach in a way that inspires students. Teaching is about empowering students and a place where teachers grow and are inspired by the process. She stresses that empowerment cannot happen if we decline to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Wilson (2002) would also agree that the promise of critical theory for adult learning and education is emerging but argues that without a practical theory of critical learning, the profession of adult education will become increasingly

irrelevant and weak in addressing the increasingly complex demands of adult educators to mediate knowledge and power relations in their practice.

Wenger's (2011) view on "communities of practice" and mutual engagement is compatible with these learning theories. In a "community of practice," the author states that members engage in activities and discussions designed to help each other and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other and support a shared repertoire of resources and experiences for addressing ongoing problems. "Communities of practice" are formed by people who engage in collective learning in a shared area. This notion of community practice reinforces the importance of building relationships and cultivating a learning culture and climate that SEL supports.

Researchers argue that educators are capable of engaging in a transformative learning process during professional development training, but considerations need to be made around learner readiness, as well the learning context and the outside factors that may impact transformation (Cranton, 2013; Sprow & Blouin, 2016; Taylor, 2007). People need a frame of reference and a value system to build their own identity and develop a sense of belonging. This requires paying careful attention to people's challenges and discomfort when transforming deeply rooted beliefs, assumptions, and opinions, especially regarding race, power, and socioeconomic status (Cohen, & Heinecke, 2018). Ultimately, for educators to engage in the iterative meaning-making process, they will require brave and trusting spaces to participate in a transformative professional learning experience that adopts a critical lens.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is based on the notion that critical analysis and action can transform societies. The philosophy of critical theory originated in 1923 at the Frankfurt School's Institute

for Social Research in Germany, founded by Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal, Eric Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse (McLaren, 1989). Critical theory has a dual purpose in that it acts as a lens to view situations critically while also seeking the means to transform such conditions (McLaren, 1989). Critical theorists examine how knowledge is constructed and disparities exist in a specific space and then seek to cultivate measured agency and action to interrupt such inequities. Dialogue is central to critical theory as it requires collective action to co-create solutions (McLaren, 1989).

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is a function of educational pedagogy that was first proposed by Paulo Freire (1970) to fight against the factors that maintain inequalities in society. To support communities in breaking down their social circumstances, Freire offered a theoretical framework using critical consciousness to explore and evolve one's critical analysis, agency, and action to fight against oppressive conditions. The disparities of injustice become visible when people use critical consciousness to understand the political, economic, and social powers threatening their communities. This awareness then empowers people to engage in activities that challenge these inequities (Ginwright, 2010). In summary, critical consciousness involves developing critical awareness of social constructs and then changing that present reality into an improved existence.

The tenets of critical consciousness can empower educators to build awareness and take action against oppressive situations and inequities in education. Freire (1993) stated that this process must involve a balance of power, whereby youth and educators identify and transform unjust situations through dialogue and discussion. Through this transformative process, a community transpires with a purpose greater than themselves (Freire, 1993). Therefore, leveraging a transformative approach to SEL to enhance equity and excellence in education

requires critical consciousness to examine the oppressive systems that may influence the construction of caring, inclusive, and just schools and societies.

Oppression and Privilege

According to Ferber and Samuels (2010), oppression is the systematic devaluing of certain social identity groups that marginalizes them in contrast to a privileged norm. Oppression results in denying individuals in these groups something of value. These scholars explain that in contrast to oppression is privilege, the other side of the coin. Privilege awards power, dominance, resources, and rewards. Oppression and privilege cannot exist without the other. Both privilege and oppression are derived from one's group membership or social location. It is not the result of anything that one has done as an individual. To combat inequality, both the oppressed and the privileged must participate in the process of undoing this power dynamic that results in such disparities (Ferber & Samuels, 2010).

Inequitable and oppressive systems continue to infiltrate the educational system (Kohli et al., 2017). Kohli et al. (2017) argue that not enough attention is being paid to analyze racial oppression in the field of education critically. They reviewed 186 research studies in K–12 U.S. school context that examine racism. Through this review, they observed the indication of a 'new racism' in K–12 schools that are challenging to identify because it is normalized and hidden under the pretext of multiculturalism, colorblindness, neoliberal policies, and racial microaggressions. In these learning environments, students of color continue to be disproportionately deprived of academic and economic opportunities. The review highlights how continuing to ignore the role of oppression in shaping school experiences perpetuates the status quo of inequity (Kohli et al., 2017).

Critical Lens in SEL and Education

For schools to create more thriving learning environments for all children, future research efforts could begin with investigating students' lived experiences, intersectional identities, and positionalities within the school walls. Doing so may glean the evidence needed to understand better its impact on developing social-emotional competencies and authentic teacher-student and peer-peer relationships. Building authentic relationships with and amongst students empowers them to embrace their and others' identities, lived experiences, and cultural assets that foster civic responsibility towards creating equitable learning environments and just societies (Schlund et al., 2020).

According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), the SEL competencies of self-awareness and social awareness are essential components for youth to understand and interrogate the intersectionality between identity and power relationships and their immediate social world functions. Youth can be encouraged to think critically about issues in their school communities and implore the SEL competency of responsible decision-making to participate in civic engagement to take action. Positioning students in leadership roles that embrace voice and agency can encourage them to share power and co-create equitable solutions through peer-adult collaborative problem-solving efforts to strengthen democratic learning environments (Jagers, 2016). However, this will require educators to participate in professional learning opportunities that help them actively embrace their students' voices and identities. Shared power and agency effectively promote a sense of belonging and engagement in the learning environment.

Blending the nuances of transformative learning and critical theory through "community of practice" could provide more in-depth insight on how best to support youth and adults in acquiring and assimilating new knowledge and ideas to create safer, more caring, and just learning environments. Such engagement is a meaning-making experience aligned with a

constructivist epistemological stance. When provided with such opportunities, individuals can shift their mindsets and widen their world views. The power of relational sharing of lived experiences on building those vital relationships that cultivate learning and translate into new ways of being cannot be underestimated. Undoubtedly, building the social-emotional competencies of both youth and adults will be vital to this process. To fully understand what is required to leverage SEL to transform schools and evoke systemic change, one must conceptualize an equity-driven social-emotional learning framework and theory.

Conceptualizing Social-Emotional Learning

In 2017, the American Institutes for Research conducted a vast search of social-emotional competence frameworks and yielded 136 frameworks based on a search of nearly 20 areas of study. Using a coding system developed by Stephanie Jones and her colleagues at Harvard University, they coded 50 of the frameworks in their database (Jones et al., 2015). The researchers coded patterns across frameworks, using data such as the main age groups, developmental sequencing, the involvement of recognizing childhood adversity or trauma, and acknowledging the unique needs and experiences of racial and ethnic groups (Berg et al., 2017). Their analysis revealed notable findings through a trauma-informed, social justice lens that less than 20% of the frameworks considered culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and groups. Less than 20% of frameworks considered the experiences of youth with disabilities.

Furthermore, only 6% of frameworks acknowledged trauma experiences. These findings necessitate consideration of whether or not current school-based SEL frameworks are psychometrically reliable and valid for groups of diverse cultures, ethnicity, and identities (Berg et al., 2019). It also highlights the need to investigate the relationship and intersectionality between trauma and social and emotional development in youth from marginalized and

oppressed backgrounds. For transformative SEL to take root, it must anchor in a framework that recognizes and supports a holistic viewpoint to educating the whole child—an SEL Framework that embraces a trauma-informed, student-centered, and equity-oriented approach.

CASEL 5 Framework

Of these frameworks, the CASEL 5 Framework is one of the most widely used to delineate what skills need to be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts to accomplish academic achievement, health and wellness, school and civic engagement, and career success. The CASEL 5 core social-emotional competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL (2020c) defines these five core SEL competencies as such:

Self-awareness. The ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.

Self-management. The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation & agency to accomplish personal/collective goals. habits

Social Awareness. The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts. This includes the capacity to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship Skills. The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and effectively navigate diverse individual and groups settings. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.

Responsible Decision-Making. The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacity to consider ethical standards and safety concerns and evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being (CASEL, 2020c, p. 2).

The CASEL 5 Framework takes a systemic approach that underscores the significance of instituting equitable and fair learning environments that enhance adult and youth social-emotional competency. CASEL researchers and advocates argue that for SEL to be effective, it must be co-constructed in collaboration with families and communities and integrated throughout the school's culture, policies, practices, and academic curricula. In doing so, school communities can promote youth voice, agency, and engagement to establish caring and just classroom and school climates and discipline approaches that enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic development (CASEL, 2020c).

CASEL's Theory of Action

CASEL 5 Framework is field-tested as part of their Collaborating District and State Initiatives (CASEL, 2017a). It is driven by a Theory of Action across the school, district, and state levels to comprehensively support quality implementation. Four focus areas uphold their Theory of Action for effective and sustainable SEL implementation, including 1) *Build*

foundational support and plan by establishing a collective vision and plan for SEL, and ensuring

aligned resources and ongoing commitment, 2) *Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity*

by cultivating a trusting community that enhances adults' professional, social, emotional, and

cultural competencies and their capacity to promote SEL for students, 3) *Promote SEL for*

students by developing a coordinated approach across classroom, schools, homes, and

communities that ensure consistent, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate

opportunities for all students to enhance and apply social and emotional competencies to daily

tasks and challenges, and 4) *Reflect on data for continuous improvement* but establishing an

ongoing process to collect and use implementation and outcome data to inform decisions and

drive improvements (Yoder et al., 2020).

Focus area two, strengthening Adult SEL, acts as the theoretical underpinning that drives

this study's methodology and research design. The emphasis on supporting educators in

developing their Adult SEL competencies is central to ensuring the effective teaching, modeling,

and shaping of these skills in youth. Coupled with gaining the necessary social-emotional skills

and mindsets is the need to cultivate a critical consciousness lens that investigates and

interrogates the systems and policies that may impact the development of social-emotional

competencies of all children.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that grounds this proposed study combines transformative

learning theory, critical theory, and the CASEL 5 Framework and Theory of Action to support a

systemic evaluation of social-emotional learning. This study is rooted in transformative learning

theory to understand better how Adult SEL and critical consciousness can advance a

transformative approach to SEL to explore the role of the individual, institutional, and social

systems that influence student learning outcomes and ultimately benefit from social-emotional learning in schools.

In summary, this research design is rooted in a belief that educators can shift their mindsets and widen their worldview through a meaning-making process to co-construct new realities with others. When rooted in Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Vygotsky's social learning theory, this meaning-making process can be shaped and supported through learning opportunities and lived experiences within oneself and amongst others. Moreover, by adopting a critical lens, this transformative experience can interrogate systems of power and oppression that impact equity and inclusion in schools. It can then explore how fostering social-emotional learning skills in youth and adults can support the co-creation of more democratic and just learning environments. Therefore, paving the way towards re-conceptualizing SEL to shift how we educate the whole child will require professional learning opportunities that utilize critical consciousness to strengthen Adult SEL competencies in educators.

Empirical Literature Review

This empirical literature review investigates the evolutionary history of social-emotional learning instruction and assessment and its associated benefits. Next, through a critical lens, the literature review will explore the individual, institutional, and systemic impact on SEL's effectiveness for all children. Finally, the examination will consider whether the current SEL research provides sufficient evidence to ensure that all students have equal access to thrive in a safer, more caring, and inclusive learning environment.

Foundational Findings of Social-Emotional Learning

This section is intended to provide a foundational understanding of the current research that purports SEL instruction and assessment benefits. The results of this section will point to the

need to explore further the research associated with the individual, institutional, and systemic obstacles that may prevent all youth from accessing the benefits of SEL.

Benefits of SEL

Over two decades of research authenticating the benefits of implementing social-emotional learning at the classroom and school level are vast and lend itself to a variety of promising outcomes for students of all ages compared to those who do not participate in school-based SEL programming. A compelling conceptual and empirical case links SEL to improved school attitudes, behavior, and performance (Zins et al., 2004). These outcomes were duplicated in other meta-analyses (Beelmann & Lösel, 2006; Conley et al., 2015; January et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012) and were steady across all grade levels and school demographics (Durlak et al., 2011).

According to a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, comprehensive social-emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 K-12 students, adding an SEL program can improve students' academic performance by up to 11 percentile points (Durlak et al., 2011). The 2011 study also discovered that SEL improves social behaviors and attitudes towards self and others while lowering distress and reducing conduct problems. An additional meta-analysis in 2012 reviewed 75 published studies that reported the effects of universal, school-based social, emotional, and behavioral programs. The authors found that beneficial effects on all seven major categories of outcomes ensued, including academic achievement, social skills, prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, positive self-image, and mental health (Sklad et al., 2012).

What is even more promising, a 2017 meta-analysis follow-up study evaluated SEL's long-term effects. 82 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions

involving 97,406 kindergartens to high school students were reviewed, and results concluded that SEL's impact could last up to 18 years post-intervention. Positive academic outcomes were noted with an increase in attendance, GPAs, graduation rates, and a reduction in conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use. Regardless of students' socioeconomic status, race, or school demographic (Taylor et al., 2017).

Furthermore, there are statistically significant associations between SEL skills in kindergarten and critical outcomes for young adults years later. SEL reduces the probability of living in or being on a waitlist for public housing, receiving public aid, having involvement with the authorities before adulthood, and spending time in a detention facility (Jones et al., 2015). The researchers also found that SEL increased education and employment outcomes and decreased substance abuse and mental health issues. Finally, a 2015 study conducted by Colombia University found practical, cost-effective benefits to SEL programming. The overall conclusion is that the return on investment for SEL programs is 11 to 1 resulting in 11 dollars for every dollar spent on SEL (Belfield et al., 2015).

Collaborating Districts Initiative

Beginning in 2011, CASEL took the extraordinary step of initiation the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), an effort to research and scale high-quality, evidence-based academic, social, and emotional learning in ten of the largest and most complex school systems in the country: Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, Atlanta, Boston, El Paso, Washoe County, Nevada, enrolling 900,000 students a year. To date, it is one of the most aspiring and far-reaching school district improvement initiatives ever (CASEL, 2017b). To measure the impact of the CDI's efforts, CASEL entered into an ongoing data collection and evaluation partnership with the districts and the American Institutes for Research (AIR). As a

result, qualitative and quantitative research measures reveal promising outcomes on math and English Language Arts testing measures, overall grade point averages, graduation rates, attendance, student engagement and behavior, social-emotional competencies, and school climate (CASEL, 2017a; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

These comprehensive meta-analyses and district initiatives prove SEL intervention's vast benefits and stand as staples in building its relevance in education. However, some limitations are noted regarding measuring its effective implementation for diverse student groups. The 2011 meta-analysis found that one-third of the reports contained no information on student ethnicity (31%) or socioeconomic status (32%). Only thirty-three of the studies (15%) met the criteria for collecting follow-up data at least six months after the intervention ended. Moreover, over two-thirds of the 213 programs neglected to include strategies for building the school-family connection. Doing so showed positive outcomes on children's social skills, attitudes, and school performance (Durlak et al., 2011). For school communities to leverage SEL in the service of equity and inclusion, they will need to build genuine school-family-community partnerships that co-construct a culturally relevant shared vision and SEL plan that safeguards its sustainability (CASEL, 2020d; CASEL, 2020e). Future research could consider whose voices are represented at the decision-making tables to ensure all students benefit from systemic social-emotional learning initiatives.

Even more concerning, a 2019 review of 66 studies of social-emotional learning interventions in urban schools also exposed that few of the interventions assimilated culturally responsive strategies, and none addressed racism and the impact on student well-being. To adequately leverage SEL in the service of equity and inclusion, researchers and program developers will need to investigate and include SEL frameworks and interventions that embrace

cultural competency and interrogate systemic racism. Not doing so perpetuates the status quo of a slew of inequities and disparities and ensures that all students will not receive the fruitful benefits of SEL (more discussion below). Furthermore, the review exposed how few studies examined the social validity of its SEL intervention, pointing to the importance of involving students in the evaluation of SEL programming (Barnes, 2019). With SEL's prominence entrenched in fostering self-and social awareness, building collaborative learning and problem solving through youth voice and agency, and promoting strength-based assets in each student, the concept of social validity is central to ensuring students' opinions are heard and acted on (CASEL, 2018).

SEL Assessment

The validity and reliability of social-emotional competency assessment measures are also in question. A 2017 meta-analysis conducted by the American Institutes for Research revealed that a majority of SEL assessments did not specify whether the measures were valid and reliable for culturally diverse groups, nor did they contain measures of competencies that are distinctive to the backgrounds of underrepresented groups (Berg et al., 2017). A meta-analysis conducted by an interdisciplinary and international research team also reviewed 149 assessment tools for social, emotional, and intercultural competencies (SEI) in youth. The researchers found that intercultural competence had the scarcest pertinent assessment instruments, and the majority of the measures relied on self-reported survey and inventory data. (Müller et al., 2020). The lack of intercultural competence assessment instruments is important to consider. It speaks to a larger gap in culturally relevant assessment and intervention protocols which impacts such practices' efficacy and validity for all students. Fortunately, leveraging SEL in service of equity is a budding topic gaining momentum in education (CASEL, 2020a; Jagers et al., 2019; Jagers et al.,

2018a; Jagers et al., 2018b). As schools integrate SEL into their academic curriculum and culture and climate, it is vital to ensure that SEL interventions and assessment measures are effective and sustainable for a globally diverse student population.

Multifaceted Impact on SEL in Education

Through this blended theoretical and empirical lens, the initial literature review points towards the individual, institutional, and systemic impediments that impact SEL's effectiveness for all children and revealed three proposed themes to investigate further. Theme one of the next sections of the literature review focuses on the individual's role in developing the social-emotional competencies in children. It reviews existing studies that reveal the connections between educator well-being, adult SEL skill sets, and beliefs and assumptions that impact students' experience in the learning environment. To glean a deeper perspective of these factors, this study will also consider student identity, voice, and agency's role in reimaging schools to be safer, more caring, and inclusive learning environments. This section also stresses the need for quality pre-service and in-service professional learning resources and opportunities that highlight the intersection of a trauma-informed, student-centered, and equitable approach to SEL.

Theme two highlights the school institution's organizational role in supporting children's social-emotional competencies. It analyzes existing school policies, procedures, and practices. It evaluates the prevailing data that rationalizes its influence on students' academic, social, and emotional development, including existing discipline policies and trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching practices on the school culture and climate. The research reviewed makes a special connection that while an educator's role is critical on student social-emotional development, the institutional and systemic factors play an even larger role to consider and warrant further research.

Finally, theme three explores the broader systems that influence lived experiences and youth development. This portion of the literature review will argue that enduring inequities in the larger systems may create circumstances that impede the development of social-emotional competencies for some students of oppressed and marginalized communities and groups. The findings of this portion of the review will point to a gap in the literature that underscores the need to research how adult SEL professional learning opportunities must connect to the larger issues perpetuating inequities in education. It will advocate further research on how these structural disparities impact students' sense of identity, voice, agency, and belonging in a K-12 public school.

Individuals Impact on SEL in Education

This section is intended to outline the research associated with the role of individuals in supporting SEL in education. The section explores the impact educator well-being, implicit bias, and deficit thinking have on effective SEL implementation and the role of student voice and agency in supporting equity and inclusion in education. It concludes with a noted gap in the literature that points to the need to investigate further the need for SEL pre-service and professional learning opportunities for educators and ensure the benefits of SEL for all youth.

Educator Well-being. Educators are rated at the bottom among professional careers for feeling their viewpoints and opinions matter in the workplace (Gallup, 2014). Large majorities of teachers believe their voices are not often considered in the decision-making process at the district (76%), state (94%), or national (94%) levels. However, 53% of teachers felt that their opinions are factored in most of the time at the school level (Rentner et al., 2016). Likewise, teachers who say they have a voice in their schools are twice as likely to work hard to achieve their goals. In addition, they are four times more likely to be eager about their future career in

education than those who do not believe they have a say (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). Studies indicate that when educators are provided opportunities to get involved in district and school-based policymaking and have authentic partnerships with colleagues, it reduces the impact of stress on their health and creates a feeling of empowerment and higher job satisfaction (Greenberg et al., 2016; Verhoeven et al., 2003).

Teaching is undeniably one of the most stressful jobs, with an alarming 61% of educators reporting that their job is "always" or "often" stressful (Gallup, 2014). Studies indicate that educator stress and burnout have detrimental effects such as emotional numbing, loss of enjoyment, lack of energy, and difficulty making responsible decisions. These effects also increase pessimism, illness, fatigue, aches and pains, absenteeism, and sick day use (Lever et al., 2017). Studies estimate that 23 and 42 percent of educators leave the profession within their first five years. Teachers leave the profession due to many cited reasons, including poor working conditions and lack of classroom resources (Greenberg et al., 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2015; Merrill & Stuckey, 2014). Studies also suggest that high turnover rates of teachers in schools with considerable populations of low-income and minority students are propelled largely by teachers escaping the dysfunctional and unsupportive work environments to which low-income and minority students are most likely to be dispersed (Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011). The relationship between teacher turnover and principal turnover is also concerning. Recurrent principal turnover equates to lower teacher retention rates and can be particularly detrimental to high poverty, low achieving schools (Beteille et al., 2011). High turnover leads to the enduring weakening of low-income neighborhood schools, which exasperates the inequities present in education both in access and resource allocation and fractures the school-family-community partnerships necessary for student success (Greenberget al., 2016).

Even more alarming is how educator stress and burnout outcomes can trickle down to affect student learning adversely. According to a longitudinal study, elementary school teachers with higher stress and show more depression symptoms create classroom environments less conducive to learning, leading to poor academic performance and more behavior problems among students (McLean & Connor, 2015). A two-part study in a high-needs elementary school with a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse children in kindergarten to grade 3 and their teachers found that children show lower social adjustment levels and academic performance (Hoglund et al., 2015). Evers et al. (2004) conducted a quantitative study with 73 teachers and 411 students investigating students' and teachers' perceptions of teacher burnout concerning disruptive classroom behaviors and the teachers' competence to cope with such incidences.

One of the key findings revealed and pertinent to this literature review was that teachers' positive views on their classroom performance to manage disruptive behaviors were not supported by their students' opinions. This means that teachers perceived their ability to handle these occurrences more effectively than their students felt they could. According to the researchers, very few studies include the student's perspective when measuring educator burnout and managing classroom behaviors. While this study is not recent, it speaks to the longstanding gap when including students' assessment of their classroom learning experience. Raising student voice and agency to co-construct the factors that positively impact their learning outcomes is pertinent now more than ever.

In a more recent study, researchers Braun et al. (2020) employed a multilevel growth modeling studying 15 fourth and fifth-grade elementary teachers and their 320 students. The study concluded that a teacher's emotional regulation skills and life satisfaction were associated with students' well-being. Findings indicate that teachers' own SEL competency skills and well-

being are revealed in the classroom and significantly affect students' self-reported and peer-reported experiences at school. These findings also imply that professional development programs that aim to improve teacher well-being and advance adult SEL skill sets may benefit the classroom climate and students' well-being.

Educator Implicit Bias. Unfortunately, the impact of teacher stress does not stop there. The research also indicates that educators are most likely to act on their implicit biases under time constraints and when burnt out, exhausted, or have a lot on their plate (Staats, 2015a). According to the Kirwan Institute (2015), implicit bias refers to the spontaneous and unconscious stereotypes that influence individuals' judgments and decisions. These implicit associations are harbored in our subconscious and cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on race, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation. These associations develop over a lifetime, beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages, including media and news programming (Staats et al., 2015b). While research indicates how implicit bias penetrates the criminal justice system (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Gill, 2014; Levinson et al., 2014) and health care systems (Blair et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2012; Green et al., 2007; Penner et al., 2010; Sabin & Greenwald, 2012), a growing body of research outlines the effects of these implicit associations on student outcomes in education.

A 2020 study used two national data sets to explore teachers' explicit and implicit racial bias, comparing them to adults with similar characteristics. Findings indicated that both teachers and nonteachers hold pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases. Furthermore, differences between teachers and nonteachers were small and inconsequential (Starck et al., 2020). Research shows that implicit bias impacts how educators handle discipline in their schools and classrooms and may differ depending on teacher race. A 2016 study recruited 135 participants at a large

conference for early educators. Among other tasks (see below), participants were asked to read a typical vignette of a preschooler with challenging behavior and were randomized to receive the vignette with or without information regarding the child's family background. Providing family background information caused a reduction in severity ratings when teacher and child race matched but resulted in amplified severity ratings when their race did not correspond. While no differences were found based on suspension or expulsion recommendations, interestingly, Black teachers overall recommended lengthier periods of disciplinary exclusion notwithstanding of child gender/race (Gilliam et al., 2016). Additionally, Downer et al. (2016) found that preschool teacher ratings of child behavior problems showed no significant differences based on teacher-child racial match at the beginning of the academic year. However, by the end of the year, significant differences emerged such that White teachers (relative to Black teachers) classified Black boys as having more challenging behaviors.

Moreover, in March 2014, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights published data and statistics about school discipline. Their study found that Black children represented 18 percent of enrollment, but 48 percent received more than one out-of-school suspension. In comparison, white students represented 43 percent of enrollment but only 26 percent of out-of-school suspensions. Students with disabilities were more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension at 13 percent versus students without disabilities at 6 percent. Black students were suspended and expelled three times more than white students. This was confirmed by the above 2016 study where preschool teachers were shown a video of four children playing: one white female, one white male, one Black female, and one Black male. They were instructed to look for "challenging behavior" among the students, and their eye movements were tracked while they examined the video. Although no challenging behavior was

portrayed in the video, the teachers watched the Black male child. They identified him as the child who needed the most attention (Gilliam et al., 2016). Furthermore, a study found that when provided with discipline scenarios that differed only in the students' name, teachers were more likely to heighten the reaction to a second violation for students perceived to be Black than for students perceived to be white (Okunofua & Eberhart, 2015).

Unfortunately, exclusionary discipline practices are not the only area of concern that impacts equity in education. The White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gap in reading and math continue to persist, with White students favoring significantly (Ferguson, 2003; Gregory et al., 2010; NCES, 2016). Advocates for equitable educational outcomes for all students argue for more conclusive research to discover the connection between educator implicit bias and academic and learning outcomes of students (Chin et al., 2020; Farkas, 2003; Quinn, 2017). While limited data exist, evidence suggests that implicit bias impacts teacher attitudes of student achievement based on race and socioeconomic class (Tobisch & Dresel, 2017). Researchers discovered that teachers believed that Black students were 47% less likely to graduate from college than their white peers and Hispanic students were 42% less likely to get a college degree than their white peers (NCES, 2002). Ford et al. (2001) found that educator bias about diverse groups' cognitive ability influenced whether or not Black students were identified for gifted programs. Likewise, educators implicit racial bias found that racial minority groups were more often referred for discipline and special education (Eccles et al., 2006). Furthermore, rather than examine the institutional and systemic factors that impact student performance and outcomes, school staff may resort to blaming students and their families for student behavior and academic deficiencies, now commonly referred to as deficit thinking (Reed et al., 2020).

Deficit thinking. Deficit thinking believes that academic achievement gaps result from students' intellectual, behavioral, or cultural deficits (Valencia, 2010). The phenomenon of blaming the individual is commonly associated with poor and minority students and their families (Walker, 2011; Gorski, 2012). Placing the burden on learners allows educators to determine that students and their families need to change background characteristics such as their culture, values, or family structures to experience successful outcomes at school (Reed, 2020). This perpetuates the ethnocentric notion that White, U.S., English speaking experiences are considered the normative view for supporting student achievement. Thus, improvement solutions are deemed beyond the school's power and control (James-Ward et al., 2012; Walker, 2011). Educators may embrace the concept of putting the responsibility of such deficits on the students and their families, as it offers a less intimidating attitude to school improvement (Valencia, 2010) and allows them to dodge onus for student outcomes (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Gannon-Slater et al., 2017). Rather than considering the complex, systemic changes that might be contributing to the inequities, deficit thinking permits educators to avoid wrestling with their beliefs, practices, and policies that might contribute to school failure (Gorski, 2016). When educators use a deficit thinking lens, they may use student data to sanction, rather than confront, their pre-existing biases and assumptions about students, which may perpetuate the equity problem (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Vanlommel & Schildkamp, 2019).

However, while often associated with individualistic ideology, researchers suggest that deficit thinking might reflect larger, more complex institutional features of data use in schools that can influence educators in ways that push them toward deficit thinking. Lasater, Bengtson, and Albiladi (2020) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 52 educators to examine how the institutional features of data use impact deficit

thinking in schools. The researchers identified expansive ways schools endorsed data practices that perpetuated inequitable practices. Schools pushed teachers to engage in deficit thinking when they shifted the focus from instruction to accountability measures, prompted teachers to view students as numbers rather than people, and created an unsafe professional environment where data is used to threaten an educator's sense of self-integrity. This study is critical to consider and encourages the educational institution to move past placing responsibility on individuals and interrogating what organizational and systemic policies and procedures enable the status quo of inequitable and neoliberal educational practices (more discussion below).

Suppose schools are to create more caring, just, and thriving learning environments for all children. In that case, research must investigate how best to provide educators with professional learning opportunities to unpack and mitigate the effects of their own biases and deficit thinking. These considerations also speak to the importance of researching and listening to students' lived experiences and intersectional identities and positionalities in the school walls and its impact on developing social-emotional competencies and authentic teacher-student and peer-peer relationships. The importance of building authentic relationships cannot be undersold. It is necessary to mitigate the negative beliefs and assumptions that educators and students may hold about themselves and one another. Building these relationships with students empowers them to embrace their and others' identities, lived experiences, and cultural assets that foster civic responsibility towards creating equitable learning environments and just societies (Schlund et al., 2020). When school communities take the time to cultivate youth identity, voice, and agency, they foster a sense of belonging where all students feel seen and heard.

Student Identity, Voice, and Agency. The concept of identity is difficult to define and can have varying meanings depending on the context. Culture, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic

status, and gender are considered factors of social position and are key defining features of identity (Jagers et al., 2019). Jenny Nagaoka and her colleagues (2015) assert that having an *integrated identity* is one of the three factors, along with agency and competencies, for predicting young adult success. Embracing an *integrated identity* means having an internalized sense of who one is across time, place, and various social dominions. An *integrated identity* provides an internal framework for making sense of how one's choices and actions relate to one's past, current social identities, and desired future. Identity development is a lifelong process of integrating one's strength-based assets and lived experiences to center skills and efforts more effectively toward pursuing prospects and setting and achieving life ambitions (Nagaoka et al., 2015).

Youth actively and regularly grapple with the meaning of their identities and their role in their lives and society. Yet research suggests that critical consciousness can encourage youth to challenge inequities in education (El-Amin et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2011) and be a gateway to academic achievement and engagement for marginalized students (Carter, 2008). We can begin by empowering youth voices and agencies to interrogate and combat issues and obstacles related to their identities.

The power of students' voices has long been maintained and supported by multiple research sources to improve learning, teaching, school improvement, youth development, school culture, diversity, and civic engagement (Fletcher, 2005; 2015). However, while students make up the larger majority of a school's population (92%), they are seldomly purposefully involved in school decision-making or teachers' professional development (Harper, 2005). Nevertheless, researchers discovered that students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice.

Student voice also increases the likelihood that students will experience self-confidence, engagement, and commitment in school (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016).

Research also supports student voice and agency's meaningful use as a catalyst for school improvement efforts (Mitra, 2008). Engaging students in school improvement activities can increase feelings of belonging and commitment in schools (Beaudoin, 2005) and ensure cultural, racial, and social diversity in school improvement efforts (Mitra, 2006; Rubin & Silva, 2003). Utilizing students in the research process can lead to more efficient inquiries and results. However, Adam Fletcher (2014) argues that research teams and youth partnerships need to be cautious not to whitewash student involvement as no individual or group can embody every student in every school. In our rapidly evolving world, it is more imperative than ever to honor cultural identities and diversified representation of voices at the decision-making tables. For schools to leverage SEL in service of equity and inclusion, researchers could explore how embracing student voice and agency in the area of SEL could become a critical component to whole child development.

However, while well-intended and aspirational for educational reform, promoting youth voice and agency without addressing power and interrogating whose voices are heard and silenced risks perpetuating the status quo of inequities in education. Actively teaching students to recognize their own identities, biases, and civic responsibilities towards creating equitable learning environments and just societies takes time and requires holding safe and trusting learning spaces to support these vital conversations for students. Handling sensitive topics can bring up discomfort and requires confidence and skills on the educator's part to engage in respectful and purposeful discussions to support student awareness of the world's varying

underpinnings. Professional learning opportunities for educators that leverage SEL in service of equity will become crucial to cultivating authentic student identity, voice, and agency.

Educator Pre- and Inservice SEL Professional Learning and Adult SEL Skillset.

With social-emotional learning efforts pushing ahead to advocate for more playing time in the classroom, the need for staff to more explicitly learn about the research and practices behind a transformative approach to SEL has become apparent (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings & Frank, 2015; Jones et al., 2013). Research confirms that both educators and administrators value the role of SEL in education. DePaoli et al. (2017) surveyed 884 Pre-K to 12 public school principals and interviewed 16 superintendents and ten district-level research and evaluation specialists representing diverse school districts and with varying levels of experience in implementing SEL programming. Study findings revealed that administrators grasp SEL initiatives' potential and benefit from college, career, and life readiness but argued that they need more training, support, and resources to implement systemic SEL fully.

Professional learning. Undoubtedly, educators play a vital role in fostering the development of the whole child. Researchers already know that professional development to support teacher knowledge, effective instruction, and practices enhance effective SEL implementation (Hart et al., 2016; Reyes et al., 2012;). A two-phase study examined 935 educators in phase 1 and 88 in phase 2 to determine teacher beliefs about SEL. The researchers found that educators who reported higher comfort and commitment levels with teaching SEL had greater self-efficacy and a sense of achievement teaching with a more remarkable aptitude to see their students as individuals. Furthermore, teachers who felt supported by a healthy school culture experienced less emotional fatigue and teacher burnout (Bracket et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, a 2016 survey found that SEL training is lacking in most schools. Four out of five educators reported interest in receiving further SEL training, but only half of the teachers received some form of SEL training. Preschool and elementary school teachers were the most likely to receive SEL training, while high school teachers were the least likely (Hart et al., 2016).

Schonert-Reichl et al. (2017) found that most teacher certification standards in the U.S. incorporated SEL in the required knowledge and skills necessary to receive the teacher certification. However, an analysis of 3,916 required courses in teacher preparation programs in 304 colleges of education in the U.S. found that less than 1% of courses analyzed included the SEL competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management. For relationship skills, only slightly more than 1% of courses scanned included this SEL dimension.

Adult SEL. Coupled with the notion that professional learning opportunities play an essential role in fostering SEL, educators need to reflect on and grow their social, emotional, critical, and cultural competencies. A quantitative study conducted by Poulou (2017) explored teacher perception of Emotional Intelligence (EI), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills, and teacher-student relationships concerning students' emotional and behavioral struggles. Findings revealed that teachers' emotional functioning and professional competencies were correlated with the quality of teacher-student relationships. This research is essential to consider in this current study. It proposes that enhancing teacher social-emotional and teaching competencies and skills promote positive teacher-student relationships and prevent student emotional and behavioral difficulties. However, because the study did not indicate the ethnic and socioeconomic status demographics—of both teachers and students—it is difficult to determine the cultural implications needed to build such relationships. The outside barriers—institutional

and systemic—may or may not have contributed to the student's emotional and behavioral difficulties and the teachers' perceptions. A critical consciousness lens could gain a deeper perspective on the quality and nature of a teacher's social-emotional enhancement and competency and its connection to educational equity.

Equity in education means providing all students with a meaningful and high-quality education regardless of race, gender, ability, language, and class. Often this is linked to ensuring resource allocation, which educators often have little control over. However, Jagers et al. (2019) advocate that educators have control over how they view themselves, their students, the school community, the world, and how they choose to act on these outlooks. Reflecting on their current views, assumptions, and perspectives, employ the SEL competencies of self-awareness and social awareness and support civic-minded responsible decision-making to foster educational equity and evoke systemic change.

To date, the empirical research to determine the specific correlation between adult SEL skillset and student acquisition of social-emotional competencies is lean and reveals the need to explore further the connection of outside institutional and systemic barriers that may influence both the teacher's SEL knowledge and skillset and the student's overall well-being (Bracket et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Palomera et al., 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). A critical consciousness lens could also consider how socioeconomic status and cultural considerations influence student outcomes regardless of teacher SEL skill set.

Suppose we are to create more equitable and inclusive schools and classrooms. In that case, researchers will need to determine what adult professional learning experiences and SEL skillsets are required to meet all learners' diverse social and emotional needs. To support educators' transformative learning experiences, a more in-depth look at the institutional and

systemic barriers to student learning is warranted. This may include educators examining their own sociocultural identities, biases, and how their actions impact equitable outcomes, bolstering their ability to empathize and take on perspectives of others and build authentic relationships with students, staff, and families (CASEL, 2019). This not only necessitates the advancement of students' social-emotional competence but the creation of a safe and caring learning environment where adults listen to and regard what youth have to say (CASEL, 2018).

Institutional Impact on SEL in Education

This section is intended to outline the research associated with the institutional role in supporting SEL in education. The section explores the impact and influence of school culture and climate, discipline policies, and trauma-informed, restorative, and culturally responsive teaching practices on SEL effectiveness for all youth. It concludes with a noted gap in the literature to further investigate how systemic disparities may or may not penetrate school policy and weaken the chance that all students will benefit from SEL.

School Culture and Climate. While it is common practice to push change at the individual level placing the majority of the ownness on the educator and student, researchers advocate for school-wide, systemic implementation of social-emotional learning (Mahoney et al., 2020). That mission's forefront is establishing a safer, more caring, and inclusive school culture and climate. School culture encompasses the norms, attitudes, assumptions, practices, and collective experiences and expectations of all school community stakeholders (Osher et al., 2008). School climate can be described as the school's heart and soul and the spirit that connects teachers and students to love and desire to be a part of the school community (Freiberg, 1999).

Traditionally school culture, climate, and SEL have been studied separately, but researchers claim they are innately interconnected and can create the conditions for prosocial

development (Berg et al., 2017). Institutes that embed character and moral education, civic education, and social-emotional learning into their school climate promote essential social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning (Thapa et al., 2013). Schools that embrace cultural competencies allow for multiple perspectives and core values to be appreciated and shared. A healthy and inclusive school culture helps to build strengths-based individual and collective narratives (Osher & Berg, 2018) and, in turn, encourages student belonging and connectedness.

Undoubtedly, student connectedness and a sense of belonging are paramount to student SEL success at school, yet little attention has been given to its importance compared to academic achievement (Allen & Bowles, 2013). Built on-off of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework principles, researchers advocate for a socio-ecological framework that encompasses school belonging as a multidimensional paradigm that should foster and maintain school belonging at multiple levels and contexts (Allen et al., 2016). For school communities to leverage SEL in the service of equity and inclusion, they will need to build genuine school-family-community partnerships that co-construct a culturally relevant shared vision and SEL plan that safeguards its sustainability (CASEL, 2020d; CASEL, 2020e). Future research could consider whose voices are represented at the decision-making tables to ensure all students benefit from systemic social-emotional learning initiatives. Doing so could open the doors to genuinely valuing all students' assets, identity, and diversity, a goal that is rooted in this dissertation.

Despite these known factors, a healthy and inclusive school climate is not guaranteed for all students. Jain et al. (2015) examined how school climate varies by school-level characteristics in California using administrative data from the California School Climate Survey completed by teachers/staff. The results of this study found that schools in large cities, ones serving low-income populations, Hispanic- and black-majority schools, and low-performing ones reported

less favorable school climates. Compared to their counterparts, areas affected included staff/student relationships, norms, standards, student facilitative behaviors, and perceived safety.

Boen et al. (2020) led a study that utilized longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (n=11,382), diverse physiological functioning and well-being indicators, and multilevel regression models to assess if and how school characteristics shape trajectories of physiological dysregulation and depressive risk from adolescence through early adulthood. Findings revealed that schools' social and structural factors play an essential role in shaping adolescent health risk through young adulthood. In particular, indicators of school-level violence, perceptions of safety, and school social disconnectedness had noticeable associations with short- and long-term health risks. Study findings also revealed that low levels of safety and high exposure to violence were connected with greater depressive risk, which is consistent over time. Jointly, this study's findings indicate that school environments can result in life stressors in young people that influence health trajectories and contribute to broader displays of health inequality. Furthermore, the findings revealed a strong relationship between toxicity and school SES, with a greater proportion of students of color attending "low" SES schools and "high" toxicity schools than "high" SES schools and "low" toxicity schools.

These studies are relevant to consider in this current research study in that it points to the need to address the health of school culture and climate as part of any SEL effort. The research indicates that all students, regardless of race, face health risks due to toxic school environments and inadequate school socioeconomic structure disparities. It speaks to the importance of catalyzing the commitment to this work to interrogate a school's institutional inequities and how the disparities in the systems of law, health, employment, etc., perpetuate these circumstances in

education. All of which have a compounding negative impact on youth's health and well-being and social, emotional, and academic development.

Discipline Policies. To examine social-emotional learning through a critical consciousness lens requires that school institutions investigate how their policies, procedures, and practices season inequities in the school environment to impact student learning and well-being, including discipline. As mentioned before, research indicates that implicit bias influences how educators handle discipline in their schools and classrooms (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okunofua & Eberhart, 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Exclusionary discipline policies in schools have resulted in an extraordinary number of students entering the 'school-to-prison pipeline.' This troubling national exclusionary discipline trend siphons children out of public schools and into the criminal justice systems. This push-out trend affects mostly disabled minority youth living in some of the most impoverished and under-resourced communities (Skiba et al., 2011). A study involving 26,000 U.S. middle and high schools concluded that the vast majority of suspensions are for minor infractions of school rules, such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code violations, rather than for violent or criminal behavior (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Aside from the negative impact on a school climate, such "zero-tolerance" policies that choose suspension and expulsion end up placing students out of school and on the streets. "Zero-tolerance" policies then surge the probability that these youth will be arrested for relatively minor, generally nonviolent offenses (Advancement Project, 2010).

More alarming is that studies reveal that students of color experience a much higher rate than white students when facing suspension and expulsion. In a longitudinal study of 928,940 students tracked over a minimum eight-year period, African American and Hispanic students were more likely than white students to experience recurring disciplinary involvement of several

conduct violations. About one-fourth of African American students (25.7%) had more than 11 disciplinary actions, compared to about one-fifth of Hispanic students (18.1%) and less than one-tenth of white students (9.5%) (Fabelo et al., 2011). Additionally, while poor Black youth in poverty are more likely to be suspended than poor White youth, middle- and upper-class Black youth are also more likely to be suspended than their White equivalents of comparable socioeconomic position (Skiba et al., 2016).

Many of these students who receive punitive punishment often come from communities reddened with traumatizing lived experiences, such as poverty, violence, insufficient nutrition, health care, and education, resulting in distrustful, aggressive youth unprepared to navigate the demands of the public-school environment (Oehlberg, 2008). Furthermore, no evidence substantiates the use of "zero-tolerance" disciplinary policies to create safer schools or increase students' academic achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Such discipline practices have been linked to higher rates of misconduct (Green et al., 2017) and re-traumatization (Dutil, 2020). The effects of trauma are inarguable and invasive and can influence every aspect of child development and learning.

Trauma-Informed Practices. Trauma is defined as an actual, perceived, or threatening adverse event or series of events that have caused emotional pain and a sense of feeling overwhelmed (SAMHSA, 2015). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) are defined by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as experienced or witnessed events in childhood that are potentially traumatic. These might include abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction such as domestic violence, drug, alcohol addiction, mental illness, an incarcerated parent, or divorce (SAMHSA, 2015). Traumatic events can also include natural disasters,

pandemics, school shootings, poverty, inequities in resources, discrimination, and historical and racial violence (CDC, 2019).

According to a 2016 study conducted by the National Survey of Children's Health, roughly 50% of children are exposed to one of the 9 ACEs, and 20% of children are exposed to 2 or more ACEs. Even more alarming is that over 6 out of 10 black children and 58% of youth from low-income backgrounds experience ACEs (CAHMI, 2017) which significantly increases the risk for poor life outcomes, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, stroke, depression, suicide attempts, and alcohol and drug use (CDC, 2019; Copeland et al., 2007). Students who experience trauma from institutional and structural disparities are at a troubling disadvantage that negatively impacts graduation rates, academic achievement, and career and college outcomes (CDC, 2019) which perpetuates the vicious cycle of structural violence. S*tructural violence* refers to how inequitable social arrangements in governments, economies, religions— -including access to health care, education, and housing—-create real harm for certain marginalized groups (Sossenheimer et al., 2018).

According to the National Equity Project, as students in such communities enter school, their survival mechanisms can kick in quickly. Constant messages that they are incapable and worthless have an aggregate effect on students. This state of being called a "stereotype threat" results from a negative stereotype about a persons' identified group where they are distressed about being judged or treated undesirably based on this stereotype. This threat causes extra pressure to avoid confirming the stereotype. It undermines the targeted groups' performance, making it more difficult for them to succeed than it would be for a nonstereotyped person in their position (Spencer et al., 2016).

For many students, this accumulated effect means job and life prospects are dim, and school success may not seem pertinent. Schools can often perpetuate these inequities triggering in students a constant state of threat (Osta et al., 2020), leading to responses such as frequent disruptions, inappropriate language, verbal or physical conflicts, chronic absenteeism, walking away from authority figures, shutting down, and avoiding interactions, "spacing out," not doing work, or seeming uninterested (Frieze, 2015). With each of these responses, the brain experiences a surge of the hormone cortisol and a decreased supply of oxygen to the brain; this affects the brain's ability to function, resulting in reduced cognitive reasoning. The rational thinking brain deactivates in these moments, and it is all about protection mode (Statman-Weil, 2015). This state of affecting a student's ability to develop language and communication skills, pay attention, follow directions, organize and remember new information, and form-critical social-emotional skills to cope with stress, regulate their emotional responses, read social cues necessary to build relationships, and make responsible decisions (Cole et al. 2013; Trauma and Learning Policy and Initiative, n.d). When educators are not aware of these vulnerabilities, and when they lack social-emotional awareness skills, they may respond with a punitive approach, which then perpetuates the problem and further splinters the school culture and climate and students' ability to flourish past these traumatic situations (Oehlberg, 2008).

While the research that connects trauma-informed practices with SEL is relatively non-existent, researchers in the field advocate for all SEL programs to be trauma-informed (Pawlo et al., 2019). They contend that for SEL programs to be trauma-informed, they must consider that many learners experience intense and overwhelming emotions connected to an acute traumatic incident or chronic stressors. Trauma-informed SEL instruction must emphasize the importance

of building connectedness and a sense of belonging through authentic and caring relationships. In doing so, students can be empowered to evolve and grow from a strength-based method.

Restorative Practices. If critically conscious leaders and educators genuinely want to reduce harm, they will need to create systems built off the principles of inclusion, fair process, and belonging. A growing body of research points to restorative practices as a strategy to address hurt while maintaining a safe and healthy school culture (González, 2021; Gregory et al., 2016). Restorative practices are built upon the principles of restorative justice commonly used in the courts and the justice system to rebuild a sense of safety through corrective action between victims and offenders. It gives the victim a voice and the offender a chance to reconcile their actions (Zehr, 2015). Restorative practices in education go beyond simply repairing harm from a single incident, emphasizing creating shared responsibility and a commitment to creating just and equitable learning environments (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Restorative practices are rooted in healthy and productive relationships between and among students and staff to facilitate a positive school climate and learning environment (Smith et al., 2015).

Schiff (2013) did an extensive literature review that considered the effectiveness of restorative justice in schools as an alternative to excessively punitive discipline policy and a strategy for reducing racial disciplinary disparity for school-based youth. This study revealed that using restorative justice practices has helped reduce exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions in the United States. However, the author makes vital points to consider and points to a gap in the research at the structural level, stating that intolerable racial inequality levels are progressively urging therapeutic responses to mitigate harm in schools and communities. The author argues that reducing the 'school-to-prison pipeline' requires more than employing a specific disciplinary or educational strategy or technique. Instead, there is a critical

need to consider the political, cultural, and policy frameworks and institutional bias and structural racism that prevent the recognition and employment of therapeutic strategies. In particular, for restorative practices to take root and repair damage, the power relationships amongst peers and students-adults must be addressed, especially for historically marginalized groups. Otherwise, individuals' unequal power distribution is counterproductive, placing educator buy-in and subsequent commitment to restorative practices at risk.

This review is essential to consider in this current proposed study as it points to the need to dig deeper than empirical support for restorative practices. This paper makes a notable argument that school communities who choose to remain in the strategy/technique mentality to educate the whole child will remain paralyzed in the traumatic effects of structural and institutional inequities (Schiff, 2018). A more in-depth systemic look at these inequities is warranted and discussed in theme three of this review to move past a strategy-based mentality to whole child development.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices. In an ever-evolving, globally diverse nation, the institutional inquiry process must also investigate where culturally responsive pedagogy and practices exist in the school. Adopting a caring multicultural educational framework requires schools to incorporate care, culture, and community rooted in strong cultural competencies (Pang, 2010). Cultural competence is the capacity to critically examine the social and cultural identities, recognize and value diversity rooted in historical soil and through an asset-based lens, acknowledge and embrace cultural burdens and prospects, and build authentic relationships across cultures (Schlundet al., 2020). Culturally competent educators cultivate their abilities to combine the ethics of care and cultural elements in creating effective learning environments (Pang et al., 2011). Fortunately, educators have come a long way from a resistant

attitude toward adopting culturally responsive teaching practices (Gallavan, 2000) to advocating for increased professional learning opportunities to build knowledge about cultural differences. Barnes and McCallops (2019) used focus groups with school personnel to gain insights on educator beliefs, perceptions, and the use of culturally responsive practices in implementing an SEL intervention. The researchers found that educators believe culturally responsive practices are fundamental and should occur before implementing SEL to ensure inclusive and culturally sound SEL practices.

While encouraging, we are far from proficient at connecting culturally relevant practices with our SEL interventions and practices. McCallops et al. (2019) conducted a systematic 10-year review of the international use of social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions in urban schools. The researchers summarized and studied the interventions used, culturally responsive practices in each intervention, and student outcomes across 51 studies. The majority of studies utilized experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Of the 51 studies, five indicated the use of culturally responsive practices, while none of the studies addressed the effects of discrimination on social-emotional development. The study argues that teachers should receive training in culturally responsive pedagogies, adult social-emotional competencies, and effective social-emotional learning interventions for students in urban areas. The authors suggested that teacher training include strategies for examining bias and cultural perceptions, emotional awareness of the teacher, plans for building strong relationships with students and families, strategies for incorporating student perspectives into SEL lessons, and reflective teaching within the context of SEL instruction.

While valid and essential to consider in this proposed study, this argument neglects to view the broader institutional and systemic barriers to implementing SEL effectively. To

lucratively leverage SEL in the service of equity and inclusion, all barriers need to be investigated and incorporated in future efforts and professional learning measures. Utilizing qualitative research methods, Slaten et al. (2015) interviewed 15 staff members at an urban alternative school, ranging from teachers to mental health professionals to community educators, to comprehensively understand their unique approaches to SEL serving approximately 175 students. Approximately 80% of the enrolled students were eligible for free or reduced lunch costs. The most striking finding participants advocated for was the educators' desire to address students' social and emotional needs through a culturally relevant and critically conscious educational lens. The participants suggested that while the school environment felt welcoming and accepting and traditional SEL interventions were essential and valuable, critical consciousness is also necessary for all youth's success and wellness, particularly for underrepresented and marginalized student groups. These scholars argued that developing interventions to increase critical consciousness would result in individual and community transformation.

While notable and encouraging, efforts to critically evaluate educational practices at the school level will be barren if neoliberal educational systems and policies continue to cement the obstacles that prevent educators and schools from actualizing systemic change. According to Peck et al. (2009) neoliberalism is a policy model that endeavors to limit government spending, regulation, and public ownership while enhancing the workings of free-market capitalism. Neoliberalism has been rebuked for confining social services, empowering corporations, and worsening economic inequality (Peck et al., 2009).

Neoliberal reforms were designed to diminish the linking between neighborhood residence and school quality so that students living in poor or segregated neighborhoods were not

relegated to the worst schools (Brathwaite, 2017). Neoliberalism assumed that when all schools are amended, and all families have school choice, they will have a better system of schools to choose from and choose the school that best suits their needs (Brathwaite, 2017). Furthermore, Brathwaite (2017) researched to test this theory by examining 2000-2013 using the School-Level Master File (SCHMA) developed by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools at New York University. Analyses showed that despite many positive outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, neoliberal reforms did not provide families of all races equal access to a high-quality education. Black and Hispanic students are still attending segregated schools. Most Black and Hispanic schools still have the lowest outcomes, and minorities still attend schools different from their White and Asian peers. Study findings disputed that while neoliberal policies succeeded in allowing some minority students access to improved schools, they did not impact the patterns of disparities that public schools have traditionally suffered. Essentially, remedial efforts will be futile until research efforts reach beyond the individual and institutional role and investigate how systemic disparities penetrate school policy and weaken the chance that all students will benefit from SEL.

Systemic Impact on SEL in Education

This section is intended to outline the research associated with the systemic barriers that impact SEL effectiveness for all youth. Additionally, the section addresses the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and SEL when determining equitable SEL practices. It concludes with a section summary of the findings and a call to action for future research.

Systemic Barriers to Equity in SEL. Simmons et al. (2018) assert that health and educational disparities persist due to a slew of barriers; including limited access to technology, mental health services, education, and school-family engagement opportunities, as well as

segregation, insufficient and inequitable school funding, and biased hiring practices that limit teacher diversity. At the top of this long and paralyzing list is poverty. They insist that low-income status has detrimental effects on children and limits their access to quality education, healthcare, and necessary social and economic resources. These disparities are pervasive for students of color and marginalized youth (American Psychological Association, 2016). Moreover, exposure to poverty in early childhood increases the risk of chaos and affects brain development in self-regulation and executive functioning, which directly impacts the growth of social and emotional competencies (Blair & Raver, 2016; Boyle et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2005).

Likewise, researchers question whether the current SEL frameworks and instructional features are applicable for all students, in that most programs are not rooted in cultural differences and ignore issues related to systems of privilege, power, and oppression that largely affect racially and ethnically diverse groups (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Simmons, 2017). The little body of empirical research available to investigate if SEL is equally meaningful across racial groups is inconsistent, inconclusive, and has found varied results (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Garner 2008; Garner et al., 2014; Rowe & Trickett, 2017). To date, there is not sufficient data available to know if SEL interventions have similar outcomes across racial groups.

Furthermore, the Aspen Institute (2018) put out a call to action for educational leaders to rethink how they work towards advancing educational equity, arguing that focusing only on resource allocation, test scores, graduation rates, and career and college readiness will not suffice. The potential of SEL to cultivate increased achievement and equity in education may not be actualized unless we bridge the theory-to-practice gap and tackle the political and cultural assumptions that are being constructed into present-day approaches (Hoffman, 2009). Osher et

al. (2016) urge educators and researchers to understand that SEL is not a cure-all for amending educational troubles. Similarly, they warn that while SEL might help some individuals traverse the obstacles of institutionalized racism and structural inequality, it does not eradicate them. According to Hammond (2014), systems remain inequitable because of seemingly nonthreatening institutional practices or structures that diminish and limit opportunities for people of color, poor people, disabled individuals, and immigrants, which over time creates a domino effect that leads to undeserved detriments that obscure the root cause of the inequity. In other words, to make real gains toward educational equity, a race and class -conscious focus needs to be placed on reducing bias, improving learning environments, building asset-based mindsets in students and staff, and addressing the root cause of power and privilege. While the research gap is vast, a budding body of empirical studies has surfaced to wrestle with these inquiries and pleas for more just learning environments.

Intersectionality of Race, Socioeconomic Status, and SEL. Kuo et al. (2020) conducted a study that inspected the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) in predicting social and emotional (SE) skills in 81,950 6th to 8th graders. Their findings concluded that at low levels of SES, White students were inclined to have the lower SE scores, but as SES increased, White students were inclined to have higher scores than minority groups. Across SES levels, Asian students showed higher academic discipline and self-regulation scores. However, the SES and SE skill relationships were less noticeable for underserved minority groups. According to the authors, this study is the first to explore race/ethnicity and SES factors relative to social-emotional learning skills. It will serve as valuable research to consider in the proposed study and a steppingstone to reconceptualizing social-emotional learning to transform education.

Jones et al. (2020) surveyed 29,415 3rd through 12th-grade students in a district with 97 schools to examine three topics: RQ1) whether there are racial inequities in students' experiences of school as measured by school climate and whether there are racial inequities in student self-reports of SEL, RQ2) whether racial inequities in school climate and SEL conveys to race inequities in grades, and RQ3) the degree to which the connection between school climate and SEL differs based on students' race. Findings from the study determined that: RQ1) students of color reported notably lower SEL levels than their White peers, and modest differences in perceived school climate appeared across racial groups. Only Multiracial students perceived the climate of their schools to be worse than White students did. In contrast, Asian and Latinx students reported a slightly better-perceived climate, RQ2) SEL accounted for an insignificant percentage of the racial inequity in student reported grades and RQ3) school climate did not weaken the association between race and grades. However, it was consistently related to grades for students from different racial groups.

Additionally, the association between SEL and grades was controlled by race, suggesting that SEL was significantly more strongly related to grades for White students than Black and Native American students. These findings are essential to consider as school institutions wrestle with connecting their SEL and school climate reform efforts. The authors insist that for educational equity to be actualized, a critical perspective must be used to determine how school practices, educator bias, and privilege impact the lens through which they view students' strengths and behaviors. Essentially this argument underscores how individual, institutional, and systemic factors permeate through one another and collectively influence student outcomes on a deep level. It speaks to the importance of investigating and unraveling the entangled layers to find the commonality of root causes that affect student achievement on multiple fronts. Hence a

school cannot question its policies and practices without acknowledging the role of an educator's belief system in implementing such procedures. Likewise, an educator's belief system cannot be wholly understood and unpacked without acknowledging the larger systems at play that influence one's beliefs in the first place.

However, the plea to become more race-conscious cannot just lie in the hands of educators. Together, school communities can also support students in cultivating positive thoughts and beliefs toward people from different racial groups to prepare them to be more active in fighting for more just and inclusive societies (Quinn, 2017; Tatum, 1992). San Antonio (2018) engaged in a 7-month long participatory action research study with a high-poverty rural elementary school in the U.S. Seven teachers, grades 3-6, agreed to adopt a literacy-based SEL approach that required teachers to facilitate a highly participatory classroom conversations. Students engaged in sharing their points of view on complex interpersonal, emotional, and societal topics. The researcher-practitioner partnership aimed to examine what skills, ethics, and ways of being were learned and how self-reflexivity led to new understanding, growth, and transformation. Findings from classroom observations, teacher conversations, interactive journals, and field notes revealed that while teachers grappled with addressing race, immigration, and gender discrimination in a predominantly white community, it led to new ways of thinking about their practice, classroom interactions, and their students' abilities. Follow-up concerns revealed that without proper ongoing professional learning opportunities for new and incoming staff, the sustainability of results weakened, and a call-to-action for ongoing equity-based SEL professional development for educators was highlighted.

Concluding Call to Action. It is clear from the plethora of empirical evidence stated throughout this literature review that multiple factors shape the success of youths' social-

emotional learning outcomes. The individual, institutional, and systemic barriers that affect the development of social-emotional competencies in both children and adults cannot be undersold. These obstacles are tightly enmeshed and need to be teased out thoughtfully with the next wave of research efforts of scholars in the field of SEL. We must reach beyond the status quo of inequities that infiltrate and poison the educational system. Doing so requires society to bravely come together to analyze and interrogate the systems that prevent all students from growing into whole civic-minded beings both in their hearts and minds. Leveraging SEL in the service of equity and inclusion appears to have a fighting chance at helping school communities reconceptualize how we educate kids. The final section of this empirical review will investigate the current methodologies used in SEL while identifying the gaps that this research study aims to fill.

Methodological Features of SEL Research

Furthering the scientific base for SEL has been at the forefront of the research efforts of CASEL and other partnering collaborators for the past two decades. Payton et al. (2008) reviewed 317 SEL studies and determined the methodological features to include that almost half (45%) used randomized designs, and most (71%) reported no problems with attrition. Seventy-six percent of outcome measures were of acceptable reliability, and 50% were of acceptable validity. As the field of SEL legitimizes its validity in education using a primarily experimental and quasi-experimental design, examining the effectiveness of these interventions in "real world" settings warrants the attention of future research (Barnes, 2019). Fortunately, researchers and advocates are focusing on a more action-oriented research methodological model. Since 2016, CASEL's research methodology has focused on placing a more concerted effort in forming Research-Practice Partnerships between researchers and practitioners. Research-Practice

Partnerships (RPP) are long-term collaborations that focus on researchers and practitioners mutually investigating problems in practices and coordinating research efforts that produce intentional strategies for actionable outcomes for the partnering school or district. One of the three research practice partnerships is Design Research, geared at building and studying solutions simultaneously in real-world contexts to support student learning (Coburnet al., 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). However, Gregory & Fergus (2017) insist that educators and scholars need to refine SEL theory further and conduct empirical testing to develop a more comprehensive, equity-oriented conceptualization of the CASEL 5 to address how culture, power, and privilege affect schools and students. In particular, they advocate for future research to consider how students from marginalized groups are expected to achieve the same SEL competencies as white students, who do not face the limitations of power and privilege.

At the forefront of these requests is the plea for future studies to employ mixed methodologies in SEL professional development. They encourage a multidisciplinary approach that includes partnerships and pays explicit consideration to the practical application of the research in service to the participants (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). A noticeable gap in the literature also involves how SEL can practically align with and support another school, district, and state efforts to improve academic performance while reducing the achievement gap and exclusionary discipline practices. Several program initiatives bid for both educators' and students' time, and it is imperative to determine which practices can be easily mastered and employed regularly by educators (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). To enhance SEL effectiveness and increase educator buy-in, future research must seek to align SEL with widely adopted student support interventions efficiently (e.g., trauma-informed practices, culturally relevant teaching, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support and Restorative Practices) in a way that promotes

synergies while addressing differences (Osher et al., 2016). Bridging the gap between SEL theory and practice in the service of equity and inclusion for all students will be imperative when seeking to support professional learning for educators and families.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to discern whether or not the current SEL research provides sufficient evidence to ensure that all students have equal access to the benefits of social-emotional learning efforts in school. This literature review used a critical lens to reveal the individual, institutional, and systemic barriers that may influence SEL's effectiveness for all children. It underscores the problematic gap between theory and practice when implementing SEL in the service of equity and inclusion in education. At the root of this disconnect are systemic hurdles that perpetuate these inequities, and little is likely to shift without addressing the origin of these obstacles. However, research is also evident that both the educational institution and the role of the educator play significant parts in either mitigating or maintaining some of these disparities.

Nevertheless, few professional development resources are available to support school communities in implementing equitable SEL. As a result, this research study seeks to use a qualitative methodology using narrative inquiry to explore what professional learning, skills, mindsets, and resources educators require to leverage a transformative SEL approach in the service of equity and inclusion in K-12 public schools. The following methodology chapter will further outline the research design in detail.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Although there is substantial evidence to outline the significant impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) efforts, considerable gaps in the research exist regarding racially diverse students from under-resourced backgrounds. Jones et al. (2019) proclaimed that future research efforts must investigate the quality of educator pre-service and professional development to better understand the positive effects of SEL. In addition, these efforts must also consider the degree to which these trainings lead to high-quality SEL implementation and more equitable learning experiences and outcomes for all youth. Thus, a greater focus on adult SEL is warranted to leverage SEL to foster more equitable learning environments and produce optimal outcomes for young people furthest from opportunity (Jagers et al., 2019).

Research Design

To address the gap above, this study utilized a qualitative methodology to explore the beliefs, experiences, and insights of K-12 educators when conceptualizing SEL to improve equitable outcomes for all youth. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research can assist researchers in pondering a central phenomenon and offer a voice to individuals who may not otherwise be heard. Qualitative research also allows researchers to unravel stories by assembling "words rather than numbers to understand human action through interpretation rather than prediction and control" (Kim, 2016, p. 4). Although several qualitative methods exist, a narrative inquiry was the most suitable for this proposed study. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that can act as a vehicle to express our lived experiences and world views through stories that can then be understood and made personally meaningful (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Kim (2016) declares that "theory devoid of lived experience would be like an empty tin can that just makes noise" (p. 41).

Narrative inquiry has become a robust research methodology in education in recent years. By studying educators' lived experiences, we can challenge traditional epistemological theories that view knowledge claims as objective and finite. Narrative inquiry can amplify and bring forth the lived experiences of educators to reshape the understandings of education (Kim, 2016). To leverage a transformative approach to SEL in education, we must first understand educators' beliefs, viewpoints, lived experiences, and level of critical consciousness related to SEL and equity. Adopting critical consciousness is necessary for educators to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and then commit to taking action against these systems. Through narrative inquiry, we can listen to their stories to glean what is required to overcome the obstacles and barriers that perpetuate disparities in education and their communities. Therefore, a narrative inquiry was employed to understand the participant's level of critical consciousness needed to leverage a transformative approach to SEL in education. Narrative inquiry was used to unearth themes and patterns across participants through semi-structured interviews. The overall aim of this study is to bring to the surface what adult SEL professional learning, skills, mindsets, and resources do educators need to leverage social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting.

This methodology chapter shares a self-reflexive statement identifying my positionality and the epistemological framework that guides this study. Secondly, the chapter outlines the data generation and pilot study used to inform this study, which includes the sampling strategy, selection criteria, participants involved, and interview process included in this research study. Thirdly, data analysis procedures are explained. Lastly, validity, ethical, and social justice considerations are acknowledged and addressed.

Epistemological Framework

Zhao et al. (2021) argue that it is wise to assume that a researcher's epistemological stance affects what research question they inquire about and what methodological approaches they choose for a particular study. As a researcher, my epistemological stance informs this study and is rooted in constructivism. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that contends that humans generate knowledge through a meaning-making process between their experiences and their ideas (Mogashoa, 2014).

According to Piaget (1977), knowledge occurs by actively constructing meaning rather than through passive learning. He explains that when learners confront an experience or a situation that clashes with their current thinking, a state of imbalance are generated. The learner must then adjust their thinking to reestablish equilibrium by integrating the new information with their existing knowledge. When learners cannot assimilate the new knowledge with the old, they accommodate by restructuring their present knowledge to a higher level. Piaget's constructivist theory is relevant to this study as the researcher believes that learning happens within oneself and is derived from a meaning-making process that employs critical thinking. This constructivist stance is also influenced by Vygotsky's social learning theory (1978), whereby one's knowledge claims and lived experiences can be affected by other people and is influenced by one's culture and community. Vygotsky suggested that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and is then internalized and used by individuals. Therefore, engaging in co-learning and collaboration can help individuals co-create understanding together, and this construction cannot be possible alone within individuals (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

I believe that learning can be co-constructed and is an ever-evolving, active process whereby an individual's perspective can be altered as one's lived experiences and knowledge constructs shift and develop. However, for educators to shift their knowledge constructs to

address inequities they may not previously know will require a critical lens. By cultivating critical consciousness, educators can engage in a meaning-making process to transform how they understand systems of power and oppression and their overall impact on their students' social and emotional development. Ultimately, it is my view that to foster equitable and inclusive learning environments, educators need to co-create democratic learning environments amongst themselves and with their students and families, which requires strong social-emotional competencies and a critical lens. So, while my epistemological stance is primarily rooted in constructivism, it is also grounded in critical theory. Ultimately, evolving our worldview without critical consciousness could do more harm than good, causing confusion and ineffective implementation of a transformative approach to SEL.

The use of narrative inquiry research design aligns with this epistemological stance in that it provides participants with the opportunity to share their lived experiences with the researcher. Narrative inquiry assists in listening to, observing, and analyzing an educator's meaning-making process related to their level of critical consciousness necessary to implement a transformative approach to SEL. Additionally, semi-structured interviews invite participants to co-construct new meaning and cultivate space for the iterative process. As a result, this epistemological stance guides this research design to consider how individuals (K-12 educators) can shift their world view on a particular topic (creating equity and inclusion in education by leveraging SEL). However, this research design is also influenced by critical theory in that to seek a transformative approach to SEL we must also utilize a critical lens. To understand what educators require for adult SEL skills and mindsets to support equity and inclusivity in schools, requires critical consciousness. In essence,

In summary, through a critical lens, this research design is rooted in an epistemological stance of constructivism that believes individuals can shift their mindsets and widen their world view through a meaning-making process to co-construct new realities with others. When rooted in Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Vygotsky's social learning theory, this meaning-making process can be shaped and supported through learning opportunities and lived experiences within oneself and amongst others. By adopting a critical consciousness lens, this transformative experience can interrogate systems of power and oppression that impact equity and inclusion in schools. It can then explore how fostering social-emotional learning skills in youth and adults can support the co-creation of more democratic and just learning environments.

Reflexivity and Positionality

I am a White, upper-middle-class cisgender female raised in a small coastal town whose primary demographic was White. That position afforded me several unearned privileges (security of living in a safe community, earning a high-quality education, plethora of opportunities to engage in enriching experiences, etc.). Each of these advantages led me to the place where I could depart from my 20-year position as an educator to seek a doctoral degree in transformative leadership, education, and applied research. As a leader, educator, and researcher, these positionalities place me in an even more unique and advantaged privileged vantage point.

As a leader, I have the power to change the landscape of how we sharpen our critical consciousness lens and participate in vital discourse about the role of school communities in creating equitable learning environments so all children can thrive. As a lifelong learner and educator, I have the opportunity to continue my own personal and professional transformation as I co-construct new ways of knowing with my colleagues and students. Finally, as a researcher, I

have the power and privilege to leverage educators' voices to change educational policy for the betterment of youth.

My current positionality on SEL in service of equity is that we must first interrogate the systems that cause such disparities using a critical consciousness lens. Until we do so, we cannot ensure that all youth benefit from SEL. Moreover, we cannot expect educators to be solely responsible for this transformation. My positionality is that we must build authentic school-family-community partnerships to co-construct systems that promote an equity-driven SEL approach that elevates Adult SEL, engages students in SEL, and embeds SEL in schools and homes.

I consider it an extraordinary privilege to engage in research with others. My overall intent as a researcher, holding a constructivist stance, is to develop a research design and validity measures that facilitate participants' meaning-making process to build awareness and inspire action. I am committed to noticing and considering others' narratives with curiosity and care when conducting my research. To safeguard my positionality from influencing my ability to interpret the data collected and accurately report the findings, I am also actively engaging in a self-reflexive practice to understand my own beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing. As a researcher, my positionality is ever-evolving; I am devoted to continuing my engagement in the meaning-making process, expanding my worldview as I seek to become a transformative leader, educator, and researcher.

Consequently, I believe that my positionality as an educator, who is intensely interrogating her White power and privilege, has prepared me to listen to and interpret the beliefs, viewpoints, and lived experiences of educators who may be wrestling with issues related to understanding oppressive systems. I am also aware of the discomfort that can arise when

discussing equity topics. Finally, I hope that this experience has prepared me to be a compassionate researcher with an open heart and a curious mind.

Data Generation

Zhao et al. (2021) encouraged researchers to employ data collection through a dialectic process that seeks to understand and interpret data collectively rather than entering the experience impartially like a passive recipient. They argued for researchers to engage in this process using "a different way of thinking about data—one that asks for openness, not neutrality; engagement, not aloofness; and criticality, not proceduralism" (p. 176). Considering this viewpoint, this study's data generation methods used semi-structured interviews to engage in discourse and reflection amongst the researcher and the participants to discover data. Additionally, a self-reflexive journal was utilized throughout the data generation and analysis process to allow the researcher to reflect on ongoing personal beliefs, assumptions, and positionality. These data generation methods align with a constructivist epistemological stance and narrative inquiry methodology. Together, they allow each participant an opportunity to share their perspective and worldview on the topics presented.

The following section describes the sampling strategies and inclusion criteria of the study. Next, it outlines the research participants' demographics and explains the interview process. Additionally, the official IRB Number associated with this study is 20/21-058, with an approval date of 9/03/2021.

Sampling Strategy

This research study used a *purposive sampling* strategy to select 14 participants based on pre-determined investigation criteria. Specifically, participants were certified educators currently teaching in a K-12 public school setting in the U.S. According to Zhao et al. (2021), a purposive

sampling strategy is used when the sample for a study is distinctive and would render particularly insightful data, though not necessarily a representation of the larger population. In this case, this purposive sampling sought to amplify the voices of public-school educators. The goal was to understand better their lived experiences and viewpoints on issues related to existing systems, policies, and practices in public education that may create disparities and the role social-emotional learning might play in mitigating such barriers. By understanding educators' stories and experiences, we may transfer these insights to other public-school educators outside the study.

Participants were enlisted by outreach to Facebook and LinkedIn professional groups in education, social-emotional learning, school counseling, and social work using a recruitment opt-in page (Appendix A). Interested participants that met the selection criteria were then sent a survey link to review and sign the informed consent (Appendix B) and complete the participant information form (Appendix C) that included a brief questionnaire to gather important information and demographics from each participant. Once participants were selected, a follow-up email was sent to schedule the 1:1 interview via the Zoom teleconferencing platform. Additionally, participants were offered a gift card as compensation for participating in this study.

Participant Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria to participate in this study were as follows:

1. Be a licensed educator with a certification in any of the following states: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

2. Be currently teaching in any level of a K-12 public school setting.

3. Have at least two years of experience directly teaching social-emotional learning in the classroom setting.

4. Be willing and available to participate in a 60 minute 1:1 interview with the researcher through a remote video conferencing platform.

Participants

Fourteen participants between the ages of 27 and 47 engaged in this study and were required to be certified educators who work in a K-12 public school setting. Six participants worked in an elementary school setting, five at the high school level, two in a middle school setting, and one was a clinical director at all three levels. Nine participants are employed at an urban district, four in a suburban district, and one in a rural district. Of the participants, two identified as Asian females, one as a Black female, one as a Black male, one as an Asian male, one as a Hispanic male, and eight as White females. All participants live in either New York, New Jersey, or one of the six New England states. Table 3.1 specifies the demographics of each participant in alphabetic order using their chosen pseudonym.

Table 3.1

Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	State	Grade(s)	School Setting
Akira	34	M	Asian	Massachusetts	9-12th	Urban
Helena	37	F	White	Connecticut	K	Suburban
Jackie	47	F	White	Massachusetts	11-12th	Urban
Julianne	42	F	White	Massachusetts	7th	Urban
Kaitlyn	40	F	White	Massachusetts	K-5th	Suburban
Liz	27	F	White	Massachusetts	5-6th	Urban
Miguel	31	M	Hispanic	Connecticut	K-12th	Urban
Raquel	47	F	Black	Massachusetts	9-12th	Urban
Saira	35	F	Asian-Indian	Massachusetts	2nd	Urban
Scooter	37	M	Black	Massachusetts	5th	Urban
Siren	37	F	White	New Jersey	8th	Suburban
Susan	46	F	White	Massachusetts	5th	Urban
Suzy	32	F	Asian	Vermont	2nd	Rural
Tami	35	F	White	New York	9-12th	Suburban

Interview Process

Once participants were selected, they engaged in a semi-structured interview process that utilized an interview protocol (Appendix D). An interview protocol comprises instructions for the interview procedure that specifically outlines questions before the interview (Creswell, 2015). Interview questions originated from the literature review, personal experience, and professional knowledge on social-emotional learning, equity, and associated areas of interest, including trauma-informed and restorative practices. Interviews were conducted through remote access via the Zoom platform and were recorded and transcribed through a professional transcription service (www.rev.com). Data collection methods also included field notes observing my interview techniques and capabilities post-interview. In addition, they were collected in a self-reflexive journal to support my continued research development.

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Data Analysis

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According to Kim (2016), through narrative inquiry, researchers can use data analysis and interpretation as a meaning-making act to better understand human phenomena and existence. By analyzing the narratives of the human experience, we can better understand human actions. This narrative analysis aimed to integrate the educators' experiences into themes and then convert these narratives into a rich and detailed description of the result of the analysis for the reader. As a narrative researcher, I do not stand outside in a neutral position, merely presenting the words being told, but rather, I am intimately involved in the process of analyzing and interpreting the plots, themes, and social and cultural constructs to develop an understanding of the meanings of one's lived experiences through storytelling (Kim, 2016). The purpose of collecting and analyzing interview data is to allow personal experiences to be shared privately between the researcher and the interviewer.

The data analysis process involved in this fieldwork consisted of thematic analysis and followed three stages. First, thematic analysis is the quest for and extraction of common patterns found in the narratives central to the description of the phenomenon and become the categories for analysis (Yukhymenko et al., 2014). Second, this data analysis approach allowed for ideas and patterns to emerge. In particular, themes related to a participant's knowledge claims, meaning-making process, beliefs, assumptions, biases, and personal and professional lived experiences relate to social-emotional learning and equity. Third, the researcher is committed to an active, ongoing engagement with the literature associated with narrative inquiry and thematic analysis and the writing process while collecting and analyzing the data.

Thematic analysis was the process utilized to analyze, assemble, and interpret the data from each narrative to bring to the surface initial cross-sectional codes, paying attention to the foregrounded and backgrounded messages in the transcripts (Kim, 2016). First, thematic analysis was utilized to analyze, assemble, and interpret the data in each interview to compile thematic data to create a short introduction for each participant. Each introduction briefly described the participant's journey as an educator, their professional identity and demographics and offered succinct highlights of some of the surfaced themes and subthemes. Next, the thematic analysis process deepened by assembling and interpreting the data from each narrative to discover any initial cross-sectional codes. The codes were then manually organized into main categories. Manual coding was chosen because it allowed me to fully immerse in the narratives, paying attention to the foregrounded and backgrounded messages in the transcripts. Then, once these codes were identified, another round of examination occurred to collate and organize the data under each category to identify the overlapping themes and subthemes.

Moreover, the researcher analyzed the self-reflexive journal for additional themes and patterns. Finally, once the participant introductions and findings sections were written, the researcher then engaged in the member checking process by sharing an interview summary highlighting the findings with each participant. This validity measure allowed for the meaning-making process to evolve for participants. After this member checking round, a final round of thematic analysis was conducted to include any additional participant reflections. Through narrative inquiry using thematic analysis, data from all interviews and reflexive journals were analyzed, interpreted, and coded to glean relevant information to answer my research inquiry.

Pilot Study

In preparation for this vital work, I engaged in an informal pilot study to help shape the interview protocols. This process also informed best practices for assisting the participants to engage in dialogue surrounding potentially uncomfortable topics and social structures that impact equity in education. As part of this informal pilot study, the researcher conducted a 1:1 interview with a 6th grade White cisgender male social studies teacher. The most significant outcome gleaned from this experience was the need to clarify my chosen lead-off topic questions further and shift the order so my intended research inquiry could be more thoroughly answered. As a result, I have updated my interview protocol to reflect these needed changes.

Additionally, I conducted an informal discussion with 11 aspiring mental health professionals via Zoom who are currently furthering their education in school counseling. Before the meeting, I sent the participants a condensed summary defining transformative SEL and a list of four topic questions we were likely to discuss. During the conversation, participants were eager to speak on the topic of SEL. All participants offered their viewpoints and perspectives that the other members respectfully received. Overall, the conversation was fruitful and offered some

initial insight that pointed to the importance of SEL for educators. Furthermore, this informal pilot study experience gave me the confidence that building trust and rapport is possible to establish via a remote platform.

Validity

Zhao et al. (2021) contended that we inevitably engage in a meaning-making process to comprehend any knowledge claim. Carspecken (1996) explained that the three types of knowledge claims (objective-realm, subjective, and normative) require distinctive consequent validity strategies to ensure a research design and methodology harmoniously embody the considered narrative inquiry. Multiple validity measures were considered in this research design to enhance these three types of knowledge claims.

First, *objective-realm knowledge claims* are based on the truth of multiple access by different observers. Providing a detailed and vivid description of the study's setting, participants, and themes is a validity procedure that can enhance objective-realm knowledge claims. It establishes credibility through the readers' lens. Researchers help readers understand that the findings are credible while also enabling them to decide the validity of the results to generalize to other settings or similar contexts (Creswell and Miller, 2000). I committed to writing in a storytelling process to create a detailed description of the participants' experiences during the interviews to boost the objective-realm knowledge claims. The intention was to paint an accurate report of the research collected by providing abundant details for the reader to absorb.

In contrast, *subjective knowledge claims* are based on privileged access into the research participant's emotions, aspirations, levels of awareness, and meaning-making process. The purpose of the 1:1 interviews is to offer each participant space to express their realities by sharing their beliefs, viewpoints, and experiences as they know them without fear of judgment.

Additionally, cultivating trust and openness amongst researchers and participants to ensure authentic and sincere exchanges helped bolster the subjective knowledge claim. I created a safe space for participants to share their lived experiences and engage in the dialectic process with the researcher. This was fostered as part of the welcome and introduction procedures during the 1:1 interviews.

Finally, *normative knowledge claims* are based on position-taking and recognition of a particular cultural view to understanding a phenomenon from that perspective (Carspecken, 1996). Researcher reflexivity is a validity strategy that can improve normative knowledge claims. Researcher reflexivity is a process whereby researchers report personal beliefs, values, and biases that may shape their inquiry. Zhao et al. (2021) argued that validity measures must involve a concerted effort on the researcher's part to actively reflect on their interests in and assumptions about knowledge in general and their particular research phenomenon. This awareness allows a researcher to examine how this knowing facilitates or hinders their effectiveness in that given research context. Ultimately, they contend that "as you explicate your epistemological assumptions, often in the form of personal theories, you can more easily be able to consciously design a study that best honors your values and commitments as a researcher and stay open to being challenged and to change" (p. 108). When researchers acknowledge and describe their entering beliefs and biases early in the research process, it enhances validity by allowing readers to understand their positions and seeks to prevent bias as the study proceeds (Creswell and Miller, 2000). As indicated, I actively participated in self-reflexivity to acknowledge my power and positionality concerning the participants and the knowledge claims regarding SEL, equity, and inclusion in education. Additionally, throughout the research and writing process, I was committed to engaging in the iterative meaning-making process to

interrogate my beliefs, assumptions, and biases that may hinder the data collection and interpretation progression.

Finally, member checking is a validity procedure that can improve normative knowledge claims whereby the researchers take data and analyses back to the participants in the study to verify the trustworthiness of the information and narrative interpretation (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Member checking through unfolding dialogue was utilized throughout the data gathering and analysis process to check for validity. More formally, member checking occurred by offering participants an opportunity to review their interview summaries and collective themes to validate or dispute the knowledge claims of the themes that surfaced during the interview process. Of the 14 participants, Akira, Jackie, Kaitlyn, and Julianne chose to participate in this process. Each of them validated that their individual summaries and the concluding themes and recommendations reflected their individual and collective beliefs, perspectives, and experiences as an educator in relation to SEL and equity. Together, researcher reflexivity, engaging in detailed, vivid descriptions of the data collected, and member checking were implemented to ensure a holistic approach to validity.

Ethical Considerations

Although ethical considerations are essential in research, the concern becomes more salient in qualitative research due to its iterative and dynamic process (Baker et al., 2016). Since my study seeks to understand better how educators can support marginalized and oppressed youth, my responsibility as a qualitative researcher is to ensure an ethical research process to balance the potential risks of research against the potential benefits. As a given, participation in this study is voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. This was clearly outlined in the informed consent, before and during the 1:1

interview. The interviews were conducted privately to maximize participants' anonymity, and participants were asked not to discuss the focus group's matters with outsiders to enhance confidentiality. The data collected from the questionnaires and interviews were kept private, using pseudonyms, and were stored in a password-protected computer. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Since the narrative inquiry is a relational method, it requires ethical considerations. A critical step to the ethics surrounding narrative inquiry is the commitment to being a reflexive researcher. Kim (2016) recommends that researchers put their actions under the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data, addressing essential questions such as, "How do I know what I know?" and "How am I being ethical?" Central to self-reflexivity is building caring relationships with participants that honor their stories and shared lived experiences in the narrative inquiry process. Together, "caring reflexivity" can help improve the quality and validity of the research to be more rigorous (Kim, 2016).

Finally, it should be disclosed that I have a personal interest in researching and learning about the SEL skills, mindsets, beliefs, viewpoints, and experiences of educators. I left my position as an educator to advance my education and build a business to support SEL professional learning experiences for school communities to create systemic change in education. Therefore, it is only reasonable to consider that the data collected may impact future training in my program. However, as mentioned prior, I have chosen the validity strategies of self-reflexivity and member checking to ensure my role as a researcher remains at the forefront of this research study. This is to safeguard the reliability of the data and allow participants' voices to rise to the surface without the interference of my positionality.

Social Justice Aims

I left my 20-year position as an educator to pursue my doctoral degree not for lack of love for the job but because of what I believed was missing in education. I knew that my fellow front liners in education were a dedicated, hardworking, and compassionate group of human beings who needed more support, resources, and sustainable solutions to the challenges they faced each day when educating our next generation. I also knew that we needed to be more intentional in creating space to educate the whole child and that social-emotional learning was a viable answer.

In the end, my doctoral journey helped me to better understand that it's not just about fostering the SEL competencies in students and ensuring they are kind and respectful to one another. It's also about recognizing that the starting line is not the same for all youth. Things like systemic racism, poverty, trauma, and other biases push the starting line farther and farther back for many of them. Building relationships with students let them know that we see and value them, but it does not help shift their starting line closer to where it should be. That unfairness is inequity, and as an educational system, we have a lot to learn about how it affects our students, their social-emotional development, and their chances of success. I hope this research study will help school communities wipe the fog from their equity lens and provide them with the confidence to advocate for a transformative approach to SEL. Only then can we reach beyond the status quo of inequities that penetrate the educational system and bravely come together to interrogate the structures that prevent all students from growing into whole civic-minded beings both in their hearts and minds.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological framework and research design for this dissertation project. I begin this chapter with a brief account of the study's overall purpose and

the resulting research question from the identified literature gap. I then examined my epistemological stance as a constructivist and engaged in a self-reflexive process to reveal the correspondence of my stance to my positionality as a white, upper-middle-class cisgender female educator and entrepreneur. Next, I outlined my intent to use purposive sampling strategies and identified the inclusion criteria for selecting research participants. Following the selection process, data collection and analysis procedures were outlined to bring forth my intention to use thematic analysis to code and investigate the information gathered from the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Afterward, an evaluation of the validity and normative, subjective, and objective knowledge claims were acknowledged and summarized. Lastly, potential ethical considerations were revealed to illuminate potential obstacles or barriers in this dissertation project.

In conclusion, this study seeks to utilize a qualitative methodology through narrative inquiry to understand an educator's role in actualizing a transformative approach to SEL in education. This research design is rooted in an epistemological stance of constructivism that believes individuals can widen their world view through a meaning-making process to co-construct new realities with others. Through narrative inquiry, we can listen to educators' stories to glean what is required to support them in overcoming the obstacles and barriers that perpetuate disparities in education and their communities. Therefore, the narrative inquiry was employed to understand the participant's level of critical consciousness needed to leverage a transformative approach to SEL in education. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this narrative inquiry endeavored to unearth themes and patterns across participants. This study aims to reveal what adult SEL skills, mindsets, professional learning, and conditions educators need to

leverage social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS

This qualitative narrative inquiry examines how K-12 schools can leverage social-emotional learning (SEL) to develop the whole child and create more equitable and inclusive learning environments so all youth get what they need to succeed. This section briefly introduces each of the 14 participants who graciously contributed to this study.

The thematic analysis process involved examining each individual interview for thematic data highlighting some of the surfaced themes and subthemes, including the participant's journey as an educator, their professional identity, and demographics of both the educator and their students. Sharing these introductions centers the reader in abstracting the "characters" whose beliefs, viewpoints, and lived experiences are revealed in the subsequent findings chapter.

As interview transcripts contained typical verbal tics such as "like," "um," and backtracking to find the right word, many direct quotations have been lightly edited for conciseness and readability. Additionally, participant names are protected using pseudonyms throughout the document.

Miguel

Miguel, a 31-year-old Hispanic male, residing in Connecticut, began his career in education seven years ago as a school social worker. His prior work as an in-home therapist and a mobile crisis team member ignited his interest in social work, where he pursued his original goal of "figure[ing] out ways to support students in schools." After about five years in the school environment, Miguel noticed staff members needed a more therapeutic leadership style from their administrators, which led him to pursue a role in the administration. He currently serves as clinical director for seven urban elementary, middle, and high schools, where he oversees a variety of medical and therapeutic staff.

Additionally, as a doctoral candidate, Miguel is investigating the impact of teacher burnout during the COVID pandemic and why some teachers choose to stay in the role of educator while others are not. His research suggests that culture plays a significant role:

> We're noticing for Latinx teachers, it's more of a cultural aspect . . . where there's pride in your profession and pride in your culture . . . and quitting or leaving or choosing something else is a form of weakness.

Miguel candidly shared the implicit bias he faces from colleagues and district leaders based on his Hispanic heritage: "You just get all those comments [like] 'Oh, I just assumed that you went to community college,' or 'I assumed that you didn't know your dad.'" He also regularly encounters microaggressions in the form of having his educational and leadership practices called into question. This requires him to consistently justify his methods with evidence, research, and data: "The ignorance is there; implicit bias is there, right? And people were just jumping to [conclusions and] assuming things…especially when you [participate in] services that affect Black and Spanish people."

Amid volatile criticism of public school curriculum, Miguel voiced concerns about schools shying away from discussing critical consciousness and adopting culturally responsive teaching practices:

> It used to be more open in the classroom, part of the discussions. History . . . [and] civic classes would talk about it and incorporate it into . . . what we're experiencing now and how trauma can be generational and things of that sort. But . . . since September, I haven't heard anyone talk about it—any of the classes for any of the schools.

Miguel prioritizes building trusting relationships with the staff he supervises, which creates a foundation for him to provide administrative support. He also believes that restorative practices can engage staff and students in ways that promote community-building and model responsible decision-making. His holistic approach to leadership embraces his staff's well-being and identifies conditions that can foster their efficacy. This year, Miguel has set a goal to help students develop the necessary coping skills to handle change, especially amidst unpredictability and instability.

Helena

Helena, a 37-year-old White female, living in Connecticut, describes herself as a lifelong learner. An eight-year teaching veteran, Helena holds a master's in education and a certification in special education. She is currently working toward her Ph.D. to become an administrator. Her research focuses on the impact of distance learning on special education students.

During her teaching career, Helena has held various instructional roles, including a regular education first-grade teacher in an urban district, a special education teacher in a self-contained classroom, and a full-time virtual learning educator last year. She now teaches in a new district as a regular education kindergarten teacher in a primarily White Pre-K-6 suburban public school. The school's roughly 740 students include some minority students who are bused in from Hartford through the Choice Program.

Helena found her calling as an educator as an adolescent caring for children after school. She described how this experience motivated her to become a teacher:

I first started doing an aftercare program when I was about 15, and so I was helping out K-8 students doing things, and I was just like, "This is something I really enjoy doing."

And so, when I was thinking about something I would want to do for the rest of my life, I was like, "All right, I want to do something that I enjoy, right? Something that doesn't feel like it's work." So that's where [my teaching vocation] really started.

From the onset of the interview, Helena emphasized the importance of achieving equity for all students by looking at each child as a whole, unique person with specific, individual needs and strengths. She sympathized with students facing challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and expressed a strong belief that metrics don't tell the whole story when indicating these students have fallen behind:

> There's always that new push for something. The education department comes up with their new rules or new things or new guidelines. . . . They keep saying . . . that all the kids are behind . . . and I'm like, "In the grand scheme of life, they're really not behind."

However, Helena remained acutely cognizant of inequities between her suburban district, made up of mostly White middle- to high-income families, and her fellow urban districts. Helena's district has a plethora of resources to support students, and her less affluent neighboring districts struggle with large classroom sizes and inefficient resources to fully address student needs.

Helen demonstrated her critical awareness when noting how her primary focus as a Kindergarten teacher at this time must be helping her students function in a classroom environment and adjust to school procedures so they have an overall sense of well-being. She was noticeably grateful that her current school designates daily time to support students' social-emotional welfare through evidence-based curriculums (Second Step and Harmony).

However, Helena recognized the importance of incorporating SEL into all subjects and routines. Her goal this year is to "put SEL into everything that we do . . . so that it doesn't get lost along the way." She believes in weaving SEL into the natural learning environment during teachable moments and wants to "sprinkle it everywhere I can throughout the day."

Tami

Tami, a 35-year-old White female with 12 years of teaching experience, felt called to be a teacher from a young age: "I always knew that I really loved working with kids, and I knew that I wanted to be in a profession where I could make an impact and make a positive change." She lives in New Jersey and teaches Grades 9 through 12 in a suburban district in New York. Tami described her school as, "Right next to a county that is very wealthy, upper class, all white, not very diverse. There are some kids at my school that are Black, Indian, but for the most part, it's a lot of white kids." Her school serves between 1,200 and 1,500 students.

Of her students who were returning to in-person learning after the COVID-19 school closures, Tami said, "Socially, emotionally, they're much better than I thought they would be. They're adjusting okay. They have been present in school a lot more often than I thought they would be." She objected to the term "learning loss" as a descriptor of shortfalls in academic progress during school closures, as it implied students regressed during remote instruction and lacked any new learning during that time.

Tami expressed concerns about drama and friction in her district regarding how best to address equity and inclusion in the school community, citing:

> But I would love to work somewhere that I do feel supported in trying to make it truly a
> safe and inclusive space for everybody. But it seems that a lot of time, there's just so

much tension . . . and everyone kind of seems to have an agenda, and our administrators don't seem to wanna be caught in the middle. And I feel like administrators have no guidance either. They just don't know how to support us and how to tell us to best support our kids, so we all kind of feel a little bit lost.

While Tami shared that her school was planning to roll out an evidence-based SEL curriculum (RULER), she felt that "Ideally, I think it [SEL] should look and feel really authentic and it should just be embedded in instruction every single day." She further questioned, "How can you really do SEL the right way if you aren't going to be able to let people be who they truly are?" Ultimately, Tami's goal for this year is to create a trusting space where her students feel seen, heard, and acknowledged enough to express themselves freely.

Akira

Akira, a 34-year-old Asian male residing in Massachusetts, started his career in education 12 years ago as a middle school art teacher. His urban school district serves a diverse population of students, including White, Jamaican, Brazilian, and Hispanic. He now holds the position of a Grade 8-12 Dean of Students in a school with roughly 1800 students and 200 faculty. Akira is currently one of a small number of BIPOC staff that teach at his school. From the onset, a career in teaching attracted Akira because he desired a profession where "every day was different." He added, "I like having routine and ritual, but I also like the unknown and uncertainty, and it's suspenseful."

When speaking about setting priorities for students and instructors, Akira voiced strongly that learning should take precedence over other concerns. His philosophy reflected a belief that students achieved the greatest learning gains when teachers delivered curriculum through a variety of teaching methods. He leaned into the idea of adopting a more culturally responsive

teaching style to allow students to see themselves in the curriculum, which would enrich and heighten their learning experiences.

Akria's school recently implemented a Universal Design for Learning framework, which helps provide all students with an equal opportunity to learn. He seemed encouraged by its potential to positively affect student learning. Furthermore, Akira's narrative perceptively exposed that while he was in favor of deemphasizing standardized tests as measures of student and teacher achievement, he acknowledged that teachers struggled to let go of the teaching-to-the-test mindset after being habituated to it for years.

During his interview, Akira expressed empathy for students, most of whom had not yet experienced a "normal" high school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This had resulted in a high rate of immature behaviors. In response to these lagging social-emotional skills, Akira's school decided to implement a weekly advisory class this year to deliver an evidence-based SEL curriculum to students, but he was leery of the impact it would have after witnessing pushback from staff. The dissenters argued that the curriculum felt unauthentic, and it wasn't their job to teach these skills.

He shared some of their reservations: "I guess the research behind it is that if kids feel connected to somebody, they're gonna perform better." However, he felt it would be more impactful for him to teach the skills through his natural interactions with students as Dean rather than from the front of a classroom. Entrenched in these reflections, Akira's voice became intensely attuned to a need for adults to grow their own social-emotional skills and mindsets, and he shared, "You have a group of staff that is resistant to change, and . . . it's [those same] social-emotional skills that they're lagging themselves. So how can we expect them to teach it?" He

suggested that helping educators blend SEL into the core subjects might be more realistic for staff and students than isolating an SEL curriculum into an advisory class.

It was clear throughout the interview that Akira tried to intentionally consider students' perspectives when addressing unexpected behaviors. This allowed him flexibility when responding to infractions that were not detrimental to learning. He explicitly identified nominal rule violations, such as students wearing hats, did not necessarily justify disciplinary intervention when learning was unaffected. Akira would like to implement a more restorative justice approach to discipline but was unsure the idea would come to fruition. These tensions illuminated his overall concern around student well-being and how best to support whole-child development. In summarizing his overall philosophy on education, Akira adamantly expressed that learning should be fun and teachers should focus learning activities on providing students with a baseline of knowledge to build upon.

Siren

Siren, a 37-year-old White female with seven years of teaching experience, said of the origins of her teaching vocation, "I always joke; it's a fate that I ran from for many years. Ever since I was little, I was told I was going to be a teacher." She first studied archaeology in college and then switched to English and considered becoming a writer. Her professors continued to encourage her to become a teacher, yet she remained resistant to that path. Her reluctance came from her fear that she would be forced to teach in ways that were not in her students' best interests. Eventually, she earned her master's in education but taught only briefly before leaving her position to start a family.

Spending four years outside of the workforce as a stay-at-home mom impacted Siren's self-worth. She described her state of mind at the time by saying, "I watched myself kind of

disappear and didn't feel like I had any value." At her mother's encouragement, Siren resumed her teaching career, a change that felt like a return to her proper place. She said, "When I was in college to get my master's, this thing [teaching] that I'd been running away from, it was when I felt most aligned."

As a Grade 8 English and Study Skills teacher in a diverse suburban district in New Jersey, Siren uses a holistic approach. She emphasizes building relationships with her students and allowing them creative ways to express their identities. In her position, she is provided autonomy to meet her students' needs as she deems fit.

According to Siren, her school culture and climate are positive, genuinely caring, and focused on student well-being. In expressing her perspective on SEL, she suggested that attention on student accountability via grades and test scores was often contrary to the goals of SEL:

> Everything has to be attached to some sort of outcome or grade. And the tough thing with SEL is that you might never see the effect. It's planting the seed, right? But that might help them two years from now. SEL . . . in essence is creating containers and spaces and holding them for students.

Siren focuses her approach to social-emotional learning on modeling these skills and providing a safe place for students to express themselves. She believes in being open and honest and leaning into having difficult conversations with her students. These conversations can ignite their desire to be well-rounded and kind humans.

However, Siren reported that her school falls short in providing central messaging around equity and inclusion:

A message that happens with administration sometimes is a mixed message. So, when things happen in the world, we will be told to address it or maybe not address it, but as soon as somebody complains, that teacher gets in trouble; the support gets pulled.

Siren hopes for a future in which school communities create their new normal together, one that focuses on changing classroom dynamics and allowing students to have more input on the changes:

Being able to see themselves as teachers, . . . it's more . . . interactive [and] equitable like we're all participants.

Raquel

Raquel, a 47-year-old Black woman, has 20 years of experience in education. As a high school student, she considered becoming a lawyer or working in fashion design, but she ultimately felt a calling to education. Raquel first worked as a daycare director and then taught in two urban districts (one Charter and one Public). She currently teaches Grades 9, 11, and 12 Social Studies in an urban district in Massachusetts.

During the interview, Raquel mentioned some contention in the community about whether her current district should be designated "urban." Still," she added, "We are a school that has urban problems." Raquel believes the root of the debate involves members of the community resisting the transition from their previous identity as a rural coastal town to an urban one, as well as resisting an increasing proportion of minority students: "I think they want to go back to when the school was maybe 10% minorities or 15%. So, there's a big disconnect with that with the community. We now have about 38%."

Citing equity as an important cause, Raquel detailed working with the superintendent for the past two years on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Through her advocacy, she has promoted culturally affirming teaching practices, which allow students to see themselves in the curriculum. Raquel stated that she wanted her efforts to create an inclusive educational environment for all students: "We are here to educate all students and to help all students feel comfortable and supported and safe in the classroom."

When discussing the topic of social-emotional learning, she admitted to not being a fan of it at first, noting how she questioned "What is this nonsense?" and did not appreciate it being "shoved down our throats when it first happened." Now, Raquel sees the value in building relationships with students and helping them shape vital life skills that allow them to function in this world with manners and respect for others, including authority.

Raquel also expressed concern about the uptick of disruptive and disrespectful behaviors this year. She felt her school's discipline policies and practices warranted an overhaul and believes restorative practices could be a viable option. However, she understood that "it has to be implemented correctly, and you have to have the backing of the community. If you don't have that, then it's a waste of time."

When asked about her vision and goals for the year with regards to social-emotional learning and equity, she candidly shared:

I don't have any serious goals this year. To be honest, I am simply trying to focus on surviving this pandemic. It has created underlying anxiety in me, and I feel like society wants teachers to ignore the fact that we are all in collective trauma. I am teaching, but I don't feel that I am on top of my game. I am barely treading water. Much time is devoted

to reteaching basic skills to kids because they essentially lost a year and a half of learning. I find that having more personal conversations with students to guide them to better behaviors and self-management seems to be the best style for me in terms of incorporating SEL.

Susan

Susan, a 46-year-old White female with 22 years of teaching experience, first developed an interest in teaching as a teenager, "I love school, and I was a very, very, very good student, like, stupidly good." In high school, she was salutatorian in a class of 700. In college, her interest in social justice reaffirmed her calling to teach because "I thought education would be the great equalizer." However, Susan had to follow her passion and complete her teacher education in spite of her professors' efforts to steer her toward other careers: "I had a lot of teachers saying, 'Don't be a teacher; be a lawyer or a doctor.'"

She currently teaches Grade 5 in a large K-8 urban district in Massachusetts, serving a diverse population of approximately 500 students. Operating under a full inclusion educational model, each classroom in the school has two regular education teachers, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional.

Her commitment to social justice is at the forefront of Susan's educational philosophy. She strongly disapproves of standardized testing as a goal of instruction and measure of student achievement, stating that it forces educators to use a deficit thinking lens and label students based on testing performance. She said, "I happen to think the MCAS is stupid and not a real measure of student performance or ability and a racist test because the knowledge base is usually very Western, white-centered."

Susan's district offered some professional development in September 2020 around equity; however, she discouragingly reported the initiative had fizzled out and fallen flat. She observed that her school culture and climate lack trust and cohesiveness, but she enjoys a positive relationship with her co-workers in her classroom. Together, they have implemented a variety of methods to address their students' social and emotional development. While they use an evidence-based SEL curriculum (Second Step), Susan dislikes its contrived feel and prefers blending SEL into her everyday practice as an educator. She and her colleagues also rely heavily on using a PBIS approach with incentives and rewards to support student behavior. Her goal as an educator this year is to:

> Provide my students not only with interesting and relevant content, but also help students grow emotionally and socially. I plan to do this using Restorative Justice Circles, de-escalation training, SEL lessons developed by me, [my] colleagues, and the district. I will also reflect on the needs of my students and notice their successes as well as areas that need more support.

Scooter

Scooter, a 37-year-old Black male with ten years of teaching experience, describes himself as an "Army brat." He attended high school in the U.S. after returning from Germany, and as a teenager, he started going to a local youth center to make friends and work with mentors. Scooter's positive relationships with these mentors, which he described as "like friendships," first sparked his interest in teaching. The youth center provided Scooter with opportunities to volunteer, and he worked with infants through pre-K. His fellow volunteers noticed his innate ability to connect with children and recommended that he become a teacher. Initially, Scooter resisted attending college, but encouragement from his colleagues and mentors

eventually prompted him to apply. After earning his teacher certification, he taught for two years in urban charter schools in the Southeastern United States before relocating to Massachusetts. He currently teaches Grade 5 in a diverse urban district serving roughly 850 students.

During his interview, Scooter acknowledged that while his district had a long way to go in serving all students through an equity lens, he was encouraged that they were placing a high focus on anti-racist teaching. He spoke positively of efforts to train staff on understanding and recognizing their biases and microaggressions in the classroom. He is one of few educators of color in his school and district and has joined the Ally Group that includes other like-minded colleagues and community members who have a vested interest in creating social change in his school community.

Scooter places great importance on having open and honest conversations with his students about racism in an age-appropriate manner, and he believes it's vital to connect about these issues:

> I try to be as real with them as possible about the history and about things that have gone on in the news [and] things that I've been through. Because I can relate to a lot of the things that they're going through, having grown up in poverty, having family members that have gone through things as well. So, I try to share my experiences in a G-rated fashion.

Scooter also voiced the importance of building his own SEL skills to help support the social-emotional development in the youth he teaches, and he makes it a priority to promote a calm, comfortable learning environment. Using humor to relate to and connect with kids brings

levity into his classroom interactions. In turn, that levity creates trust, a sense of belonging, and strong relationships.

Suzy

Suzy, a 32-year-old Asian female with seven years of teaching experience, "grew up appreciating educators in general." Her mother was a teacher, so the idea of joining the teaching profession came to her early. However, the most powerful push sprang from the way she saw her role in her community:

> I think I wanted to become a teacher because I felt like I didn't just love kids; I also wanted to really help in some way, and it seems corny, but like have some kind of civic duty of responsibility.

Suzy currently teaches Grade 2 in a rural district in Vermont where "The kids are wonderful, and they are curious, just as they are anywhere else." She believes her students required modeling and practice with self-expression because there are fewer opportunities for interaction in a rural setting:

> They also have this unique need for talk, for speech, and to be heard, and they actually need a bit more in terms of modeling than I've seen in my previous settings.

Suzy reported that most of her students came from impoverished, single parent homes and noted that one in five of her students was on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for speech. This also contributed to the needs she had observed and diligently tried to meet.

In describing her perspective on SEL, Suzy emphasized her belief that repairing relationships in an active, positive way should replace punitive discipline approaches when a student's behavior adversely affects other members of the learning community. She helps

students take the initiative in making amends for their negative actions: "It gives them a lot more agency, understanding, and hopefully would build empathy for their classmates."

Additionally, she expressed concerns around the universal perception that educators and schools are solely responsible for a child's success and cited an article in *The Atlantic*, stating:

> Schools . . . can only account for like 20% of the responsibility to a community's success. People always point to, "Well, the school needs to get better, the test scores are [poor], no child left behind, [so] we're gonna put these mandates on teachers." But really the community is responsible for at least 60% of whether the people in it succeed. So, until communities can be strengthened, and people can be paid a living wage and [find] stable housing, affordable housing, then test scores are not gonna do anything.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn, a first-year educator, is a 40-year-old White female living in Massachusetts. She has prior experience working in the foster care system and as a paraprofessional in an ELL program. During that time, her district gave her vouchers that enabled her to go to school for social work, and there she developed the desire to work with children in the school setting. Kaitlyn commented that, "I wanted to be in a school. I love the school environment, the kids."

She currently works as a Grade K-5 School Adjustment Counselor (SAC) for two schools in a suburban district where most of the students come from families of low socioeconomic status. In addition to her duties as a SAC, which involve providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 support to special education students who need it, Kaitlyn also serves as a guidance counselor. Kaitlyn works with 22 students across both of her schools. In one school, the majority of the students she interacts with are on the Autism Spectrum (ASD), and in the other school, the majority of her

students have social-emotional cognitive deficits as the result of trauma. She said of the students who have experienced trauma that they were "just kids that need a little bit of extra attention throughout the day, just to talk about their feelings and identifying what they are, the triggers and coping skills."

In her interview, Kaitlyn addressed concerns with discipline practices that shaped student behaviors through shaming techniques (i.e., the clip up/down system). She was more favorable to a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) approach that focused on praising and rewarding students for expected behaviors. She also spoke highly of how SEL instruction empowered students by focusing on positive behaviors, but she wasn't particularly interested in the curriculum they were using, as it seemed outdated.

Additionally, while Kaitlyn's knowledge of equity and culturally responsive teaching practices were still budding, she expressed strong empathy for students who experienced trauma. She emphasized the importance of teachers understanding the many ways that trauma in students can be exhibited in the classroom. She said of trauma and its effects on students, "Trauma's ugly. It rears its head in many different ways. It could be from typical dysregulation that you think of when you think of a kid having a temper tantrum to presenting more like ADHD, and they can't focus." She added of the imperative of informing teachers about how trauma could manifest in negative student behaviors, "That's something to keep in mind, especially when you're thinking about your reaction."

Kaitlyn set a goal this year to help students build skills to self-regulate and calm themselves. She hopes that by learning to identify and express their feelings and utilize effective coping strategies, her students will be better prepared to handle everyday life situations.

Julianne

Julianne, a 42-year-old White female with 20 years of teaching experience, originally planned to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in physical therapy. However, when she learned that her degrees required participating in a cadaver lab, she switched her major to education. Because Julianne believed she would enjoy being an educator, the switch didn't feel disappointing to her: "I was like, 'All right, I know I like kids. I've done a lot of babysitting.'" Initially, Julianne taught math to regular education students but ended up earning her master's in special education and currently teaches Grade 6 special education in an urban district in Massachusetts.

During her interview, Julianne expressed how essential culturally affirming teaching practices and equity were in education. She described equity from a special-education perspective as, "Trying to level the playing field, so everybody gets what they need." This is of utmost importance to Julianne, as the demographics of her classroom and school are very diverse. She feels strongly that her district needs to offer more training to help her better incorporate the corresponding practices into her teaching.

Julianne reported the necessity of understanding and empathizing with students who were victims of trauma. Committed to enhancing her ability to meet these students' needs, she has taken nine graduate credits in trauma-informed practices. Julianne recognized an imperative for teachers to understand how trauma can manifest in negative student behaviors that could impact learning, such as aggression and withdrawal. She said of one student, "He's seen abuse; he's seen domestic violence, and [aggressive behavior] seems to be his go-to. It's what he knows."

She expressed concerns about education practice still embracing a "one size fits all" mentality and hopes to see needed shifts toward a more therapeutic education system. In

reference to the recent rise in discipline issues, Julianne felt a restorative justice approach would hold students accountable while helping them better understand the impact of their actions. Her goal for the year is to support her students in building connections with their peers so they feel more included and have a sense of belonging within the school community.

Saira

Saira, a 35-year-old Asian-Indian female with ten years of teaching experience, currently teaches Grade 2 in an urban district. Most of her 16 students are either first-generation immigrants or from families of low socioeconomic status. Saira shared how she'd been destined for a career in education: "I come from a family of educators, so my cousins are teachers, my aunt and uncle are teachers, and ever since I was little, I would play teacher on the board with my best friend. I always wanted to teach." In spite of this family legacy, Saira did not initially want her own classroom and intended to teach either sign language or ESL. However, to earn a specialized license in either of those areas, she first had to obtain her elementary teaching degree. In fulfilling this prerequisite, Saira became more comfortable with leading a classroom. Saira gained experience teaching early childhood education and Grades 2, 3, 4, and 5. The highlight of this exploration was teaching her second-grade students how to read, and she discovered her passion for working with this age group.

For Saira, SEL teaches her students about social skills and helps them identify, express, and manage their own emotions. She shared that her school is devoted to implementing school-wide SEL with designated time in the week to teach SEL curriculums (Second Step and Collaborative Problem Solving) during morning meetings and closing circles. Regardless of this SEL block, Saira models and practices the skills throughout the school day in her natural interactions with her students.

She also expressed her awareness that when students experienced trauma outside the classroom, it could manifest as negative behaviors in school. When students had negative behaviors, "We [Saira and her co-teacher] really do use that [Collaborative Problem Solving] SEL approach as far as figuring out why the student is acting that way, what's going on."

While Saira's school and district focuses on equity and inclusion issues through professional development, she voiced concern that these efforts seemed to be landing on deaf ears among the staff. "I hope that we get more [buy-in from staff] because I think that there's a lot of work that needs to be done," she said. "When you look at our district, it's incredibly diverse, and we need to make sure that we are not feeding or heeding any stereotypes."

Saira's goal for this year is to build relationships and connections with her students so they feel she is their champion to help them be their best and learn to advocate for themselves.

Liz

Liz is a 27-year-old White female with five years of teaching experience. For her, the calling to be a teacher came early:

> I always have loved working with children. Even when I was super-young, I knew I wanted to work with kids. So, I think the natural progression was babysitting, camp counselor, [and then] "Okay, I'll go to college and be a teacher."

Up until this year, Liz taught Grade 3 in an urban public school. This year she moved to an urban charter school in Massachusetts where she teaches Grades 5 and 6 in a self-contained classroom and leads the first SEL-focused program in her district.

Liz reported that she had not planned to transfer from a public school to a charter school, but "When I saw that job opening, I was like, 'That's my wheelhouse, that's my passion.' So, I

wanted to jump over and try something new. Liz works in a district comprised mostly of black students from families of low economic status. Though the staff in her district are very diverse, she found it interesting that most of the lead teachers were White and most of the paraprofessional helpers were of color. She did express that the administration was primarily people of color and was pleasantly surprised at the natural conversations she was already having with the administration around equity and discipline.

Liz works with two Applied Behavior Analysists (ABAs), one of whom is a social worker and a former school counselor. She supervises the ABAs during their direct instructional blocks, and they also have designated time each day to deliver an SEL curriculum (Social Thinking). In describing her work in the charter school, Liz said, "SEL for us is looking like morning meetings that are regularly checking in on goal-setting and preparing for the day, trying to frontload for any anticipated troubles." Liz noted that despite having a social-emotional learning coach on staff in her previous public school district, that school did not value SEL, and the focus was strictly on the curriculum. As a result, she realized that "we're never going to get to make any academic gains if [we're] not opening up time for the SEL stuff. So, I snuck it in." She also shared that she'd gained secondhand knowledge of trauma-informed practices from colleagues who had taken courses or held certifications. Still, she stated that she had significant experience with trauma-informed practices because her previous public school was identified as trauma-informed.

She expressed gratitude that her current school places a high value on educating the whole child. Liz's goal for this school year is to build on this momentum by making a concerted effort to engage students' families in supporting their social-emotional development, which will hopefully reduce aggressive behaviors in her students.

Jackie

Jackie, a 47-year-old White female, began her career in education as a childcare professional by earning a daycare certification. She later became a one-on-one paraprofessional assisting an academically proficient student with physical needs. From there, Jackie transitioned into working as a paraprofessional in a special education program. After earning her master's degree, Jackie became a teacher. She currently has three years of experience teaching eleventh and twelfth grade English language learner (ELL) students in a large sheltered English immersion (SEI) urban district in Massachusetts. Her school serves over 1,300 students amongst the two grades, 97% of whom are Hispanic. The majority are Spanish-speaking students who have immigrated to the States, and many of their families are low in socioeconomic status. Though the staff is primarily White, Jackie appreciates that her school is becoming more diverse with Hispanic educators and a Hispanic principal at the helm.

A strong theme running throughout Jackie's interview was her empathy for students. She noted that during a typical year many of them balanced the demands of school with work and family responsibilities, and then the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated those challenges. Furthermore, after so many months of remote learning, students had become unaccustomed to the discipline and order of in-person classes. Jackie expressed the urgency of recognizing how these unprecedented conditions heightened the need for educators to be more trauma-informed and trained in culturally responsive strategies to best support students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

Jackie cited a rise in disruptive student behaviors this year, including disrespect, wandering the halls, and skipping classes. When students in her class lapse in their discipline, she tries to turn it to everyone's advantage. She said, "Some of the best learning moments I've

had with some of my kids have come out of those [lapses], where they realize that, 'Hey, I can make a mistake too and it's okay.' And we learn from it, and we keep going. So, I think being real with the kids is important."

Jackie has set a goal this year to get to know who her students are outside of her classroom. This will help her continue building relationships upon a foundation of respect. She shared that she "wants to be cognizant of when they might be having a bad day and try to check in with them to make sure they are doing okay and offer what support I can."

In conclusion, these participant introductions allow the reader to conceptualize the "characters" whose insights and perspectives are explored in the following chapter. The subsequent findings chapter will outline in rich, vivid detail the five main themes and their corresponding subthemes that surfaced during this study. These themes study the conditions that will best support educators' efforts in safeguarding equitable and inclusive SEL practices to ensure students foster the SEL competencies necessary to succeed.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Narrative inquiry can bring forth and amplify the voices of teachers to reshape the understandings and practices of education (Kim, 2016). To leverage a transformative approach to SEL in education, this study sought to understand 14 educators' beliefs, viewpoints, lived experiences, and level of critical consciousness as they relate to SEL and equity. Through thematic analysis, data from participant interviews were analyzed, assembled, and interpreted to bring to the surface initial cross-participant codes, paying attention to the direct and indirect messages in the transcripts. The significant results described in this chapter are organized into five main themes. These themes explore how best to support educators' efforts in ensuring equitable and inclusive practices to help their students build the lifelong SEL competencies necessary to thrive in and out of the classroom.

The first theme advocates for educators to first build their own SEL competencies and adopt a flexible mindset that helps them overcome inevitable setbacks and honestly reflect upon current practices. The second theme recommends implementing SEL by consistently using an SEL curriculum and understanding how SEL skills support academic learning, all of which require convincing teachers to see SEL as worthy of their time and efforts. The third theme addresses how student discipline practices should move away from a punitive approach to better align with and support SEL skill development, a shift that requires an honest assessment of current practices. The fourth theme discusses how SEL inherently supports equity and inclusivity efforts by encouraging students to make space for each other at the table, whether discussing issues, making decisions, or sharing experiences. Critical consciousness and culturally affirming teaching practices reinforce equity and inclusivity by creating a sense of belonging where students feel safe practicing their SEL skills. The fifth and final theme acknowledges that SEL

initiatives ask much of already overwhelmed teachers and suggests supporting teachers through effective school leadership, increased family engagement, and authentic measures prioritizing teacher well-being, all of which can significantly bolster the success of a school's SEL initiative.

Table 5.1 depicts the respective themes, subthemes, and sub-subthemes identified during data analysis and outlined in this findings chapter.

Table 5.1

Themes, Subthemes, Sub-Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Sub-Subtheme
Theme One: Educator SEL Skills and Mindset	• Patience and Flexibility • Vulnerability and Self-Reflexive Mindset • Empathy • Building Relationships and Classroom Community	
Theme Two: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Implementation	• SEL Awareness and Buy-In • SEL Curriculums and Instructional Practices • Nurturing Students' Social-Emotional Competencies • Finding the Balance Between Academics and SEL	
Theme Three: Managing Student Discipline	• Discipline Policies and Procedures • Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) • Restorative Practices • Understanding of Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practices	
Theme Four: Equity and Inclusivity	• Critical Consciousness	

- o Implicit Bias
- o Barriers to Fostering Critical Consciousness
- o SEL and Critical Race Theory

- • Valuing Culturally Affirming Teaching
- • Creating a Sense of Belonging

Theme Five:
Conditions Impacting
Teacher Efficacy

- • School Leadership
- • Family Engagement
- • Teacher Burnout

Theme One: Educator SEL Skills and Mindset

To effectively teach any subject or skill, an educator must possess a personal expertise in that area. Therefore, the first theme highlighted the participants' perceptions of the SEL skills and mindsets an educator must personally practice when supporting whole-child development. Four subthemes emerged from a review of this more prominent theme. The first subtheme outlined the advantage of having a mindset that embodies both patience and flexibility. To best build SEL skills, participants considered it necessary to persist in SEL practices (patience) and modify them when necessary (flexibility). The second subtheme also emphasized a specific mindset, as participants cited vulnerability and a self-reflexive mindset as essential for continually improving their teaching practice and connecting with students. Next, the third subtheme noted how having empathy for students when addressing their social, emotional, and academic needs can position educators to meet youth where they are. The fourth and subtheme arose when participants named cultivating relationships and safe, trusting classroom communities as critical for facilitating student engagement and whole-child learning.

Patience and Flexibility

Because effective SEL practices do not always yield immediate results and individual student needs shift constantly, participants perceived patience and flexibility as necessary educator mindsets. Without them, educators will struggle even more to meet students where they are in all skill areas: academic, behavioral, social, and emotional.

Susan spoke of patience and flexibility as necessary mindsets that encourage educators to persevere in practices that do not have immediate effects and to refine those practices as necessary. Jackie indicated that educators needed to be patient with students, notably as children returned to the structure and environment of in-person learning following the COVID-19 school closures. Tami expressed her perception that some career teachers lacked the patience and flexibility necessary for effective SEL implementation, as those veteran educators focused on teaching content. Failing to embrace a mindset of patience and flexibility prevented them from tending sufficiently to the needs of the whole child. Tami stated:

> There are a lot of teachers here who are on the verge of retirement, and it just feels like they've given up… They're too impatient to be bothered considering the stuff that weighs on the minds of the kids… They're just so concerned about teaching their content.

Kaitlyn suggested that patience and flexibility helped educators maintain realistic expectations based on their students' actual developmental levels: "I need to meet them where they're at, not what society expects them to be able to do." Helena resonated with adopting a flexible mindset in her daily practice. What worked yesterday may not be effective today, so she shifted her strategies with students as needed. Saira and Akira both agreed that an open mindset like Helena's helped teachers remain flexible and willing to continually adjust practices to meet the ever-evolving needs of students.

Patience and flexibility stood out as core attributes educators must possess in order to meet whole-child needs. As schools and faculty members take on increasing amounts of responsibility for child-rearing, patience and flexibility will likely continue to define the mindsets of effective educators. Participants noted that developing and maintaining a patient and flexible mindset required a willingness to be vulnerable and engage in self-reflexive practice. The second subtheme explores these additional mindsets.

Vulnerability and Self-Reflexive Mindset

As the participants discussed the adult SEL competencies an educator should possess to successfully implement SEL instruction, vulnerability and a self-reflexive mindset continually surfaced. A self-reflexive mindset allowed educators to analyze which parts of their practices were working and which ones fell short. Those willing to be vulnerable could more effectively change course to strengthen their weak areas. Additionally, the ability to vulnerably admit to mistakes and flaws, as well as the learning opportunities they presented, helped build connections with students, who often learn through their own mistakes.

Participants connected vulnerability with having a self-reflexive growth mindset, which together allowed them to remain open-minded and strengthen their proficiency in student-centered teaching. From this space, they could honestly assess the effectiveness of their current practices by reflecting on students' needs, successes, and struggles. Helena reflected:

It's that productive struggle and being able to acknowledge your own flaws and being able to grow, [to] have that growth mindset that this is not about you. This is about what's best for the kids and what you need to do to support them.

Embracing vulnerability when practicing self-reflexivity helped Siren appreciate how her passion for teaching grew out of her desire for radical change in educational delivery: "I want to give [students] an opportunity to have a different experience… I have come to see teaching as maybe an act of rebellion and revolution." She cautioned that "SEL can very easily turn into toxic positivity [and] good vibes only" but emphasized that "being able to reflect for yourself, to understand how you deal with vulnerability" can help avoid that outcome. Essentially, not adopting vulnerability in that self-reflexive process may divert educators from addressing those biases and assumptions that often drive actions, thus causing more harm than good. Likewise, leaning in with vulnerability gives educators the courage to wrestle with such beliefs as they self-reflect on their daily practices as educators and the impact on students' overall success and well-being.

Julianne indicated that being both vulnerable and self-reflexive helped educators develop an equity lens and become mindful of their biases. Helena touched on similar ideas when discussing the importance of "putting [biases] to the side and getting to know that child for who they are and what they bring to the table without judging them."

Tami also drew a connection between self-reflection and vulnerability, describing how honest, vulnerable self-reflection consistently raised her awareness of where she needs to grow and change. She noted the difficulty of artificially instilling those mindsets where they did not already exist. However, she believes that most teachers are amenable to vulnerability under the right conditions. For Scooter, being vulnerable with students helped him become relatable to them. Still, he also noted a need to place boundaries on that vulnerability so he could maintain a needed degree of authority.

Miguel adamantly advocated that creating safe environments for youth required more self-awareness and self-reflection from educators. He cautioned:

> If you don't check yourself, if you don't look at your flaws, if you don't reflect on your negatives,…then you're just always going to look at everyone else as the problem… You're not checking into your implicit biases,…so that causes students to not feel safe in the classroom [and to]… become anxious or depressed or suicidal at times.

For Suzy, self-reflection served as an indicator for how successfully an educator would implement SEL, and she suggested that teachers needed "true emotional competencies in themselves, first, and [then comes] understanding and reflecting." She denoted how educators used their own communication skills to model for students how to manage conflicts with others. Without strong skills of their own, adults could not authentically teach these SEL lessons to children.

These participants' responses notably perceived that vulnerability had become a non-negotiable trait for educators to meet student needs. It made the educators relatable to their students and enabled them to grow as teachers. Self-reflexivity and vulnerability were closely related because educators could optimally deliver student-centered SEL instruction by acknowledging their growth areas. Ultimately, a willingness to be vulnerable allows educators to embrace a self-reflexive mindset that values one's need to grow and evolve in that role. Participants recognized that having these Adult SEL skills opened the door to fostering empathy for students, their lived experiences, and developmental processes, which arose as the third subtheme.

Empathy

In considering how to effectively implement SEL, participants described the necessity of having empathy for students. This adult social-emotional competency helped educators diagnose the underlying causes of both positive and negative student behaviors and pinpoint the skills a student needs to learn or practice.

As schools reopened after the prolonged COVID-19 shutdowns, participants noted the increased need to not only acknowledge the challenges students faced as virtual learners but to truly empathize with it. They recognized the importance of demonstrating empathy by patiently helping students relearn classroom routines and expected social behaviors knowing that students couldn't ready themselves to learn until they'd reviewed and practiced appropriate classroom behavior. Saira demonstrated empathy for students who felt fatigued by COVID protocols and restrictions. She advocated for educators to reflect on their own exhaustion and need for self-care:

> When [my colleagues are] ready to throw their hands up and say, "Hey, I can't do this anymore," or "I need a break," [their students] are probably right in the exact same boat with them.

Participants also acknowledged that students' unexpected behaviors resulted from so many missed opportunities to develop their social-emotional competencies during COVID. Akira encouraged his colleagues to be mindful of the source of the negative behavior and use that knowledge when correcting it.

In several responses concerning empathy, participants revealed their deep care and concern for students. Kaitlyn and Julianne expressed empathy for students labeled as problematic or who struggled to make meaningful connections with their peers. They both saw these students

as deserving of compassion and support. Suzy's empathy encouraged her to think through her options when correcting negative student behaviors, and she refrained from calling caregivers when she believed her call might trigger abuse: "Sometimes families have a much more hands-on approach [to discipline]. So, it's often worrisome to bring up a behavior because I'm afraid of what's gonna transpire at home." Siren used empathy to form strong bonds with her students. Similarly, Tami acknowledged how empathy helped her toward "being a teacher who truly cares about the wellbeing of kids."

An important part of Scooter's adult SEL practice involved understanding the challenging circumstances some students of color experience: "I think being able to empathize with students of color would be a tremendous way to help students get along, …and not everybody's willing to open themselves up to empathize or see what students of color have gone through." He expressed concern that not all of his colleagues showed empathy for students of color or their lived experiences: "How can you entice them to…put themselves in the shoes of students of color, …understand the plight, …[and] adjust their teaching styles and their attitudes accordingly?"

The participants' responses indicated that educators must strive to have empathy for their students. This necessary mindset aided educators in understanding students' lived experiences and supporting their social and emotional well-being. By viewing students through an empathetic lens, participants naturally gave students the benefit of the doubt, an important factor in building the strong, trusting relationships that contributed to a safe, positive classroom community. The subsequent section further discusses this effect.

Building Relationships and Classroom Community

Building a classroom community where all students felt seen, heard, and valued required the teacher to first foster a positive relationship with each individual student. The interconnectedness of one-on-one relationships and the overall strength of the classroom community arose often as the participants shared their experiences.

Participants consistently identified strong relationships as the foundation of the positive influence they could have on their students. For Tami, nurturing trusting relationships with her students served as the basis of effective SEL because "if you don't have an established rapport with the kids, it's gonna be really hard to try to pull anything out of them and expect that they're gonna trust you and be vulnerable and share how they're feeling." For Miguel, this equated to those little efforts like saying hi. He noted that even small interactions cultivated connections that teachers could leverage during challenging times with students:

> If teachers just take time to create a relationship with every student . . . then it'll help with the classroom behavior. Otherwise, the next thing you know, you don't like that student. You're always brushing them off or giving them negative feedback or complaining about them.

Susan mentioned how SEL and community building became a positive cycle. Building a classroom community allowed more effective SEL instruction, which in turn strengthened that community: "I focus a lot of social-emotional learning on building a community so that we're all responsible for each other." Suzy described in concrete terms how she worked to cultivate a positive classroom community through patience, modeling, interactive routines, and vulnerability:

I think routines . . . promote their social interactions [and] patience for each other. It's a little scary sometimes to [laughs] give them the power, but . . . they respond so well when I am vulnerable with them and when I do apologize if I make a mistake. So, I think that's a big part of building that trust and culture.

Several participants notably remarked that building relationships with students served as a precursor for supporting students in learning a variety of other skills. To this point, Raquel said, "If [teachers] are able to learn to build relationships with kids, it's a little bit easier for them to teach them the other skills that they need to be equipped with." Liz agreed with Raquel that relationship-building underscored all student progress and created what she described as "stamina for learning." Likewise, Helena viewed building relationships with students as prerequisites of learning: "[Students] wanna feel safe. They wanna feel that they can depend on you, trust you. . . . Those relationships are so important if you wanna have the kids learn from you."

Participants perceived relationship- and community-building in the classroom as instrumental in promoting student success. Both established a basis of trust through which educators and students could co-facilitate a nurturing and engaging learning environment. Additionally, participants viewed developing a positive rapport with students a necessary precursor for facilitating academic learning, and they urged educators to hold the necessary space and time to foster such relationships.

To effectively teach SEL competencies to students, educators must also personally hold these skills. Throughout the interviews, participants touched on similar philosophies regarding the most effective adult SEL skills for helping students learn and develop their own social-emotional capabilities. Patience and flexibility allowed educators to adapt to the ever-changing

educational landscape and individual student needs. Vulnerability and a self-reflexive mindset revealed new insights and improvements as educators reflected on their current practices and philosophies. Viewing students through an empathetic lens helped build individual relationships that in turn fostered a positive classroom community. When educators worked toward competency in these adult SEL skills, it paved the way for the next step: implementing an SEL curriculum in their classrooms and schools. The succeeding theme outlines participants' insights and perspectives about their role in implementing social-emotional learning.

Theme Two: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Implementation

In this theme, participants shared their thoughts regarding the importance of implementing SEL instruction, as developing these skills and mindsets helped youth succeed in both school and their lives beyond the classroom. All participants considered SEL an essential piece of their role in educating the whole child.

Four subthemes emerged as components of the SEL Implementation theme. The participants identified the first subtheme, stakeholder SEL awareness and buy-in, as a prerequisite for successfully engaging students in developing their social-emotional skills. The participants' desire to effectively and meaningfully teach students to grow their SEL skills highlighted the second subtheme, SEL curriculums and instructional practices, and also the third subtheme, social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making). Lastly, participants expressed concerns about losing academic instructional time and offered solutions, which raised the fourth subtheme, finding the balance between academics and SEL.

SEL Awareness and Buy-In

Most of the interview subjects worked as classroom teachers and spoke from a personal perspective when suggesting a few requirements for gaining buy-in from educators. They returned often to a conviction that when teachers believed in SEL's benefits, it resulted in stronger SEL instruction. The opposite was also true. When educators didn't consider SEL an imperative for student growth, it interfered with SEL implementation. As classroom teachers spent the most time interacting with students, the bulk of SEL implementation responsibility rested on their shoulders, which made gaining their buy-in a high priority.

Lack of buy-in interfered with SEL implementation, as Julianne found at her school, citing that educators felt overwhelmed with having to be responsible for addressing the SEL needs of their students because of what felt like added work to their already full plates: "It has not been well received. There's a SEAD[1] coach, and we have [what] they're calling [an] equity PLC[2], and [the coach was] going to work through some of that SEL for adults. And the teachers were not happy about it." Suzy is a supporter of SEL for educators and suggested that teachers with higher adult SEL skills would more readily buy into implementing an SEL curriculum: "I think they need buy-in. I think that they need to be able to have high communication skills, not just with kids, but with each other. . . . Just their own emotional competencies need to be there." Tami proposed presenting SEL implementation to teachers as something in their best interests as educators: "Realize this really does work, and it pays off, and you'll see you'll have less classroom behavior issues, you'll have a higher engagement level from your students if you try the SEL stuff." Miguel also advocated for raising educator awareness of SEL's vast benefits on student and staff well-being. He noted how neglecting this awareness and not seeking

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[1] Social, emotional, and academic development
[2] Professional learning community

stakeholder buy-in would hinder proper SEL implementation: "[If] the person doesn't believe in it, they're not going to engage in it." Jackie echoed Miguel's call for more awareness and suggested that teachers should receive more professional development (PD) to raise their awareness of SEL. Helena recognized the immense need to support student well-being and took personal initiative to learn about SEL outside of school. Her experience supported Jackie's request for more PD offerings from schools and districts.

Noting that awareness didn't guarantee educator buy-in, Akira shared how some teachers declined to buy into SEL instruction regardless of knowing its benefits because it required changing comfortable routines and habitual practices: "They don't feel it's their job [and say things] like, 'I don't teach social-emotional learning, I teach math, and that's what I've done for 20 years, and I'm gonna continue doing that until I retire.'" He suggested two requirements for gaining buy-in: educator trust in the SEL messenger and conviction that the training filled a gap in their skills or knowledge.

Siren expressed some of her colleagues' perception of SEL as a superfluous behavioral management system that placed additional burdens on them: "[SEL] becomes this thing that I think some teachers think of as, 'Oh, here's a way to control behaviors, a behavioral management system, or here's something extra I have to do.'" She expressed concern about SEL becoming the "latest jargon, right? And that's always dangerous . . . because it gets pushed out, it gets really commodified." Siren cautioned educators to thoughtfully consider how SEL fits into the big picture of whole-child development rather than compartmentalizing it into a behavior management system.

The participants all touched on the importance of educator buy-in, and noted that educators reluctant to implement SEL likely wanted to avoid either additional responsibilities or

changes in comfortable routines. Moreover, they recognized how educator buy-in requires trust in the messenger and the potential results, as well as assurances that teachers' already overflowing plates will not get heavier. To counteract this resistance and gain buy-in, participants recommended conveying information about SEL through an individual the teachers trusted, raising teacher self-awareness about skills deficits and areas for improvement, and conducting PD dedicated to SEL. Additionally, convincing teachers that social-emotional learning could enhance student academic success might encourage its implementation. Strong SEL curriculums and instructional practices, a topic discussed further in the next section, can help encourage buy-in through answering these educator concerns.

SEL Curriculums and Instructional Practices

In general, participants felt encouraged that their SEL practices were having a positive impact on their students and that carving out time to build such skills was a vital component to effective implementation. However, many participants expressed concern with whether teaching formal SEL lessons translated effectively into the natural, everyday environment and if these programs connected meaningfully to the diverse identities of their students. Scooter reported using an evidence-based curriculum but mentioned that it was not "the most realistic curriculum, as far as what goes on in the real world." Tami believed SEL should "look and feel really authentic, and it should just be embedded in instruction every single day, rather than just through single taught lessons. Helena recognized that learning social-emotional competencies was a lifelong journey and not limited to what students learned in her classroom SEL lessons. Likewise, Siren observed the lifelong nature of building SEL skills, noting that the positive effects of SEL in her school and students might not manifest until years in the future: "The tough

thing with SEL is you might never see the effect. It's planting the seed, right? But that might help them two years from now . . . [or] five years from now."

A few participants reported that their schools had not yet fully implemented SEL or struggled to build SEL momentum. Saira shared that they'd previously used an evidence-based curriculum but that her school "kind of fizzled out" in formally implementing it. Julianne's school temporarily paused using an evidence-based curriculum because the staff felt the curriculum did not suit their student population and demanded a better fitting one. She shared how her school struggled to implement an advisory block into the schedule, and she attributed this difficulty to their SEL initiative hanging in limbo: "I just think there needs to be a decision so we're all using the same methods or same vocabulary." Susan described an uphill battle to gain administrative approval for SEL instruction: "We'd work on things and bring them back to our administrators, and then we would need them to approve it. . . . It was like hitting a brick wall."

Siren expressed concern for how schools rolled out SEL implementation without first considering the SEL skills and mindsets of the adults facilitating the instruction: "It needs a pedagogy just like everything else. There's not enough unification; there's not enough central direction." Moreover, Siren identified social-emotional learning instruction as more than a lesson or curriculum, but rather a space in which students could actively participate in cultivating their learning: "In essence, [SEL] is creating containers and spaces and holding them for students, . . . and that is a scary thing for a teacher to do. As far as creating a container in the classroom, you have to let a lot of things go, and that is not something educators especially do very well." She challenged her educator peers to view COVID as an opportunity to shift the classroom culture and power dynamic and to resist the urge to go back to the way things were before: "Let's do it

together. I would like the students to have more input…[which is] a change in classroom dynamics…The teacher doesn't have to be the custodian of knowledge anymore, right? These kids know so many things."

Overall, participants endorsed using SEL curricula and instructional practices to develop the whole child but advocated for such methods to be more reflective of their students' identities and weaved into the natural learning environment for maximum effectiveness. This opinion held true regardless of the outcome of implementation efforts in their schools. The common thread through the participants' desire to implement SEL instruction, irrespective of the curriculum used, involved their dedication to educating the whole child, which soared to even greater importance amid a pandemic. All participants raised the significance of supporting students' growth in their social-emotional competencies, a topic further explored in the following subtheme.

Nurturing Students' Social-Emotional Competencies

Participants widely agreed that preparing students for life beyond the classroom required helping them develop social-emotional competencies. Many of them noted the interdependency of social skills and how strengthening one would naturally strengthen others. While the participants' philosophies varied on the most advantageous place to focus their efforts, they shared a common goal of helping students understand and express themselves in ways that would positively affect those around them.

Participants described **self-awareness** as a foundational social skill necessary to empower students to interact more successfully with others but observed that students often failed to realize how they appeared to others. Liz explained how self-awareness worked hand-in-hand with empathy to promote social awareness and responsible decision-making, so she tried hard to

help her students care about how their individual actions affected others: "They need to figure out some empathy skills, and some understanding of these relationships around me, and how what I'm doing is affecting the people around me." For Tami, self-awareness contributed to appropriate self-expression, so she helped students in "communicating about how they're feeling but doing all of that in a non-entitled way." Susan's students built self-awareness through self-reflection, and this encouraged accountability: "[Students should] be willing to be reflective and willing to be accountable."

Additionally, participants also considered **social awareness, relationship skills**, and **responsible decision-making** essential social skills. Helena noted the importance of "teaching kids how to socialize, how to talk to one another, how to be appropriate, how to understand their own feelings and how it's okay to feel what they feel." Siren prioritized teaching situational awareness, which she defined as: "Helping [students] navigate and code-switch, and say, 'Okay, in this environment, this is what's appropriate. And then in this environment, that's what's appropriate.'" Scooter taught conflict resolution skills by guiding students toward acceptable resolutions: "If you got two students that don't get along, [and] they're beefing with one another, you would go to a social group to hash it out [and] give them some skills to where they can coexist and work together." As a whole, Saira perceived **social skills development** as interdependent with other aspects of SEL:

> We're just trying to… promote well-being among students [so they can] be problem-solvers, risk-takers, critical thinkers, and…be able to communicate. So, I think all of that encompasses allowing students to be independent learners and thinkers who can communicate with one another.

Participants also viewed **emotional awareness and regulation** as another vital skill for life in and out of school. Susan taught students to regulate and express their emotions by using simple hand signals to communicate their feelings: "You'll say, 'How is your day, fist to five?' So, fist is a zero, five [fingers] is a great day. So then, everyone shares how their day went." Siren also noted the importance of providing students with a vocabulary to appropriately articulate their feelings: "Language is a big piece of it. How do we differentiate between being nervous and excited? You know, what are those words? Like building our emotional vocabulary." To help students acknowledge their emotions, Tami asked them to report how they felt, and she modeled how to describe emotions by being candid with them about how she felt. For Saira, supporting students in expressing their emotions appropriately meant "understanding how to advocate and voice your own thoughts." This required emotional awareness because students needed to "be in tune with your own self, but then be able to convey that into a well-articulated sentence or statement." In Suzy's classroom, her students struggled with self-management: "I don't think our kids are able to attend academically because they're so wrapped up in a lot of the emotional things that have happened to them, which is really unfortunate." As schools reopened following COVID-19 closures, Raquel and Miguel both spoke of the need to teach students coping skills to regulate their emotions appropriately. In particular, Miguel found that students needed skills to help them cope with change: "They're so afraid of change, because there's been so much change within two years that it's causing them to not know how to function…They've gotten so comfortable with isolation and so uncomfortable with normal day-to-day activities that are not in isolation."

Participants expressed that advancing students' social-emotional competency meant building their self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, empathy, communication, and

responsible decision-making through guiding conflict resolution. Moreover, participants described emotional awareness and regulation as a top priority involving three major components: expressing how they felt and why, using coping skills to regulate emotions and handle change, and developing a verbal and/or signed vocabulary to distinguish between emotions and advocate for themselves. Despite a concerted effort to support the development of their students' social-emotional competencies, many participants voiced notable concern about finding the time to balance SEL instruction with academic demands. The next subtheme looks more deeply into this concern.

Finding the Balance Between Academics and SEL

While schools and districts have added SEL instruction for its benefits to the whole child, the status quo for academic growth remains, with standardized test results affecting variables like school standing, program funding, teacher salaries, job assignments, and more. As teachers often struggle to fit the academic requirements into the limited instructional time available, participants acknowledged that they and their colleagues often felt burdened to choose between SEL and academic instruction. Even enthusiastic SEL supporters tended to defer to the immense pressure to prepare students for standardized tests, but they found opportunities to sneak in SEL instruction, modeling, and practice.

As Tami said, "So many teachers don't want to or feel like they can't create that time [for SEL], I think, largely because of state exams." Several participants noted the same dilemma and expressed a need to establish a balance allowing them to convey both the academic and SEL curricula effectively. Tami, who maintained that SEL strengthens students' ability to absorb academic instruction, found that balance by reserving a place in her daily schedule for SEL: "Just creating the time to really [be] vulnerable and having honest conversations with the kids and

saying [things] like, 'I don't really feel that great today,' [and] 'How do you guys feel?' [and] 'Are you upset about anything?'" Liz had similar insights as Tami, arguing that general education teachers would benefit from implementing SEL into their academic curriculum: "Gen ed teachers would be most successful if they could look at [SEL] skills and how they could connect them to their curriculum. I think that that would maybe open up an avenue where it's easier for them." Likewise, Helena disagreed with the either-or perspective of SEL and academic instruction. She suggested that without SEL, academic instruction was more likely to fall short, making SEL instrumental to academics: "The bottom line is, if you can't get [and] give SEL, [then] you can't have that culture and climate in the building that's positive, [and] these kids aren't going to learn anything." For Siren, balancing SEL with "overt instruction" involved finding a "sweet spot," or point of balance at which SEL optimally supported instruction. Susan also emphasized the equal importance of academic and social-emotional instruction, "My goal as an educator is to provide my students not only interesting and relevant content, but also help students grow emotionally and socially."

As the participants recommended ways to modify academic teaching practices to meet students' social-emotional needs more effectively and equitably, several recommended placing less emphasis on teaching to the test. Kaitlyn noted administrators placing an excessive emphasis on standardized test results, and she suggested that students would be better served by "more understanding, less rigidity. . . . While [data is] important, it's not everything." Akira agreed about the problematic nature of teaching to the test, as it encouraged a traditional, lecture-style instruction. He suggested that removing the obligation for teachers to produce positive test results would encourage educators to replace those antiquated methods with small-group, project-based learning. Susan also saw several flaws in placing so much importance on

standardized tests, and she specifically argued that the tests disadvantaged students of color. Susan also saw the effect of standardized testing on instruction methods, and she recommended fully eliminating assessments to leverage equity and inclusion in the classroom.

Jackie suggested shortening the school day at the high school level and distilling teaching into a more concentrated, less time-consuming delivery method that would place fewer time demands on students and maintain their engagement. Raquel also highlighted the importance of student engagement, endorsing more creative problem-solving and less rote learning to get students "to think outside of the box and really get creative and [use] problem-solving strategies. What I see a lot of is, 'Here's the worksheet; do your assignment,' and [then], 'Where's my A?'" Siren recommended adopting a more student-centered mode of instruction in which the teacher served less as an authority figure and more as a participant and guide, a change that would require teachers' "being able to see education [as] more interactive [and] equitable, like we're all participants. Instead of teacher [or] student, we're all participants here. I want [students] to feel like they can create, [and] they can contribute as well."

In conceptualizing an ideal learning environment, participants asserted that SEL skills supported academic instruction. As a result of this perception, participants strove to maintain a place in their daily schedules for SEL. Participants often described standardized testing as a barrier to the student-centered teaching style they saw as more conducive to social, emotional, and academic success. Their suggestions for modifying teaching practice consistently involved reducing rote learning and traditional, teacher-centered methods in favor of interactive, collaborative practices where students co-created learning and engaged in active problem-solving. Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently emphasized how intentionally

teaching social-emotional competencies was critical for student success, and they recommended all teachers find ways to incorporate it into their academic instruction.

Regarding the theme of finding a balance between academics and SEL, participants generally expressed enthusiasm for implementing SEL instruction, regardless of the outcomes they saw from their district, school, or personal efforts. They each noted the importance of making stakeholders aware of SEL's benefits as a way to gain the buy-in needed to successfully implement an SEL initiative. Using consistent, universal instructional practices through an SEL curriculum also encouraged buy-in while promoting stronger collaboration among all stakeholders. Overall, participants firmly emphasized the important role social-emotional competencies played in their students' lives, both inside and outside of the classroom, which motivated them to make room for it in their classroom routines. However, they noted that pressures to meet standardized testing requirements discouraged many teachers from relinquishing their limited academic instruction time. Despite challenges with buy-in, curricula, and academic pressure, the participants agreed on SEL instruction as the best course of action for supporting their students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.

Theme Three: Managing Student Discipline

The third main theme to emerge correlated to managing student discipline. Interview data identified four subthemes. First, participants discussed disciplinary methods that they perceived as ineffective and described how they effectively dealt with student behaviors. The second subtheme addressed Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a supportive practice in preventing unexpected social behaviors. This fed into the third subtheme, a discussion of restorative practices as a viable approach in developing the SEL competency of responsible decision-making in youth. Finally, participants noted in the fourth subtheme the importance of

recognizing how unexpected behaviors can result from trauma which required resolution through trauma-informed practices.

Discipline Policies and Procedures

Unexpected behaviors affect the learning environment by creating distractions, disruptions, and sometimes even danger. Because these behaviors are unique to each student, teachers spend much time and effort figuring out what will work in each situation. In this subtheme, participants voiced a preference for discipline policies and procedures that shaped students' SEL competencies and helped prevent repeat offenses. They pointed out current practices that they felt their schools should cease using or modify in order to contribute to teaching the whole child and minimize subsequent disruptions.

Participants recognized that to deliver instruction to students, teachers must constantly manage student behavior, encouraging positive, expected behaviors while addressing and discouraging negative, unexpected behaviors. To mitigate disruptive behaviors, Suzy designated an area in her classroom as a peace center, where students could sit and work through their dysregulation without interference. By choosing to enter the peace center, students communicated to Suzy and her colleagues that they needed time apart from others: "How do we best not disrupt the learning for the other kids, but also not make it a punitive thing to recognize that, 'Hey, I'm not available for learning right now.'" Kaitlyn also described how she allowed a social time-out for students who became dysregulated: "You can tell when they're starting to lose their focus and that they're gonna dysregulate [so you] take them for a quick walk, letting them reset." Likewise, Siren and Saira had one-on-one conversations with students when conflicts arose, something they said minimized disruptions to instruction while promoting emotional awareness and responsible decision-making through teachable moments.

Most of the participants did not like punitive classroom management strategies. Kaitlyn believed the clip-up/clip-down or stoplight system shamed students. Susan described purely punitive procedures as ineffective, referring to "those teachers back in the day that . . . took recess away from the kids that didn't do homework, and every day they had the same kids. I'm like, 'Well, that's not working.'" Akira also noted that punitive procedures did not work and suggested incorporating restorative practices that engaged students in reflecting on "how . . . what happened impact[ed] an individual or . . . the community and how to fix that, versus the traditional punitive model where you did something, [so] here's a consequence." Tami's school required teachers to assign tardy students to detention and call home which was considered a misalignment between school policies and the adoption of SEL. She viewed this policy ineffective in resolving the behavior and promoting social-emotional development, so she implemented a different practice in her classroom: "If I have a kid that comes in late, instead of just saying like, 'All right, you have detention; I'm gonna call home,' I would try to sit and have a conversation with the kid about how to fix the behavior."

Participants also objected to a lack of effective policies related to addressing student behavior, such as when Raquel referred to a problematic absence of disciplinary follow-through: "There [were] a lot of major incidents . . . that we knew about, that students know about, that parents heard about, and they were swept under the rug. They weren't dealt with." Moreover, participants described the lack of nuance in checklist policies that determined whether a behavior warranted disciplinary action and what kind. In particular, a few participants described the dilemma teachers faced when deciding whether to remove a student from class for disruptive behaviors. Suzy stated:

They need to feel safe that if they make a mistake, whether it's social or academic, that they are not going to be ostracized or taken away . . .. And that's been a bone of contention with some of my colleagues who are . . . more of [the opinion that] if there's a behavior that's disrupting a class, they need to be removed. And . . . if we are taking children out of the situation without solving it, . . . I think that that ends up being more of a problem.

Jackie struggled with a policy requiring her to drop everything and immediately report when a student walked out of the classroom, resulting in disrupting learning for the entire class. Alternatively, Scooter expressed frustration with the lack of accountability on the students' part that resulted from a no suspension approach. He offered the example of students not receiving discipline for walking out of the classroom and roaming the halls because their offense did not rise to a level meriting suspension: "The cycle just continues. So, there's no in-between, there's either, 'Everything's cool' or 'You're at 100, and we've gotta suspend you.'" Miguel observed how many schools used inadequate methods to address disruptive behaviors, choosing to "extinguish the fire" and then move onto the next problem, as opposed to "restoring the situation so you're not seeing it again." As a result, he witnessed "a lot of repetitive behaviors [because staff are] dealing with the situation at hand, not trying to restore the root of the problem."

Overall, participants expressed that their role as a whole-child educator involved addressing student behaviors through teachable moments to build lagging SEL skills and foster more acceptable social behaviors. Participants expressed their belief that behavioral issues decreased as students' social skills increased throughout each interview. Additionally, participants expressed dislike for punitive measures that prevent students from understanding the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, they disapproved of school-wide policies that did not

indicate clear consequences or emphasize consistent follow-up. In the subsequent subtheme, participants shared their preference for proactive measures through *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (*PBIS) for adopting a holistic approach to preventing disruptive behaviors and encouraging self-awareness and responsible decision-making.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Participants referenced PBIS as one of the practices educators could use to prevent unexpected social behaviors. This framework prioritizes prevention rather than punishment, and the participants preferred this less punitive approach. They appreciated that PBIS promotes building SEL skills through teaching, modeling, and practicing positive behavior strategies. It also promotes good citizenship by elevating student voices and making them stakeholders.

Suzy noted the positive effects of PBIS, observing that her students preferred to work toward incentives according to the classroom rules they helped to create over receiving punitive consequences based on teacher-determined rules. Susan also preferred incentivizing good behavior, and she described her students' accumulating rewards throughout the week in order to enjoy the weekly incentive. Julianne reported using two PBIS practices, one for individual rewards and another for group rewards. She described a raffle system for individual rewards as "a variable reinforcement system, and . . . they're also learning [that] just because you did something right doesn't mean you're going to win a prize at the end." Additionally, Julianne used group rewards to leverage peer pressure and boost student performance: "If everybody does their homework, we can do this. I do less of those, more individual, but sometimes a little peer pressure helps." Scooter reported that his school was currently developing PBIS: "We're trying to figure out more ways to reward [students]. We're trying to come up with some sort of threshold to where we can reward classrooms for having 70% attendance for the week or something like

that." However, while Helena reported how her school incentivized demonstrating respect, responsibility, and kindness with prizes, public praise, and recognition, she showed notable concern that PBIS often created inequitable outcomes for students struggling with their social-emotional competencies:

> PBIS sometimes only rewards the kids that are doing the right thing. But what about those few that are struggling and they're working probably 10 times harder than the other kids, but they just can't do it because of . . . their barriers.

Suppose schools want to adopt a more proactive approach to discipline. In this case, careful consideration to reinforce students based on a tiered continuum of growth is vital to ensure all students receive the positive feedback required to evolve and grow.

In summary, participants regarded PBIS as effective because it invested students in rules they co-created and rewarded them for good behavior rather than assigning punitive sanctions for disruptive behaviors. They described using incentives to maintain students' focus on classroom goals as more effective than punishing rule infractions. However, whether PBIS practices lead to equitable outcomes for all students warranted careful consideration. While PBIS incentivizes expected behaviors, not every student follows the rules every moment. Educators will still need to address unexpected behaviors. In the next subtheme, participants offered hope for the use of restorative practices to correct negative behaviors while supporting the SEL competency of responsible decision-making.

Restorative Practices

Punitive discipline punishes the offenders, but restorative discipline focuses on repairing the harm. It generally involves communication about how the behavior negatively affected

others, which encourages the offender to take accountability for wrongdoing and avoid engaging in the same or similar behaviors later. Participants noted restorative practices as a potentially effective way for educators to build classroom culture, support responsible decision-making, and manage student discipline in equitable ways. However, few reported using the approach in a formalized manner.

Of the participants, only Miguel consistently utilized restorative practices. As a school leader, he described using these methods with both staff and students:

> I actually do restorative practice in my leadership style, too. I use that approach to restore the relationships when the relationships are broken within the school. But with students…we're starting to see positive results… because we are confronting the issue. It's helping them learn those skills to get to that moment of rejection and then dealing with that in a way that's not the end of the world.

After attending a training in restorative practices, Susan intentionally uses restorative circles with her students as a preventive and skill-building measure to cultivate classroom culture. Likewise, Suzy's understanding of restorative practices led her to believe in their effectiveness and use them in her approach to discipline:

> To me, [restorative practices] means that when a student makes a mistake that affects other students . . . [or] teachers or really anybody within our learning community, that it really ought to be on the student to try and make amends or try to work towards some kind of resolution instead of it being like, "You did this bad thing; you're being punished for it; don't do it again."

Raquel observed that administrators at her school have not yet prioritized rolling out school-wide restorative justice, though she and other educators would like to see it happen. Such a system would create consistent expectations: "Somebody down the hall may go ballistic and write [students] up and do all that other stuff, whereas I'm more apt to have a conversation with you." Akira believed that his district might implement restorative justice in the future, but he expected such a move to encounter resistance from some teachers:

> I think that the district might be going that way. From my experience at the high school, it's challenging to do anything because of such a large population of students and teachers. And again, you get kinda stuck on those teachers who are set in their ways.

While Julianne's school had a school-wide restorative justice policy in place, it tended to fall short. Without administrative guidance and follow-through, teachers used different procedures: "People handle [discipline] in their own classroom. Admin always throws around [the words] restorative justice, but there really isn't [any]. It's not just a term. You have to invest in these procedures and teach the children how it works."

Most participants expressed enthusiasm for restorative practices and a strong belief in its effectiveness. However, most of them reported having minimal opportunities to engage in those practices. Those who saw ineffective execution worried it would impact students' social-emotional growth. In discussing effective and ineffective discipline policies, the participants noted how understanding the source of the behavior allowed them to equip the student with SEL skills targeted toward helping them make more responsible decisions in the future. Experienced trauma stood out among the sources of negative behavior because it did not arise from irresponsible decision-making. In the next subtheme, participants share their understanding of

the impact of trauma on student social behavior and how educators must employ specific, trauma-informed SEL methods in these situations.

Understanding of Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practices

When a student engages in negative behaviors, an educator might take a typical approach and teach them responsible decision making. In the case of a student whose behavior comes from trauma, this approach will not work because the trauma has taken hold of the decision-making wheel. In these unique situations, participants noted how understanding trauma and implementing trauma-informed practices can address unexpected social behavior within the context of the trauma, helping students to overcome their challenges and better regulate their behavior.

Participants who were familiar with the effects of trauma recognized the different ways that a student's trauma can manifest in disruptive classroom behaviors and actively sought to support them through SEL. Katelyn shared that: "Trauma's ugly. It rears its head in many different ways. It could be from typical dysregulation that you think of with a kid having a temper tantrum to it presenting more like ADHD [where] they can't focus." Helena resonated with Kaitlyn, stating that in her previous district "we talked a lot about trauma and recognizing trauma and how it could come out in different ways." Helena suggested practicing grounding exercises during SEL time to help students cope with the effects of trauma, which can help them better regulate their behavior. Both Suzy and Liz reported that they also utilized SEL practices and strategies to assist traumatized students by teaching them the language to describe how they're feeling, having safe spaces within the classroom, and allowing them to take breaks as they need it. Each recognized how fostering the SEL competencies of self-awareness and self-

management supported students who experienced trauma to build emotional awareness, regulation skills, and resilience.

For some participants, lack of training, awareness, or inadequate supports made them leery of their ability to meet the needs of students who had experienced acute or chronic trauma. For Tami, she stated that she attended a multiday training about trauma in students. The kinds of trauma described there seemed so extreme that she initially denied that her students could have experienced any of them. She later was shocked to learn that her students had, in fact, suffered from some of those traumas but questioned her ability to sufficiently meet their needs. Saira qualified her experience in trauma-informed practices as minimal: "We tried to be aware of the students' background . . .. That's really the only formalized training of trauma-informed practice [we've received]." Jackie reported that she had not received training in trauma-informed practices, and as a result, she did not feel capable of supporting students who suffered from effects of trauma: "I tend to shy away from some of that stuff because I don't feel like I have the qualifications or the knowledge to deal with that with my students." Jackie added that her students needed trauma-informed support from qualified individuals: "Our kids are coming from some really tough situations and trying to do a lot. And sometimes they'll tell me stuff, and I'm like, 'I don't even know where to go with this.'" Julianne resonated with Jackie, sharing that despite her extensive training and background for supporting traumatized students, she recognized the inadequacies of existing mechanisms for creating therapeutic learning environments for these students. She advocated for schools to consider shifting their mindsets to address students' well-being through a trauma-informed lens, including structured, therapeutic support systems.

Overall, participants recognized that trauma sustained at home or in the community could have severe adverse effects on students and that those effects could manifest as a variety of disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Participants further acknowledged that educators needed an understanding of trauma and trauma-informed practices to effectively address behavioral manifestations of trauma. Most participants reported insufficient support services, such as therapists, counselors, and social workers, to care for students with trauma.

In reference to the theme managing student discipline, participants spoke with authority and experience on the current behaviors they saw in their schools and classrooms. They discussed the ineffective, punitive nature of traditional methods and how more recent research aims to take a different approach. Throughout the interviews, the participants reinforced the importance of incorporating SEL competencies into behavior management and discipline, and they put the well-being of the whole child at the forefront of their discipline practices. Though participants did not mention a connection between structural social inequities and trauma, participants inherently understood the value of creating space in their classrooms to promote equity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging, a theme that is further discussed in the next section.

Theme Four: Equity and Inclusivity

The fourth main theme to emerge, equity and inclusivity, presented solutions to ensure all students had meaningful opportunities to develop their social-emotional competencies and connect with learning material. The analysis revealed three subthemes. The first subtheme indicated that educators' critical consciousness helped them identify personal biases and provide more equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for their students. The second subtheme showed how educators who valued culturally affirming teaching practices better ensured all students could make personal connections to the curriculum. The third subtheme, creating a

sense of belonging, indicated that helping students feel connected to one another, the teacher, and the classroom community placed value on students' identities and cultural assets.

Critical Consciousness

When an educator possesses critical consciousness, particularly understanding systemic racism, they can promote the fairness necessary to foster caring and inclusive learning environments where students are safe to bring their whole selves to the classroom. Critical consciousness development can cause discomfort in the best of circumstances, so educators must draw from their vulnerability and self-reflexive mindset to identify and explore their own implicit biases, understand the impact of microaggressions, and interrogate oppressive policies and practices in education. Participants described critical consciousness as the basis for embracing inclusion and equitable practices in education and viewed the practice as vital to cultivating a sense of belonging for all students.

Implicit Bias

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of confronting their implicit biases and using that awareness to provide an equitable education for all their students. Siren noted how unconscious bias in educators could negatively impact learners, and as the demographics of teachers and administration at her school did not match those of the students, she saw critical consciousness as non-negotiable. As an example of an implicit bias, Scooter offered the stereotype of Black girls being too loud. He emphasized how such a bias could lead an educator to unintentionally dissuade Black girls from developing their voices and realizing their right to be heard. Having struggled with his own negative lived experiences with racism, Miguel understood the effects of implicit bias and sympathized for his students of color:

It's…a struggle for me, and I'm an adult, so I can just imagine what kids are feeling and what they're going through…That's why you see a lot of acting out,…anxiety,…A lot of kids say, 'Oh, Mr. Like, this teacher said this to me, and it made me feel uncomfortable. And [what the teacher said to me] is not true.'"

Helena reported that teachers in her school had barely scratched the surface in discussing implicit bias: "I've heard of the term implicit bias, and we've dabbled in it as far as where we see that in education, and when we talk about minorities." However, Helena was encouraged by the efforts of her school's new director of equity, inclusion, and diversity. She described her as having an equity lens that supported all students and not just students of color: "The first thing our equity director said to us was, 'I'm not here to represent that [critical race] theory. I'm here to support all the kids.' And that, to me, made her a good equity director [be]cause it's not just about that. It's about everyone that needs to be supported." While many participants saw the value for nurturing their critical consciousness to support their equity lens, obstacles were present that impacted their ability to engage in this transformative process within their school environments.

Barriers to Fostering Critical Consciousness

Most participants reported that their district or school administrators had made only minimal efforts to raise critical consciousness in teachers, and much of their knowledge or training came from personal initiative. Both Julianne and Tami said that they began developing their critical consciousness through a workshop they attended voluntarily, but that other teachers in their school had opted out. Susan joined an anti-racist group in her community, but the teachers in her school had not been similarly exposed to anti-racism. Saira shared of a meaningful professional development (PD) experience she had last year raising awareness on microaggressions but was cautiously optimistic of its effects on the staff as a whole. She, too,

noticed how staff members seemed uninterested in the information and worried it

disappointingly "fell on a lot of deaf ears." Likewise, Siren felt concerned that her school staff

remains seemingly unaware of how their implicit biases and microaggressions can affect

students. She suggested that mandatory PD in creating more inclusive environments might reach

"the teachers that don't think it's that important." Raquel echoed many of the other participants,

believing that educators needed more professional development: "If they would stop a lot of this

stuff in the tracks, then we'd have a better learning environment." However, Suzy's experience in

her district cast doubt on this conclusion. "We were doing some district-directed PD around bias

and trauma," she reported, but added that district-mandated PD was "never as meaningful" as

when teachers attended voluntarily. While most participants described a lack of training in

critical consciousness, Akira reported an exception to that rule, stating that his school has "taken

a pretty strong stand . . . to be anti-racist and to evaluate all those things with the intent [of]

'Whatever is best for kids, that's what we're doing.' To make it more culturally diverse and

inclusive."

The participants hit on an interesting hypothesis to explain the dearth of critical

consciousness-raising efforts in their schools and districts. They mentioned the discomfort

teachers felt when discussing the subject and how easily these conversations could turn into

arguments, which might lead to educators avoiding trainings. Suzy sympathized with her White

colleagues who struggled to fully grasp the nuances surrounding topics associated with equity

and inclusion:

> I try to put myself in the perspective of a White teacher, but I think a lot of it just stems
>
> from experience. . . . Until teachers teach non-white students, they probably won't come

close to understanding how critical it is to have those voices heard and to teach through a more authentic lens."

Beyond experiencing discomfort and navigating difficult discussions with colleagues, participants also noted the challenges they faced within their school communities and the lack of clear directives and support from district and school administrators, school boards, and the legislature when navigating these topics with students.

SEL and Critical Race Theory

Participants recognized that students should also learn critical consciousness, but shared backlash they'd received when bringing these conversations into their classrooms. This disapproval for developing the critical consciousness of staff and students started occurring more often and more fiercely amid debates over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its connection to SEL. Tami said: "Parents would email about something a teacher [said] that they were offended by, and now it's, 'Well, why are you teaching Critical Race Theory?' Every teacher is so afraid of being accused of that." Threats from the legislature to remove school funding and reprimand or, worse yet, terminate educators perceived to be indoctrinating students when addressing issues surrounding historical and existing structural inequities in their schools and communities seem to be fueling this fear. Raquel shared the confusion that the CRT controversy had on anti-racist efforts at her school: "The superintendent will get an email from parents, [and] they try to challenge Critical Race Theory, and they don't even know what it is." Having received little instruction in raising critical consciousness from his school, Scooter relied on his ability to identify with his students through shared experiences: "I can relate to a lot of the things that they're going through, having grown up in poverty, having family members that have gone through things as well. So, I try to share my experiences in a G-rated fashion." Ultimately,

participants viewed SEL as a viable measure to leverage equitable and inclusive practices in education but were notably concerned that misinformation from right-winged political groups declaring SEL a disguise for CRT made implementing a transformative approach to SEL in a school near impossible.

Overall, participants agreed on the importance of critical consciousness, but they reported that they and their colleagues had few formal opportunities to develop it. They consistently called for more professional development and expressed disappointment when their colleagues did not take advantage of the few opportunities offered. However, participants warned that discomfort and parental objection could dissuade teachers from developing critical consciousness. Given the current political climate with angry and concerned parents threatening school board members and educators over an often-skewed perception of CRT, participants were concerned that educators must wade into uncertain waters to gain critical consciousness. Nevertheless, when teachers possess critical consciousness, they understand the value in adopting culturally affirming practices that meaningfully connect students to the curriculum by appreciating their cultural assets. The following subtheme explores the participants' views on culturally affirming teaching.

Valuing Culturally Affirming Teaching

Culturally affirming teaching refers to practices that connect students' cultures and backgrounds, including language, traditions, and role models, into the academic curriculum. By doing so, educators tap into the brain's intuitive connection making, which helps students see the relevance of the lessons. It also exposes students to the diversity within their own classrooms and communities. Interview participants believed culturally affirming teaching supported student success in the classroom, and they sought to continue implementing these practices.

Participants practiced culturally affirming teaching by ensuring their students saw themselves and their backgrounds represented in instructional materials. Helena reported building a classroom library that reflected the diversity of her students, as well as inviting students to share their diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Raquel also considered representing students and their backgrounds an essential part of lesson preparation, otherwise, students might view themselves and their experiences as insignificant: "I think that one of the biggest problems is when kids don't see themselves in the curriculum. . . . 'All I see are white people (laughs) in every class. Where is me? Do I even matter?'"

Tami took care to teach history from perspectives other than the dominant one, "I say to my kids all the time, 'History is told from the perspective of the winners,' but that doesn't mean that there weren't losers, and we have to teach from their perspective, too." However, Susan reported that while she valued culturally affirming instruction, her school prioritized teaching that increased test scores: "We're very content-focused. Even social studies is the lost subject of school because there's no MCAS for social studies." Likewise, Suzy wanted to implement more culturally affirmative teaching, but she lacked the resources: "We don't get offered times [to do] that kind of thing, and often, schools didn't have any textbooks for it or any supplies."

Therefore, participants agreed on the value of culturally affirming teaching and its ability to help students see the significance of their identities, backgrounds, and experiences in the curriculum. However, lack of time and resources might dissuade educators from engaging in culturally affirming teaching. Participants suggested social studies as potentially the most productive place for culturally affirming practices. However, given that standardized testing does not include assessing social studies skills, this subject tends to fall through the cracks during decisions regarding funding for staff, materials, training, and other resources. Regardless,

participants pointed back to using culturally affirming practices to create a sense of belonging for students, which encouraged students to connect with and value one another's identities. The following subtheme further explores the importance of this sense of belonging.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Participants emphasized that creating a sense of belonging promoted equity and inclusion in the classroom, and their efforts to increase their critical consciousness and use more culturally affirming teaching practices also cultivated a sense of belonging in their students. In many ways, the participants viewed this sense of belonging as their end goal for developing critical consciousness and using culturally affirming practices, as these skills helped the participants prepare safe places for students to share their individual identities and cultural assets, cultivate their social, emotional, and academic development, and practice navigating their role in a larger community.

When speaking of building a sense of belonging, participants emphasized the importance of creating an environment where all students felt welcome, accepted, and safe. Tami shared: "In a perfect world, it would create this really beautiful, harmonious place in school where people would accept each other and feel open to having courageous conversations." Siren also believed students should feel a sense of belonging, and she made deliberate efforts to foster a safe place where all students could find their voices while not infringing on another's voice. Cultivating this trusting learning environment carved out opportunities for her students to create and honor their identities. Similarly, Saira saw the benefits of giving students the freedom to speak for themselves: "I think it still goes back to letting them talk about what interests them and what their commonalities are." Saira conveyed of how possessing a sense of belonging could stimulate

students' growing maturity and SEL development while also helping to nurture equity and inclusion where all students felt capable and safe to bring their whole selves to the classroom.

However, having supportive roles in multiple schools, Miquel articulated concern for schools not focused on fostering a sense of belonging: "Some don't even care about culture and climate. It's like the last thing right now because of COVID, and everything's [about] 'safety first.' They're forgetting that you can coincide both objectives." Similarly, Raquel considered it critical for teachers to create a sense of belonging, but worried they needed more awareness and preparation, otherwise they might fall into counterproductive practices:

> There was an incident [in a class] where I think there was a kid who was gay, and a teacher had said some kind of derogatory remarks…You're not in that classroom to make that kid feel bad about what their identity is. There's a lot of teachers…missing those skills, believe it or not.

The participants all wanted students to feel a sense of belonging, which required educators to nurture a safe environment where all students felt welcome to develop their voices and share their identities and perspectives. However, participants cautioned that not all educators had the know-how to do this effectively and intentionally. Belonging extended past the classroom door, as well, where a positive school culture and climate could also provide students with activities where they could share and connect with one another.

In discussing their perspectives on the three subthemes threading through the Equity and Inclusivity category, the interview participants continually highlighted the necessity of educating the whole child. They agreed that educators who possessed critical consciousness, valued culturally affirming teaching practices, and created a sense of belonging could best meet whole-

child needs and lay the foundation for social, emotional, and academic gains. However, to fully embrace equitable and inclusive practices like those emphasized in this theme, educators required support from their schools and communities. The final theme, conditions impacting teacher efficacy, uncovers what educators require to support their ability to leverage SEL in service of equity and inclusion in schools.

Theme Five: Conditions Impacting Teacher Efficacy

The fifth theme identified through the data explores conditions impacting teacher efficacy when implementing a transformative approach to SEL. The interview participants touched on three subthemes: school leadership, family engagement, and teacher burnout. All three indicate conditions or practices that contribute to empowering teachers to effectively use social-emotional learning as a lever for equity and inclusion in education and ensure all students gain access to the benefits of SEL.

School Leadership

The participants noted the critical need for educators to feel valued and heard by those in leadership positions. They argued that working under caring and collaborative school leaders empowered teachers to nurture their students' academic success and social-emotional development. Participants also asserted that skilled leaders cultivated a teamwork mentality among staff members that positively affected how educators approached teaching, as well as emerging challenges. School leaders failing to live up to these important standards could damage school communities, teacher effectiveness, and student growth, both academic and social-emotional.

Participants advocated for a strong, central directive from leadership in order to impact the entire school to positively support learner outcomes. Siren explained that support from

administration in the form of a clear, schoolwide directive would increase teacher potential to deliver SEL instruction effectively. Tami described her administration failing to support teacher-led initiatives designed to increase educator effectiveness: "I'm on the SEL and equity and inclusion committees. We all feel like we're doing so much work, and we're not getting a lot of support or getting anything back for the time and effort we're putting in." Both Jackie and Saira emphasized the importance of an administration in driving initiatives to promote equity and inclusion for students. Liz also expressed appreciation for administrators willing to discuss issues of inclusivity, curriculum, and behavior with her as she learned to navigate the culture at her new school:

> I find that everyone is super approachable at the administrative level, which I appreciate. With one of the deans, I had a really enlightening conversation about how race is perceived. A lot of the teachers are White, and a lot of the [support staff] . . . are people of color, and how that kind of plays into things.

However, participants also cited breakdowns of trust and communication between educators and administrators, and how these breakdowns impeded teacher efficacy. Siren reported administrators lacking trust in teachers' ability to appropriately address public events with students, resulting in restrictive and inconsistent central office mandates that left educators like her vulnerable to criticism. Likewise, in Liz's school, students and teachers lost trust in school- and district-level administrators when these leaders poorly addressed issues related to diversity and equity. Susan speculated on this lack of trust and transparency: "My opinion is they like to divide and conquer, and we'll be lied to…We're definitely not trusted. There's not a lot of trust in [our] leadership." Comparably, Julianne reported that a lack of value for educator voice and agency at her school exacerbated this scarcity of trust and mis-communication which not

only fostered a negative school culture but encouraged staff in her building to disengage due to that negative atmosphere: "I'd like to see that teachers have a voice in what is and isn't working…The autonomy isn't there to be able to make those choices in their best interest. I think the staff is kind of burnt out." Jackie, an outlier in this subtheme, reported that she felt she had a voice in her school, but she believed not all staff felt the same way.

Helena suggested that administrators listen more to stakeholder voice when staff members express their needs, especially when advocating for what professional learning experiences would be most meaningful in supporting their efficacy as educators. Miguel recommended that district and school leaders stop changing initiatives every year. He wanted administrators to focus instead on connecting the big picture to core education values and allow teachers to choose what areas they felt needed the most attention: "Now you got the buy-in, like your [staff is] the one that created it, . . . [so] it's a school decision." Additionally, in listening to his staff expressing their needs, Miguel noticed a craving for "more one-on-one coaching, one-on-one support, [and] small group meetings. He suggested individualized support could "start combing those knots out. Then [teachers] start feeling more and more comfortable and supported and listened to."

In summary, participants stated that supportive administrators enabled teacher efficacy. Administrative support comes in many forms, including driving initiatives that benefit students, providing teachers with the necessary time and resources to maximize effectiveness, and trusting educators to use their autonomy, voices, and agency to promote positive outcomes. However, not all participants received support from their administrators. Some asserted that administrators' lack of trust and transparency, whether it took the form of withholding support for initiatives or actively lying to teachers and turning them against one another, created a negative culture that

damaged teacher efficacy. Likewise, participants felt that administrators delivering inconsistent messaging on equity and inclusion issues divided educators and created confusion. In turn, dissention between administrators and staff generated misunderstandings and pushback from community members, creating a misalignment of family engagement in the students' learning progress. Participants emphasized the need to invoke the proverbial village to raise a whole child, which required cultivating more family engagement, a topic explored in the next subtheme.

Family Engagement

Teaching the whole child does not stop after the final bell of the school day, so many participants suggested that when families supported and continued their children's social-emotional development at home, those students made the biggest academic and SEL gains in school. With modern technology tools readily available, the participants hoped to increase family engagement so students could reap the benefits, but they also acknowledged the challenges and barriers to their efforts. Furthermore, some participants recommended training families on effective SEL strategies for offering their children the support they required to thrive outside of the school environment.

Some participants used a variety of means to successfully engage parents, including organizing family nights to help stakeholders to connect with one another. Liz expressed a desire to organize more, but she recognized that COVID limited her ability to do so. However, the pandemic ushered in a schoolwide initiative to establish and maintain communication with families through technology, and Liz hoped this would continue as students returned to in-person learning. Julianne also appreciated the use technology to reach out to non-English-speaking families when an interpreter was not readily available. Saira also used technology to engage

families by bringing them into the classroom virtually. Moreover, Susan pointed out that two-way communication with families provided valuable information that assisted teachers in meeting students' individual needs. She appreciated parents who reached out to her as a trusted partner: "I think it's helpful when parents and caregivers let us know of things that might be pertinent to the student's life that might come out in the classroom."

Other participants reported low parental engagement in spite of their best efforts. Jackie shared a recent experience that continued the expected trend: "I sent out probably 10 emails the other day. I had one parent that emailed me back. A lot of times, when we do the meet-and-greets, we're excited if we meet five or six of our parents." Kaitlyn also noted how two-way communication "with certain populations are not great." She clarified that by "certain population," she meant families of low socioeconomic advantage. Suzy and Akira both witnessed low parental response to schools' and teachers' efforts to include them. Suzy said, "I generally don't have very high participation for parent-teacher conferences, which is really hard." Akira described many parents as "standoffish" and said they took a "hands-off" approach to their child's education: "The kids are grown up and [their parents] basically don't want much to do with it. Whether it be discipline or making sure the students are doing well, [the parents say,] 'They're in school; that's your job. Take care of that.'"

Many participants speculated that low parental involvement often resulted from parents working long hours. Akira acknowledged that "for some of the kids, their parents are definitely living paycheck to paycheck. They're working a million hours a week, and they're trying the best they can, but they don't have the time." Suzy also understood this reality. However, she emphasized that schools' influence only stretched so far, and she advocated that systemic shifts to the status quo would help strengthen families. Suzy continued this line of thought with the

suggestion that providing more time and resources to families could increase parental support enough to bolster teacher efficacy: "I think parents need more resources. They need help. They need financial help. Because I think it's really hard to expect that families are gonna do better [in engaging with teachers and schools] when they're really just trying to get by." While many participants spoke of parents who did not have enough hours in the day to take a more engaged role, Scooter believed that some parents actively interfered with their children establishing trust with their teachers: "I think the parents are getting in the way to where the kids aren't even able to have the opportunity to trust the teacher." Scooter attributed this parental behavior of "jumping to the side of the student" as a guilt response to overcompensate for working too much and not being around the way they'd like.

Participants suggested that training caregivers to build their adult SEL skills might promote family engagement while also ensuring students experienced consistent practices between school and home. Liz emphasized how parents learning and practicing social-emotional competencies would promote their students' SEL growth at school and at home: "I wish the parents had more [SEL] skills so that it was able to be generalized at home when we're teaching the kids these skills in school." Saira related a similar observation: " Parents and caregivers can foster [social-emotional learning]. They play an important role because they can help students use their words." Suzy shared a similar belief as Saira that some parents needed to develop the skills that would encourage their children to talk more: "When I think about the population of kids that I serve now, I think their White parents really need to speak to them more and have conversations and allow them to speak." Likewise, Tami expressed her frustration with managing the varying viewpoints and values of her students' families, especially when those families held views she recognized as inherently racist: "I've had kids who come in and are blatantly racist. I

don't know what the role of a parent is or what it should be besides teaching kids to be good people." A greater sense of trust in educators to support students' iteration and meaning-making machines may support the development of the SEL competency of social awareness necessary to gain perspective-taking and appreciation for their and others' lived experiences.

Throughout their interviews, participants identified the important role that engaged families played in increasing teacher efficacy. Family engagement supports daily routines and positive classroom behaviors, which helps create a better learning environment. Participants also agreed that various technology tools could aid communication and collaboration with students' families, but they reported low parental engagement at their schools. Participants suggested providing training to boost SEL awareness and trusting relationships with parents/guardians, as the lack of SEL skills in caregivers not only impeded teacher efficacy but contributed to teacher burnout, a subtheme further discussed in the final section.

Teacher Burnout

In the most ideal year, teachers cite overwhelming physical, mental, and emotional demands of their profession. With the teacher job description lengthening each year as families, legislators, and administrators place more responsibilities on teachers' shoulders, teacher burnout raised concern even before the pandemic exponentially increased the stresses of teaching. The participants all agreed that teachers cannot effectively implement all forms of instruction, including SEL, without those in power advocating for significantly greater efforts toward improving educator well-being, healing existing teacher burnout, and transforming the system to prevent future burnout.

Since these interviews occurred amidst schools reopening following COVID-19 closures, the participants had teacher burnout at the forefront of their minds. They cited residual

exhaustion and ongoing stressors from the pandemic as significant contributors to this phenomenon. Tami described how constantly readjusting to the latest version of normal had taken a notable toll: "Teachers seem really, really burnt out, and every day it feels like we have to pump ourselves up and overcome the hurdles. It feels like we're still stuck in 2020 and haven't had time to recover from that." Akira made a similar observation: "[Educators] are on edge with COVID. . . . They're taking care of elderly people, [they're] overwhelmed by being back in the building, [and they're] dealing with [students] that are not where they expect them to be [in academic and SEL skills]."

Other participants identified administrators placing excessive burdens on teachers as the primary cause of teacher burnout in any year. Susan's response about administrators' role in teacher burnout summed up this perspective: "They say 'self-care' and 'work-life balance,' but then . . . we just keep getting more and more tasks." Jackie resonated with Susan about how unrealistic workloads caused teacher burnout: "I've talked to multiple people who have said the administration keeps telling us we're appreciated, and then they just keep piling stuff on for us to do." She shared sentiments she heard from her colleagues: "A lot of people are saying, 'If I'm this tired now, what am I gonna be like in June? I can't keep doing this for this long.'" Julianne also highlighted administrators' effect on staff well-being. She gave the example of her administration failing to appreciate educators' efforts in the classroom and how this contributed to teacher burnout: "I don't think the wellness of staff is very good. People are overwhelmed, overworked. There's not a lot of validating how hard it is from the admin." In addition to this, Julianne noted that well-meaning administrators often presented new initiatives for teachers to implement without considering the burden this placed on overworked faculty members.

Liz made a connection between teacher burnout and SEL initiatives: "You have to take care of the [students'] emotional needs first before you can get to the [academic] learning. [Likewise,] I feel like you have to take care of the emotional needs of the teacher as a whole before you can start pushing demands on them." Siren also acknowledged that teacher burnout undermined SEL instruction and modeling because overstrained teachers dealing with problem behaviors might not have the patience to appropriately address those students' SEL needs.

Miguel's research and experience as a social worker helped him see that "teachers are so burned out that they're just like:

> Whatever. Just do whatever.' They're not taking care of themselves right now. A lot of teachers are just kind of living on the edge…It's that elephant in the room that no one talks about, an invisible stigma of being a teacher, that you're just supposed to be a superhero and not . . . feel bad or be tired or be sick."

Liz suggested that teachers should have true downtime after periods of hectic work to practice self-care and process all the input they'd received: "I feel like [teachers] need time to process things. The decision fatigue is always there. And whenever you get a break, it's to make more decisions or plan or have more PD thrown at you."

Consequently, several factors impacted a teacher's overall well-being and contributed to burnout, including COVID fatigue and administrators' excessive burdening of already-overworked teachers. Though the participants shared specific examples, the proverbial metaphor taken from airplane safety procedures sums up the big idea: teachers have to put their own oxygen masks on before they can make sure students have theirs on. Otherwise, no one has a good outcome. Participants noted how burnout significantly impeded teacher effectiveness

because exhausted and emotionally overstrained educators encountered greater difficulty in meeting students' emotional needs and responding appropriately to negative behaviors. Additionally, they lacked the resources and support to effectively adopt self-care practices to manage their well-being.

Teacher efficacy reaches its potential when a school community embraces three core goals: an effective school leadership, increased family engagement, and teacher well-being. An effective school leadership supports educators in ways that make them feel valued and heard. Furthermore, effective administrators foster a positive collaborative community by trusting their educators and communicating with them. When teachers feel like trusted members of a team that values their expertise, they can create the most effective lessons and learning environments. Family engagement extends the team from the classroom to the home. Caregivers supporting and practicing new concepts with students helps students make larger gains in a shorter amount of time. Finally, burned out teachers operating on survival mode cannot effectively meet students' needs. Measures that promote realistic expectations and authentically value teacher well-being can reduce and prevent teacher burnout.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings to address the study purpose and research question. Through 14 semi-structured interviews, participants shared their insights, perspectives, and lived experiences as they related to whole-child development, social-emotional learning, and equitable teaching practices. The findings from this study determined that educators would have better success in building students' lifelong SEL competencies by meeting certain criteria. First, educators must possess SEL skills and adopt a mindset that prioritizes SEL instruction in spite of inevitable setbacks. Second, implementing SEL into existing educational structures involves

winning teacher buy-in, consistently using an SEL curriculum, and understanding how SEL skills support academic learning. Third, student discipline issues offer educators opportunities to mentor students in SEL competencies and incorporating SEL into discipline methods requires honest assessment of current practices. Fourth, SEL competencies enable students to make space for each other in conversations, opportunities, and decision-making. Educators who possess critical consciousness and value culturally affirming teaching practices can help reinforce those ideals while creating a sense of belonging that encourages students to practice their SEL skills. Finally, SEL initiatives ask teachers to go the extra mile, a demand all too familiar to educators. Effective school leadership, increased family engagement, and authentic measures prioritizing teacher well-being can help teachers reach peak efficacy and significantly bolster the success of a school's SEL initiative.

The following chapter synthesizes the study results and engages in further discussion and dialogue. I begin by further dialoguing with the study results in connection to prior research and considering the implications of these findings relative to my research questions when implementing transformative social-emotional learning. Additionally, I address the limitations of the study and offer recommendations for furthering research in the field of social-emotional learning. Finally, I end dissertation with researcher reflections and a concluding summary.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considerable evidence exists to outline the substantial benefits of social-emotional

learning (SEL) and its influence on measures impacting student success (Beelmann & Lösel,

2006; Conley et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Zins et al.,

2004). Yet, significant gaps in the research exist to determine how SEL could be leveraged to

foster more equitable learning and whether all students gain access to its benefits. To address the

noted gap, this study utilized narrative inquiry through semi-structured interviews to reveal what

adult SEL skills, mindsets, resources, and professional learning educators need to leverage

social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting.

Regardless of a participants' perceived level of existing SEL awareness, skills, mindsets,

and critical consciousness, it was clear that a more concerted effort was required to pave the way

to implementing a transformative approach to SEL. This discussion chapter is an integrated

summary of the interpretations, implications, and recommendations drawn from the findings of

this study. In this chapter, I begin by recapitulating and interpreting the results in relation to prior

research while drawing connections to the study's research questions aimed at discovering how

to create more equitable and inclusive practices in education. Additionally, I discuss the

implications of this research and make recommendations to consider regarding transformative

social-emotional learning in education. Finally, I conclude the chapter addressing the study's

limitations, offer future recommendations for furthering the research, and share my final

researcher reflections as they relate to my journey participating in this study.

Discussion of Findings

Throughout the interviews, participants advocated for educators to possess their own

adult SEL skills and to adopt a growth mindset that prioritizes SEL instruction and reflect upon

existing practices, overcome obstacles, and embrace change. Participants also expressed how implementing SEL into current educational systems involves stakeholder buy-in, regularly using an SEL curriculum, and appreciating how embedding SEL into the fabric of the school culture can enhance both academic learning and more equitable and inclusive practices.

Additionally, participants noted that a candid evaluation of current policies and procedures could shift educators' mindsets to view SEL as a tool for fostering the competencies necessary to more effectively manage issues related to trauma and student behavior. Participants also discussed how SEL naturally augments equity and inclusivity efforts by creating a sense of belonging and encouraging students' identities and cultural assets to be seen, heard, and valued. Finally, participants voiced how effective school leadership, increased family engagement, and authentic actions prioritizing teacher well-being can build educators' capacity to bolster the success of a school's initiative to implement a transformative approach to SEL. The following sections will discuss the implications of these themes in dialogue with past research.

Educator SEL Skills and Mindsets

Leading experts agree that to teach SEL competencies to students effectively, educators must also personally possess these skills themselves (Bracket et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Palomera et al., 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). Likewise, CASEL encourages schools and districts through their theory of action to place SEL for educators at the forefront of their mission to implement systemic SEL (Yoder et al., 2020). Comparable to the Braun et al. (2020) findings that concluded that a teacher's emotional regulation skills and life satisfaction were associated with students' well-being, this study indicates that teachers' own SEL competency skills and well-being are revealed in the classroom and significantly affect students' experiences at school. In particular, participants note how

embodying strong social-emotional competencies helps foster relationships with students necessary for supporting their whole child development and cultivating a classroom community where students feel safe, supported, and engaged.

Participants offer their suggestions for the most effective adult SEL skills for helping students learn and develop their social-emotional capabilities. Patience and flexibility are seen as core characteristics educators must hold as they take on increasing amounts of responsibility to meet the ever-evolving needs of their students. Both patience and flexibility help educators to advocate for their students' vast social, emotional, and academic requirements through more effective and equitable policies and procedures. By exemplifying patience and flexibility, educators can create the space required to examine current practices that no longer serve their students' greater good, such as exclusionary discipline practices and teacher-directed teaching methods. While also shifting mindsets to adopt more inclusive practices like restorative justice, culturally affirming teaching, and student-centered learning that requires ongoing efforts to take root and sustain. Collectively these skills help educators embrace change as the needs of their students evolve and situate youth as co-creators of their learning process, thus cultivating their voice and agency to promote more equitable experiences at school.

The findings from this study also mirror the advice from bell hooks (1994) to teachers to dedicate themselves to a process of self-reflexivity. Participants' responses notably highlight that vulnerability and a self-reflexivity mindset are non-negotiable traits for educators to deliver student-centered SEL instruction successfully. Past literature also confirms how educators must adopt this mindset to shift from a deficit to a strength-based lens when wrestling with systems that might contribute to school failure (Gorski, 2016) and perpetuate the equity problem (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Vanlommel & Schildkamp, 2019). Furthermore, studies challenge

how avoiding the topic of racism in education research, policy, and practice exacerbates this deficit-thinking and results in superficial methods to reform that continues to allow institutional systems to evade responsibility for the structures, policies, and practices that systemically fail students of Color (Kohli et al., 2017). Therefore, vulnerability and a self-reflexive mindset can act as the vehicle allowing educators to acknowledge their growth areas and lean into discussions that can reveal new insights and improvements at the systems level required to support more equitable and inclusive practices in education.

Participants also recognize that having these Adult SEL skills opens the door to fostering empathy for students, their lived experiences, and developmental processes. By viewing students through an empathetic lens, educators naturally position themselves to give students the benefit of the doubt, which is an essential factor in building strong, trusting relationships that contribute to a safe, positive, and just classroom community. The findings in this research make similar conclusions to Poulou's (2017) study, documenting that fostering adult SEL enhances teacher social-emotional and teaching competencies which correlates to positive teacher-student relationships and prevents student emotional and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, adult SEL supports educators in gaining the necessary social-emotional skills and mindsets required to support more equitable and inclusive approaches in education. By fostering adult SEL, educators build the capacity to examine their own identities, biases, and how their actions impact equitable outcomes, bolstering their ability to empathize and take on others' perspectives and build authentic relationships with students, staff, and families (CASEL, 2019). Doing so nurtures students' social-emotional competence and supports the creation of a safe and caring learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging (CASEL, 2017c).

In a recent report shared by CASEL (2022) outlining the research gathered through their 10-year Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), partnering districts offered their wisdom to prioritize adult SEL sooner in the implementation process. School leaders found that educators themselves became better advocates, practitioners, and models of SEL with increased social-emotional competencies and capacities (CASEL, 2022). Ultimately, when educators work toward proficiency in these and other adult SEL skills, it lays the groundwork for building awareness and execution of SEL-focused teaching practices in their classrooms and schools.

SEL Awareness and Implementation

CASEL researchers and advocates also argue that for SEL to be effective, it must be co-constructed in collaboration with families and communities and integrated throughout the school's culture, policies, practices, and academic curricula (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). As a result, school communities can promote youth voice, agency, and engagement to establish caring and just classroom and school climates with discipline approaches that enhance learner outcomes (CASEL, 2020c, 2022). Study participants often return to a similar belief that when teachers have strong SEL awareness and appreciation of its value, it results in more robust SEL instruction, which positively impacts the entire learning environment. Therefore, participants view gaining stakeholder approval of SEL as a high priority. Without such buy-in from educators, schools risk experiencing implementation drift where well-intended initiatives to embed SEL into learning environments fizzle over time.

While the study's findings touch on the importance of investing in SEL, it also made clear that educators unsure of committing often resist to evade what they perceive to be added obligations or unwelcomed changes in long-standing practices. Placing a more concerted effort to conduct meaningful professional development delivered by trusted sources to clarify SEL and

convey its benefits can counteract this opposition and gain stakeholder buy-in. Similar to the recommendation of Wenger (2011) who advocates for "communities of practice" to support members in sharing information, professional development in the area of SEL could create space to encourage a shared repertoire of resources and experiences for addressing ongoing needs and problems. Additionally, convincing teachers that social-emotional learning could enhance student academic success while offering practical applications that blend SEL into their daily practice might encourage its implementation. It would assure these adopted practices would reduce burdens that exasperate the overflowing of their already full plates.

Nonetheless, participants felt encouraged that their SEL practices positively impact their students and that carving out time to practice such skills is a vital component to effective implementation. Furthermore, findings reveal that using universal, consistent instructional practices through an SEL curriculum encourages buy-in while promoting stronger collaboration among all stakeholders. All of which, confirms the results of Snipe et al., (2002) study on educational reform, that uncovered a lack of consistency to be a challenge schools face when implementing initiatives and programs. The findings of that study encouraged schools to follow an implementation plan, offer professional learning, and integrate universal SEL curriculums and practices across the district (CASEL, 2022). However, concerns surfaced from participants on whether teaching formal SEL lessons generalize successfully into the natural environment and if these programs connect meaningfully to the diverse identities of their students. Participants also recognize how social-emotional learning interventions rarely assimilate culturally responsive strategies, similar to findings revealed by researchers investigating culturally affirming practices within existing SEL programs (Barnes, 2019; McCallops et al., 2019). Additionally, these study findings echo the concerns of past researchers who question whether instructional features of

SEL programs encourage student voice and agency to interrupt inequities in education, in that most programs ignore issues related to systems of privilege, power, and oppression that largely affect racially and ethnically diverse groups (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Simmons, 2017). Therefore, to ensure SEL is an inclusive and equitable practice for all students, SEL program developers must move toward creating lessons and materials that not only embrace students' identities and cultural assets but also encourages them to participate in school improvement initiatives.

Moreover, despite a school or district's valiant effort to place the development of their students' social-emotional competencies at that forefront, the status quo for academic growth remains. As teachers struggle to "catch students up" academically amidst a pandemic, participants acknowledge how educators often feel fraught with choosing between SEL and academic instruction. Standardized testing is perceived as a barrier to the student-centered teaching style that is more conducive to social, emotional, and academic success. Alternatively, educators are encouraged to view their role in instruction as more interactive and equitable where students help co-create their learning.

These assertions resonated with Lasater, Bengtson, and Albiladi's (2020) findings that declared how schools perpetuate inequitable practices when they push teachers to shift the focus from instruction to accountability measures. These measures encourage teachers to view students as numbers rather than people, which creates an unsafe professional environment where data is used to threaten educator efficacy. Essentially, if the educational system continues to rely on testing measures to drive student success indicators, this accountability structure will impinge on SEL implementation and ultimately negatively impact educators' ability to engage in this transformative learning process. Alternatively, supporting more equitable and inclusive practices

requires shifting the onus off staff and students onto systems. When schools work to remove the system barriers that prevent positive learner outcomes, they create sustainable change providing staff, students, and families the fighting chance to promote just schools that close the achievement gap.

Regardless, participants widely agree that improving learner outcomes and preparing youth for life beyond the classroom requires helping them develop the social-emotional competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The study findings assert that when both staff and students embody these skills, it creates classroom and school climates where students are safe to bring their whole selves to the learning process. They suggest modifying instructional methods in favor of interactive, collaborative practices where students share in the learning process and engage in active critical thinking and SEL skill building. All of which heightens student success and fosters civic-minded youth. These learned SEL skills of empathy, tolerance, communication, and collaboration, in turn, empower student agency to co-create safer, more caring, and inclusive learning environments and societies.

Notwithstanding challenges with buy-in, curricula, and academic pressure, the study denotes SEL instruction as the best course of action for supporting whole child development. Research findings consistently emphasize how intentionally teaching social-emotional competencies is critical. Ultimately, study findings urge educators to strive to maintain a place for social-emotional learning in their daily schedules, a precursor for leveraging its benefits to foster more equitable and inclusive practices in education.

Discipline Through a Trauma-Informed SEL Lens

Trauma-informed practices were considered imperative for educators to acquire to ensure all students get what they need to succeed. Findings from the study suggest that educators must use a trauma-informed, equity-driven lens to understand how current punitive discipline practices are not only ineffective but do not contribute to holistically teaching the whole child. Moreover, the findings reckon how these exclusionary discipline policies and procedures prevent students from building adequate SEL competencies. Additionally, these ineffective practices fracture student-teacher relationships and heighten students' fight, flight, and freeze trauma responses that perpetuate unexpected behaviors. While there remains a void in the research that connects trauma-informed practices with SEL, researchers endorse SEL programs to be trauma-informed (Pawlo et al., 2019), as many students experience extreme emotions related to acute and chronic trauma incidents. Trauma-informed SEL instruction can help normalize such practices, so educators feel more empowered to emphasize the importance of building connections and a sense of belonging through authentic and caring relationships.

The findings also noted how understanding trauma and implementing trauma-informed practices can address unexpected social behaviors within the context of trauma, helping students to overcome their challenges and better regulate their behavior. Participants who were familiar with the effects of trauma recognized the different ways that a student's trauma can manifest in disruptive classroom behaviors and actively sought to support them through SEL. When educators are not aware of these vulnerabilities, and when they lack social-emotional awareness, they may respond with a punitive approach, which then exasperates the problem and further splinters the school culture and climate and students' ability to flourish past these traumatic situations (Oehlberg, 2008). Ultimately, participants express that their role as a whole-child educator is to acknowledge how students need time and space to process their emotional

responses and that classroom disruptions present teachable moments to build lagging SEL skills such as self-awareness and self-management.

Conversely, participants did express disapproval of school-wide discipline policies that did not indicate clear consequences or emphasize consistent follow-up as they prevent the shaping of responsible decision-making. In the end, participants consistently express their belief that behavioral issues decrease as students' social skills increase and advocate for more proactive, restorative measures for preventing disruptive behaviors. Educators can promote responsible decision-making through teaching, modeling, and practicing positive behavior strategies such as PBIS by prioritizing prevention rather than punishment. Such student-centered discipline practices also promote good citizenship by elevating student voices and making them stakeholders. Collectively, staff and students can work together to create classroom creeds and expectations that are agreed upon and fostered by all community members.

However, whether PBIS practices lead to equitable outcomes for all students warrants careful consideration. While PBIS incentivizes expected behaviors, not every student follows the rules every moment. Participants offer hope for the use of restorative practices as a potentially effective way for educators to build classroom culture, support responsible decision-making, and manage student discipline in equitable ways (González, 2021; Gregory et al., 2016). However, most participants report having minimal opportunities to engage in those practices. Those who saw ineffective execution worry it will impact students' social-emotional growth. Students who lag the necessary social skills to meet the expectations are likely to give up trying if they continue to meet with failure. To move away from punitive actions and towards student-centered approaches to discipline requires intentional skill-building and meaningful consequences to

promote positive behaviors along a tiered continuum. Doing so allows all students to experience success as they learn and grow.

If critically conscious leaders and educators genuinely want to leverage a transformative approach to social-emotional learning, they will need to create systems built off SEL principles that prioritize inclusion, fair process, and belonging. Schools can begin this process by embracing a transformative approach to SEL to examine the obstacles that impact some learners from achieving, such as poverty, lack of trauma-informed practices, exclusionary discipline practices, implicit bias, and educator burnout. Schools can then start the journey to comprehensively implement evidence-based practices, instruction, interventions, and assessments that promote equitable and inclusive whole child development.

Transformative SEL as a Lever for Fostering Equity and Inclusivity

Transformative SEL is an approach that supports youth and adults in cultivating healthy, respectful relationships grounded on an appreciation for similarities and differences necessary to critically examine root causes of inequity and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems (Jagers et al., 2019). Transformative SEL can offer school communities ways to share this responsibility by viewing students as experts in their own lived experience, capable of working together to co-create equitable solutions (Jagers, 2016). Cultivating this democratic learning environment that encourages shared power amongst youth and educators necessitates developing a critical consciousness lens.

When educators possess the adult SEL skill of self-awareness and social awareness necessary to adopt a critical lens, they build the capacity to notice how their identities, beliefs, assumptions, and lived experiences might drive decisions and practices that impact their classroom and school's environment and ultimately learner outcomes. Participants emphasize the

importance of confronting both their biases and the impact of microaggressions as necessary components to leveraging SEL to provide an equitable education for all students. Much like Freire (1993) advocates, this type of curiosity can provide educators and youth the confidence they need to interrogate oppressive systems, policies, and practices that are exclusionary and unjust as noted above. These tenets of critical consciousness can empower educators and youth to balance power to identify and transform biased situations through dialogue and discussion (Freire, 1993).

While participants agreed on the importance of critical consciousness to drive more equitable practices and cultivate authentic social-emotional competencies, they report that they and their colleagues have had few formal opportunities to develop it. They consistently called for more professional learning and voiced frustration when their coworkers did not take advantage of the few opportunities offered. Participants speculate that the lack of professional learning experiences and educators' avoidance of critical consciousness stems from the discomfort often associated with discussions surrounding structural racism and insufficient direction from school officials on navigating such topics. Researchers confirm this hypothesis and argue that considerations need to be made around learner willingness when immersing in a transformative learning experience during professional development (Cranton, 2013; Sprow & Blouin, 2016; Taylor, 2007). Therefore, to adopt transformative SEL demands mindful attention to build adult SEL competencies necessary for educators to engage in the iterative meaning-making process in trusting spaces. Shifting rooted beliefs, assumptions, and views associated with how power and privilege affect youth experiences in and out of the classroom requires a critical lens.

Additionally, research suggests that critical consciousness can encourage youth to challenge inequities in education (El-Amin et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2011) and be a gateway to

academic achievement and engagement for marginalized students (Carter, 2008). According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2021), central to this effort is permitting developmentally appropriate discussions about privilege, discrimination, bias, and systemic racism in our nation's schools. Such conversations are not meant to divide students or make them feel shame about their race, community, or country. Instead, these dialogues foster critical thinking and build awareness of how existing systems, structures, and policies can cause inequitable outcomes.

Participants agree that students should learn critical consciousness but voice criticism they've faced from parents/guardians when incorporating these conversations into their classrooms. This denigration started occurring more often and more aggressively amid debates over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its relation to SEL. CRT offers researchers, practioners, and policymakers a race-conscious framework for discovering resolutions to educational inequity and structural racism. Proponents against CRT have misrepresented SEL's presence in K-12 schools, arguing that SEL is a disguise for CRT. Parental protest further exasperates and conflates the assumption that SEL is used to indoctrinate our youth. This misinformation is causing school boards and state legislatures to advocate against SEL adoption in primary and secondary schools.

Furthermore, participants warn that the transformative journey towards evolving one's critical consciousness can bring discomfort under normal circumstances. Given this current political climate that threatens educators promoting SEL, equity, diversity, and inclusion, participants are concerned that educators must navigate uncharted waters without proper guidance or fear retribution that could deter them from fully embracing SEL as a lever for equity. Leaders, researchers, and believers in SEL must work collectively to dispel these detrimental

effects and safeguard SEL while moving towards a more transformative approach. Ultimately, educators and youth require SEL skills that encourage co-creating democratic learning environments that leverage youth voice and agency to fight against these inequitable policies that impede their development into civic-minded youth.

Regardless, many participants view embedding culturally affirming teaching practices into their instructional materials an effective way to value their students' identities, backgrounds, and cultural assets. Much like the results found in Barnes and McCallops (2019) study, participants recognize how such practices promote more equitable and engaging learning environments and exposes students to the diversity within their own classrooms and communities. This approach is viewed as a natural way to build the SEL competency of social awareness-needed to appreciate, value, and respect others' identities, cultural assets, and lived experiences. Participants suggest social studies as potentially the most productive place for culturally affirming practices but report that since standardized testing did not include assessing social studies skills, this subject tends to fall through the cracks when considering funding materials, training, and other resources.

Finally, nurturing learning environments where students feel welcomed and accepted arose often as participants shared their experiences on building their classroom communities. Developing a positive rapport with students is viewed as necessary for creating a sense of belonging that promotes equity and inclusion in the classroom. Participants point back to using culturally affirming teaching as a daily practice that encourages students to connect with and value one another as a larger school community. Doing so ensures each student not only sees themselves reflected in the curriculum but also allows students to view their similarities and differences as assets to appreciate instead of limitations to fear or disregard. In many ways, the

participants viewed this sense of belonging as their end goal for developing critical consciousness and using culturally affirming practices, as these skills helped the participants prepare trusting places for students to boost their SEL competencies and co-facilitate a nurturing and engaging learning environment. Nonetheless, regardless of educators' efforts to promote such learning environments, participants advocate for certain conditions to support a transformative approach to SEL.

Conditions Supporting the Implementation of Transformative SEL

Results from the study advocate for a strong, central directive from leadership to drive initiatives that benefit students while also providing teachers with the necessary time and resources to maximize effectiveness. Moreover, study findings note the critical need for teachers to feel appreciated and respected for their expertise and trusted to use their autonomy, voices, and agency to promote equitable outcomes for their students. Trust, transparency, and effective communication are seen as vital to deliver consistent messaging on SEL and equity amongst school stakeholders to lay the groundwork towards leveraging a transformative approach to SEL. Researchers reinforce that when educators are provided opportunities to get involved in district and school-based policymaking and have authentic partnerships with colleagues, it reduces the impact of stress on their health, creates a feeling of empowerment, and promotes higher job satisfaction (Greenberg et al., 2016; Verhoeven et al., 2003). The literature also highlights how leaders play an imperative role in fostering a sense of belonging, collective agency, and well-being by centering social-emotional competencies at the heart of how they interact, collaborate and cultivate relationships with staff, students, families, and community partners (CASEL, 2022). Ultimately, participants note how caring and collaborative school leaders empower teachers to nurture their students' academic success and social-emotional development.

Additionally, participants advocate for strong partnerships between home and school that strengthen family engagement. Study findings suggest that students who have the solid family support that nurtures their social-emotional development at home make the biggest academic and SEL gains in school. However, some participants noted that either inadequate parent engagement or parental interference with unreasonable expectations and misguided agendas negatively impacted students' progress. Insufficient parental engagement leads to a lack of consistency between home and school when developing the whole child. It reduces the benefits associated with growing the social-emotional competencies that drive student success measures. Likewise, parental interference in dismissing or refuting teacher attempts to foster self-awareness and responsible decision-making often creates inconsistencies and contributes to confusion for students that result in youth missing opportunities to develop their social-emotional competencies.

Some participants recommend training families SEL awareness and effective SEL strategies for offering their children the support they require to thrive outside of the school environment. Existing literature confirms that fostering parent learning can enhance engagement and reinforce the collaborative approach that builds long-term commitment to SEL (CASEL, 2022). However, participants also recognize that a more rigorous effort was required to cultivate authentic school-family-community partnerships that collectively promote and foster SEL and equity. Nurturing a school culture and climate that leans into diversity and encourages inclusivity builds the skills of social awareness necessary to promote a sense of belonging where stakeholders collectively ensure all youth get what they need to succeed. Without building such common ground rooted in a shared vision and communal core values, educators are apt to feel their efforts are futile, which eventually can lead to burnout and ultimately affect student success.

Lastly, previous studies not only confirm that educator stress and fatigue trickle down to unfavorably affect student learning (McLean & Connor, 2015; Hoglund et al., 2015) but also reveal that burnt out, exhausted, and overworked educators are more likely to act on their implicit biases (Staats, 2015a). Overtaxed educators not only struggle to meet students' social and emotional needs but are less apt to respond appropriately to disruptive behaviors while also marshaling the self-reflection required to ensure fair practices in their classrooms. Fortunately, research also shows that educators can improve well-being by focusing on their adult SEL, which helps to foster more caring relationships that enhance learner outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). However, while participants in this study agree that burnout significantly impedes teacher effectiveness, they voiced concern that superficial efforts like encouraging self-care practices outside of school to nurture teacher well-being will not suffice. Likewise, normalizing unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol to self-medicate was a notable concern addressed in the study's findings. Instead, protecting educator well-being requires investigating what conditions burden their efficacy and act as barriers to student growth, such as lack of resources, standardized testing, top-down initiatives with inadequate training, and insufficient support from parents and communities.

Additionally, while participants voiced experiencing their own impacts of trauma resulting from the pandemic, they also expressed hope for it to become the catalyst for systemic change in education. They recognized the importance of educator well-being when strengthening their adult SEL. However, in the end, teachers cannot effectively implement all forms of instruction, including SEL, without more significant effort to address and transform the systems that affect their well-being and create inequitable outcomes for students. Barriers such as structural racism, poverty, trauma, implicit bias, inequitable allocation of resources, and lack of

teacher pre-and in-service SEL and DEI training continue to poison the education system preventing stakeholders from closing the achievement gap. Suppose schools want to ensure all youth benefit from SEL in education, then implementing transformative SEL could offer a viable solution to removing such obstacles and enacting systemic change.

Implications of Findings

Ensuring All Students Benefit from SEL in Education

Participants share what adult SEL skills, mindset, resources, and professional learning they believe educators require to ensure all students gain access to the benefits of social-emotional learning. We can glean from the findings a clearer understanding of where schools and districts are at with executing SEL, the barriers that prevent systemic implementation, and where the gaps remain when addressing and combating inequitable practices in education that affect student success. In summary, bringing together the social-emotional half with the academic half in ways that foster the whole child will require a more intensive effort on the part of school communities. Ultimately, this study reveals the necessity for school stakeholders to strengthen their SEL knowledge and critical consciousness to use one to elevate the other. Not having strong adult SEL skills and mindsets and SEL awareness, buy-in, and effective implementation left educators underutilizing a crucial component to whole child development. Likewise, not having critical consciousness left educators more susceptible to executing inequitable practices and less apt to ensure all students get what they need to succeed. Study findings also revealed the barriers and obstacles educators face when implementing a more transformative approach to SEL. Without a more concerted effort to actively resist these hurdles, educators will have a great challenge closing the achievement gap.

If done thoughtfully, transformative social-emotional learning can help build equity and culturally responsive teaching to promote inclusive learning environments and ensure all students benefit from social-emotional learning. When school communities more explicitly link CASEL's five core SEL competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) to their equity and inclusivity efforts, they can elevate every aspect of students' growth and achievement. Viewing social-emotional learning as a lever for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is vital to building the skills necessary to cultivate safer, more caring, and inclusive schools and societies.

Promoting Equity and Inclusion Through CASEL's Five Core SEL Competencies

The study findings help to connect how fostering CASEL's SEL competencies can ultimately promote civic-minded students that help to cultivate a sense of belonging where all learners feel seen, heard, and valued. All of which builds trust and cultivates a safe classroom community—this trust and community then heighten student engagement towards maximizing learner outcomes.

Self-Awareness

School communities can foster equity through *self-awareness* by supporting students in better understanding and appreciating their and others' identities, strengths, and cultural assets. Doing so requires that schools, families, and communities create safe spaces to normalize discussions for recognizing and addressing the biases, opportunities, and obstacles associated with these identities and how they impact youth's experiences in and out of the classroom. This reflection process becomes more approachable when practicing culturally responsive teaching and representing all cultural identities in the instructional curriculum. Educators achieve this by including a variety of literature and history topics and perspectives and by creating classroom

environments that allow students to experience and demonstrate their learning in multiple ways that honor ones' community and cultural beliefs and values. These practices let students know that they are equally represented in the classroom, help them share their strength-based assets, and encourage student agency.

Self-Management

School communities can cultivate equity through *self-management* by embedding culturally compassionate self-care and mindfulness into daily practices to support emotional awareness and regulation. Self-management skills are also required to build the growth mindset needed to persevere and overcome the challenges students face. These skills also encourage student voice and agency to address inequities in the school and community, co-creating democratic learning environments rooted in fair processes.

Social Awareness

School communities can build equity through *social awareness* by understanding that while we all assimilate into different environments, some races and identities often have to leave their identities outside of the classroom. To strengthen students' social awareness muscles of perspective-taking, empathy, and belonging, school communities will need to acknowledge broader historical frameworks and norms of social behavior in various situations and how that affects all group members. Doing so fosters social norms that appreciate the similarities and differences of staff, students, and their families and allows space for all to be represented.

Relationship Skills

School communities can encourage equity by cultivating culturally responsive *relationship skills* that seek to encourage mindful communication, conflict resolution, and collaboration. These skills are needed to vigorously interrupt and respond to acts of disrespect

and unkindness that negatively impact a school's culture and climate—doing so arms school communities with the skills required to nurture authentic partnerships that collectively identifies a shared vision rooted in their communal core values.

Responsible Decision-Making

School communities can promote equity through *responsible decision-making* by analyzing the impact of social and institutional systems and taking collective action to make sustainable change. It's working together to take care of the community through service-learning opportunities and creating policies and procedures that encourage ownership and accountability to care for the school community at large. All of which requires listening to all voices and ensuring the concerns and ideas of students, staff, and families are heard.

In addition to intentionally weaving equity and inclusivity into CASEL's five core SEL competencies, study findings can be utilized to further outline the criteria needed to implement transformative SEL to safeguard more equitable and inclusive outcomes for students. These recommendations seek to confirm and augment existing research that supports systemic social-emotional learning in education. Furthermore, these suggestions offer the tenets required to view SEL as a lever for ensuring all youth get what they need to succeed in school and life beyond the classroom.

Recommendations for Implementing a Transformative Approach to SEL

1. ***Elevate adult SEL skills, mindsets, and well-being.*** This enables educators to more effectively teach, model, and shape social-emotional learning in the classroom. Adult SEL also encourages members of the school community to foster the authentic partnerships that help embed SEL into homes, schools, and communities.

2. ***Assertively boost SEL awareness and buy-in, including the adoption of culturally affirming practices.*** When educators understand and believe in the benefits of SEL, they are more inclined to use evidence-based SEL practices that thread equity into the fabric of the school culture and climate. This includes increasing the representation of the full student body through culturally affirming practices and curricula.

3. ***Cultivate critical consciousness in school stakeholders.*** School communities that use a critical lens will highlight youths' identities, lived experiences, and cultural assets, thus enhancing the generalization of CASEL's five core SEL competencies. This naturally progresses into more equitable conditions for students as they become co-creators of a democratic culture within their classrooms and school.

4. ***Emphasize student voice and agency.*** When adults value students' voices and encourage students to actively participate in their school community through shared power, they are apt to collectively construct more equitable practices that foster a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging reinforces youths' willingness to use their voices and agency, creating a positive loop that embeds in the school culture and climate.

5. ***Entrench SEL in systems to promote trauma-informed, equitable policies and practices.*** Policymakers must consider the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the well-being of youth and adults. Students who have experienced trauma will often manifest that trauma through unexpected behaviors. These students may be unable or unwilling to disclose their trauma, leaving them highly susceptible to additional trauma when subjected to punitive discipline

policies that don't reach the root cause of the behavior. Educational systems need to evaluate how longstanding policies and procedures lack trauma-informed practices and exacerbate the inequities that negatively impact students' experience in and out of the classroom. When used effectively, research-based, trauma-informed practices can help educators build critical SEL skills in their students, thus promoting equity by ensuring all learners get what they need to succeed.

Each of these five recommendations is a piece of the whole. When weaved together, they support and reinforce one another. Likewise, bypassing one creates a gap that reduces the effectiveness of the remaining efforts. Transformative SEL implementation may succeed or fail based on how effectively a school community integrates all five recommendations. While it might be challenging to jump-start a transformative SEL initiative and get the velocity going, there comes a tipping point when a school community needs to maintain momentum. Ideally, by then, members of that community will begin to experience the many benefits associated with SEL. These positive outcomes then fuel the desire to leverage SEL to boost equity and inclusion to assure all students gain access to its benefits.

Limitations and Future Research

Using narrative inquiry to elevate educators' voices was a fruitful research approach to analyzing and advocating for the successful implementation of SEL and equity in education. Yet limitations are present in all study designs, including this one. While the participants selected ranged in age, gender, race, school setting, and grade band, comparisons amongst these criteria were inconclusive. The limited number of participants in a demographic resulted in an inability to isolate an independent variable to draw clear conclusions from the findings. Therefore, the findings discovered cannot be adequately generalized to any one school setting or grade band.

An additional limitation of this study is within the selection criteria. While this study's selection criteria helped ensure participants had a strong awareness and understanding of SEL, their level of critical consciousness differed vastly. Regardless of a participant's racial background or experience working in an urbanized setting with a diverse population, each participant offered their own unique perspective to grasp how SEL could be a lever for equity. However, requiring participants to have an evolved level of critical consciousness in the selection criteria could have deepened the findings of this study. Conceptualizing how staff, students, and families could elevate their social-emotional competencies and share power when co-creating equitable schools and classrooms is a vital component to consider when actualizing transformative SEL. Therefore, seeking participants whose school or district is already prioritizing a transformative approach to SEL could have offered insights into the hopes and hurdles of implementing. Since transformative SEL is a newer framework for schools to consider, future research efforts might consider identifying early adopters and conducting a case study.

Nevertheless, to fully capture the nuances associated with building one's social-emotional competencies to support equity and inclusion in schools will require future research efforts to include a broader representation of voices. In this study and others, students' voices are often missing at the table. While the literature review pointed to a noticeable research gap when determining the educator's role in leveraging transformative SEL, the voices of youth were even more alarmingly silenced and unheard. Under better circumstances, I would have preferred a youth participatory action research design that amplified students' voices to uncover longstanding inequities in education. However, this design was challenging to consider due to the looming pandemic's unpredictable time constraints and safety concerns. Having student

voices represented in this study could have unveiled perspectives not considered as students share their lived experiences in and out of the classroom.

Future research efforts could seek to elevate these important voices to fully actualize the development of our students' SEL competencies and ensure more equitable and inclusive outcomes. By researching students' beliefs, perspectives, and lived experiences in and out of schools, we can capture data about their levels of engagement, perspectives on learning, school climate and belonging, social and emotional competence, attendance, and discipline (CASEL, 2020a). Doing so situates youth as partners in the data inquiry process that examines root causes of inequities and engages them in implementing solutions in school improvement using their developed social-emotional skills and mindsets.

Research has shown that while students make up most of a school's population (92%), they are seldomly purposefully involved in school decision-making or teachers' professional development (Harper, 2005). Studies have also confirmed that schools are unlikely to yield actionable results without youth input (Caraballo et al., 2017). Alternatively, researchers have discovered that students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not think they have a voice. Student voice also increases the likelihood that students will experience self-confidence, engagement, and commitment in school (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). Allowing students a voice during student-led discussions and when making classroom and school decisions can empower them to develop the SEL competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, healthy communication, empathy, and conflict resolution and encourage them to take greater ownership and responsibility of their school culture and climate. Elevating students' voices can

ultimately improve learning, teaching, school improvement, youth development, school culture, diversity, and civic engagement (Fletcher, 2005; 2015).

While qualitative and quantitative methodologies could advance youth voices when advocating for systemic change, youth participatory action research (YPAR) would build on their voices to empower their agency to elicit such change. YPAR has been confirmed to make significant contributions in multiple educational contexts, particularly in school reform (Kelly, 1993; Noguera, 2007) and education policy (Bertrand & Ford, 2015). Such efforts can encourage youth to actively participate in policy and practice changes that improve their school experiences and outcomes. Ultimately, YPAR could help schools, policymakers, and researchers evolve educational pedagogy, curriculum, and school community practices to embrace students' social, emotional, and academic understandings, identities, and lived experiences to cultivate more caring, inclusive, and just schools and societies.

Future research might also seek to understand the correlation of adult SEL skills, mindsets, and critical consciousness with effective instructional approaches and inclusive practices to determine if one influences the other when creating more equitable learning environments for all youth. For example, does having strong adult social-emotional competencies and critical consciousness improve educators' ability to advocate for and implement more equitable practices such as restorative justice and culturally responsive teaching? Future research questions might also investigate how fostering adult SEL impacts educator well-being to reduce burnout or how implementing Transformative SEL in schools affects the achievement gap? Ultimately, the research potential is endless as we begin the journey towards systemic change in education to support the well-being of both staff and students in K-12 public schools.

Conclusion

The results of this study point to multiple individuals, institutional, and systemic considerations to ponder when shaping the success of youths' social-emotional learning outcomes. The barriers and obstacles that are tightly enmeshed need to be teased out thoughtfully with the next wave of research efforts of scholars in the field of SEL. We must reach beyond the status quo of inequities that penetrate the educational system and bravely come together to interrogate the systems that prevent all students from growing into whole civic-minded beings both in their hearts and minds.

In the end, we all come to this work from different places, having had our own personal and professional lived experiences. No matter where each of us may land on this journey, schools, along with their communities, will need leaders and educators to strengthen their adult SEL skills and embrace a growth mindset that builds the capacity to create lasting and impactful change. Many of us will have to step into uncharted waters, and at times it will be messy and unpredictable. We will be asked to thoughtfully and courageously consider whether our past policies, practices, and priorities genuinely prepare children to become those civic-minded whole beings ready to contribute to our world in meaningful and impactful ways. We'll also need to do so while looking through our equity lens. By adopting a critical stance, we can transform ourselves and the systems that perpetuate the inequities impacting the lives of our next generations. This transformation can then reach beyond the school walls and into our societies. My experience as a researcher is evidence of how this is possible. Through my doctoral journey, my epistemological view has evolved into more of a critical stance believing that systemic change is only possible when we widen our worldview through critical consciousness.

Suppose we genuinely want to safeguard equity in our schools. In that case, we're going to have to consider how our students' identities, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and lived experiences get reflected in our teaching practices, academic and SEL curriculums, and discipline policies and procedures. Transformative social-emotional learning could be a viable process for elevating how we individually and collectively teach, model, and shape the social-emotional skill sets in youth and ensure equity and inclusivity in schools and societies. All those SEL competencies we encourage in our students to develop; we'll also need to have them in ourselves too. However, we must bravely shift our approach to prevent one-and-done initiatives, checking boxes, and only measuring achievement against test scores. Our cookie-cutter kids are crumbling, and no amount of frosting is going to put them back together. The reality is that any change worth accomplishing takes time. As they say, it's a marathon, not a sprint. The best we can do is lead with an authentic heart and a curious mind as we commit to slow cooking our mission and using our students' best interests as our new compass. Together, let's pave the wave to a better future.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Opt-In Letter

Hello Fellow Educators:

My name is Jeanne Baskin. I am a 20-year veteran educator, and current doctoral student at Lesley University. I am seeking research participants who wish to share their experience as an educator as it relates to social-emotional learning in a public-school setting. The overall aim of the study is to bring to the surface what adult SEL professional learning, skills, mindsets, and resources educators need to leverage social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting? Additionally, this research study will explore how existing policies and practices intersect and impact equitable access to the benefits of social-emotional learning for all youth.

To participate is this study, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Be a licensed educator with a certification in any of these states; New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.
2. Be currently teaching in any level of a K-12 public-school setting.
3. Have at least two years teaching social-emotional learning in the classroom setting.
3. Be willing and available to participate in a 60 minute 1:1 interview with the researcher through a remote video conferencing platform.

All participants who complete the study will receive a $100 Amazon gift card.

If you meet the above criteria and are willing to participate in this research study, <u>please click the link below</u> to complete the informed consent and registration forms. Once both are completed, I will contact you to schedule a 60 minute 1:1 interview via Zoom teleconferencing.

If you are interested in participating, but have additional questions or concerns, please contact me at <u>jbaskin3@lesley.edu</u> or call (508) 237-4626. I am happy to address any and all inquiries.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jeanne Baskin, M.S. CCC-SLP

YES, I WOULD LIKE
TO PARTICIPATE

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent

29 Everett St., Cambridge, MA 02138

"You" refers to the person who takes part in the research study.

Welcome! Please read this disclosure before beginning.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this dissertation study. Please read the information below. After reading the information, if you wish to participate in this study, please type your full name and date in the box below.

Description of Study:

You are invited to participate in this dissertation research study, *Understanding The Role of Educator: Implementing Social-Emotional Learning in Service of Equity and Inclusion.* The intent of this study is to understand and document your experience as an educator as it relates to social-emotional learning in a public-school setting. The overall aim of the study is to bring to the surface what adult SEL professional learning, skills, mindsets, and resources educators need to leverage social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting? Additionally, this research study will explore how existing policies and practices intersect and impact equitable access to the benefits of social-emotional learning for all youth.

Benefits:

While there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, your participation has the potential to improve schools and society by building awareness amongst educators and school leaders of the potential for social-emotional learning to leverage equity and inclusion in a public-school setting.

Interviews and focus group discussions will be conducted in a private space via Zoom teleconferencing platform. During the interview you will be asked questions about your beliefs, attitudes, and experiences as an educator in implementing social-emotional learning and other related school policies, procedures, and practices.

Voluntary Participation/Confidentiality:

- You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation in the research at any time.
- Identifying details will be kept confidential by the researchers. Data collected will be coded with a pseudonym, the participant's identity will never be revealed by the researcher, and only the researcher will have access to the data collected.

- Any and all of your questions will be answered at any time and you are free to consult with anyone (i.e., friend, family) about your decision to participate in the research and/or to discontinue your participation.
- Participation in this research poses minimal risk to the participants. The probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are no greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. However, some topics discussed in the interviews may be sensitive in nature as they relate to personal and professional identities, experiences, and histories. The interviewer will respect your decision if you wish not to discuss certain topics.
- If any problem in connection to the research arises, you can contact the researcher Jeanne Baskin jbaskin3@lesley.edu or the Dissertation Committee Chair Dr. Peiwei Li at pli3@lesley.edu.

My agreement to participate has been given of my own free will and I understand all that is stated above, including potential risks and benefits.

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu

By typing your full name and date in the boxes below you give consent to participate in this research study.

Additionally, by signing you give permission for the researcher to video and/or audio record the interview and focus group meetings.

Please note, you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.

Participant's signature   **Date**

Researcher signature   **Date**
Jeanne Baskin, M.S. CCC-SLP

COMPLETE REGISTRATION FORM HERE

APPENDIX C: Information Form

Thank you for choosing to participate in the research study titled *Understanding The Role of Educator: Implementing Social-Emotional Learning in Service of Equity and Inclusion*. The purpose of this study is to explore how social-emotional learning can be leveraged to ensure equity and inclusion in education. Please complete this online registration form in its entirety to establish participant eligibility and confirm that your background and professional experience is accurately documented.

First Name:

Last Name:

Phone number:

Email address:

Gender Identification:

Age:

Racial Background:

Your current teacher certification is valid in what U.S. state?

What grade level do you currently teach?

How many years have you taught in a public-school setting?

By pressing send, you certify that the above information is to the best of your ability accurate.

PRESS SEND WHEN FINISHED

APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

<u>**Research Topic:**</u> This research project's primary purpose is to explore how existing policies and practices intersect and impact equitable access to the benefits of social-emotional learning and on cultivating caring, inclusive, and just learning environments for all youth.

<u>**Research Question:**</u> What adult SEL professional learning, skills, mindsets, and resources do educators say they need to leverage social-emotional learning in service of equity and inclusion in a K-12 public school setting?

Interview Questions:

<u>**Topic Domain One:**</u> **Personal and Professional Identities**

Lead-Off Question: How did you come to choose to be an educator?

1. **Covert Categories:**

   a. How narrative identities impact one's decision to become an educator?

   b. How the evolution of narrative identities impact the role of an educator over time?

2. **Possible Follow-up Questions:**

   - Were there any significant experiences in your life that led you to become an educator?

   - What are some theories of teaching that have shaped/influenced your teaching?

Topic Domain Two: School Culture and Climate

Lead-Off Question: Describe your school culture and climate.

1. **Covert Categories:**

    a. Status of participant's well-being in work environment

    b. Participant's perception of the health of the school environment

    c. Existence of School-Family-Community Partnerships

    d. Presence and perceptions regarding Student Identity, Voice, and Agency

2. **Possible Follow-up Questions:**

    - What assessment protocols do you have in place to measure the wellness of students?

    - What assessment protocols do you have in place to elicit feedback from students to measure students' perception of safety, connectedness, and engagement within the learning environment?

    - What role does student identity, voice, and agency play in your classroom or school?

    - What assessment protocols do you have in place to elicit feedback from staff to measure the wellness of staff?

    - What supports are available to staff to ensure their well-being?

    - How do you experience your identity, voice, and agency at your school and district?

    - How does your school engage families and the larger school community in its effort to cultivate a strong culture and climate?

- How would you like to see the culture and climate of your school evolve?

Topic Domain Three: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Lead-Off Question: How do you experience social-emotional learning (SEL) in your school?

1. **Covert Categories:**

   a. Awareness of CASEL's updated equity-driven definition of SEL and 5 Core Competencies

   b. Buy-in for implementing SEL

   c. Observed benefits of SEL for students and staff

2. **Possible Follow-Up Questions:**

- What do you think social-emotional learning ought to look like in a school setting?

- What, if any, are the perceived obstacles when executing SEL in the school setting?

- What do you believe to be the role of educators in shaping the social-emotional competencies in their students?

- What is your understanding of Adult SEL or SEL for educators?

- What do you believe to be the role of students in shaping the social-emotional competencies of themselves and cultivating a sense of belonging?

- What do you believe to be the role of parents/caregivers in shaping the social-emotional competencies of themselves and cultivating a sense of belonging?

Topic Domain Four: Leveraging SEL in service of equity

Lead-Off Question: What is your understanding of the term equity? Transformative SEL?

1. **Covert Categories:**

     a. Awareness of SEL skills and mindset needed to ensure equity and inclusion for all youth

     b. Self-reflexive process and presence of critical consciousness-awareness of beliefs, assumptions, biases

     c. Presence of deficit thinking versus asset-based thinking

     d. Perceived barriers to ensuring equity in education

2. **Possible Follow-Up Questions:**

   - How might having the SEL competency of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making support equity in schools?

   - What is your understanding of;

        o Culturally competency/culturally affirming practices in education

        o Color-blindness

        o Implicit Bias

    o Microaggressions

    o Power and privilege

    o Oppression

    o Critical Race Theory

- What is your understanding of the impact of trauma associated with racial inequities and racial violence?

- How does your school respond to acts of racial violence that are reported in the news?

Topic Domain Five: Trauma-informed Practices

 Lead-Off Question: How do you experience the term trauma-informed?

1. **Covert Categories:**

  a. Awareness of trauma-informed practices

  b. Buy-in for implementing trauma-informed practices

  c. Awareness of types of experienced trauma (ACES, structural and racial violence)

  d. Perceived obstacles and/or resistance when executing trauma-informed practices in the school setting

2. **Possible Follow-Up Questions:**

- What trauma-informed policies or procedures exist in your school and in your district?

- What trauma-informed systems are in place to bridge your school and home environments?

- How has your understanding of trauma-informed practices helped you during crisis situations?

- Describe how you use trauma-informed practices to meet the needs of your students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- How does your staff currently respond to the needs of students who are at risk of or have experienced trauma?

- Describe the relationship between trauma-informed practices and the development of the whole child.

- What trauma-informed practices might your building staff need to implement in the coming school year?

Topic Domain Six: Discipline Policies and Practices

Lead-Off Question: Explain your school's discipline policies and procedure?

1. **Covert Categories:**

    a. Awareness of exclusionary discipline practices

    b. Awareness and implementation of PBIS

    c. Awareness and implementation of restorative practices

    d. Perceived obstacles and/or resistance when executing a student-centered approach to discipline in the school setting

2. **Possible Follow-Up Questions:**

- Describe what it means to you to have a student-centered discipline approach

- What is your understanding of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)?

- What is your understanding of restorative practices?

- What concerns/barriers do you have when implementing a student-centered approach to discipline?