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## Untapped Potential: Social Emotional Learning and Intervention Programs for Students Experiencing Underperformance

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DePaul University  
College of Education

**Untapped Potential: Social Emotional Learning and Intervention Programs for Students  
Experiencing Underperformance**

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Kathleen B. King

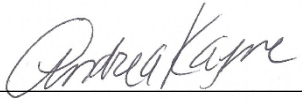
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Submitted in Partial fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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We approve the dissertation of Kathleen B. King.

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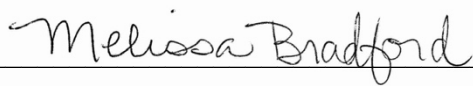
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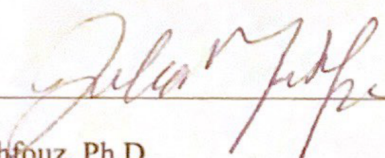
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Author Signature *Kathleen B. King* Date *5/1/2021*

## ABSTRACT

This study seeks the voice of practitioners to identify social emotional factors positively influencing students otherwise experiencing academic underperformance. Research has affirmed the positive impact of social emotional learning (SEL) on both short-term and long-term outcomes, while also indicating a correlation between difficulties with social emotional factors and academic underperformance. Intervention programs provide a unique opportunity to leverage SEL assets for more positive outcomes for students experiencing underperformance. This study examines the SEL factors intervention program practitioners identify as having a positive impact on students experiencing underperformance, utilizing triangulated sources: (a) document analysis of intervention program design, (b) interviews with program coordinators regarding significant SEL factors, and (c) surveys in which practitioners identify SEL factors of significance. While intervention program design emphasized academic skills with a minor emphasis on SEL factors, practitioners indicated the significance of a much broader array of SEL factors: relational capacity/interpersonal qualities, self-identity/efficacy, conflict resolution, ethical and performance values, and qualities of perspective. Results support consideration of an array of student social emotional assets in intervention program design to support positive student outcomes, rather than a narrow focus on the development of academic skills.

*Keywords:* social emotional learning (SEL), intervention programs, opportunity gap

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## DEDICATION

Though I submit this dissertation as complete,  
a final chapter in my doctoral program,  
I do so with recognition that it is not complete but a beginning,  
a launching pad for ongoing investigation and learning  
in a quest to better meet the needs of students.

This dissertation is dedicated  
to those who feel “less than” from their educational experiences,  
who do not see their strengths because school systems do not award them value,  
and who see school as an obstacle to their dreams rather than an enabler of them,  
that they may have hope,  
a glimpse of being seen,  
amidst a commitment to remedy this grave injustice  
to their amazing potential.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### The Genesis of this Study

*“He’ll be fine in life if he can just get through school.”* As an educator hearing these words, I bristled. “Getting through school” was referenced as if it was an obstacle to be overcome on the path to future success, and yet I knew this was not a novel sentiment. The line implied confidence in life skills for success that were not ascertained in the school environment. This platitude echoed in my mind as I began investigating the untapped assets of students who were otherwise experiencing underperformance in school. Exploring how their “non-academic” assets could be better harnessed to change their school trajectory became the impetus for this study, with the intent to better realize their academic potential.

School mission statements in PK-12 schools often aspire to foster responsible, collaborative, committed, empowered, socially developed life-long learners (Slate et al., 2008), yet school success is all too often measured by high-stakes standardized tests narrowly focused on specific academic indicators. In recent years, however, renewed interest has focused on the social emotional learning (SEL) aspects of school mission as manifested in rapidly increasing interest among parents, educators, and policymakers (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

Though research has indicated that positive student outcomes are associated with social emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2016; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017) and negative outcomes are associated with a lack of SEL skills (Suh & Suh, 2007; Zins et al., 2007), little research has focused on which SEL assets are particularly beneficial to the trajectory of students who have been experiencing underperformance. This study analyzes the design of four intervention programs regarding SEL and utilizes convergent mixed methods data collection to assess the perceptions of intervention program personnel. Through interviews and

surveys these practitioners were able to identify particular SEL factors, they found to positively impact the development of students identified as underperforming at their schools. This examination of SEL in relation to an underserved student population has the potential to aid student achievement and inform program design by leveraging specific SEL student assets.

### **Problem Statement**

Students utilize social-emotional skills to reach their full potential (Durlak et al., 2015). Four meta-analyses of SEL programs provide significant evidence regarding the positive impact of social-emotional learning on multiple aspects of student success, noting gains in student achievement were supported through both short-term and long-term findings (Durlak et al, 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). At the same time, many students in our current educational system are not experiencing the same success as their peers despite their rich potential. This academic gap cries for an urgent response. SEL may be an underleveraged tool for better serving this student potential. SEL has been demonstrated as having a positive impact on factors of underperformance such as motivation and engagement (Suh & Suh, 2007). While research has documented associations between student underperformance and educator perceptions of poor SEL skills (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008), the positive impact of SEL for such populations has been identified in previous studies as an area in need of research (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Rather than exploring deficit correlations, research into underutilized assets has rich implications for effective program design.

Educators have an obligation to better serve student populations experiencing underperformance to assure they, too, excel. Specifically, additional information is needed on how social emotional learning assets can be leveraged to close the opportunity gap manifested in academic discrepancies. Though the positive effect of social-emotional learning on student

achievement has been indicated (Durlak et al, 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016), its effect on specific sub-groups, such as students experiencing underperformance in the traditional education program, is in need of further examination. In a US Department of Education large-scale study of intervention programs from 22 states, social and emotional support was identified as a component of effective intervention programs but specific SEL areas were not specified (Gandara & Bial, 2011). A better understanding is needed regarding particular social emotional factors that prove significant for the positive development of students experiencing underperformance.

Practitioners who have worked successfully with students previously experiencing underperformance have unique insights that can be capitalized upon to better identify what SEL factors can be effectively leveraged to aid the realization of student potential. Ultimately, schools need to have more information on how to better serve the needs of students experiencing underperformance. SEL factors have promise to inform program design to better meet this need, but additional research is required for informed decision-making.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between social-emotional factors and the development of youth experiencing underperformance. More specifically, it is to examine whether or not social-emotional factors are of particular significance from the perspective of intervention program practitioners. Given that SEL can have an important role in meeting academic and behavior goals of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) (Integrate Student Supports with SEL - CASEL Schoolguide, n.d.), determining whether particular social-emotional factors are of significance in intervention programs is valuable information for program design. Ultimately, better understandings of what SEL skills prove particularly



impactful to students experiencing underperformance can also inform practices in the classroom. These understandings can reduce the need for intervention programs as the SEL assets of previously underperforming students are better capitalized on for success.

### **Research Questions**

To examine the relationship between social-emotional factors and the development of youth experiencing underperformance, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What, if any, social-emotional learning is noted as a target of the participant intervention programs?
2. What social-emotional factors do program educators describe as particularly significant to the success of students who had been identified for these intervention programs due to underperformance? (*qualitative*)
3. When presented with research-identified SEL factors, which, if any, do intervention program educators identify as significant to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance? (*quantitative*)

A mixed method approach allows for practitioners' perspectives to be captured in both a deductive and inductive manner, with intervention program personnel self-identifying impactful SEL factors via interviews qualitatively analyzed, while also choosing among provided SEL factors in an e-survey which are quantitatively analyzed. Document analysis of intervention program descriptions provides an additional data source regarding SEL factors of emphasis in program design.

## Definition of Terms

### Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Though the terminology for SEL skills can vary from “character education, personality, 21st century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills, just to name a few,” this research adopts the SEL or social-emotional learning moniker because it is the term most referenced as inclusive of other concepts, it has been identified in market research as preferred by policymakers, parents, and educators, and it better captures the learning process and growth than other terms (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 3-4). Yet, the definition of social emotional learning and its parameters remains subject to debate and a major challenge to the measurement and assessment of these skills (Wigelsworth et al., 2010). In fact, a Brookings Institute report argued it was “premature and unhelpful” to align school mission, programs, and measures of success to vague factors described simultaneously as “soft skills, emotional intelligence, social and emotional learning, personal qualities, character, virtue, non-cognitive skills, 21st century skills, and so on” (Whitehurst, 2016, p. 1).

Despite the debates on a precise definition or the limits to what SEL encompasses, there remain consistent refrains within various definitions. For over two decades social emotional learning (SEL) has been defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019, “What is SEL” Para. 1). Rutgers University’s Social Emotional & Character Development (SECD) Lab similarly defines social-emotional and character development as involving “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, take others’ perspectives, and establish positive,

empathic relationships with others” (Rutgers, n.d., SECD Home page, Section “How do we prepare our children”).

Stephanie Jones, who has undertaken an extensive study involving the nomenclature of SEL at Harvard’s Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, and Emily Doolittle (2017) describe SEL as involving “children’s ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others, and that help youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship” (p.4), which they note involves cognitive skills such as attention, problem-solving, self-perception, social awareness, and conflict resolution. SEL, for the purposes of this study is an inclusive concept, encompassing a broad taxonomy of non-academic skills including, but not limited to understanding and managing self, emotions, social interactions, relationships, decision-making, problem-solving, perspectives, and positive dispositions.

Perhaps most noteworthy among these definitions is that social emotional learning is not identified as fixed traits but as skills that can be learned and developed. The CASEL definition specifically emphasizes SEL as a process (CASEL, 2019). Similarly, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) defined the domain as “socio-emotional or behavioral characteristics that are not fixed traits of personality” (Garcia, 2014, p. 6) but can either be nurtured during school years or contribute to cognitive development during the same time period. This study embraces SEL as a process of skills that can be nurtured, developed, and learned. Moreover, this study purports that intentional school programming and development can capitalize on student SEL assets for positive development. Development of SEL skills can not only leverage better academic achievement, but it also is well aligned to fulfilling goals identified consistently in school mission statements (Slate et al., 2008).

## Deficit Student Terminology

At the same time that interest in social emotional learning has surged, educational institutions have continued to grapple with a well-documented achievement gap, identified as the most important issue in schools in a 2016 study of over 800 educators (Ratcliff et al., 2016). The achievement gap emphasizes the significant differences in achievement measures including standardized tests, with gaps prevalent between Whites and Latinos, Whites and African-Americans, students in poverty and wealth, children of parents with low formal education and greater formal education, and native English speakers and English learners (Carter & Welner, 2013).

While the term *achievement gap* focuses on academic discrepancies, investigation of the *opportunity gap* shifts attention to inputs—"to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes" (Carter & Welner, 2013, p.3). This shift in terminology is significant; as an example, a recent study noted that phrases like "racial achievement gap" elicited lower levels of issue prioritization than phrases like "racial inequality in educational outcomes" due to social justice connotations (Quinn et al., 2019). Deficit terminology reinforces a false perception that students experiencing underperformance have been given equitable experiences and opportunities and are responsible for failing to actualize these experiences for individualized success. Thus, this study adopts the term *opportunity gap* to describe persistent inequities in achievement, emphasizing the institutional nature of the issue rather than perpetuating the false narrative of a student issue.

Researchers recognize that language is not the extent of the problem but rather one manifestation of the belief system that it represents (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Racial and

cultural variations too often can be interpreted as intrinsic deficits not complying with the normed expectations of privilege, and this deficit viewpoint impacts outcomes (Harry & Klingner, 2007). In this manner, students experiencing underperformance can be viewed from a deficit perspective that is counterproductive to aiding their accomplishment of school-defined measures of success.

Positive psychology (Achor, 2013) encourages a shift towards capitalizing on positivity and affective mindsets for success, calling for instruction that aids students in achieving such an emotional mindset. Multiple studies using different methods and subjects indicate that positivity, happiness, and well-being contribute to success and may be contributing factors towards performance and achievement (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Reflecting the need for such an orientation shift, this study is asset-focused and purposeful in avoiding an emphasis on deficits of students experiencing underperformance. Rather it purports that students experiencing underperformance possess SEL assets which may not have been effectively harnessed and fortified to impact school measures of achievement.

This study adopts nomenclature regarding *students experiencing underperformance* rather than *underperforming youth* as the former phrase more clearly reframes the identifier from a descriptor of the student to a condition a student might find himself/herself/themselves without a presumption of culpability. This attention to phrasing is intended to minimize stigmatization of students who may not be well served from current school structures steeped in systemic bias. Attention to deficit framing is further reinforced through the study's conscious attempts to adopt an asset orientation of students experiencing underperformance, as the study's design is oriented towards program success factors and identification of student SEL assets.

## Success

Since this study is focused on positively impacting students, the definition of student success, with all its cultural and political baggage, needs to be unpacked as it pertains to this study. A 2015 examination of *academic success* and *student success* across content fields (York et al., 2015) indicated these terms are often used interchangeably, and researchers usually define success as aligned within G.P. Kuh's definition: "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., 2007, p.7). At the same time, the *measure* of student success is often narrowly defined as grades and GPA (York et al., 2015). Such a confining measure of student success to quantitative barometers fails to capture the rich value of social emotional skills and exacerbates issues regarding the deficit-framing of marginalized student populations. Though an extensive 2011 meta-analysis (Durlak et al., 2011) did determine SEL program participants had an eleven percent gain in academic achievement, this same study noted positive indicators that would not otherwise be captured through GPA/grades, including positive attitudes, positive social behaviors, and decreased emotional distress.

Though grades, test scores, GPAs and other statistical measures of academic achievement are the norm for most school program evaluations and this study includes these indicators of student success, this study is not confined by these measures of success. Rather this study adopts the recommended expanded definition of academic success to include "growth of cognitive ability and/or acquisition of skills or learning outcomes" as well as consideration of the participant's aspirations and goals (York et al., 2015). In a report by The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, Foundations for Young Adult Success (2015), a more inclusive

definition of success was adopted beyond academics to include having the means to “fulfill individual goals and have the agency and competencies to influence the world” (Nagaoka et al., 2015). This study acknowledges that other proven gains attributed to SEL programs are in fact indicators of student success including a positive impact on behavior problems and emotional distress and the development of positive social behaviors, attitudes, and SEL skills (Mahoney et al., 2018). Thus, academic achievement may, in fact, be articulated as a barometer of success in this study due to its rampant public adoption as an indicator of success, but it would not qualify as the only or most important indicator of student success. For the parameters of this study, positive development or success includes academic indicators as well as positive dispositions, attitudes, and skills as important additional indicators.

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a constructivism paradigm, recognizing that reality is informed by mental frameworks, including that of the researcher, and that theory and facts cannot exist independently and unequivocally (Guba, 1990). A case study approach was adopted through a focus on four intervention programs in four different schools in the same geographic region. Data was triangulated through three focus areas: document analysis, interviews, and surveys. This triangulation adopts an emergent multimethod sequential triangulation design (Denzin, 2010) that works out of an empowerment, critical theory. The triangulation increases the “scope, depth, and consistency” (Flick, 2002, p. 227) of results rather than validating them. The nature of this triangulated data does not allow for generalized results, but does provide a basis for transferability.

A convergent/parallel mixed methods approach was adopted which emphasizes separate parallel data collection approaches that converge to surface new understandings (Creswell,

2015). Qualitative data collection took place via interviews which provided inductive data coded to emergent themes regarding SEL factors of significance. Quantitative data collection took place via a questionnaire which provided deductive data with participants choosing from provided category codes of SEL factors as to whether any were of positive significance. The analysis of the survey took place independently from the analysis of the open-ended interview questions, providing the convergent/parallel model.

Document analysis was conducted on any publicly available program materials for each of the intervention programs, including school website information, to determine whether social emotional factors were explicit, implicit, or not present at all in the program design purported to public stakeholders. Document analysis data was cross-referenced with data collected from the interviews and surveys to gain a more complete understanding of whether SEL factors were targeted in program design. The interview questions and surveys sought a better understanding of which, if any, SEL factors were perceived as having a positive impact on student development within the intervention programs. In this manner, the study was able to gain a deeper understanding of how intervention program practitioners perceived the significance of SEL factors on the positive development of students otherwise experiencing academic underachievement, whether intended as a program aim or not. In addition, these tools allowed for the identification of any specific SEL factors of particular note.

Using snowball or chain sampling, four different sites with intervention programs were selected from the same geographic area--the suburbs of a large metropolitan area in Illinois--to allow for comparative data. Each qualifying program for the study had to have been successfully meeting its goals for at least one year as self-identified by the school program coordinators. The program needed to be a separate program that took place during the school day to assure the



collected data pertained to interventions versus instructional adaptations utilized in a typical instructional context. Participants from these instructional programs needed to have had at least one year working with youth identified as experiencing underperformance who participated in the intervention program. Additionally, the intervention program personnel participating had to have been directly involved with students in the intervention programs.

Codes for the surveys and document analysis were based on the coding framework created by The Taxonomy Project from the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, led by Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Jones, 2019), with the addition of a category related to communalism and culturally responsive practice that was an area indicated as important to marginalized groups in a critique of coding frameworks (Berg et al., 2017).

After analyzing data from the document analysis, interviews, and surveys, the results were compared across data tools to surface points of consensus and tension. This data across evaluation tools strengthened understanding of the intervention program design as well as any emergent SEL elements deemed of significance to the positive development of students.

### **Significance**

As school sub-group data continues to point to student underperformance in disproportionate numbers for marginalized populations (Paschall et al., 2018), the need for effective interventions and program redesign becomes all the more urgent. At the same time, research supports the efficacy of building upon students' social emotional assets to improve academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). This study meets a gap in the literature regarding what, if any, SEL assets can best be utilized to positively impact students experiencing underperformance as well as giving voice to

educators with experience positively impacting these students to gain their insights regarding specific SEL skills that aided in leveraging success.

Dissemination of this research is intended to inform program design as to whether SEL factors are worthy of consideration in intervention programming and/or to inform efforts for addressing the opportunity gap. It is an asset-oriented approach that seeks to both build on the capabilities of underperforming students and recognize the expertise of program personnel in assessing impactful practice. The ultimate research goal is to identify whether SEL elements are positively impacting students in intervention programs in order to develop a framework for program planning that will more effectively address the needs of underserved youth.

### **Researcher Perspectives**

As articulated by Fusch (2018), “qualitative researchers bring their bias to the research, share their bias with the reader, and strive to mitigate their personal bias to ensure that they are correctly interpreting the other/participant(s)” (p. 19). As a former teacher and administrator in schools with low-income neighborhoods and high crime rates, I have formed deep convictions about the need to assure students in underserved communities receive a quality education as well as a professional conviction that social emotional learning is an essential element of a quality education. In fact, I would identify education as an invaluable tool for breaking the cycle of poverty and unleashing unrealized potential, with social emotional development an essential aspect of such an empowering education.

My experiences as a school leader in PK-12 schools have informed the research interests captured in this study. Moreover, as a White, Caucasian, middle-class educator, I recognize that this work with underserved populations comes from a position of privilege. Further, my position as a female from an academic environment impacts my interpretation of interview narratives and

document analysis, and that positionality also may have impacted the responses I received during open-ended interviews.

In an effort to mitigate this bias, I constructed the face-to-face research (interviews) as primarily inductive, allowing the practitioner participants to control the narrative through open-ended queries which allowed the points of emphasis to emerge from their experiences. In these interviews, I also made a pointed effort to clearly communicate my regard and respect for the interview participants' expertise as practitioners serving youth. By clearly articulating my intention to better understand the valuable insights participants possessed as practitioners, I hoped to capture what was working in the field on behalf of the underserved youth population and minimize the intrusive impact of my positionality as a researcher.

In order to fairly represent the lived experience of marginalized individuals, I structured the study with an asset orientation so I was learning from success rather than investigating and unintentionally contributing to negative framing. I circled back to amend my research methods to include analysis of the race and low-income status of the students in the intervention programs so it became part of the analysis of study data. I also endeavored to include research on the impacts of race and poverty as part of the data analysis. Consideration was also given to the adoption of terms and phrasing to minimize implicit bias and unintentional reinforcement of deficit framing too often characteristic of privileged prisms.

Nevertheless, these efforts to mitigate my position and privilege have limitations. Milner (2007) argued researchers, particularly those studying race and culture, must consider "dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen" (p.388). *Seen* references the dangers that emerge from research decisions, *unseen* are those implicit or unseen from the research process, and *unforeseen* involve the unanticipated that emerge based on researcher decisions.

I have made efforts and describe in methods how my research design attempted to address the *seen*. Ongoing interrogation throughout the research process through check-ins with colleagues and mentors as well as self-reflection attempted to address the implicit or unseen with modification in language throughout the process. I acknowledge the rearview mirror on this study will continue to surface *unseen* implicit issues. As for the *unanticipated*, in this presentation of research, I acknowledge needing to circle back to the student populations of this study to surface demographic data on marginalization due to its clear but unanticipated—from my position of privilege—relevance to the story of SEL factors. Clearly the lived experience of marginalization was relevant, but unanticipated due to my position.

Racialized experiences are relevant in this study and need to be interrogated in order to adequately address findings. I include how the research design was amended after initial data collection to address analysis of the student profile due to its racial relevance. However, the *unseen* and *unforeseen* are acknowledged as ongoing issues as my myopic lens of privilege may hinder my ability to decipher issues of relevance and importance. I acknowledge these limits and embrace ongoing reflection on interpretations given this positionality.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

My experiences as an educator have shaped my convictions that curriculum and materials may not be as compelling in the effort to impact student success as the relational context: the connection among individuals as part of an investment in the whole child's development. My experiences have informed the research interests captured in this study, including the belief that all students have capabilities which educators can further nurture and develop to optimize potential.

As noted, precautions have been taken in the design of this study to minimize the telegraphing of convictions about the role of social emotional factors to study subjects as well as steps to minimize the impact of my position as a researcher of societal privilege studying programs for student populations often not afforded access to privilege. The interviews have been constructed in an inductive manner that do not frame questions on whether the development of specific SEL factors is essential, noting that such a query might, in fact, bias the interview participant to express its importance. Rather the queries are open-ended regarding what SEL factors might be present and whether any specific ones are considered particularly impactful. Only after this line of questioning is pursued are the participants provided a follow-up survey with queries about specific research-identified SEL elements and whether they might be present in the program or perceived by the participant as significant regarding positive student development. In all cases, the participant has been provided the opportunity to indicate that none of the posed SEL factors are of significance.

Moreover, the study has been constructed in a manner that allows for triangulation of data. Documents on the program are cross-referenced with open-ended interview responses, as well as data from queries on specific SEL factors in the survey responses. This triangulation of data provides an opportunity to examine points of tension and agreement to better determine emergent themes and minimize the impact of bias in interpreting data.

Prior to implementation of this data collection, a pilot study was conducted with three programs in Summer 2018. This study helped inform the design of this study to further reduce opportunities of bias. The pilot study also included an intervention program that did not self-identify the importance of social emotional factors as essential to student development or program success. This experience documenting a program that did not note social emotional

factors as impactful indicates a commitment to objective data collection which does not conform data to a preconceived narrative that would more aptly serve the study's intent.

I make no apology for the conviction that an examination of successful intervention programming is important and essential work. It is my firm belief that all educators should be dedicated to optimizing opportunities for populations experiencing underperformance in schools, as these students deserve the tools of education and its transformative power but remain grossly underserved by current educational systems. I believe the assets of these students have been underserved and need to be more conscientiously developed in order to realize their untapped potential. However, this study relies on the schools' identification of students experiencing underperformance, which acknowledges different environmental settings, accommodating their interpretations of performance indicators. I did not arbitrarily impose a definition of underperformance on the school environments because the school's framing of students as underperforming reflects the lived experience of the students in their own school environment; they are being viewed that way in their schools and have to contend with that framing. Acknowledging this lived experience seemed more relevant than externally applying underperformance criteria. Nevertheless, accepting school interpretations of underperformance reinforces an assumption of underperformance that may not be accurate in other school contexts. This determination reflects the variability of contexts students face in identification of performance levels and is a necessary assumption to acknowledge the students' lived reality in their own schools.

### **Summation**

With these definitions, assumptions, and attempts to minimize bias in mind, this study aspires to better understand how SEL assets can be utilized so students don't have to "get

through” school to utilize their arsenal of SEL assets but can, in fact, encounter school programming that leverages their assets towards improved realization of their potential. Through surveys and interviews of intervention program personnel and a study of intervention program goals, this study examines what, if any, SEL factors are of particular significance in the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. An exploration of the racial and low-income profiles of students identified for these intervention programs further illuminates findings.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

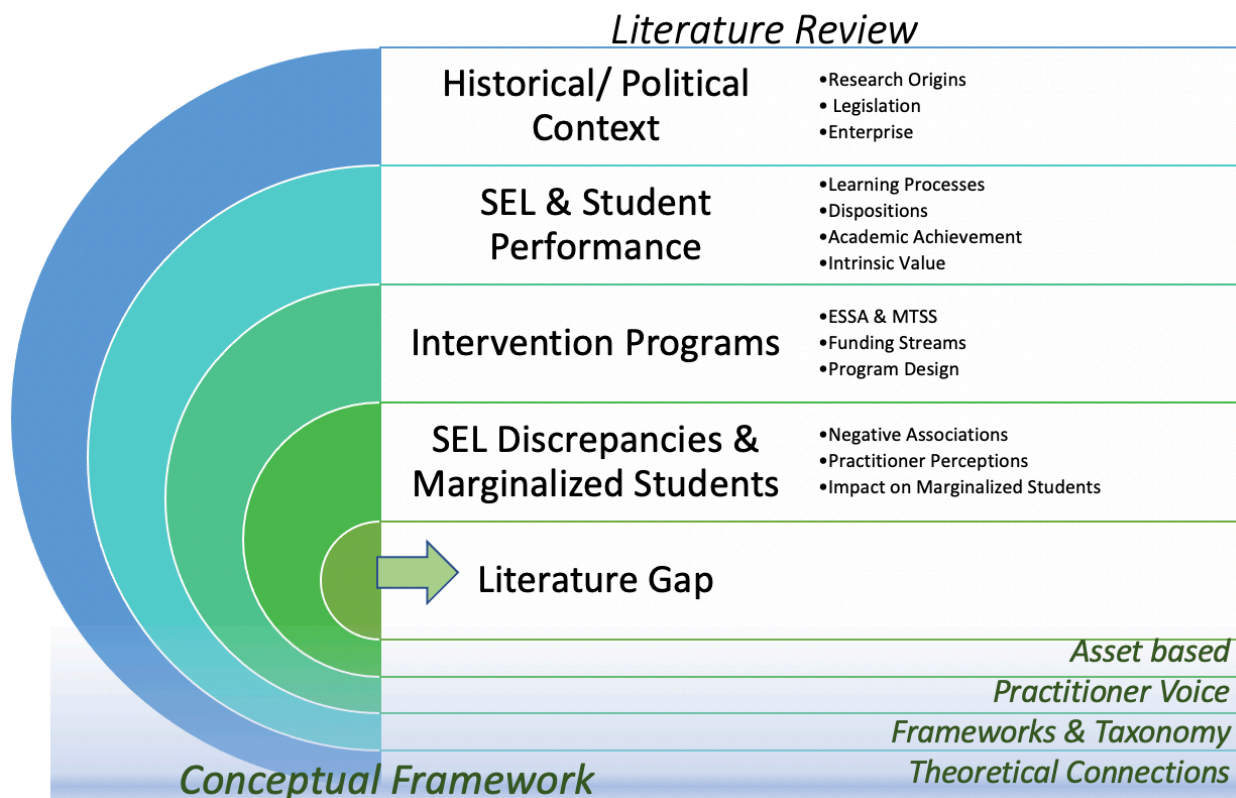
In order to establish the research landscape and crystalize the need for this study, this literature review frames the historical and political emergence of social emotional learning as an educative priority in schools today. The relationship between social emotional learning and student performance, including academic achievement, is further unpacked as an important point of research for students experiencing underperformance. Given the context of the study is intervention programs, research regarding the context of interventions is also explored, establishing the advantage of examining during-the-day, stand-alone intervention programs to identify SEL's potential impact. Since marginalized populations are overrepresented in underperformance data, an examination of research focuses on SEL and marginalized populations. These intersections provide the foundation of this study as well as its unique significance in addressing an under-researched area in the literature. This literature gap will be defined in terms of its contribution to the field. Finally, the conceptual framework for this study will be established regarding its asset approach, emphasis on practitioner voice, use of SEL frameworks, and connection to theory.

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the literature review components and their interrelationship, indicating how the different research areas establish a context for this study and drill down to the gap in the literature addressed. The conceptual framework is inspired by this context, adopting an asset-based approach centered on practitioner voice and informed by SEL frameworks and theory as a lens for this study's exploration.



**Figure 1**

*Overview of Literature Review*



**Research Literature**

This research study emerges from a rich historical and political foundation important to our understandings of social emotional learning as a school priority. Considerations about the origins of SEL, influencing legislation, and the impact of enterprise crystalize how this area of learning has become a priority of school implementation.

**Historical/Political Context**

*Origins of SEL*

Though the roots of social-emotional learning go as far back as ancient Greece with Plato’s inclusion of character and moral judgment in a holistic curriculum, James Comer’s

establishment of the Yale Child Study Center--School Development Program (SDP) in 1969 and Maurice Elias and Roger Weissberg's work in the 1980s contributed to the emergence of what came to be termed *social emotional learning* in the 1990s (*Social and Emotional Learning*, 2011). In 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded by Daniel Goleman, Mark Greenberg, Eileen Growald, Tim Shriver, Linda Lantieri, and David Sluyter (*Social and Emotional Learning*, 2011), and the organization has seen exponential growth in the last three decades. Daniel Goleman's 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* (EQ) provided a "new way of thinking about the ingredients of life success" (Goleman, 1995, p.ix) and sparked the work of Mayer and Salovey who synthesized different strands of research, including the forerunners of affective neuroscience (Goleman, 2020; Mayer et al., 2016). By 1997, three leaders in the field, Elias, Zins and Weissberg, published thirty-nine guidelines for SEL programs in what proved to be an influential book, *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias et al., 1997). These organizations and publications provided a strong foundation for the development of student social emotional skills in schools.

### ***Legislation***

Another catalyst towards the promotion of SEL in schools has been attention to mental wellness due to compelling health studies and resulting legislation. In 2008, with passage of the Federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, an emphasis on treatment policies, programs, and services for all children emerged, and, in Illinois, *The Illinois Children's Mental Health Act* (ICMH Act) of 2003 prioritized mental health prevention and early interventions. Social emotional learning surfaced as a natural and crucial response due to its importance to mental health outcomes as well as its impact on academic performance, delinquency, and substance abuse (Denham et al., 2009). As a result, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)

adopted Illinois SEL standards, the result of collaboration between ISBE, the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership and CASEL (CASEL, n.d.; ISBE, n.d.). The need for strong social emotional skills as a prophylactic to the negative impacts of trauma as well as a means for promoting positive mental health outcomes added fuel to the movement integrating SEL in schools.

Soon the importance of social emotional skills was identified in in major policy documents (Wigelsworth et al., 2010). United States government agencies adopted educational policies which invested in social emotional skills to advance the well-being, adjustment, and academic achievement of students (Denham et al., 2009). In 2011, Illinois became the first state in the nation to adopt PK-12 SEL standards; as of 2019, all 50 states had adopted preschool SEL competencies/standards with eighteen states establishing PK-12 competencies/standards—many based on the CASEL SEL framework (Dusenbury, 2020).

In 2015, the federal government passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a bipartisan renewal of a 50 year-old national education law, formerly known as Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). ESSA allowed several funding streams related to SEL. Social emotional measures were designated as meeting ESSA evidence requirements for non-academic measures of school success (Grant, 2017a), while requiring 20% of funding to be spent on well-rounded opportunities and 20% on supporting the safety and health of students (Committee on Education and the Workforce Democrats, 2015). In 2017, two bills with a positive impact on SEL integration also passed. *The Supporting Social and Emotional Learning Act* focused on increased research and professional development in SEL (HR 1864), and *The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act* (HR 2544) that addressed teacher SEL and wellness dimensions (Congress.gov, 2020; CASEL: Federal Policy, 2021 ). All

of these political developments provided strong external incentive to prioritize SEL in school education plans.

### ***Enterprise***

Yet another force supporting an emphasis on SEL, originated from enterprise: the future employers of students who consistently have rated highly the essential nature of soft skills on employee success in the workplace (NACE Staff, 2016). Social emotional development has surfaced as an advantage to economic interests and job performance (NACE Staff, 2016). Research reinforces a correlation between the affective domain and employment skills, including a study by Bandaranaike and Willison noting employer need for more candidate affective skills, advocating emotional work-readiness as a pathway for work-readiness (2015). In addition, an extensive study of the economic value of SEL, determined that its benefits to cost analysis was favorable, making it a substantially positive model (Belfield et al., 2015). Thus, SEL has emerged as an educational initiative well aligned to wellness, government priorities, and employment demands.

A 2018 national landmark analysis concluded that there is growing demand and adoption of social, emotional, and academic-related practices across states, districts, schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs (Boston Consulting Group, 2018). This surge in SEL practices was attributed primarily to policy (such as ESSA), evidence (impact), and educator resonance: “93%of educators think social, emotional learning is important for school experience, 87% think larger emphasis will improve outcomes” (Boston Consulting Group, 2018, p. 13). Regardless of the catalyst, the historical and political evolution of social emotional learning has led to its acceptance as an integral aspect of education, even while depths of understanding regarding SEL continue to evolve.

## **SEL Relationship to Student Performance**

As SEL has emerged as an initiative with broad support, a strong body of research has emerged indicating the positive effect of SEL to student outcomes. Specifically, work related to emotional intelligence sparked understandings of the relationship of SEL to learning processes, several meta-analyses affirm that SEL can positively impact academic outcomes, research related to specific SEL dispositions indicates specific SEL factors can leverage student performance, and research related to the intrinsic advantages of SEL further magnify its importance as a lever to student success.

### ***Learning Processes***

Goleman (2006) indicated the influence emotional intelligence has on both student learning and behaviors (Jones, 2019). Goleman proposed that much of SEL's efficacy came from shaping children's neural circuitry, particularly executive functioning in the prefrontal cortex, impacting working memory and emotional impulses (2020). Mark Greenberg subsequently supported this theory in his research on SEL's impact on student development (Greenberg et al., 2003; Goleman, 2020). Goleman and Senge (2014) suggest a more integrative view of learning is emerging:

We are at the very beginning of rethinking our views of human development in a more integrative way: cognitive (frontal brain/ lobes), emotional (mammalian brain and limbic system), spiritual and energetic (which could be embedded in the whole mind-body system functioning rather than particular circuits). (Goleman & Senge, 2014, p. 31)

In fact, it is clear that SEL is not aptly described as a non-cognitive process, though the term noncognitive learning is sometimes used to refer to this body of study. It is, in fact, an infused

aspect of cognitive function, involving brain function and learning processes. Recognizing SEL as an embedded part of the learning process reinforces its importance as an area to be targeted for development in order to aid realization of student potential.

### ***Academic Achievement***

Research establishing the correlation of SEL to academic achievement has been so strong that in 2001, CASEL, which was originally an acronym for *Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning* changed the name represented by the acronym to *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* to better reflect the strong link between academic learning and SEL (CASEL: History, 2020). Other researchers coined the term SEAL to further reinforce the same connection: social, emotional and academic learning [SEAL] (Zins et al., 2007, p. 208). Goleman & Senge (2014) argued that evidence related to SEL supported the adoption of school structures with a focus on self, a stronger awareness of other people, and an understanding of the larger world and how systems interact which, in turn, positively supports academics.

Amidst the growing populism of SEL, compelling research confirmed the connection between SEL and outcomes associated with student success. Perhaps the most compelling data regarding the relationship between SEL and student performance can be found in four significant meta-analyses of SEL programs which provide significant evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL on multiple aspects of student success. Two of these meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Wigglesworth et al., 2016) were focused on SEL program studies, and two (Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017) were focused on long-term data related to SEL outcomes.

In 2011, a meta-analysis of over 213 school-based, universal (K-12) SEL programs staffed by school personnel (Durlak et al., 2011) indicated that SEL programs correlated with an

average 11% academic gain in student achievement as well as improved stress levels and school behaviors. The study further indicated that SEL programs increased “prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 417). The positive outcomes for SEL programs in the study were consistent with student success descriptors, such as students experiencing increased SEL skills, positive attitudes, positive social behaviors, academic achievement, decreased conduct problems, and lower emotional distress (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Another meta-analysis (Wigelsworth et al., 2016) affirmed the positive impact of SEL on student success, though it also noted complications in the findings such as the challenges of cultural transferability, since programs successful in one country/setting did not necessarily yield the same result in another setting. This meta-analysis examined eighty-nine SEL programs, reporting positive effects in social emotional skills, pro-social behaviors, academic achievement, and emotional competence as well as a decrease in emotional distress and conduct problems. At the same time, this meta-analysis indicated strong need for research that moved beyond *whether* SEL has a positive impact to *how* SEL programs have a positive impact, with particular methodological concerns regarding the need for bottom-up studies examining the “unique ecologies of individual classroom practice in more detail” (Wigelsworth et al., 2016, p. 368). This call for research that learns from experiences in the field is directly reflected in this study’s design which centers on the expertise of practitioners and learning from successful intervention programs.

As for the long-term effects of SEL programs, a 2012 meta-analysis of 75 studies captured outcomes that occurred a minimum of seven months after the SEL program ended so long-term impact could be assessed (Sklad et al., 2012). This analysis indicated that an increase in social skills and a decrease in anti-social behavior were prevalent, including a positive impact

on self-image, academic achievement, mental health, and substance abuse (Sklad et al., 2012). Though the effects was stronger in the shorter term than long term, a fade-off would be expected regarding positive intervention impact and would be consistent with projections. However, the impact on substance abuse indicated a reverse trend, a “sleeper effect” with positive impact stronger in the long term (Sklad et al., 2012). Overall, the long-term effect, though reduced from the short-term impact in most areas, was nevertheless significant.

In 2017, the long term benefits of SEL programs on student development were further supported in a meta-analysis that examined almost 100,000 students (K-12) from across the globe in 82 different programs (38 of the studies were outside the US) through follow-up studies ranging from six months to eighteen years after the program’s end (Taylor et al., 2017). This meta-analysis indicated that students in an SEL program performed better in social emotional skills and indicators of well-being regardless of race, SES, or location (Taylor et al., 2017). Graduation and safe sexual behaviors were just two additional indicators of impact on positive student trajectories as long term follow-up benefits (Taylor et al., 2017). This study reinforced the positive impact of SEL on vulnerable populations over-represented in identification of students experiencing underperformance.

Research has also supported a significant correlation among different aspects of SEL as dispositions associated with success, such as life satisfaction and attitude towards school (Ali et al., 2016). This drilling down to specific SEL factors has yielded significant research of positive impact. Two particular dimensions of social emotional learning, a growth mindset and grit, have proven to be dispositions positively associated with academic achievement. They provide a strong research base of how specific SEL factors can be leveraged for positive impact.



## *Dispositions*

Growth mindset embraces intelligence as a dynamic principle, a muscle that can be strengthened with exercise, practice, and effort, as opposed to a fixed mindset of intelligence as static. Growth mindset is associated with increased persistence and effort in school activities (Dweck, 2008; O'Rourke et al., 2014) as well as increases in academic achievement through increased motivation and effort (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2002). Though there have been some studies indicating a less favorable correlation between a growth mindset and academic performance (Dixson et al., 2017), growth mindset has been embraced by school districts across the country as an important focus of teacher professional development.

Strongly related to the growth mindset is a phenomena termed grit: resilience characterized by passion and perseverance (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has been indicated as positively impacting academic success, emotional stability, retention, success in life, and conscientiousness (Duckworth, 2016). The correlation of grit and growth mindset have been explored in studies that noted SEL elements are not preordained. On the contrary, grit can be taught and a growth mindset can be developed with potential to positively impact one another (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Grit and growth mindset have also been identified by some researchers (Dixson et al., 2017) as two of the four variables associated with academic achievement in adolescents—the other two being ethnic identity and group orientation.

Meanwhile, Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) suggest the ramifications for school practice from studies on grit and growth mindset include the need to challenge students and teach them to forge new pathways which will assist in their attainment of long-term goals. The research regarding growth mindset and grit as two particular SEL factors with a positive impact

on outcomes suggests that particular SEL factors may, in fact, be identified as most influential to positive outcomes.

Research oriented towards specific high-leverage SEL factors can be valuable for student populations experiencing underperformance. The concept of SEL as capable of being developed and particular SEL factors as being particularly influential is reflected in the framing of this study. Thus, research evidence is impressive regarding social emotional learning's positive impact on a variety of measures of student success, including a positive impact on academic achievement. However, academic achievement is not the only marker of success from SEL.

### *Intrinsic Value*

In a recent interview, Christina Cipriano, director of research at Yale's Center for Emotional Intelligence, noted a more intrinsic motivator for the wave of interest in social emotional learning: a realization regarding character education, peace building, and conflict resolution all having roots in the social-emotional learning frameworks that promote citizens ready to be make positive contributions to society (Tate, 2019). Social emotional competencies involve a "shift to an internal locus of control, allowing individuals' choices and action to better accord with their own values" (Belfield et al., 2015). Such soft skills predict and produce success in life, making them important considerations of public policy (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). SEL's value is not just in its ability to foster academic achievement or promotion, but in the intrinsic benefits of personal satisfaction, growth, and citizenship that also are associated with SEL development (Durlak et al., 2010), correlating positively with this study's expanded definition of success.

The benefits of SEL to student performance are clear. Before examining the unique intersections of social emotional learning to students underserved through academic programs, it

is important to assure an understanding of intervention programs and their implementation context, as intervention programs provide a unique opportunity to examine the impact of SEL on students being otherwise underserved by typical school structures.

### **Intervention Programs**

Given that this study involves a case study of four school intervention programs, the context for intervention initiatives is important to unpack. Interventions are defined as “a set of actions that, when taken, have demonstrated ability to change a fixed educational trajectory” (Methe & Riley-Tillman, 2008; p. 37). Interventions are not the same as modifications or accommodations, which are terms more associated with special education services and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Interventions can be as simple as a strategy. They can be structured as a component integrated into classroom instruction, a pull-out session for one student or a small group of students, a devoted class period in the day, or a before/after school program to address a point of difficulty. In order to understand this study’s focus on interventions, an understanding of pertinent legislation, multi-tiered systems of support, intervention funding streams, and intervention program design will be overviewed.

### ***IDEA, MTSS & ESSA***

The 2004 renewal of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) had a profound impact on school approaches to interventions. Previously, determining a learning disability required students to experience a level of failure in order to establish a discrepancy between ability and achievement. The reapproval of IDEA in 2004 allowed schools to use a process based on a student’s response to research-based interventions. The IDEA renewal spawned the rise of RtI, response to intervention, a tiered system involving early identification, intervention(s), progress monitoring, and data-based assessment of student progress. Though this

tiered system of support could lead to a special education diagnosis, the intervention model for catching those who might be falling through the cracks became a structure for better assuring the success of all students.

Currently, school systems commonly adopt a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) which is similar but more comprehensive than RtI, as MTSS integrates social, emotional, and behavioral supports in addition to academic supports (Utley & Obiakor, 2015). This integration of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic recognizes the interrelationships involved in student performance. MTSS is defined as a “continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and evidence-based practices for addressing barriers” and is structured to be responsive to varying intensity of needs for academic, social emotional, and behavioral development (Utley & Obiakor, 2015, p. 1-2). The initiatives from these systems of supports are often identified as interventions.

As previously noted, federal legislation from 1965 has gone through several iterations with the No Child Left Behind version requiring schools to address underperforming student subgroups with evidence-based interventions. In 2015, the renewal of this federal education legislation became known as ESSA. As detailed in a special report by Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy for the Alliance for Excellent Education (John Hopkins, 2017), ESSA allows states new flexibility on what those interventions look like. This flexibility in intervention design is important as SEL interventions move center stage.

### ***Funding Streams***

ESSA offers several funding streams for SEL interventions without ever explicitly mentioning social emotional learning, providing increased funding flexibility at a time when interest in social emotional learning and research regarding its role in student improvement has

surged. Interventions can meet ESSA funding requirements by meeting the evidence-based qualifications outlined as Tiers I-III (strong, moderate, or promising levels of evidence) or by using the more flexible criteria of Tier IV, which requires a strong rationale and evaluation of the intervention (Grant et al., 2017b). The US Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse offers a summary of PK–12 interventions that meet Tier 1 (randomized control trial) or Tier 2 (quasi-experimental) requirements, including rank ordering them based on research strength (US DOE WWC, n.d.). A 2017 study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation identified over 60 SEL interventions that met Tier I-III requirements as evidence-based (Grant et al., 2017b), including a substantial number that involved student samples from low socioeconomic status (SES) or racial/ethnic minoritized groups. Importantly, this study recommended utilizing the more fluid requirements of Tier IV so SEL interventions with no empirical research could be explored in order to add to the body and range of SEL approaches.

### ***Program Design***

The design of interventions varies based on the targeted issue. Academic intervention design can benefit from using the Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity, which has seven research-driven considerations to determine intervention intensity: strength (effect size), dosage, alignment (to need), attention to transfer, comprehensiveness, behavioral supports, and individualization (Funchs et al., 2017, p. 35). Social emotional interventions can be integrated into these academic interventions or targeted as a separate initiative. In fact, CASEL notes effective SEL interventions can be situated as free-standing lessons, integrated into efforts towards classroom and schoolwide conditions, embedded within academic content, or facilitated as a school-wide effort (Dusenbury et al., 2015).

This research study focuses on intervention programs that address underperforming students through a targeted during-the-day intervention program. This focus allowed for a segregation of the intervention from other instructional considerations without the complexities of out-of-school time (OST) programs. It also subscribes to recommendations from the John Hopkins and Wallace reports. The John Hopkins report noted the importance of schools guarding against top-down approaches, encouraging the use of the insights from experienced teachers and administrators along with data instruments to analyze student underperformance and vet interventions for their particular students and environmental context (John Hopkins, 2017). This study collects the insights of teachers experienced in these intervention programs along with data to determine efficacy of SEL elements.

The Wallace Foundation study also recommended giving careful attention to local conditions for effective implementation of SEL interventions (Grant et al., 2017b, p. xii). Environmental context was considered in this study through its case study approach. The school environments' interpretation of underperformance and their interpretation of intervention program efficacy was utilized in a nod to the local conditions that reflect the students lived experience and the lens in which norms are applied in their environmental context. Furthermore, this research study is centered on the intersection of academic and SEL interventions, but, even more importantly, it is focused on students experiencing underperformance. Given that marginalized populations are disproportionately represented in data of underperformance, the intersection of SEL with marginalized populations needs to be mined for its unique research implications.

## **SEL Discrepancies and Marginalized Populations**

The strong association between social emotional skills and student success has distinct ramifications for students. In order to examine the intersection of SEL and marginalized populations, it is important to investigate associations between low SEL and low school performance (without cause-effect implications), practitioner perceptions of social emotional attributes in populations experiencing underperformance, and the impact of SEL initiatives on marginalized student populations, including a nod to criticisms that it contributes to deficit mindsets.

### ***Associations Between Low SEL And Low School Performance***

While research indicates that SEL has a positive impact on many indicators of success, a reverse association has been suggested by other studies, indicating a relationship between low SEL skills and low performance. SEL deficit areas, such as disaffection, alienation, and lack of commitment, can correlate with discipline and drop-out issues (Zins et al., 2007). Some researchers have even attributed the difficulties of students from low low-socioeconomic status (SES) with behavior and emotional control, asserting that children of low incomes had “more difficulty regulating their emotions and behavior in comparison to their wealthier counterparts” (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008, p. 504). Similarly, Dymnicki attributed poor academic performance to an inability to surmount social, emotional and mental health barriers:

There are a great deal of data indicating that large numbers of students are contending with significant social, emotional, and mental health barriers that prevent them from succeeding in both school and life. Sometimes, the inability to surmount these barriers leads students to engage in risk-taking behaviors, and often this can contribute to poor academic performance. (Dymnicki, et al.,2013)

The framing of these associations can be problematic, as they could appear to blame students for low performance, inadvertently reinforcing deficit-thinking. Deficit framing and negative associations have been criticized by equity advocates (Love, 2019; Madda, 2019) as it suggests a causal relationship while ignoring unutilized student assets. Such negative framing of SEL is particularly harmful since indicators suggest SEL may be particularly essential and necessary for those who are “most at-risk for dropping out” (Zins et al., 2007, p. 192). SEL development has great potential to impact several dimensions associated with underperformance: disliking school, not getting along with teachers, lack of motivation, low levels of engagement, skepticism regarding education leading to success in life, and resistance/resentfulness toward the school community were variables associated with the propensity for dropping out (Suh & Suh, 2007).

Thus, negative correlations between low-SEL and low performance need to be carefully interpreted. Without due caution, the associations of low SEL to low school performance can perpetuate a deficit approach. Caution must be exercised about framing that communicates students are lacking in SEL assets if not achieving success or responsible for an inability to overcome their circumstances. Rather, consideration needs to be given as to whether inequitable school systems have adequately developed or capitalized upon their SEL assets.

Another consideration is whether a student’s SEL assets have been cultivated towards school-determined measures of success. Marginalized students are more likely to have challenges with both of these considerations. Bettina Love (2019) warns that such a false assumption denies the SEL strengths of marginalized students (Madda, 2019). The efficacy of SEL is undermined when it is devoid of the realities of students’ lives and, in the case of many



students experiencing underperformance, those lives are steeped in a sociopolitical context of inequities and injustice (Simmons et al., 2018). In fact, SEL can perpetuate a narrative of inferiority if the structures of inequity are not unpacked responsibly in the context of instruction; Simmons warns, SEL can become “white supremacy with a hug” (Madda, 2019, Para 11). Thus, an asset orientation needs to be carefully adopted when exploring the associations between low SEL and low performance so a causal relationship is not implied nor a blind eye to strengths reinforced.

Likewise, SEL programs should not presume that the student’s lack of manifested SEL skills is based on a lack of its existence as an asset. The SEL skill may not have been exhibited as an asset within the environmental framework of the school system, which may be due to many socio-cultural reasons. For example, a student may be demonstrating responsibility in a multi-faceted manner in the home environment without demonstrating it within a school environment where the student feels marginalized and devalued. The SEL asset exists but has not been employed for success in the school context. Dymnicki notes that “students with comprehensive SEL programming characterized by safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments and instruction in SEL skills” can overcome the barriers associated with underperformance (Dymnicki et al., 2013, p. 5), but the obligation rests with the school systems to create that environment.

### ***Practitioner Perceptions of Social Emotional Attributes***

Furthermore, practitioner perceptions of student SEL competencies and their commitment to addressing SEL can have a significant impact on efficacy. Several studies have established that students from lower SES families are often viewed as less able and viewed as having more difficulty controlling their emotions and behaviors, leading to less school success (Ratcliff et al.,

2016). Noteworthy, is that this reflects practitioner perspectives without correlating evidence of accuracy. Unfortunately, research indicates that school communities don't address the need to create a sense of student belongingness and, in fact, might even undermine student experiences (Osterman, 2000). Despite the potential dangers of negative practitioner perceptions, the inverse positive power of practitioners to change student course is also indicated.

The Brookings Institute's landmark report on reducing poverty (Butler et al., 2015) urged teacher, parent, and student involvement in evidence-based social-emotional learning programs and practices as a means for fostering supportive and safe cultures for learning. Specifically, the report identified educating the whole child to "promote social emotional and character development as well as academic skills" was one of four recommendations to improve education in order to provide poor students opportunities for self-advancement (Butler et al., 2015, p. 5). SEL skills such as motivation, self-management, goal setting, and engagement can be addressed in a purposeful and holistic manner to increase effectiveness (Zins et al., 2007). School practitioners can dispel mythology regarding students experiencing underperformance, addressing inequities, while developing student SEL assets in order to promote increased achievement.

### ***The Impact of SEL Initiatives on Marginalized Student Populations***

Though under-examined in the literature, research on the intersection of SEL and populations experiencing underperformance has been explored in select studies, providing context while also indicating the need for this study's contribution. Specifically, research indicates that SEL's impact on students termed disadvantaged can inform school reform (Becker & Luthar, 2002), SEL has potential to positively impact marginalized populations (Elias & Haynes, 2008) and alleviate educational disparities (Bavarian et al., 2013), and that more

research is indicated on how SEL can be leveraged with marginalized populations to address inequities (Aspen Institute 2018; O’Conner et al., 2017).

A 2002 study of social emotional factors that act as both risk and protective factors for students termed disadvantaged (Becker & Luthar) was examined utilizing an ecological framework. This examination of the context influencing achievement performance identified attachment, teacher support, peer values, and mental health as particular elements of significance to school reform. The importance of nuance regarding these elements was noted: attachment needed to be emphasized but not at the expense of high expectations, teachers needed to have high standards but not without sensitivity, peer values could have a supportive or detrimental effect, and the need for mental health services for all students was needed despite it rarely being included in school reforms (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Though this study was focused on school reform rather than the impact on individual students, it is indicative of the important role SEL can play in changing systems underserving an important segment of the student population.

In 2008, key investigators of social emotional learning (Elias & Haynes) acknowledged that relatively little is known about how SEL relationships in schools impact low SES students in urban communities and examined the relationship between SEL competencies and end-of-the-year outcomes for almost 300 third graders who identified as minority, low-income, and urban. Specifically, the study examined the protective process of SEL competencies and perceived environmental support for students’ successful adaptation. An effect was indicated between previous SEL competence and school outcomes for students described as at-risk, high neighborhood disadvantage communities, as well as indications that improvement in SEL competencies and perceived teacher support were predictors of variance in end-of-the-year performance (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

While the study partially validated the importance of SEL competencies and teacher support to achieving school success (defined in this particular study by academic grades), it also acknowledged that there are still “undiscovered factors that affect a student’s performance at school, especially for African American children,” and called for more research from an ecological perspective (Elias & Haynes, 2008, p. 490). Among the study’s implications was urging that academic interventions for urban youth should address SEL competencies, classroom climate, and the relationships between teachers and students in the classroom especially teacher support (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

In 2013, a significant six-year study of seven pairs of schools involving over 1,100 students and almost 250 teachers indicated that school-based social-emotional and character development (SECD) programs had a positive impact on the development of SECD as well as a positive impact on academic outcomes among low-income, urban youth (Bavarian et al., 2013). This focus on a student sample from settings described as high-risk provides evidence-based data supporting school-based SECD programs to alleviate educational disparities (Bavarian et al., 2013). Moreover, among the implications from this study was the suggestion for additional research to determine the mechanism by which SEL and character programs improve student outcomes (Bavarian et al., 2013).

As previously established, SEL programs positively affect student social emotional skills as well as academic outcomes. A 2017 literature review (O’Conner et al.), sponsored in part by the US Department of Education, sought to determine if there was a difference in these outcomes between the general student population and student subgroups often described as within the opportunity gap: low SES families, racial/ethnic minorities, male/female students, English learning (EL) students, and students from urban and rural areas. Though the review

determined that students in the general population benefited from improved social skills and academic performance, as expected, a determination of the impact on student subgroups was more ambiguous, primarily due to a lack of information distinguishing the cultural, linguistic, and social contexts of the students.

This literature review (O’Conner et al., 2017) noted that research has established the importance of student contexts, indicating that some students are more likely to experience risk-factors for poor social, emotional, and behavioral development as well as higher risk for school dropout and delinquency (O’Conner et al., 2017). In examining studies that had collected relevant data on sub-groups, the review concluded that low SES families, racial/ethnic minority students, EL students, and students in urban settings were more at risk for lower SEL competencies, but SEL programs were at least as effective for these sub-groups as for the full population (O’Conner et al., 2017). Moreover, the review indicated that additional research was needed regarding the strategies for implementing SEL with diverse populations (O’Conner et al., 2017).

More recently, the Aspen Institute (2018) released a brief urging an equity lens be adopted hand-in-hand with SEL as complimentary priorities. The brief noted the need for equitable education “irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, family background, family income, citizenship, or tribal status” (Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 1). In order to make individual, institutional, and societal level shifts, educators need to build on students’ cognitive, social and emotional competencies, confront inequities, foster positive school cultures, and engage families/communities (Aspen Institute, 2018).

Thus, the research landscape makes it clear that SEL can positively impact performance, and marginalized populations can particularly benefit from SEL interventions. Additional

information is needed on how to effectively leverage SEL for underserved populations to better address inequities. Research on the intersection of SEL assets and students experiencing underperformance, particularly research targeting how to best leverage SEL for marginalized populations, is well situated to meet an indicated need in the literature.

## **Discussion**

### **Literature Gap**

As previously indicated, social emotional factors are often an essential aspect of school mission statements. Research supports a positive relationship between social emotional factors and both short-term and long-term achievement. Meanwhile, research indicates that students deemed most likely to experience failure in schools have been perceived to have a negative association with social emotional skills. Research suggests comprehensive and intentional development of social emotional skills is important for all students, but is particularly important as a means of scaffolding success for vulnerable student populations. With the positive impact of social emotional learning well established, investigation into how one can develop social emotional assets to leverage success becomes of primary interest, particularly pertaining to those students underserved by current educational systems. A review of research indicates a need for knowledge on innovations that promote equity through student SEL and also informs practice and policies (Boston Consulting Group, 2018).

This study endeavors to meet this gap in the literature by investigating practitioner insights from intervention programs that are experiencing success in meeting the needs of students experiencing underperformance in school. Learning about the social emotional skills of greatest consequence to the development of these students provides an asset-orientation to inform educational practice. In short, this study aspires to learn which social emotional learning

foci can best serve students experiencing underperformance and which social emotional skills are being identified by practitioners as particularly impactful to students whose potential is being least served through current educational structures. As indicated, this honing down to student populations experiencing underperformance and to specific SEL skills identified as impactful is an area underrepresented in current research literature. Moreover, it is an area with particular importance to inform program design to assure greater success for these underserved students.

### **Additional Considerations**

Additional areas for study related to social emotional learning include the political climate for SEL integration so it can become a systemic part of education, assessment measures of SEL to assure evidence-based accountability without decimating its genesis into an artificial test score, and the challenge of assuring SEL does not reinforce stereotypes and inequities through reinforcement of social biases, further marginalizing oppressed students. Moreover, the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy with social emotional learning is indicated to be an important component of addressing system inequities that marginalize students. These prospective research areas intersect with this study. As SEL moves into the mainstream funding stream, there are opportunities to incorporate SEL as an essential measure of school success, but this will require accountability measures and precautions to address rather than perpetuate opportunity gaps through culturally responsive approaches.

Under the federal government's ESSA, a non-academic measure was recently allowed as one of several indicators of school success and pandemic-related funding allocations support SEL responsiveness. Both the political and financial landscape for SEL implementation has never been more welcoming. The role of SEL in enacting system changes and school reform will be a pivotal area of concern. At the same time, SEL instruction and school integration has

remained uneven among school districts and school programs, requiring additional research support to increase efficacy, lest this unique intersection of opportunity be squandered.

As SEL interventions are implemented the need for effective assessment will only be magnified to assure implementation with fidelity. Yet the standardizing of assessments related to SEL is even more contentious than the debate raging over standardized testing nationally. Measurement of social emotional factors is a burgeoning area of interest and enterprise. Tessera is one of many recently developed standardized assessments for non-cognitive skill development coming from ACT services, but over twenty-one different assessments have been identified that attempt to quantify social emotional skills in some aspect (Kafka, 2016). The use of assessment of individual skill development versus measuring SEL at an institutional level are important distinctions: one attempts to indicate areas for student development whereas the other attempts to inform program target areas for additional program development. Both areas are of interest to current assessment developers and have many limitations and dangers. Duckor (2017) warns against this ESSA-inspired march by states towards assessment without responsible attention to assessment, noting that instructionally insensitive or bias measurement tools may be adopted in the name of expediency which will prove counterproductive to the aims of social emotional development.

These concerns of bias and institutionalizing SEL norms of the privileged class are already areas of concern. Rather than recognizing the untapped social emotional strengths of students so they can be better employed for student success, a deficit approach reinforces students as lacking, with social emotional skills yet another area of deficit. Bettina Love (2019) specifically calls out the racism rampant in approaches to social emotional development, excoriating efforts that ignore the social emotional strengths of the student in an effort to further



oppress their civic development. The danger that social emotional skill development can become another tool of oppression, reinforcing privileged conceptions of “good” and further suppressing the empowerment of the most marginalized students is a very real and alarming concern. This study very consciously adopts an asset orientation, presuming that students’ social emotional assets have not been adequately tapped by current educational structures requiring a change in programming, investigating insights from specific intervention programs supporting marginalized student development, and aspiring to provide evidence for deconstructing current institutional practices in order to better serve the assets of these students. The very impetus for this study was born from alarm over school as a hurdle to be overcome, devoid of clear social emotional assets, when, in fact, schools should be the vehicle for further developing these assets in order to realize personal potential.

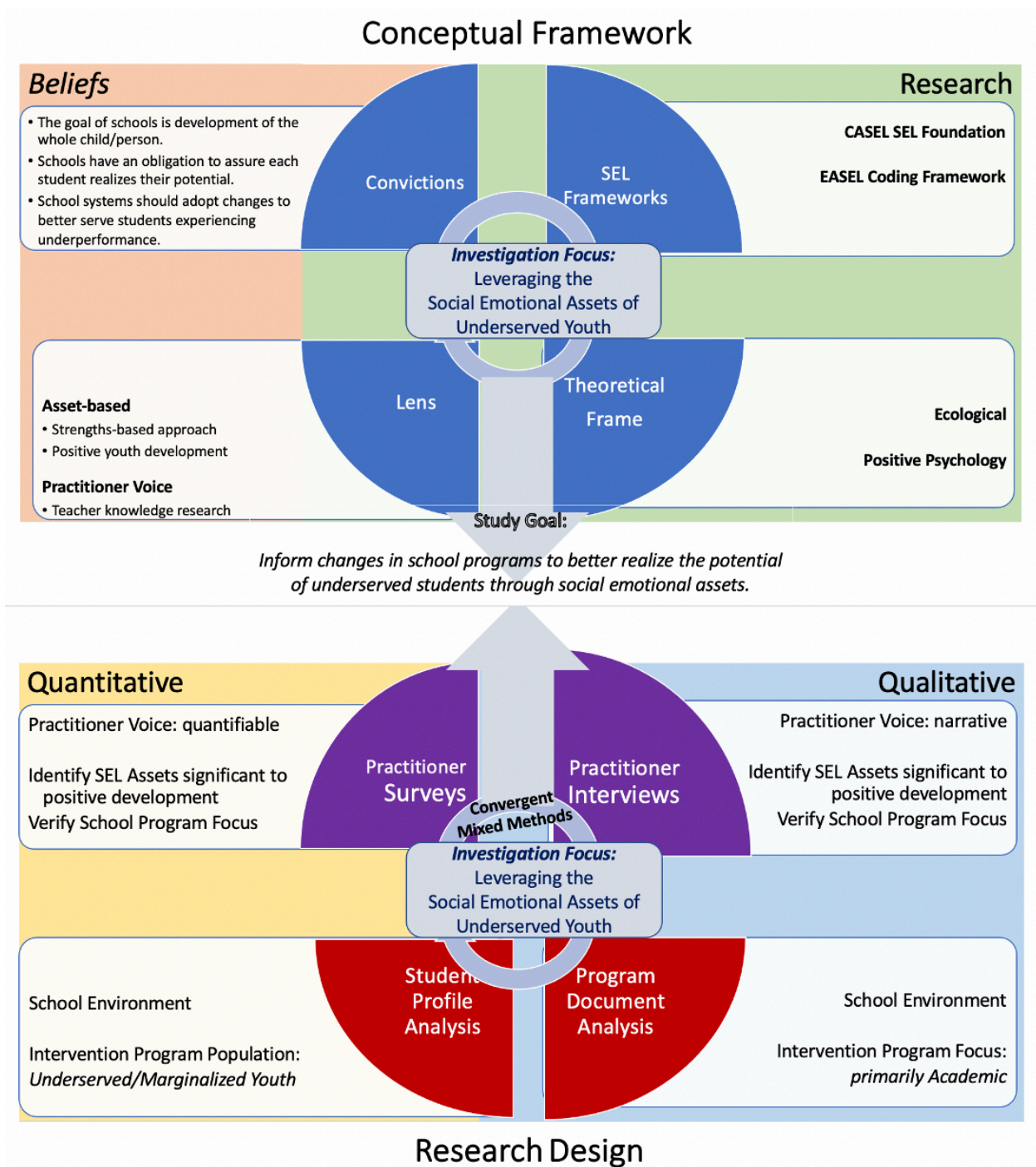
Though this study approaches the systemic, assessment, and equity thresholds, these three research areas remain needs for additional study. This study drills into the particular SEL assets that prove significant to the positive trajectory of students reinforcing the assets that can be capitalized in transformative ways. It intends to inform systemic changes through identification of essential SEL qualities to be emphasized in all classrooms rather than regulated to intervention programs. It intends to document the practitioner observed impact of specific SEL elements. It also seeks to accentuate the untapped assets of the underserved student populations, often marginalized students whose capabilities can be realized through improved practice. Yet these efforts are a humble contribution to important research work that remains to better serve student potential through SEL.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study reflects an intersection of my experiences and beliefs as an educator as well as my informed understandings regarding an asset orientation and the value of teacher voice. These conceptions interact with research I conducted in selecting the CASEL and EASEL frameworks as well as the influence of theory pertaining to ecological perspectives and positive psychology. The synthesis of these understandings provides a road map for my research design as I strive to understand how schools can better serve the needs of students experiencing underperformance through social emotional assets. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of my conceptual framework which is reflected in my research design.

Figure 2

*My Conceptual Framework and reflected Research Design*



## **Beliefs**

The conceptual framework for this study begins with beliefs formed through my own experiences as a K-12 educator and as a preservice and graduate instructor in higher education. It is also informed by my own values and positionality. Specifically, this study is premised on my belief that schools have an obligation to develop each and every child in a wholistic manner, and, in turn, that schools need to make systemic changes in order to better meet the potential of students experiencing underperformance, most especially marginalized student populations. In focusing on intervention programs, I am not aiming to simply inform improvements in intervention programs, rather I wish to inform changes in schools that would undermine the need for these interventions through better realization of all students' potential. The intervention program focus serves as an incubator to examine what can be leveraged to more effectively capitalize on student potential through development of the whole child/person.

## **Asset-Based**

Efforts to cultivate the social emotional competencies of students experiencing underperformance must vigilantly avoid deficit approaches focused on students' lack of skills and an undercurrent of student "blame" positioning. Rather, efforts need to identify and cultivate student strengths that can be more effectively capitalized upon and provide instructional opportunities for underdeveloped skill areas. Too often there is a disease entity approach, presuming a behavioral deficit in students considered at-risk under the federal Comprehensive School Reform Act (Love, 2019). The need for a positive prevention and intervention framework is needed to build student developmental assets (Edwards et al., 2007).

An example of building on student assets can be found in the forty developmental assets developed by the Search Institute (Benson, 2003), focusing on both external and internal assets

that positively influence students' lives and improve educational outcomes (Edwards et al., 2007). Despite the proliferation of strengths-based approaches, interventions capitalizing on student assets in practice are uncommon (Cox, 2008). Garoutte and McCarthy-Gilmore (2014) argue that too many approaches promote a perception of students as vulnerable and powerless, whereas an asset-based approach has great potential to help students identify relationships and illuminate power structures. Despite the marginalization many youth experience, it is more beneficial to emphasize how adversity is overcome and leverage youth assets (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). Such a strengths-based approach is more likely to support positive skill development (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). This study adopts an asset framework by investigating what SEL assets were leveraged to overcome underperformance rather than investigating what was lacking in students experiencing underperformance. The study's approach emphasizes how adversity was overcome, which is more powerful and appropriate than a disease entity investigation of student deficits.

Though there are significant long-term negative impacts of stressors, research indicates that an adaptive calibration can emerge as students orient towards prevailing and succeeding, rather than the stressors that result in dysfunction and pathology (Ellis & DeGiudice, 2019). Such a strengths-based orientation that acknowledges adaptive calibration is not intended to minimize the significant challenges and risks associated with vulnerable student populations, such as those in the opportunity gap. Rather the challenges, which can and should be addressed by school systems, are nevertheless recognized as the impetus for the adaptive behaviors which can, in turn, result in particular student strengths. A conceptual foundation for this study is that student SEL assets from adversity can be harnessed to positively impact academic performance.

An emphasis on strengths and assets through positive youth development can shift the deficit approach too often applied to students experiencing underperformance and more effectively support optimal outcomes (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). Specifically, an example of an asset orientation involves assessing the capacities, interests, and resources of students; identifying recognized strengths; and utilizing an identified strength as a “vehicle for furthering the youth’s progress toward improving functioning” (Cox, 2008, p. 20). Given that social emotional learning can have a positive effect on student success and given that students experiencing underperformance are particularly susceptible to judgments of negative social emotional competency, it is essential that an asset-based approach to social emotional skill development be adopted.

This study on practitioner perspectives of SEL and students experiencing underperformance is structured to capitalize on the positive SEL aspects of intervention programs; this study focuses on what SEL aspects are positively impacting students otherwise experiencing underperformance and how development of an SEL strength can positively impact student realization of potential. This inquiry is not an exploration of what is wrong with the students or what students are lacking. Rather, the inquiry seeks to discover what social emotional learning in a situational and programmatic environment aids student thriving. Interview questions specifically prompt practitioner narratives of students who have thrived through the program, seeking what, if any, SEL factors were most successful in supporting this positive development. In this manner, this study was designed to minimize a pathology approach to the development of student potential.

## **Practitioner Voice**

This study's exploration is focused on the perspectives of practitioners working closely with students otherwise underperforming in school. Practitioners who have worked with students to achieve greater positive development are an important yet underrepresented voice to inform research on school programming. Unfortunately, teacher voice is often muted. Teacher voice is not well represented in research literature and policy-making (Gozali et al., 2017), and less than 6% of teachers feel their voice factors in decision-making at the district or state level (Rentner et al., 2016).

Teacher knowledge research acknowledges the unique contribution of teachers on how to adapt and take advantage of the intersections of content, students' lived experiences, culture, and individual talents (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2018). Giving voice to practitioner insights rejects the notion of teachers as technicians and functionaries and provides recognition to the complexities of teaching. Teacher knowledge research is an opportunity to harness knowledge, practice, and experience through teachers' reflective voice (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2018). A national study (Boston Consulting Group, 2018) indicated a need to elevate the voice of stakeholders in the SEL implementation process--including educators, youth professionals, and youth--noting its particular importance given the relational emphasis in SEL integration, The Quaglia Institute recommends teacher voice is an underrepresented aspect and recommends a "listen, learn, lead" approach that begins with seeking teacher perspectives and opinions (O'Brien, 2016).

This study gives voice to practitioner perceptions of SEL factors of particular significance for underperforming youth as a dynamic resource to inform program design. The expertise of practitioners regarding significant social emotional factors aiding underperforming youth, can directly benefit program design to better serve their students' untapped potential.

## **SEL Frameworks & Taxonomy**

Framing SEL requires examination of prevalent frameworks and taxonomies informing the research. As previously noted, SEL can be a somewhat nebulous term with a variety of interpretations. In terms of school-based frameworks related to social emotional learning, CASEL has been one of the first and most influential forces bringing attention, research, and resources to the SEL landscape for schools. CASEL's framework defining SEL has served as the most popular resource for states adopting SEL standards, including Illinois which was a pioneer state in adopting SEL PK-12 standards. CASEL defines SEL as "the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks...to recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions" (Zins et al., 2007). CASEL provides an evidence-based framework for social emotional learning encompassing five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Figure 3 provides a graphical representation of the CASEL framework. Since Illinois SEL standards were based on the CASEL framework, it provides a conceptual infrastructure for the Illinois schools included in this study, as it is the lens for practitioner understanding of SEL within their Illinois schools.



Figure 3

*CASEL Framework for Social Emotional Learning*

(CASEL, n.d., What is SEL sec.)

As noted, the field of SEL is ripe with frameworks and interpretations of SEL. An extensive research project by the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, led by Dr. Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, sought to clarify and connect sixteen existing SEL competency frameworks widely used in the field in order to organize, connect, and describe frameworks and terminology across disciplines (EASEL, n.d.). Figure 4 offers a snapshot of the sixteen SEL frameworks that, in turn, informed

the EASEL coding. It should be noted that CASEL’s framework is among the sixteen frameworks synthesized in the EASEL coding process.

Figure 4

*Frameworks Analyzed in developing the EASEL Coding Framework*

Framework Profile Summary Table															
Framework	Framework Overview								Key Considerations				Available Resources		
	Developer		Key Parameters		Level of Detail				Culture & Diversity	Developmental Perspective	Context & Environment	Associated Outcomes	Support Materials	Programs & Strategies	Measurement Tools
	Name	Type	Age	Setting	Framework	Skill	Observable Behaviors	Learning Progression							
ACT Education and Workforce Readiness	ACT, Inc.		Kindergarten to career	School, college & workplace											
Anchorage Standards	ASD SEL Steering Committee		Grades K-12	School											
Big 5 Personality Traits	Multiple researchers		All ages	Not specified											
Building Blocks for Learning	Turnaround for Children		Grades K-12	School											
CASEL Framework for Systemic SEL	CASEL		Grades PreK-12	School, home & other											
Character Strengths (Character Lab)	Character Lab		Grades K-12	School											
Character Strengths (KIPP)	KIPP NYC & Researchers		Grades K-12	School											
Clusters of 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Competencies	National Research Council		Grades K-12	School											
Connecticut State Standards	Connecticut Dept. of Ed.		Grades K-12	School											
Employability Skills	Office of Career, Tech, and Adult Ed.		Not specified	School, workplace & other											
Foundations for Young Adult Success	UChicago Consortium		Ages 3-22	School, home & OST											
Four Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence	Mayer & Salovey		Infant to adult	School, home, work & other											
Framework for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning	P21		Not specified	School & other											
Head Start Early Learning Outcomes	Office of Head Start		Ages 0-5	Early childhood settings											
Mindsets, Essential Skills and Habits (MESH)	Transforming Education & CORE Districts		Grades K-12	School											
OECD Social and Emotional Skills	OECD		Primary and secondary school	School											

Key: minimal some comprehensive no yes government school researcher(s) non-profit intergovernmental

(Jones, et al, 2019)

In addition, Figure 5 provides examples of program clusters and attributes that informed the EASEL coding process nationally, in order to draw connections among programs beyond nomenclature differences.

**Figure 5**

*Sampling of SEL Frameworks Integrated into EASEL Coding Framework*

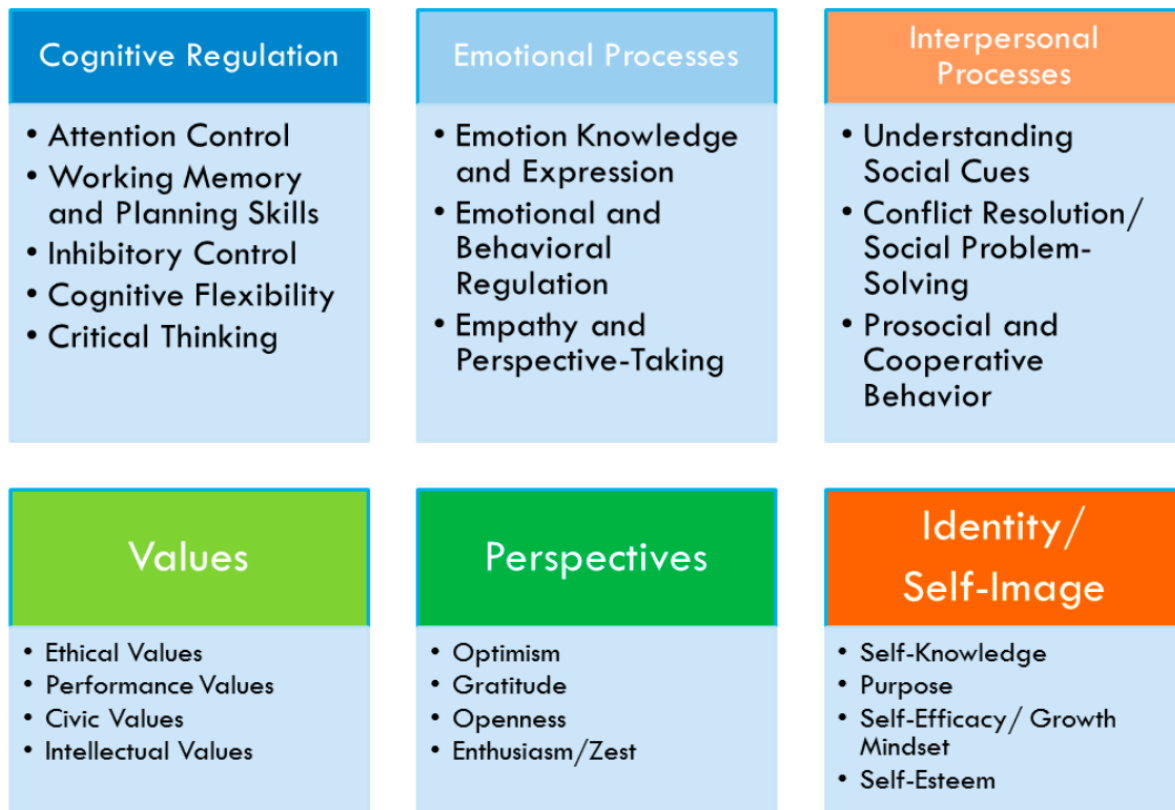
<b>School-based Competency Development</b>	<b>Positive Youth Development</b>	<b>Psychology</b>	<b>Character Education</b>
<i>33 Frameworks</i>	<i>19 Frameworks</i>	<i>11 Frameworks</i>	<i>10 Frameworks</i>
SE competencies related to learning, achievement & personal development; generally includes goal-setting & self-regulation as well as understanding people & the world around them	Youth develop via supportive interactions within contexts & self-driven development; often informing after-school work	Advance theory/research re: SE competencies, including foci on emotional intelligence, positive psychology, mindsets, & personality	Focus on human values & school environments that foster such values
<b>EXAMPLES:</b>			
Five Categories of Noncognitive Factors (Farrington, 2012)	Five Cs of Positive Youth Development (Zarrett & Lerner, 2008)	Four Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso & Sitarenios, 2001)	What Works in Character Education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005)
Building Blocks for Learning (Stafford-Brizard, 2016)	Achieve-Connect-Thrive (ACT) Skills (Boston After School & Beyond, 2017)	Positive Educational Practices Framework (Noble & McGrath, 2008)	Tripartite Taxonomy of Character (Character Lab, 2017)
Deeper Learning & 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills (national Research Council, 2012)	Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2017)	Building Blocks for Learning (Stratford-Brizard, 2016)	

After synthesizing and cross-referencing the multitude of SEL approaches and frameworks, the EASEL coding frame reflected six distinct categories as reflected in Figure 6. This EASEL coding with its six categories was adapted in creating this study's survey categories and informed

the coding framework used in its data analysis. One additional category was added to the coding, which is further explained in the this study's Chapter 3: Methods.

**Figure 6**

*EASEL Coding Categories*



In terms of a framework for defining the targeted youth in these intervention programs, this study embraces the conceptual understanding that an intervention program is intended to benefit students experiencing underperformance, with its success empirically associated with its ability to positively impact the identified behavior(s). It is acknowledged that a student underperforming in one setting might perform at-level in another setting. Nevertheless, the student qualifying for an intervention program is not experiencing success in their home environment and that is relevant for the purposes of this study as underperforming. This study

subscribes to the understanding that there is not one definition of underperforming students and attempts to do so are nebulous with symptoms and causes often interwoven at best (Kingston, 2016). Given the school environmental context reflects the student's lived experience, how the each school defines underperformance and applies it to intervention programs is most relevant.

### **Theoretical Connections**

This study of social emotional factors has been impacted by a psycho-political lens of school mission which identifies factors aligned to the goals of education including critical thinking, problem solving, and social skills as well as emotional health, work ethic, and community responsibility (Garcia, 2014). Mission statements in PK-12 schools consistently capture social emotional elements such as fostering responsibility, collaboration, commitment, empowerment, and socially developed life-long learners (Slate et al., 2008). Closeness, affection, open communication, self-control, self-regulation, persistence, academic confidence, teamwork, organizational skills, communication skills, and creativity have all been identified as important to educational success (Garcia, 2014). Framed by these investigations, this study endeavors to surface school success-related social emotional factors infused into successful programs for students.

This mission orientation is impacted by understandings from psychologists who have been on the forefront of research on social emotional well-being, including analysis of its impact on the learning process. The intersection of educational mission with understandings of child development and social emotional processes provides a lens that impacts understanding of the information garnered through this study. In particular, positive psychology informs its theoretical framework.

Positive psychology is the strengths-oriented study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive, based on the assumption that individuals want to flourish through the cultivation of their best inner self for a meaningful, fulfilling life (Positive Psychology Center, n.d.). Martin Seligman (2019), sometimes referred to as the father of positive psychology, describes positive psychology as focused on well-being and notes its growing focus on the study of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, and meaningful lives. The study is well-framed by positive psychology through its focus on assuring students are able to realize their potential, its adoption of an assets-based approach, and its framing of success as not restricted to academic achievement. Moreover, the focus on social emotional learning encompasses dimensions of well-being underserved by schools when they focus solely on achievement measured by test scores.

Ecological perspectives theory also informs this study as it posits the importance of situating the study of individuals within their social and cultural environment including their interactions with others. Though often utilized in health and social work, ecological perspective emphasizes both the individual and contextual systems and their interdependent relationship (Petrona, 2018; Steinberg, 2001). As this study examines students and practitioner voice within a proximal setting of an intervention program, it does so with acknowledgement of its interconnectedness to the school environment, its position within a broader community and cultural context, and its framing within a historical, social, economic, political, geographical, and cultural macrosystem, which includes racism, bias, and socioeconomic hierarchy.

### **Conceptual Framework Summary**

The conceptual framework for this study reflects my beliefs regarding the development of the whole student and the school's obligation to change systems to achieve that goal for all

students. An asset orientation centered informed by practitioner voice orients this study as aligned to positive psychology within an ecological perspective that notes the importance of interactions with others and environment for thriving. The CASEL SEL framework distills the definition of SEL for participants while the EASEL framework serves as a foundation for study coding. These forces inform both the design of this research study as well as the interpretation of its findings. It provides both the foundation and the lens for its investigation.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

Research in the field affirms the importance of social emotional skills in student success for both school and life. Moreover, SEL is positively associated with student achievement. Research supports the potential to leverage SEL assets to buoy students underserved by current school systems. Thus, research on successful programs for social emotional skill development may be particularly beneficial to students targeted for intervention programming, and such an impact should be specifically explored. Moreover, successful intervention programs have great potential to identify the SEL skills of particular value to better assure these students are able to experience greater success. This study endeavors to meet a gap in the literature to inform program design in meeting the needs of students not experiencing optimal performance in school through the development of their SEL assets.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of educational practitioners working in student intervention programs (Gr 5-12) to determine what, if any, social emotional elements are of particular emphasis in these programs and what social emotional elements these practitioners consider particularly valuable for positively impacting student development. Recognizing that both theory and facts are essential to meaning making, this study adopts a constructivist approach informed by a lens of critical theory. Therefore, this research is constructed with acknowledgment that my inquiry is impacted by a value-laden prism, that the “facts” I gather will be informed by a theoretical framework, that the results of this investigation cannot be *proven* due to the inductive nature of my inquiry, and that objectivity will not be achieved given the interactions between me as researcher and the study participants (Guba, 1990). A relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology, and dialectic methodology are characteristics of my paradigm for this research, though I recognize that a constructivist approach would not necessarily prescribe the use of ontology and epistemology as delineated constructs. This constructivist approach, by its nature, intends to uncover the complexities of various views, allowing the practitioner participants to construct meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2014). As a researcher, I intend to capture this meaning-making in order to support transferability, without any intention of asserting that the study conclusions can be generalized.

Within this paradigm, a convergent parallel mixed methods research approach has been adopted. In terms of my study, the mixed methods approach involves collecting and integrating both qualitative data (interviews and document analysis) and quantitative data (surveys), informed by my theoretical framework, in order to gain a deeper understanding than could be constructed with only one type of data (Creswell, 2014). The mixed methods approach is a



relatively new research approach, emerging in the 1980/1990s and has gained traction as a worthy approach as indicated by federal funding initiatives and discipline-specific discussions in social and health sciences journals (Creswell, 2014).

The convergent parallel mixed method approach in this study involves qualitative deductive data collection taking place independently from inductive quantitative data collection with the different types of data then combined/compared to gain a more complete understanding of the perceived value and impact of SEL factors. Points of tension and symmetry can then be analyzed from this convergence (Creswell, 2015). The mixed methods research design is uniquely suited to the purposes of this study:

- Through document analysis, I am able to investigate the public messaging of the intervention program design to ascertain whether social emotional learning has been articulated as a core aspect of the program.
- The qualitative data gathering of practitioner interviews allows the participants to offer narratives of their programs and the role of social emotional learning, *without* influence from the introduction of external definitions, categories, or constructs for their meaning-making.
- The quantitative data gathered through the surveys introduces categories of SEL gathered from frameworks across the country, primarily from the EASEL Taxonomy Project's coding (S. Jones, 2019), to allow practitioners the opportunity to self-identify SEL elements in their programs and articulate which, if any, are significantly impactful to the development of students experiencing underperformance. This introduction of external SEL identifiers from various frameworks allows the practitioners to marry their own

perceptions to nomenclature in the field without the intrusion of the researcher's interpretation.

The analysis of these three aspects—program descriptors, practitioner narrative, and self-identification of SEL factors to frameworks—will provide an understanding not served through either qualitative or quantitative approaches alone. Thus, the convergence of information from parallel data collection will provide meaning-making benefits unique to a mixed methods design.

A case study approach has been adopted for this study, exploring four different school programs. A case study approach allows a deep-dive exploration from multiple perspectives to paint a rich, complex picture of a bounded social phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A case study approach provides a beneficial mode of inquiry as it facilitates a specific focus on students experiencing underperformance and interventions to positively impact their success; this provides a unique intersection of factors well suited for learning about the impact of social emotional skills. As Yin notes (2009), case studies can be exploratory or descriptive and this study is positioned as exploratory, describing the phenomenon of social emotional learning in the context of intervention programs to explore whether it is impactful to students experiencing underperformance. An examination of four cases allows for cross-case analysis in order to determine if there is prevalence to any surfaced phenomenon regarding SEL's impact on learners. The goal in the case study approach is not generalizability, which is also evident through my adoption of a constructivist paradigm (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Rather, the case study approach I have adopted aspires for transferability: the application of understandings and knowledge to similar contexts and settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). These cases are current, actual cases, and triangulation of data is essential to gaining understandings from this exploration.

The triangulation of data for the case studies focuses on document analysis, interviews, and surveys. This triangulation operates from the same theoretical model, and, as articulated by Denzin (2010), adopts an emergent multimethod sequential triangulation design. Examining four case studies, this research intends to learn from practitioner perspectives regarding social emotional factors with positive impact on students identified for intervention programs. Each data source serves its own piece of the overall picture in order to address the research query (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

In summer 2018, I conducted a pilot study involving interviews with program personnel from three different intervention programs: an elementary interventionist about a PBIS program, a coordinator of a Gr. 2-12 summer school program, and a faculty member of an after-school high school program. This pilot served as a precursor to this study, informing the narrowing of my program focus and the refinement of data tools for this study's research design. Specifically, the pilot informed the choice in this study to adopt a narrowed focus on program coordinators of intervention programs that are offered by the school during the academic year with a during-the-day component. This allowed a hone focus on planned interventions rather than having to decipher what instructional approach in the regular classroom was considered an intervention. The study also provided an opportunity to vet interview approaches on how to best surface perspectives on the role of social emotional factors, resulting in the adopted approach of an open-ended interview followed by a survey with provided SEL elements. The pilot study also informed refinement of interview questions and the adoption of a coding framework for more consistent nomenclature for the survey of practitioners.

### **Research Sample & Sources of Data**

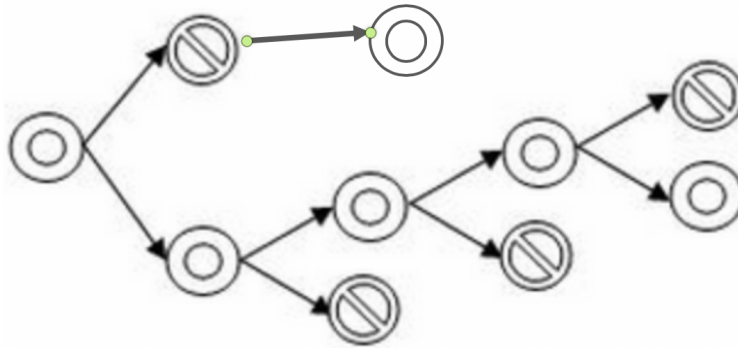
Using school site contacts from the pilot study, chain referral sampling was utilized for this study with an exponential discriminative snowball sampling method to identify program sites for inclusion in this research study. Chain referral sampling is described as relying on “a series of participant referrals to others who have experienced the phenomenon of interest; however, multiple networks are strategically accessed to expand the scope of investigation beyond one social network” (Penrod et al., 2003, p. 102). As opposed to snowball sampling alone, which may be haphazard, the chain referral sampling for this study was purposeful in assuring varied districts and programs were identified with programs noteworthy for their successful intervention programming.

Thus, the sampling adopted was an exponential discriminative snowball sampling method. The original pilot study participants were asked for recommendations of intervention programs for participation in the research study. This chain referral sampling allowed for practitioner recommendations of sites well-regarded for their intervention programs for students experiencing underperformance. Each identified program referral was vetted based on discriminative study criteria to identify whether suitable for the study. Of the surfaced programs, not all met sample criteria, but the suggested programs were also solicited for recommendations on other qualifying intervention program sites. Figure 7 provides a representation of the exponential discriminative snowball sampling method with the snowballs with a slash through them indicating potential participants that did not meet all study criteria and the circles representing potential participants.

Figure 7

*Exponential Discriminative Snowball Sampling*

Note: “o” indicates a qualifying participant and the slash indicates a participant not meeting criteria. (Chart adapted from <https://research-methodology.net/sampling-in-primary-data-collection/snowball-sampling/>)



Ultimately four participant sites were selected based on meeting qualifying criteria with consideration given to studying distinct district locations in the same general geographic area surrounding a large metropolitan area in Illinois. Qualifying criteria for research sites included the following:

1. a program in existence at least one year at the school site with a record of achieving the school’s program goals as self-identified by the school site and delineated by the program coordinators,
2. a program specifically targeting students experiencing underperformance with a during-the-academic-day component,
3. a program coordinator with direct contact with students involved in the program,
4. a program coordinator with at least one year of leadership with the program and student contact in the context of the intervention program, and

5. a willingness by program coordinators to participate in the participant research requirements.

Of the sites that surfaced via the chain sampling method, four sites were identified that met all qualifying criteria. Though geographically within an hour of one another, the four programs represented distinct approaches to interventions and distinctly different environments:

- A middle school program (within a K-8 building) serving students through two designated weeks of intervention during mid-year school breaks and a push-in approach when classes are meeting. Students in the intervention program are identified through informal teacher academic assessment or the student/family may self-identify for the program. This small one-school district of 103 students and 13 teachers is in an industrial corridor with a 17% mobility rate compared to the 7% state average. The student body is 48% White, 22% Black, 26% Hispanic, and 56% low-income. The intervention coordinator is one of two administrators and has several years of experience teaching the students designated for the program.
- A high school program targeting incoming students through a day program based on an analysis of risk factors, faculty recommendations, and in-person interviews. This large suburban school in a unit district has almost 2,700 students that are 90% White with a low chronic absenteeism rate (5% compared 18% state average) and 15 % low-income student population. The high school has over 1,000 teachers, most with an advanced degree. The experienced coordinator works directly with students during the academic day and helped design the intervention programming to better meet their needs.
- Two high schools in different districts offering an intervention course over four years aligned to AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) involving student

selection via applications and recommendations. AVID is described by the What Works Clearinghouse as a college-readiness program focused on underserved students (B, C, D grades) who gain access to college preparatory classes supported through a daily elective period and tutorial support (USDOE WWC, n.d.). The two schools with AVID programs can be described as follows:

- A suburban/rural high school of 2,800 students that is 61% White, 21% Hispanic, 9% Black, and 25% low income. There are over 1,000 teachers, 73% with an advanced degree. Chronic absenteeism at this high school exceeds state averages (22% vs 18% state average). The program coordinator has been a teacher and coordinator of the program for several years.
- A suburban high school of 2,700 students that is 57% White, 21% Hispanic, 12% Black, and 28% low income. There are 330 teachers, 86% with advanced degrees. The chronic absenteeism rate for this district is 24%, which exceeds the state average of 18%. The program coordinator has served as a teacher in the program before taking on coordinator duties.

The program coordinators from these four sites served as the data source for the interviews regarding social emotional elements of significance to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. These participants were also the data source for the follow-up survey identifying social emotional framework elements of importance. Though these coordinators were not asked to identify their race or gender, they appeared to the researcher to represent as three Caucasian females and one Caucasian male.

Demographic data on students in the intervention programs was also collected from program coordinators to compare with general school population data from the Illinois State

Board of Education website's posting of School Report Cards. This allowed for determination of proportional representation in the programs by race and low-income, when available. Since schools have a statistical tendency to do a poorer job serving the needs of marginalized student populations, in particular African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, and low-income student populations, it was important to identify how the students represented in the intervention programs compared to the overall school population demographics. This demographic data collection was not part of the study's original methods, but it became clear that demographic data was pertinent to the analysis of data and interpretation of findings. Thus, participants were contacted during study data analysis to supplement the study with demographic data they had available on the students involved in the intervention program at their school site.

Publicly available documents regarding the program were examined and analyzed for content related to social emotional learning, whether explicit, implicit, or not present at all. This data set included documents shared with prospective students/families and website posts about the program for the general public. Documents were obtained via public school websites for each site or shared by school personnel during the site visit. Examination of these documents allowed for examination of the program elements that were promoted as significant aims or benefits of the programs to prospective parents/guardians/families and students. Data on student populations was gathered from the publicly available Illinois Report Cards to determine race and low-income data on the general school populations and school opportunity gap achievement data. This was compared to data on the students in the intervention programs that was provided by the program coordinators.



### **Overview of Information Needed**

In order to answer the three research questions of this study, information was needed from program documents, participant interviews, and participant surveys. To answer the first question, “what, if any, social-emotional learning is noted as a target of the identified intervention programs,” the practitioners’ perspective of the intervention programs via interviews was needed. Information was also needed from analysis of the publicly available program documents to determine if social emotional factors were represented as points of emphasis. Finally, in the surveys, practitioners were able to identify from provided SEL factors which were present within their intervention programs.

In order to answer the second question, “what social-emotional factors do program educators describe as particularly significant to the success of students identified for these intervention programs as experiencing underperformance,” the perspectives of the program coordinators needed to be captured, most specifically the analysis of narratives from the practitioners as well as their reflections on the impact of social emotional factors (if any) on the development of students in the programs.

To answer the third question, “When presented with research-identified SEL factors, which, if any, do intervention program educators identify as impactful to the success of students experiencing underperformance,” a current taxonomy of social emotional factors was needed in order to present ways for the practitioners to identify which, if any, of the factors were of significance to student development. Categories of social emotional factors from the taxonomy, or adopted coding framework, were presented in the form of multiple-choice survey questions so a quantitative analysis of the factors could be computed and cross-referenced to narrative responses.

As part of the interviews, contextual information was sought from the participant about the program design and strengths or weaknesses. Understanding the practitioner perspective within this context was essential to interpreting the narratives identified by participants. In addition, perceptual data was the primary focus of interviews to be conducted for this study, as identified interview participants shared specific professional perceptions of the elements most impactful to student success from their at-risk program initiatives. These perceptions were crucial to the data gathering of the study, as the perceptions allowed for the interpretation of what was most important or integral to positively impacting student success. Part of these perceptions established the individual program's interpretation of "success," including what barometer was used to measure program efficacy and positive student impact on achievement.

In seeking to understand the narratives, the demographic data and data regarding the school profile were value-added additions to analysis of the data in order to determine findings.

### **Research Design**

The mixed method approach of this study was adopted in a manner specific to the principles outlined by Cresswell (2018), involving both pre-determined and emerging methods, both open and closed-ended questions, multiple forms of data, as well as statistical and text analysis. It adopts a convergent design in that parallel quantitative and qualitative information is collected from the same subjects and the data collected quantitatively and qualitatively is used together to determine interpretations (Creswell, 2018). Specifically, in this study, predetermined methods with close-ended questions and statistical analysis were characteristics of the quantitatively analyzed surveys, while emerging methods, open-ended questions, and text analysis were characteristics of the qualitative data-gathering from interviews and document analysis.

A coding framework was created in order to identify consistent language for the study. This coding framework was based on work from Harvard University's EASEL Taxonomy Project (Jones, 2019). The Taxonomy Project involves an ongoing, extensive examination of the frameworks and terms used in the social emotional non-cognitive field in order to clarify and connect research, practice, and policy in the social emotional field (Jones, 2019). The Taxonomy Project identifies and clarifies nomenclature of SEL across programs and frameworks, drilling down several levels into more and more specific terminology in order to draw connections across programs and frameworks.

The six categories and sub-areas adopted from EASEL provided the coding framework for the study with one significant addition. An extensive analysis of SEL frameworks identified a lack of attention given to aspects crucial to equity and cultural responsiveness, excluding the ways in which “diverse youth use their cultural assets to interact with a world where they are faced with unique challenges and unequal opportunities” (Berg, 2017, p. viii). Specifically, it noted that competencies related to awareness of privilege, bias, cultural competence, and navigating diverse settings were lacking in frameworks--all aspects crucial to assuring SEL builds “supportive and equitable environments” (Berg, 2017, p. viii). An equity analysis of the SEL framework most adopted in schools (CASEL) likewise identified the need to incorporate communalism and ethnic-racial identity factors (Jagers et al., 2018). Thus, the coding framework for this study added to the EASEL framework with a seventh category based on equity research: *Communalism* with sub-areas articulated as *bias/privilege awareness*, *adapting to challenging contexts*, *community connectedness*, and *cultural responsiveness*. These seven categories and their associated sub-areas provided the coding framework for the study and the nomenclature foundation for the e-survey questions:

- **Interpersonal:** conflict resolution, understanding social cues, cooperative/prosocial behavior
- **Values:** ethical, performance, civic, intellectual
- **Perspectives:** gratitude, openness, optimism, enthusiasm
- **Self-image/ Identity:** self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose
- **Cognitive Regulation:** attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility
- **Emotional Processes:** emotional knowledge, empathy/perspective-taking, emotional & behavioral regulation
- **Communalism:** bias/privilege awareness, adapting to challenging contexts, community connectedness, cultural responsiveness

The research study began with the identification of sample intervention programs for the study using the aforementioned established criteria. An e-mail was sent to school administrators requesting the identification of program personnel who met study criteria so the researcher could learn from the success of their intervention program or the e-mail was sent directly to program coordinators when referred directly through the chain sampling referral method. (Participant Recruitment E-mails are provided in Appendix A.) The Research Information Sheet was attached to the e-mail and also embedded as a link within the e-mail. The information sheet clearly indicated that agreeing to the interview and completing the survey were indicative of the participant's agreement to participate in the research study. (The Information Sheet is provided in Appendix B.)

Potential participants were only contacted via e-mail contact links associated with the school on publicly available school website directories. No group e-mails were sent so no other

e-mail addresses were disclosed in the process. Participants who responded positively to volunteering for the study received an e-mail response to set up an interview at their school site on a day/time of mutual agreement that was not to exceed an hour as per the IRB approved protocol.

All participants identified for the study were program directors who met the articulated criteria, though other personnel from the programs could have qualified. Program personnel were interviewed at the school sites regarding the elements of the program that these stakeholders identified as positively impacting student development using an open-ended interview guide. (The Interview Protocol is provided in Appendix C.) The interview focused on the following areas:

- I. an introduction to the design of the study with permission to record,
- II. general questions on the program design and its intended impact on students,
- III. questions gauging the significance of social emotional factors on positive student development,
- IV. questions about how the program did or did not target the development of social emotional factors,
- V. general questions/appreciation, including an introduction to the pending survey participants would be receiving.

Interviews were transcribed and responses coded for social emotional elements, using the modified coding framework.

After conducting interviews, an e-mail was sent to participants thanking them for their involvement and sharing a link and a QR code as options for accessing an e-survey (Survey is provided in Appendix D). The e-survey prompted participants to identify what, if any, of the

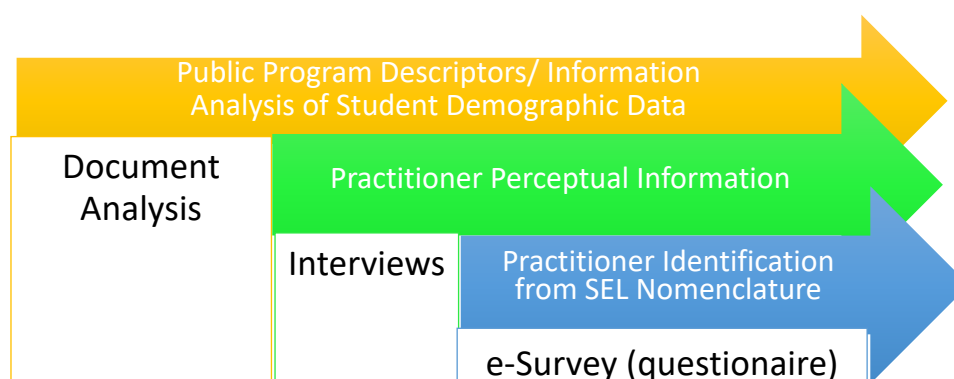
social emotional factors were significant to the positive development of students in their program and which, if any, were elements present in their programs. The survey involved close-ended multiple choice questions based on the seven categories and associated sub-areas of the adopted coding framework.

Document analysis was conducted on publicly available documents/websites to determine the articulated foci of intervention programs. Documents were coded for emergent social emotional themes using the adopted coding system from the survey.

After analysis of this qualitative and quantitative data separately, the survey results and the interview results were compared for points of agreement and tension as well as for alignment to the document analysis results. This data across evaluation tools, the convergent aspect of the mixed method approach, provided a more comprehensive understanding of noteworthy SEL factors while also identifying areas in need of further investigation. Figure 8 provides a graphical representation of the data collection tools of the research design.

**Figure 8**

*Data Collection Overview*



During data analysis, it became evident that an understanding of the racial and low-income representation of students in the intervention programs might be helpful to contextualize the findings. Program coordinators were contacted for racial and low-income data on the students

in the intervention programs, and publicly available information on the Illinois School Report Card was then used to compare the representation of intervention students with overall school demographics.

### **Data Collection Methods**

As noted, data was collected from three primary sources: program documents, participant interviews, and participant surveys.

#### **Document Analysis**

Document analysis was conducted on public informational materials for each of the intervention programs-- publicly available website information and/or shared public documents about the intervention program--to determine whether social emotional factors were noted explicitly, implicitly, or not at all in the articulated intervention program design. These documents were coded for emergent social emotional factors using the coding framework as a guide and each program was given a designated letter name for anonymity (ie Program A, B, etc). In addition, the Illinois School Report Card website was used to access opportunity (achievement) gap data and student race and low-income data for comparison to intervention program student profiles provided by the program coordinators.

#### **Participant Interviews**

Program coordinators who were directly involved with students in the intervention programs were identified and participation was requested via the recruitment e-mail for participant interviews and a follow-up survey. Participation was articulated as voluntary. Interviews were conducted at the natural school setting where the intervention program took place in order to talk directly and observe them within their contextual environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These settings had not been previously studied in terms of this aspect of the

intervention program, so there was not a danger of the sites being overly studied and did not involve students/minors.

The interviews began with a brief review of the Research Information Sheet shared with participants previously by e-mail and permission to record the interview was sought, with this permission repeated on the recording.

Participants were prompted to describe the intervention program, describe students who had benefited from the program, explain what, if any, social emotional skill development was of importance to these students and offer what social emotional factors were of importance to the development of students otherwise experiencing underperformance. The interviews were limited to one hour, and one interview was conducted with each participant. These interviews were recorded with verbal consent and stored on a password-protected phone or laptop until transcribed with the original recording intending to be destroyed after the research study. Interviews were noted without individual participant identifiers but with program letter and participant number (A1, B1). A key was developed to indicate the program to code number and this information was stored on a secured device under password protection. A list of participants, e-mail contact information, and e-mail correspondences was kept with this key code to be destroyed upon the conclusion of this research process.

Participant feedback was transcribed, labeled with the aforementioned participant codes, and coded for emergent themes regarding social emotional factors. Individual responses from other participants in the study were not shared with other participants. The key code did not identify participant names but did identify program sites. No names were associated with these transcripts, the only written record of the interview, and they were kept on password-protected devices.



## **e-Survey**

An e-survey link, with QR code option, was e-mailed to each interviewed participant within one week. This link was not participant unique so there were no identifiers as to who completed the survey, with the results anonymous. This survey was based on the adopted coding framework, delineating seven categories of SEL factors identified through research-generated models--designated as cognitive regulation, emotional processes, interpersonal processes, values, perspectives, identity/self-image, and communalism--asking participants to identify which specific areas they identified as particularly important to the development of students in intervention programs and which, if any, of these social emotional areas were part of the intervention program design at their site. The survey was designed with the intention of taking less than ten minutes (nine questions). An additional follow-up thank you e-mail was sent to participants to express gratitude for their participation in the study. A quantitative analysis of the survey results for statistically significant correlation was not possible given the data set included only four sites, but the survey responses were graphed and compared to one another and to the qualitative data from participant interviews seeking correlating themes.

Cumulative data from the survey, the document analysis, and the interviews were cross-referenced to determine points of consensus and tension. Triangulation of data across evaluation tools strengthened identification of emergent factors of particular emphasis.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

After conducting the interviews at a particular site, the interviews that were recorded after consent were transcribed, and a microanalysis was conducted of the transcript to identify any social emotional references. Upon identification of social emotional elements, open coding was initially employed to categorize emergent themes. After this open coding approach, the adopted

coding framework was used to categorize the emergent themes, using axial coding as a secondary data comparison.

Survey responses were tabulated quantitatively and then compared to open interview responses through a similar axial coding method in order to affirm or surface tensions between interview perceptions captured and the self-identified social emotional traits of importance in the surveys. After specific non-cognitive factors were affirmed as prevalent in both the surveys and the interviews, these factors were represented graphically according to prevalence in order to inform the formulation of conclusions and to inform program design intended to benefit underserved student populations.

During the analysis of the data collected from interviews and surveys, it became apparent that demographic data regarding students involved in the participant programs was meaningful to interpretation of the results. Therefore, program coordinator participants were contacted to determine availability of demographic data related to race and socioeconomic status (SES) of students in the programs. A two decade study of achievement gaps [their terminology] (Paschall et al., 2018) indicated that understanding opportunity gaps requires analysis of race/ethnicity and income. Illinois school report card data posted on a state database website was examined to surface the opportunity gap among students by race or low-income status at each program's school site. This database was also used to gather information on the schools' overall student profile to compare to the student profile data from the intervention programs. This data was important as an additional lens to determine study findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for this study included proper IRB approval, adequate consent for all participants for use of both the content of the interviews and the recording and transcribing of

those interviews, as well as considerations regarding the educator participants who may be sensitive to students being dehumanized through the inadvertent use of terminology like “at-risk” and/or other aspects of the research approach.

As part of the research proposal, an IRB approval application was prepared noting that the research qualified for “exempt” status due to the nature of the voluntary interviews with adults and their perceptions of the programs rather than human subjects who might be identified as vulnerable.

Moreover, an information sheet was developed to describe what would happen to the information gathered, the attempts to assure confidentiality, and other details of the parameters and limits of the research to assure participants were properly informed that their participation was completely optional. In terms of confidentiality, the information sheet explicitly stated that access to the interview transcript would be limited to the investigative researcher, with only limited access to academic colleagues and supervisors. Any summary interview content or direct quotations from the interview that would be made available through academic publication or other academic outlets would be anonymous and presented in a manner that minimized the risk that a participant could be identified. Additional care was taken to ensure that other information in the interview was not presented in a manner that an identifier would be revealed.

Dialogue at the start of the interview also aimed to assure that the participants felt comfortable with the intended interview and understood that they could choose to end their participation at any point in the process. The participant was also asked verbally for consent to record the interviews for transcription purposes and this consent was reiterated verbally at the beginning of the audio recording of the interview.

Noting the relational aspect of these interviews and the perceptions of the researcher that could inhibit data shared if an expert-learner binary was inadvertently perceived, the researcher opened the interview noting what attracted attention to the program for the purposes of the interview. In this manner, the researcher was able to express genuine admiration for the program and reinforce the desire to learn from the participant's wealth of knowledge. Establishing this genuine respect for the participant's knowledge and perceptions was a core foundation of the intended research as the participant was being encouraged to share some of the hallmarks of the program that might be especially beneficial to other educators attempting to craft successful interventions.

Authentic engagement with the interview participants was intended to communicate a sincere respect for their perspectives and experiences with successful program planning, enabling their insights to be more readily shared in the interview. At the same time, the recording of the interview reinforced the parameters or boundaries of the research so it was not misconstrued as an off-the-record "chat" and would lead the participants to share in a manner conducive to "on the record" sharing.

With a relational lens to research, it is clear that the researcher impacts data gathered and methodological attunement can be used to mitigate issues of power and identify, as well as addressing the contextualization of interactions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With these concerns in mind, special attention was given to some of the wording associated with this research. There is often an insinuation of blame upon populations underperforming, including the use of terminology like *at-risk* and *achievement gap* which can denote individuals underperforming whereas the *opportunity gap* and *students experiencing underperformance* are more accurate phrases in that they recognize these students may not be afforded the same advantages as

counterparts. Thus, precautions were taken against using the term *at-risk* during interviews or otherwise generalizing about the populations served through these intervention programs. In the interviews, the participants were asked to identify the populations that were intended to be served through the programs, and that terminology was used within the context of the interview.

Moreover, it is acknowledged that the students qualifying for interventions are individuals with unique assets underserved by current structures of education and precautions were taken not to adopt a deficit approach. The assets of these programs were mirrored in the study's design that acknowledged the assets of these students which were intended to be more fully realized through these intervention programs. Special attention was given to this power dynamic in education and the sensitivity that must be afforded depictions of students.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research, by its nature, is subject to multiple changing realities constructed by individuals (Merriam, 2002). Thus, the coding and interpretation of interviews with program stakeholders was subject to researcher interpretation regarding social emotional factors practitioners identified as prominent in intervention efforts. The reliability of the study is also subject to scrutiny since a single researcher makes the study susceptible to issues of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the research was conducted in a manner that made every effort to minimize these issues through several approaches, primarily triangulation and reflexivity.

This research involved the perceptions of adults running the intervention programs as gathered qualitatively through open-ended interview questions as well as through a quantitative analysis of questions on a survey. Additional qualitative analysis of program documentation and school materials further framed the data analysis of results. This triangulation of data improves

reliability, increasing avenues for investigating the stakeholder perceptions of prominent program elements, specifically any non-cognitive factors of significance.

In terms of validity, the aspects stipulated by Cohen et al (2007) are content validity, criterion-related validity, construct validity, internal validity, external validity, concurrent validity and face validity. The efforts to assure validity included the fact that the study was completed at a time and place conducive to reflection, the time frame for data collection was limited to one academic year to maintain consistency, the interviews and surveys followed a consistent structure, the survey offered the potential for criterion-related validity, and the convergent data collection method offered potential for concurrent validity.

### **Limitations & Delimitations**

Despite arduous research design, this study still has several limitations and delimitations worthy of note. Specifically, limitations involve the variance among identifying underperforming students and the veracity of participant statements in interviews, while delimitations include approaches to interventions for these students. It is also acknowledged that direct effect is not measurable in terms of impact on student development and that this study has a small geographical scope. These factors reinforce the limits of the study and the importance of not generalizing from its results.

Though each intervention program will need to have a record of having success in meeting its program objectives with the targeted student population, it needs to be noted that the level of achievement among the students targeted for interventions may vary. For example, a standardized test score that might deem a student as successful in one setting might designate another student as experiencing underachievement due to that student's comparative peer group. Despite this variance in the academic achievement of students being targeted for intervention, all

of the programs do target students who do not meet school-identified norms for success in their school environment. Nevertheless, this variability in student norms across programs is a limitation.

Another limitation involves the interview participants who were asked to identify the social emotional factors of impact in their intervention programs. The veracity of their responses and the subjective nature of their interpretations is a limitation as one attempts to compare programs using different reporters (participants) with each one's own biases and perceptions. Thus, consistency of program evaluation via interviews and surveys is subject to individual differences among program facilitators.

In terms of delimitations, the study design is narrowed to examining intervention programs for students experiencing underperformance, but the focus and scope of those interventions can vary. This inclusive approach to intervention programs allows for the measuring of varied approaches to interventions. Though a deliberate decision, allowing for such a variance of targeted interventions might inhibit the ability to recognize a trend-line in terms of social emotional factors impacting efficacy.

Another delimitation is the focus on practitioner voice without hearing the student voice as to what was most impactful or significant to their development. Though a study centering student voice would be advantageous, this study sought a deeper dive into practitioner perceptions and limited the study to program coordinators.

Moreover, this study adopts an asset-based approach by examining the success of programs having a positive impact on students not experiencing optimal success in their current educational setting. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the structure of this examination presumes the intervention programs are having the positive impact on students' lives, when, in

fact, the students could be finding success through extrinsic or intrinsic factors non-tangential to the program in which they are enrolled.

This study also concentrates on programs clustered in one particular part of the state of Illinois, and may not have the same credibility when applied to other regions of the country. The sample group is small in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the programs, but the sample group also limits the transferability of the results. Caution should be used in the application of study results to other settings.

### **Methods Conclusion**

This mixed method study has been designed with parallel data gathering tools for convergent data analysis in order to surface SEL factors of significance in intervention programs targeting students experiencing underperformance. Its asset-based approach provides an opportunity to learn from successful programs to identify key SEL factors identified as positive factors in student development. This study employs document analysis of intervention program articulation, semi-structured interviews of program coordinators who have been teachers in the programs, and e-surveys that provide those same participants a framework of SEL elements. In this manner, data can converge to offer insights regarding what, if any, SEL emphasis could be targeted more deliberately in order to leverage success for students experiencing underperformance in school.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

Shining the spotlight on the expertise of educators dedicated to students experiencing underperformance resulted in interesting findings pertaining to the three research questions of this study. As previously noted, this study adopts an asset orientation to its investigational queries, so the findings are specifically focused on practitioner identification of SEL factors of particular significance for the positive development of students. Findings are organized and presented as they pertain to the three posed research questions, with data collections tools and/or themes delineated as sub-categories within each. In addition to the research questions, data collected on the students participating in the intervention programs in terms of race and low-income as well as data on the school sites' opportunity gap are also presented as a fourth area of findings. This profile data was collected as an addition to the study when it became evident it was relevant to interpret findings.

### **Program Focus Findings**

#### **Research Question #1: Program Targets**

The first research question asks what, if any, social-emotional learning is noted as a target of the identified intervention programs. For findings related to the first research query, all three data collection methods were utilized: (a) analysis of publicly available documents coded to determine whether any SEL factors were explicitly targeted as part of the intervention program design or implicitly included within program description references, (b) analysis of one of the questions on the survey that was administered to participants which presented the modified EASEL SEL coding framework categories and inquired of practitioners whether any of the SEL areas were considered part of their intervention programs, and (c) analysis of interview responses from program coordinators to a query asking them to describe their intervention program which

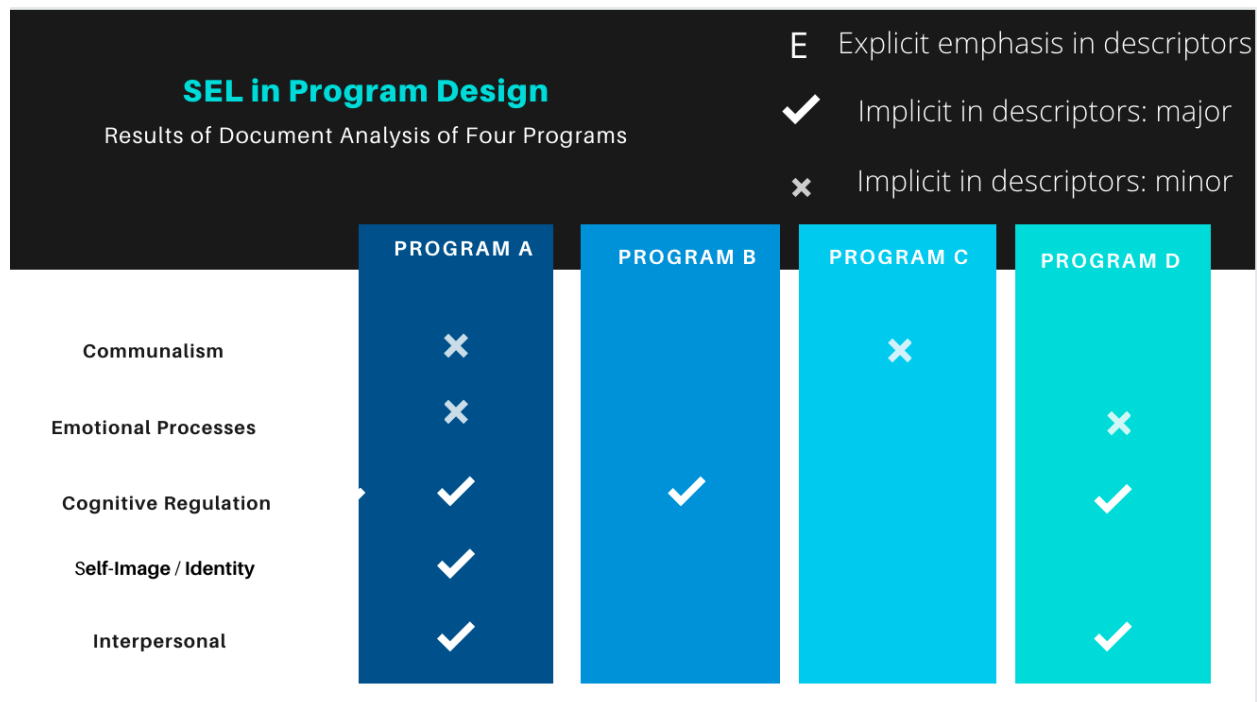
was then coded to determine if any SEL elements were targeted by the program design according to their descriptions.

### ***Document Analysis of Program Focus***

Analysis of publicly available documents--including websites, parent presentation materials, and introductory letters--indicated SEL was not a strong point of emphasis in any of the program descriptors, whereas the academic skills and strategies that students would gain from the programs were paramount. The implicit SEL references primarily centered on the cognitive regulation category of the coding framework, such as developing organization skills and meeting academic goals. Figure 9 provides an indication of which participants identified social emotional qualities, with no numeral equivalency provided, given the qualitative nature of the data.

**Figure 9**

### ***Document Analysis Findings: SEL Elements noted in Program Design***



Within the data, explicit references were defined as social emotional qualities that were articulated as explicit program goals or highlighted targets of the program. Implicit references were defined as social emotional terms or phrases that were integrated into program descriptions. These implicit references were categorized as major or minor depending on how clearly and prominently the references were articulated.

Explicit references to SEL were not present in program documents. The most prominent SEL implicit references pertained to cognitive regulation, which appeared as major threads in three of the programs. Cognitive regulation was captured through references to organization (multiple references within three programs), metacognitive references about reflecting on learning (two references), working hard (two references), and promoting self-sufficiency (one reference). Communalism was a minor reference with comments focused on involvement with community events/service (two references) and addressing school community diversity (one reference). Similarly, emotional processes were a minor emphasis, narrowly focused on motivation (two references). Only one program referenced self-image/identity with a reference to self-reflection/actualization. Interpersonal aspects were identified through references to collaboration (two references), social skills for success (two references), and positive peer/group dynamics (one reference).

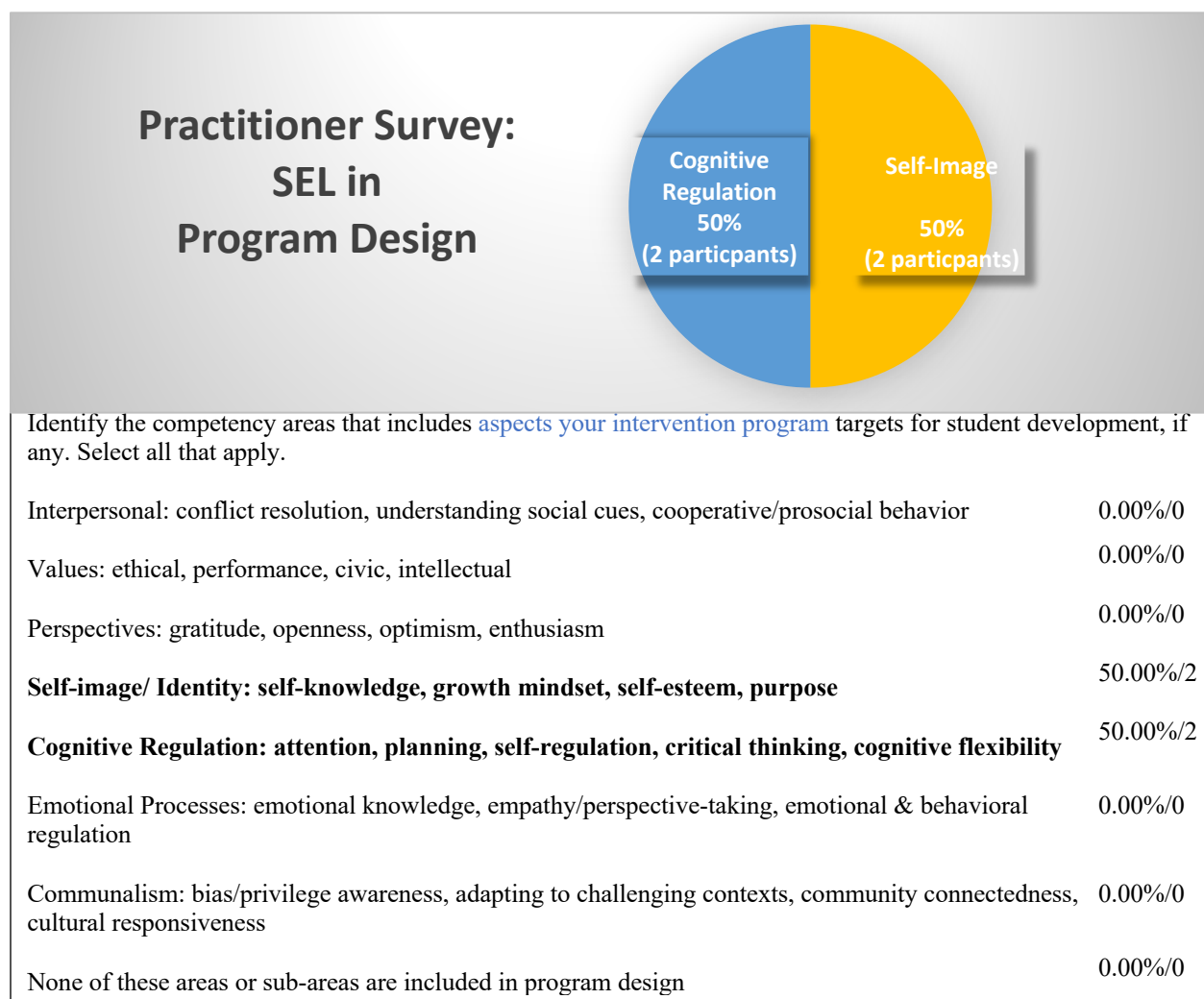
Of particular interest, two coding categories were not reflected in any of the program documents and therefore are not represented in Figure 9. The social emotional category of values which is focused on the Aristotelian virtues--ethical, performance, civic, and intellectual virtues--had no references. Similarly, the perspective category, which includes qualities such as gratitude, optimism, and openness, were not noted in any of the program documents.

The emphasis in program documents on social emotional skills related to cognitive regulation appears well-aligned to the four programs' emphases on academic skills. The most direct references to SEL were part of background information created by the AVID program and posted on school/district websites; the AVID program was the adopted program framework used as the basis for two of the secondary intervention programs. The orientation of all four school programs and their school-created materials emphasized the development of academic skills. The document analysis was cross-referenced with the practitioner responses in surveys and interviews to gain a stronger sense of the programs' orientation as related to SEL.

### ***Survey Responses on Program Focus***

Analysis of survey responses by practitioner participants to the question on program targets also indicated a very narrow focus regarding SEL factors, with half of the program responses noting cognitive regulation and half noting self-image/identity as aspects the intervention programs targeted for student development. Figure 10 captures the survey question as it was phrased and the options as they appeared for multiple choice responses. Respondents were able to select all that applied, yet none of the participants indicated more than one of the options. This could have been due to them overlooking the "Select all that apply" direction. Figure 10 also indicates the categories of the four participant responses to program focus. Two indicated cognitive regulations, consistent with the document analysis indication of SEL orientation in the intervention programs. However, two indicated self-image as the area of program focus which was provided as "Self-image/ Identity: self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose" in the multiple choice response. Though self-image was a major implicit emphasis in one program in document analysis, it was not explicit in any, so its emphasis from two practitioners is noteworthy.

Figure 10

*Overview of Survey Responses regarding Program Design SEL Elements*

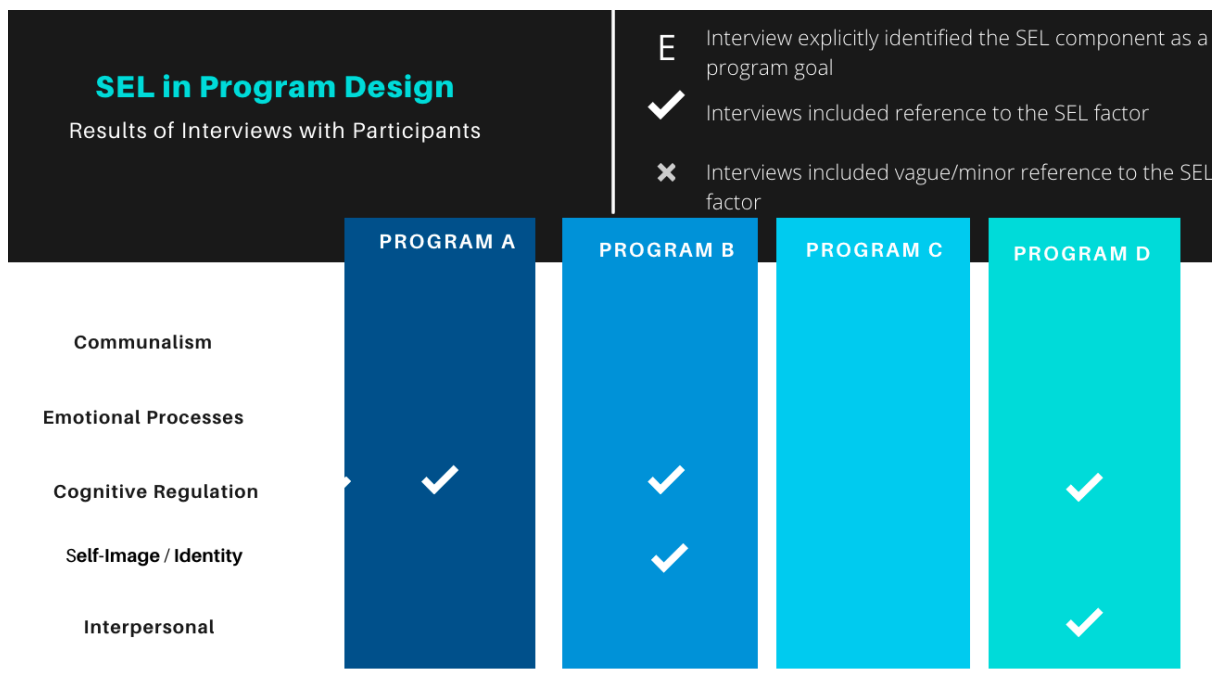
Though the cognitive regulation response would be expected given the explicit emphasis on academic goals in program documents and the implicit references regarding cognitive regulation in program documents, it was significant that half of the participants surveyed noted self-image—and only self-image—as a program goal. This finding generates additional curiosity regarding program priorities from the practitioners’ perspective which the interviews may be able to further illuminate.

### *Interviews on Program Focus*

Interviews with program coordinator participants included a query to describe the program design and purpose. Just as the program documents descriptions emphasized the academic aspects of the program, participants described academic program goals, though more social emotional aspects emerged than in the documents and survey responses. Participants either failed to reference SEL as a targeted area for development or did so in a vague, broad manner which noted SEL as an aspect of the program but not its primary purpose. If SEL factors emerged within the interview descriptions, cognitive regulation remained the primary area identified, noting that the programs were intended to help students with how to do school. Figure 11 illustrates program descriptors as categorized to the coding categories. Given that Values and Perspective categories weren't identified, once more, they are not represented in Figure 11.

**Figure 11**

### *Interview Identification of SEL in Program Design*



Interview descriptions of the programs were rich with passion about student potential as well as general SEL references. For example, Participant A and Participant D both noted that their programs included “soft skills” and Participant A noted that they taught students how to “play school.” Similarly, Participant B noted that “SEL check-ins” were part of the program, an acknowledgment of the importance of SEL without being specific. These general references seem inclusive of social emotional learning, but do not drill down into specific SEL skills for development or areas of emphasis that could be coded.

A noteworthy point of tension from the interviews involved descriptions of SEL by participants in interviews that did not correlate to SEL within program descriptions from public documents. For example, in the interview, the coordinator for Program B included a strong description of how SEL was identified as an area for targeted interventions yet the only reference to an SEL quality in numerous program documents was to organizing time and organizing approaches to studying. The references in the interview and the materials used to orient teachers to the intervention program both noted SEL broadly rather than identifying targeted skill areas within SEL, but program documents did not have SEL as a point of emphasis. Thus, practitioner descriptions of SEL were not well aligned to public documents which emphasized academics.

### ***Conclusions Regarding Program SEL Emphasis***

The intersection of these three data tools suggests that intervention programs did not articulate a clear vision of SEL as a targeted goal of the programs, but SEL was still viewed as important enough to emerge in descriptions, surveys, and narratives of program ambitions in an implicit manner. The intervention programs remained narrowly focused on academic targets, so SEL skills of emphasis were closely aligned to cognitive regulation, the SEL area most closely associated with academics. The cognitive regulation category can encompass skills such as

attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, and cognitive flexibility, however, in this study, the cognitive regulation area of emphasis was focused on the executive functioning skill of organization. Self-identity emerged in surveys and self-identity and interpersonal aspects surfaced in interviews, but were not identified as primary targets of the intervention program in program descriptors. Moreover, SEL qualities related to values and perspectives did not emerge in any of the data collection tools. Evidence suggests intervention program design emphasizes academic skills with an emphasis on organization and an implied benefit to collaboration and identity development. All data tools confirmed that SEL was not an identifiable program goal.

### **Research Question #2: Significant SEL from Interviews**

Research question two queries the following: what social-emotional factors do program educators describe as particularly significant to the success of students in these intervention programs who had been experiencing underperformance. Unlike program descriptions, which identified few targeted SEL factors, SEL that was deemed significant to the positive development of students by practitioners was a much more populous area of response. Interviews with intervention program coordinators were utilized to gather data for this essential question. Through open-ended questioning, the coordinators of these intervention programs were asked to identify what, if any, SEL elements were particularly significant to the positive development of students in the program, students who had been identified as experiencing underperformance. A variety of SEL qualities emerged through these interviews, including an emphasis on cognitive regulation which aligned well with the emphasis in program descriptions. However, otherwise unnoted SEL aspects gained new prominence in these interviews. Specifically, the following themes emerged: (a) relational capacity, (b) attention to student experience, (c) student self-confidence, advocacy, & help-seeking, and (d) cognitive regulation.



### *Relational Capacity*

One of the most emphasized attributes was relational capacity, which might be categorized as interpersonal or even communalism on the coding framework. Coordinators emphasized the importance of relationship-building with both teachers and peers. A sense of trust and caring was established with and through these relationships. Participant D noted that the “relational capacity that we build within (each) class is above and beyond what (other) students will get.”

Relationships with teachers in the intervention programs emerged as very important to the positive development of students. Comments noted “heart to heart meetings” with teachers and how well students knew and had a rapport with teachers (Participant A; Participant C), indicating the “teacher connection” (Participant B) was an important factor for student development. The investment of teachers with students was evident in comments about teachers getting calls day or night or on weekends (Participant D). One participant indicated the importance of teachers having access to resources to really know students in order to mentor them well (Participant B). It was also interesting that participants mentioned the importance of teaching students how to have positive relationships with other adults and effectively reading people so they could work together in a manner that was mutually productive (Participant A; Participant C). Participant A noted, “We become so close with our students.... Because our students feel so comfortable talking to us, we learn a lot more.” Participant D noted that the relational aspect was essential: “a place where students can feel respected, and students can feel like they’re heard.”

The relationship with peers and conflict resolution also emerged in several program interviews including a sense of family that was emphasized among the students

in the intervention program. Students would have good conversations with peers, learning to disagree and debate, but still be respectful (Participant C). Participant D, in particular, noted the interactions among peers with diverse friendships and a shared sense of purpose noting students had a sense of “I’m going to support you; you support me.” Learning how to resolve conflicts and talk with one another was also a part of the peer dynamic.

If somebody's having a relationship problem the whole class is in helping or at least knows about it because it's that kind of bond. They fight like cats and dogs. It's a true family but they share celebrations when somebody succeeds.

(Participant D)

All of the program participants included numerous comments identifying the relational aspects of the program, most akin to the interpersonal area of the coding framework. Relationships were consistently referenced as core to the success of students in the intervention programs, whether peer-to-peer or faculty-to-student.

### *Attention to Student Experience*

The relationships with teachers and students clearly influenced another important factor in the positive development of students: the additional attention students received. This additional attention was promoted through the program structure that gave additional time in the school day to the students as well as through the programs’ opportunities for teacher collaboration. This attention aspect, similarly rooted in relationships, seems most appropriate to the interpersonal category of the coding framework.

Given the structure of the program, other teachers in the school were aware that the intervention teacher would have opportunities to follow-up with a student if a problem surfaced (Participant A). Program teachers were able to track student progress so support staff could

access the information and better support students from the intervention program (Participant B). Teachers also had time to give the extra attention students really needed daily (Participant C), affording those students the extra “set of eyes so they don’t fall through the cracks” (Participant D). This additional attention to these students during the school day was noted as positively impacting their development.

Moreover, the time for teachers to collaborate on students was another hallmark of extra attention. Most of the programs noted that teachers met to discuss individual students (Participant A; Participant B; Participant D), allowing teachers opportunities to inform one another of student circumstances, unpack student issues, and brainstorm individual student supports. These collaborations were opportunities to steal ideas from one another (Participant B) and look at different perspectives (Participant D). Participants noted how teachers really knowing the student and what might be happening in the student’s world appeared a strong factor in promoting student success.

### ***Student Self-confidence, Advocacy, & Help-seeking***

In addition to these interpersonal aspects, it was also apparent that aspects of self-identity, self-confidence, growth mindset, and help-seeking were important to the positive development of students. Though not strongly indicated as a goal of the programs, the fostering of student self was well supported by interview commentary from participants.

Specifically, the ability of students to have a strong self-identity to take on challenges was strongly indicated from interview responses. Participant D indicated the importance of self-confidence, which was a “game changer” for students so they no longer “sit on the sidelines.” Similarly, Participant B noted the importance of personal identity for student positive development. Participant A, Participant C, and Participant D specifically noted the importance of

a growth mindset so students viewed their intellectual capacities as something that could be grown rather than stagnant. In terms of content challenges, programs emphasized what students already knew as a foundation to identifying their points of confusion (Participant A; Participant D). The importance of assuring students felt comfortable so they could take risks and have a voice was indicated, with Participant B noting that this risk-taking was one of the most important factors to student development.

In turn, self-advocacy was identified as an important SEL factor across all four programs. The two AVID-aligned programs were particularly articulate regarding the importance of students learning to identify what they knew and what they needed to know to address knowledge gaps through effective questioning techniques (Participant A; Participant D). The importance of seeking help was specifically targeted in programs. Participant A noted that since many of the students were also part of marginalized populations, they understood that they would have to self-advocate to assure “adults understand what you need.”

This representation of marginalized students in the intervention programs emerged as an important consideration in the interpretation of the data, so additional demographic data was gathered from participants through follow-up e-mails after interviews and surveys had been completed. Analysis of this demographic data, specifically in terms of the representation of race, low-income, and school opportunity gaps, has been added as an additional finding of the research.

### ***Cognitive Regulation***

In addition to these SEL factors, academic skills continued to be identified as important to the positive development of students and some aspects of these academic skills included SEL elements that could be categorized as cognitive regulation. As a reminder, within the coding

framework, cognitive regulation includes attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, and cognitive flexibility. It should be noted that *attention* in this context does not reference the attention a student is receiving from teachers, but the student's ability to focus attention on learning goals/tasks. Cognitive regulation is the SEL category on the coding framework most closely aligned to the descriptions of programs, as noted in findings related to the first research question. Participants identified SEL factors that could be described as organization, goal-setting, responsibility, critical thinking, and engagement as part of the interviews.

All four participants identified executive functioning skills as important to the positive development of students, with particular emphasis on organization and note-taking. Teaching how to take notes, organize materials, and schedule time were emphasized as examples of what should not be assumed to be student competencies but, rather, seen as skills that needed to be made explicit via instruction.

Metacognition also emerged as important, noting the importance of students being able to "stop, think about what you're doing" (Participant C) and using their "noodle" by thinking about it in order to create solutions, which Participant D called 'using your doodle.' Study strategies (Participant B), goal-setting (Participant C), problem solving (Participant C), public speaking (Participant D), and asking good questions (Participant A; Participant D) were just some of the additional academic skills identified by participants that aided in the positive development of students in the intervention programs. Many of these skills are not explicitly taught in typical school settings, but the intervention program provided a setting for instruction in strategies for developing these competencies. In terms of categorizing them within SEL, most of these skills align with the cognitive regulation category.

### *Practitioner Identified SEL Factors from Interviews*

Thus, intervention program educators identified important academic-related skills within the cognitive regulation category of SEL such as critical thinking, self-regulation pertaining to organization and responsibility, as well as planning via goal setting. Veering from the articulated program design, these educators also identified the importance of building student relationships with teachers and peers, giving additional attention to student progress and circumstance, as well as practices to promote student self-identity, confidence, and advocacy as evident in adoption of a growth mindset, help-seeking, and effective questioning. These SEL practices were specifically identified as having a positive impact on the development of students in the intervention program who were experiencing underperformance, yet most of these areas were not a point of emphasis in the document articulation of program design. Figure 12 provides an overview of the interview identified SEL factors as categorized using the coding framework. Non-indicated categories are not represented in Figure 12.

Figure 12

*Overview of Identified SEL Areas from Interviews*

**SEL Areas of Importance  
from Participant Interviews**  
Program Coordinators' Perspectives  
gathered from Open-Ended Interview Queries

SEL COMPONENT	PARTICIPANT A	PARTICIPANT B	PARTICIPANT C	PARTICIPANT D
Interpersonal	●	●	●	●
Self-Image	●	●	●	●
Cognitive Regulation	●	●	●	●

**Research Question #3: Significant SEL from Surveys**

The third research question queried, when presented with research-identified SEL factors, which, if any, do intervention program educators identify as impactful to student success.

Certainly, during an interview, one might expect that intervention program practitioners would identify prominent aspects of SEL that they consider valuable, but it is also likely that those educators would not have an opportunity to think of the full spectrum of SEL elements and offer oratory on all that they find to be of particular importance to the positive development of students.

Therefore, following the interviews, these practitioners were provided with the coding framework of various SEL areas in an e-survey. First, they were allowed to identify the SEL area

they found most valuable to the positive development of students in the intervention program. Then, each area was broken down further into sub-areas and the practitioner participants were able to identify if any of the sub-areas were considered particularly valuable to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. As a reminder, these sub-areas were based on the sub-areas provided in the EASEL coding schema, with the addition of the category of Communalism, as that area surfaced as an area lacking in a critique of the EASEL coding framework and was of particular importance to marginalized populations.

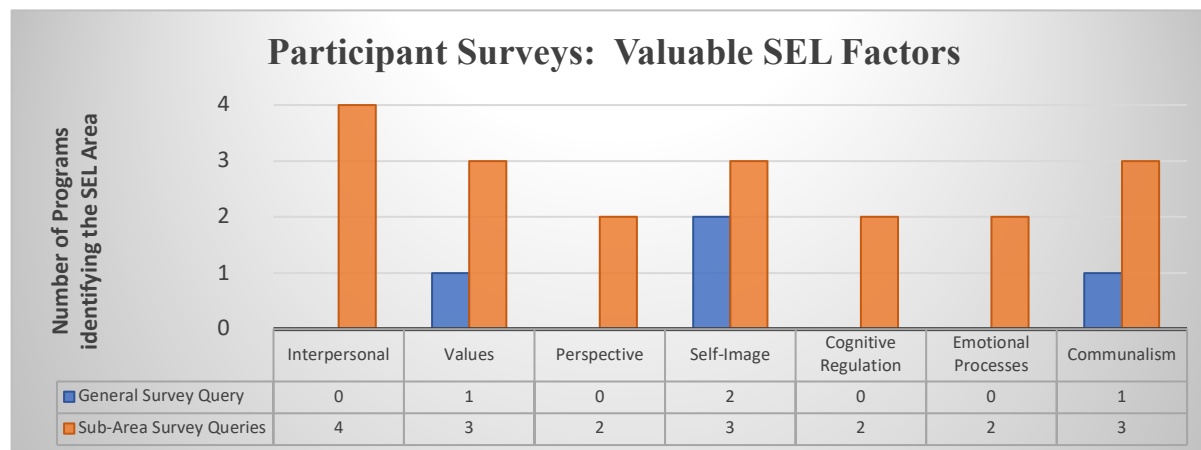
As noted earlier, the EASEL framework was developed with the intent of bridging the nomenclature divide that can exist when examining different SEL initiatives. The examination of sub-areas in the survey was intended to provide the practitioners with a more specific manner of identifying SEL elements of particular importance in the positive development of students. It should be noted that within the EASEL coding framework, even these sub-areas are further broken down into additional sub-categories, though the additional break-downs were not utilized for this study.

### ***General SEL Areas Identified in Surveys***

Both the general query and the sub-area query about SEL areas of significance surfaced surprising results. Figure 13 provides color-coding of compiled results. with the blue bars indicating areas identified by the participants when the general SEL categories were offered as choices and the orange representing the areas identified when the sub-areas were provided. Given there are four participants, a four indicates that all participants identified the particular SEL area.



Figure 13

*SEL Factors from Surveys*

Foremost, when given the general SEL coding categories, none of the participants identified cognitive regulation, the SEL focus most represented in program design. Half of participants identified self-image which was also indicated as an area of importance in interview narratives. Even more surprising, communalism and values, areas that did not particularly surface in interviews or program design, were the other two areas identified by participants as most important to positive student development, a surprising finding.

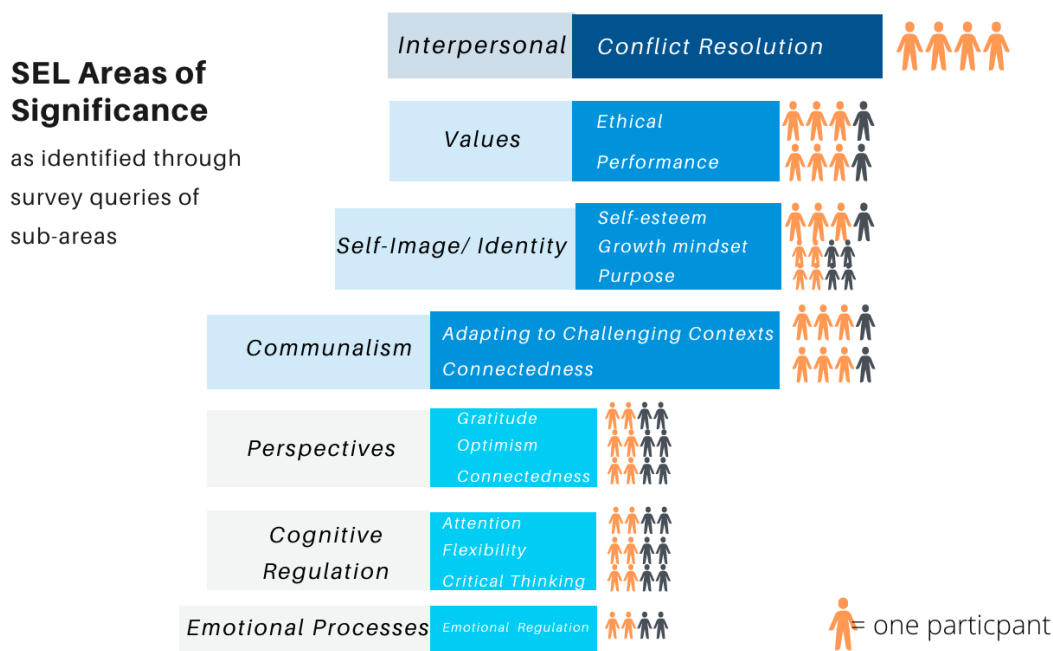
Even more surprising were the array of areas identified when participants were asked to identify sub-areas within the more generalized categories. Participants identified qualities within every SEL category as significant to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. All four participants identified interpersonal sub-areas and three of the four participants (75%) identified sub-areas related to values, self-image, and communalism. Though interpersonal and self-image surfaced in the open-ended interview narratives, the emphasis on indicators within values and communalism were unique to the survey instrument. It is

significant that the majority of participants noted the importance of these areas when provided with them as options.

Half of the participants identified perspective and emotional processes as significant, the same number of participants that noted cognitive regulation as significant. The fact that cognitive regulation was identified at the same ratio as perspective and emotional processes is remarkable given its lack of emphasis in program design documents and interview comments. A deeper dive into which elements were identified within the sub-areas is represented by Figure 14. In figure 14, an orange icon represents how many of the four participants identified that particular sub-area as a significant SEL factor for the development of underperforming students. The larger coding category in which it would fall is also provided.

**Figure 14**

*SEL Areas of Significance as indicated from Sub-area Survey Queries*



### *SEL Areas Identified in Sub-Areas Surveyed*

Sub-areas were defined in the survey to clarify what was being referenced within the general category. The survey included questions that allowed participants to identify specific areas within the SEL coding categories to assure that more specific areas were not lost within the general category. The responses to the sub-area queries definitely expanded the participant indications of SEL factors important to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. When given specific sub-areas within the more general SEL categories, at least half of the participants identified an area of significance within each of the seven categories. The areas in blue in Figure 14 delineate the sub-areas identified by at least half of the participants as significant. The icons indicate how many of the participants identified the particular SEL factor. Here are some of the more significant findings from sub-area identification:

- All respondents identified conflict resolution/social problem-solving as of particular importance to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance.
- A majority (75%) identified self-esteem and two areas in communalism—adapting to challenging contexts and community connectedness—which have some overlaps with the relational aspects previously identified and categorized as interpersonal. A majority of participants also identified two areas under values—ethical values and performance values—when those sub-areas were broken down into additional detail. Using the coding identifiers, ethical values was articulated as “compassion; courage; gratitude; honesty; humility; integrity; justice; respect,” while performance values were described as “confidence; determination; motivation; perseverance; resilience; teamwork.” Both of these areas resonated as particularly important to the majority of participants.

- Half of participants also identified the following SEL factors: gratitude, optimism, enthusiasm/zest (all categorized as Perspectives), purpose and self-efficacy/growth mindset (identified as Self-image/Identity Competencies), attention control, cognitive flexibility, and critical thinking (categorized as Cognitive Regulation), and emotional/behavioral regulation (categorized as Emotional Processes).

A more detailed report on survey results may be found in Appendix E.

### ***SEL Factors of Significance Identified in Participant Surveys***

Though the survey tool was designed as a convergent quantitative data collection tool for comparison with data collected qualitatively through interviews, the low number of participants in the study (4) currently makes the results too low for statistical analysis regarding a correlation of significance. There are, however, two clear findings evident from analysis of the quantitative data from the survey. All participants identified a broader range of significant SEL factors than self-identified in interviews or as present in intervention program design. Survey data from this survey sample supported the SEL factors identified in the interview findings (research question #2), but expanded upon those results with additional detail as well as a broad spectrum of additional SEL factors of significance representing all categories of SEL. Specifically, conflict resolution, ethical and performance virtues, self-esteem, connectedness, and adapting to challenging contexts were strongly indicated. Self-identity was well supported in other data tools, but communalism and values surfaced explicitly in this tool.

### **Intervention Programs: Student Profile Data**

As findings were compiled for the three research queries, it became clear that additional information on the racial and low-income profile of the students in the intervention programs would be valuable for interpreting results. Program coordinators were contacted for racial and

low-income identifiers for the students in the intervention programs during the academic year of the study. These attributes were chosen because they were data points associated with opportunity gaps and available for school-wide comparison via data compiled for State school report cards. School data on race, low-income, and opportunity gaps on a school-wide basis are publicly available through the Illinois School Report Cards published on Illinois Board of Education websites. These public sites were accessed to determine how student representation in the program compared to the schools' general populations. Three of the four programs were able to provide this data. The fourth program (Program C) did not provide data on student participants in the intervention program as participants varied throughout the year; however, overall school data for this site is provided as it establishes a similar profile for the intervention program.

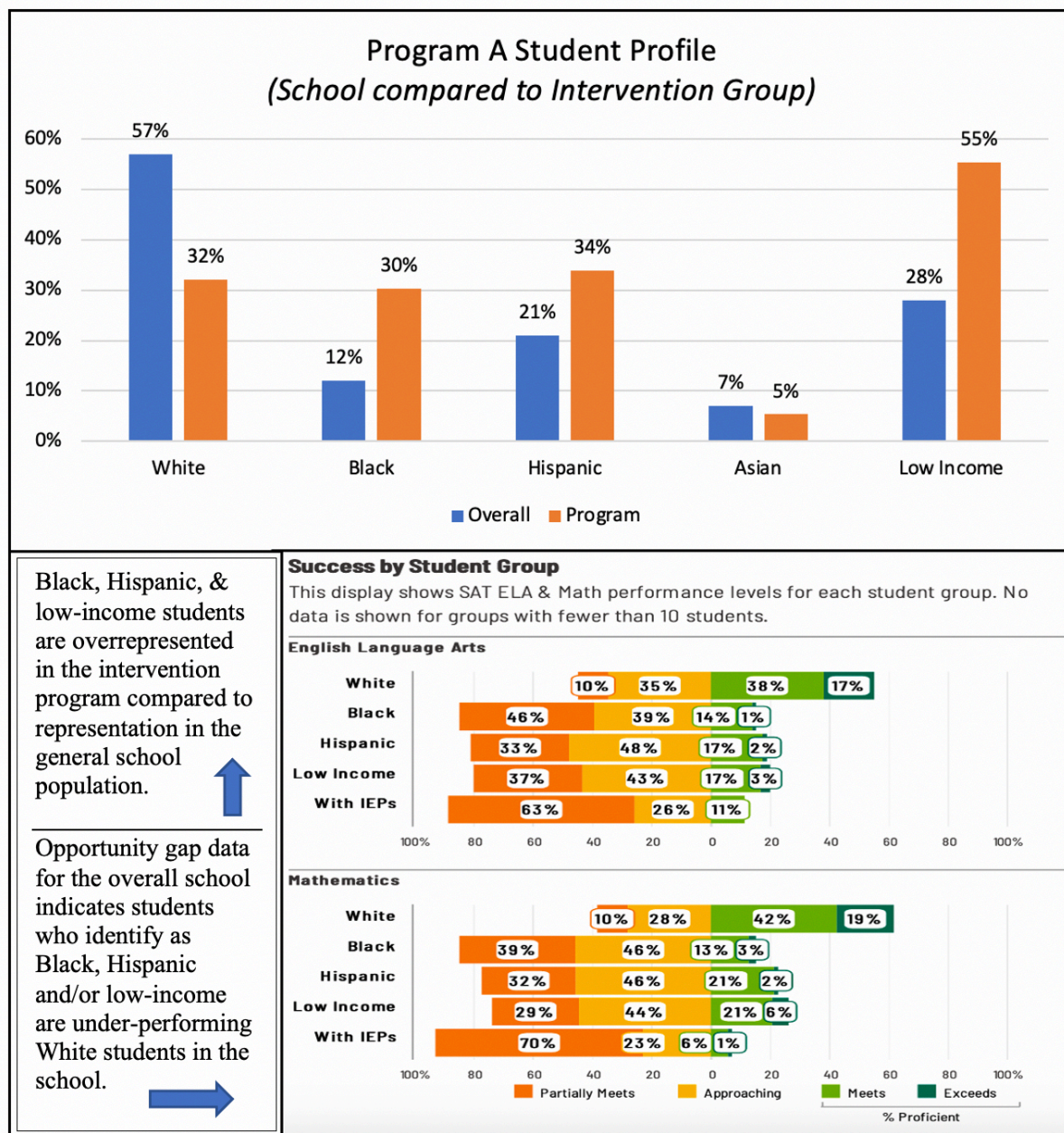
### ***Participant A Student Profile***

Analysis of Program A indicated an overrepresentation of Hispanic, Black, and low-income students in the intervention program compared to the general school population, while White students were very clearly underrepresented in the intervention program (Figure 14). White students were almost half what would have been the corresponding representation (32% in the program versus 57% of the school), while African American/Black students were almost three times as likely to be represented in the intervention program (30% of the program population while 12% of the school). Similarly, low-income students were overrepresented in the program with 55% of the program population qualifying for free and reduced lunch versus 28% of the general school population. So too, Hispanic/Latinx students represented 34% of the program versus 21% of the general population. This data is generally consistent with the opportunity gap represented in achievement data for the school with White students meeting or exceeding performance levels on standardized tests at School A, versus African American/Black

students, Hispanic/Latinx students, and low-income student populations (Figure 15). Thus, data suggests that non-White and less affluent students in School A are more likely to be identified as underperforming.

**Figure 15**

*Program A Intervention Student Data Compared to School Data*

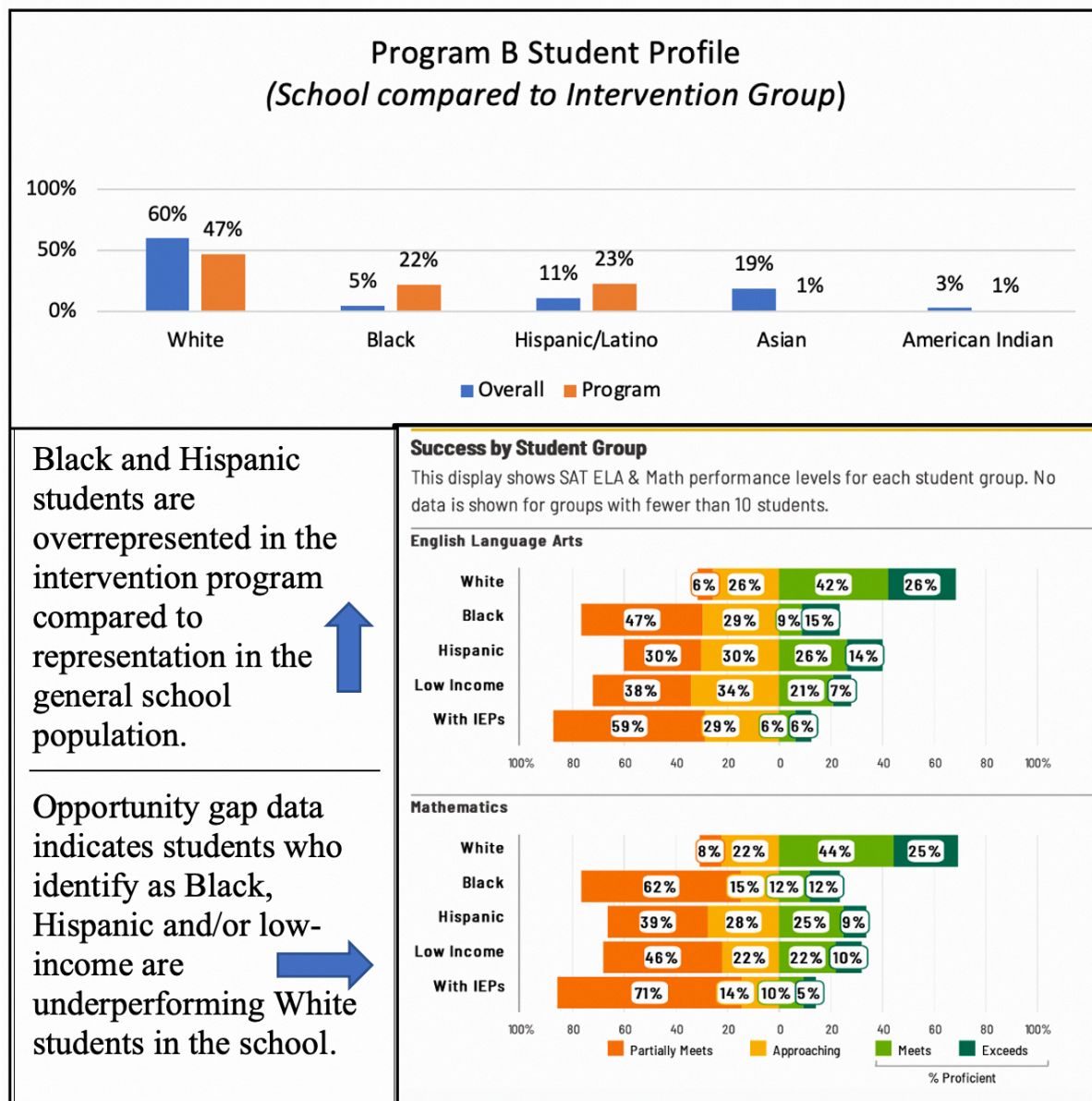


### ***Participant B Student Profile***

Program B followed a similar pattern, with African American/Black students represented in the intervention program at a rate four times higher than their overall representation in the school (22% of the program while 5% of the school population). Hispanic/Latinx students were twice as likely to be in the program as compared to their representation in the school (23% of the program while 11% of the school population). On the other hand, Asian students were 19% of the school population and White students represented 60% of the school population, but the intervention program population was only 1 % Asian students and 47% White students. Low-income data was not available from this intervention program, however overall school data documents an opportunity gap for low-income students compared to the overall White student population. This overall comparative school data also indicates that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx students are experiencing lower performance levels than their White peers at School B. Thus, similar to Program A, African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx students were more likely to be identified as underperforming at the school of Program B. Figure 16 provides a graphical representation of the overrepresentation of marginalized student populations in the program as well as documentation of the school opportunity gap for the same population.

Figure 16

*Program B Intervention Student Data Compared to School Data*



*Participant C Student Profile*

Program C did not collect student data of program participants, but it is worth noting that the majority of students in the school are considered low-income (56%) and that academic



discrepancies among race were less pronounced than at other schools as indicated in Figure 17. The student population is 48% White, 22% African American/Black, and 28% Hispanic/Latinx, indicating that more students in School C would be characteristic of populations subjected to the opportunity gap. Nevertheless, an opportunity gap was still documented in the English language arts area.

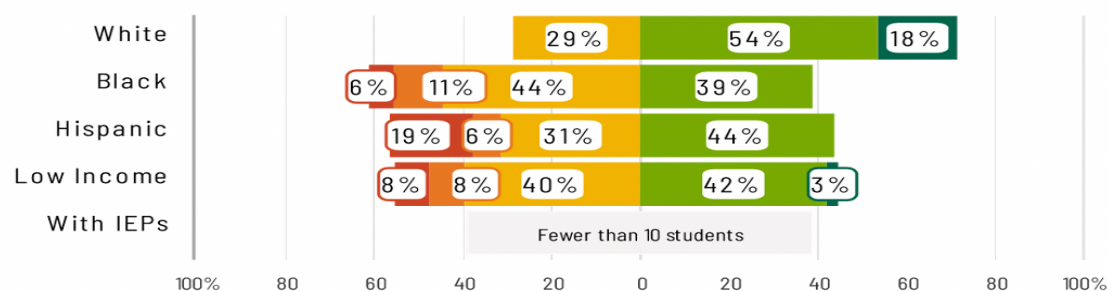
Figure 17

*Program C School Student Data*

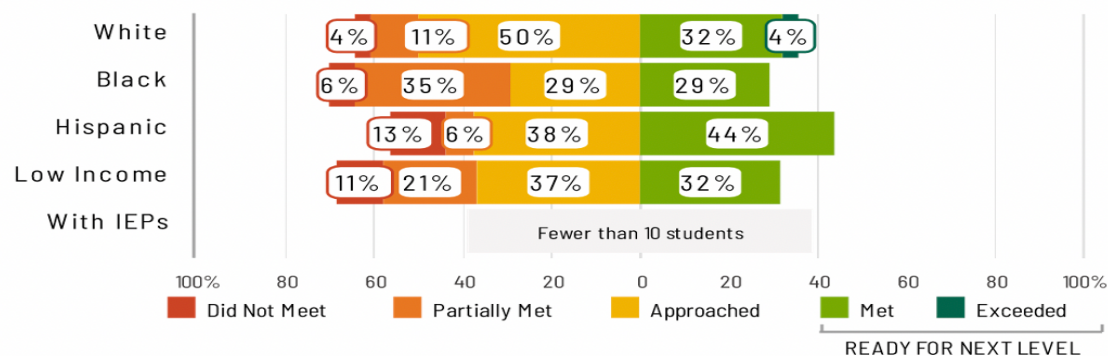
**Success by Student Group**

This display shows IAR ELA & Math performance levels for each student group. No data is shown for groups with fewer than 10 students.

**English Language Arts**



**Mathematics**

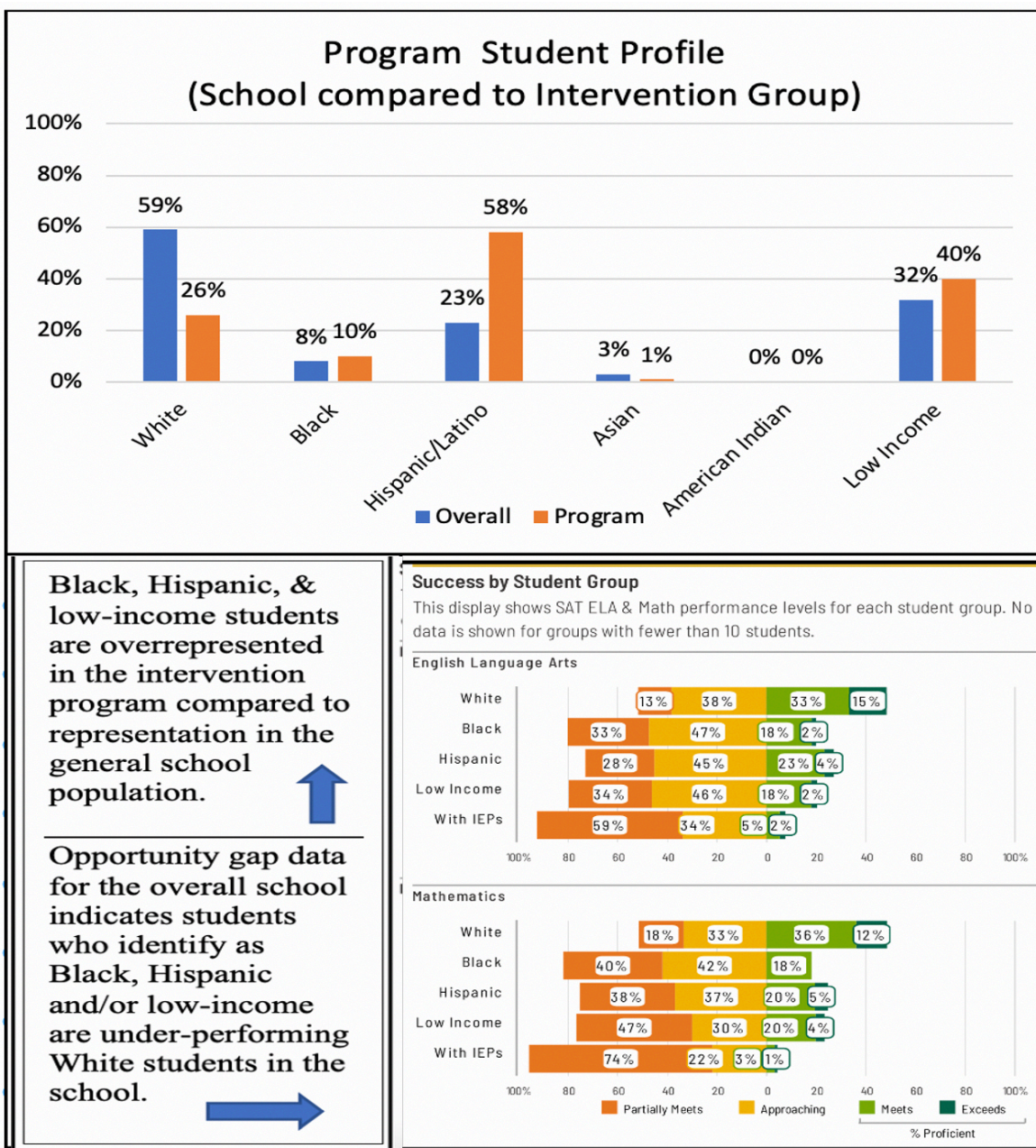


### ***Participant D Student Profile***

Consistent with Program A and B, Program D noted a large overrepresentation of Hispanic/Latinx students identified as underperforming, as this student group represented 58% of the students in the intervention program yet 23% of the school. On the other hand, White students were underrepresented in the program with 26% identified for the program versus 59% in the overall school population. African American/Black students and Asian students were a small percentage of the student population, yet Black/African American students were slightly overrepresented in the program (10% in the program versus 8% overall) and Asians were underrepresented (1% in the program of 3% overall). Those with a low-income, as indicated through qualification for free and reduced lunch, represented 40% of the students in the program while 32% of the overall student population. This data was consistent with the gap in test scores for School D, with Hispanic/Latinx, African American/Black, and low-income students experiencing lower performance levels on standardized tests (see Figure 18). Thus, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students in Program D were more likely to be identified as experiencing underperformance.

Figure 18

*Program D Intervention Student Data Compared to School Data*



**Overall Profile of Students in the Intervention Programs.**

Thus, an examination of the student profiles in the intervention programs indicates that traditionally marginalized populations—Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, and low-

income students—are more likely to be represented in the student profile of intervention program participants. Research on the intersection of SEL and marginalized populations is fairly applicable to this study and is impactful to analysis of its findings.

### **Overall Findings**

Data from the three data collection tools indicates that intervention programs are publicly oriented towards academic skills with a correlating SEL focus on cognitive regulation skills associated with academic achievement such as organization. Though acknowledging the importance of these executive functioning skills, program coordinators, through both interviews and survey responses, strongly indicated that other SEL skills are even more impactful to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. Interpersonal skills and closely associated communalism represented an SEL emphasis particularly valuable to the positive development of students. Conflict resolution, connectedness, adapting to challenging contexts, having a sense of family with other students, and being in relationship with their teachers were all aspects of this relational capacity strongly represented and captured in the interpersonal and communalism categories.

Another SEL focus strongly indicated was self-image. In narrative from the interviews and in survey responses, it was clear that development of a strong self-identity was an important SEL aspect of positive development. Emphasis on self-confidence, risk-taking, a growth mindset, and self-advocacy were all closely aligned to the development of a strong sense of self. Surveys presenting an explanation of specific SEL elements also surfaced the positive impact of ethical and performance values from most program coordinators.

Though not acknowledged in program design with its emphasis on academic outcomes, interpersonal and self-identity development are indicated as powerful SEL factors in the positive

development of students experiencing underachievement. The development of relational capacity and a strong sense of self supported the positive development of students from the intervention programs who then experienced success, which included but was not limited to academic achievement. African American/Black, Hispanic/ Latinx, and low-income students were more likely to be identified for the intervention programs, and schoolwide data indicates lower performance levels on standardized tests for these same student populations in their particular schools. The benefits of emphasizing a broader spectrum of SEL skills to support the success of marginalized students seems well supported by the data.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS**

Analyzing the findings from this study, several themes are suggested by the data that are worthy of deeper examination. In this study of four intervention programs, particular SEL factors emerged as significant to the positive development of students identified as experiencing underperformance. Another point of significance is that among the four intervention programs examined which had different approaches and designs, none specifically targeted the development of SEL to impact academic achievement. The programs' SEL components were more narrowly focused on cognitive regulations skills such as organization. Further, the findings suggest the intersection of relational skills and self-identity may be important SEL considerations for positive student outcomes. The need for students to "be seen" emerged as an additional area in need of further exploration, as suggested by the findings, particularly an investigation of inequities in light of marginalization that make the relational and self-identity components all the more essential to positive outcomes.

### **Discussion**

#### **Emergence of Particular SEL Factors of Significance**

One of the most compelling findings from this study is the strong agreement from program coordinators that specific SEL skills were valuable to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. Interviews surfaced unanimous agreement pertaining to the positive impact of relational capacity, attention to students, and self-confidence/self-advocacy, in addition to executive functioning skills within cognitive regulation. Likewise, of twenty-nine different SEL elements presented as sub-areas in the surveys, the majority of program coordinators identified the same six: conflict resolution, self-esteem, ethical and

performance virtues, community connectedness and adapting to challenging situations. In fact, all program coordinators identified conflict resolution.

These points of strong agreement suggest particular SEL skills have strong aptitude to leverage success for students experiencing underperformance and that targeting the development of particular SEL skills in intervention programs could yield an increase in positive results. Positive psychology indicates the leveraging of Given the overwhelming agreement by participants that several SEL factors were of strong significance to the positive development of students in the intervention programs, it seems compelling that targeted development of these SEL skills could be a positive addition to program design. Given research indicating SEL's impact on dimensions associated with underperformance (Suh & Suh, 2007), inclusion of these specific SEL elements in intervention program design has potential to be value-added and is supported by this study's findings.

Creating programs that intentionally develop strong relationships with teachers and among peers while stressing connection and conflict resolution may have a compelling benefit to students, as indicated in findings. Such a program culture has potential to provide a safe space for students to develop a stronger sense of identity and self-advocacy. Explicit development of SEL skills to support adaptation to challenging situations and living one's values are tertiary areas of focus supported by a foundation in relationships and self-identity. Areas identified by practitioners in this study as particularly significant could be targeted for development in intervention programs in this manner, particularly given the impact SEL development can have on academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al, 2016). Additional time for teacher collaboration would be an additional program design component of importance based on data from this study.

As previously noted, a meta-analysis of SEL skills' impact on achievement (Wigelsworth et al., 2016) called for research that moved beyond *whether* SEL has a positive impact to *how* SEL programs have a positive impact, specifically noting a need for bottom-up studies. This study contributes to that call, identifying the specific SEL factors in the program sample that are making a difference for students identified as experiencing underperformance through a bottom-up examination of practitioner insights from the field. The implications of this study for design of intervention programs is important, but the findings are also important for informing design of instruction in the classroom for all learners. Integration of attention to relationships and the development of self-identity in conjunction with efforts at fostering successful adaptation to challenges and conflict resolution has great preventative potential to reduce the number of students experiencing underperformance.

### **The Dominance of Cognitive Regulation**

Another important aspect of the findings is the narrow orientation of intervention programs towards academic skill development, with any SEL emphasis correlating narrowly towards cognitive regulation. This narrow focus on academic skills does not reflect optimal design for achieving goals. The narrow focus on academic skill development and cognitive regulation suggests a lack of targeted development of additional SEL skills with potential for a positive significance to student performance.

There are several implications to this narrow focus on academic skills and cognitive regulation. It indicates a presumption that addressing academic underperformance involves focusing on academic skills and cognitive regulation skills. While a focus on cognitive regulation can be beneficial, helping students to “do school,” the emphasis also ignores research indicating other SEL skills have a positive impact on student outcomes. United States government



educational policies emphasized adoption of SEL to advance the well-being, adjustment, and academic achievement of students (Denham et al., 2009). The narrow focus on cognitive regulation harkens to a more-of-the-same emphasis for improving academic achievement without a concerted effort to develop the whole student, capitalizing on student assets to impact trajectory. Program design remains narrowly focused on a narrow understanding of how to achieve academic competencies, betraying a lack of understanding or a lack of trust in research which indicates the positive impact of building upon other SEL capabilities.

Moreover, this inclination perpetuates the false narrative of success as being defined by academic performance and betrays underlying presumptions about the inherent value of SEL. Specifically, SEL as an important area of student development is not supported by the program designs. Student deficits are emphasized through such an orientation solely on academic indicators of success given that they are underperforming in academics. An exploration of untapped student assets or a focus on leveraging areas of strength for academic outcomes was not reflected in any of the descriptions of program design.

Given SEL's association with positive academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2016; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017), this study's findings indicate that several SEL areas in addition to cognitive regulation are significant to student positive development and should be explicitly targeted. Intervention programming could benefit from expanded program goals to include the targeting of SEL skills and assure that those SEL targets go beyond a focus on cognitive regulation. This expanded SEL focus has promise to translate into better academic outcomes, as supported by both study findings and prior research.

## **The Importance of Developing Self & Relational Identity**

Despite the program orientation towards cognitive skills, program coordinators were unanimous in their endorsement of interpersonal skills, such as relational capacity and conflict resolution, as having a positive impact on student development. Likewise, the importance of developing self-identity was stressed, particularly self-esteem, self-confidence, self-advocacy, a growth mindset, and risk-taking. These broad areas were reinforced consistently across open-ended interviews and survey responses. There is no doubt from these findings that practitioners saw the value of connecting students to a stronger sense of self and a stronger connection to peers, teachers, and community. In fact, qualitative analysis of interviews indicated that interpersonal capacity and development of self-identity are not mutually exclusive but overlap as integral aspects of co-influence. Such an understanding is consistent with an ecological perspective (Lyubomirsky, 2005; Petrona, 2018).

The importance of interpersonal development with aspects of communalism was manifested across both data collection sources: open-ended interview questions analyzed qualitatively and survey responses analyzed quantitatively. SEL indicators of significance included peer relationships, relationships with teachers, relationships with community, navigation of conflicts, and connectedness to different contexts and communities.

Despite the strong identification of these interpersonal skills and self-identify, program descriptions only emphasized relationship aspects related to group work and collaboration. Deeper cultivation of relationships was not evident in program design yet consistently identified by program coordinators as significant via both data collection tools. Ecological perspectives theory notes the importance of social and cultural environment including interactions with others and relationships (Petrona, 2018; Steinberg, 2001). Though intervention programs often resulted

in relationship development, the lack of targeted attention to this aspect of program design so it is an intentional goal is worthy of scrutiny given the strong evidence regarding its importance to positive development of students experiencing underperformance.

In addition, the development of self-identity was noted by half of program coordinators as a focus of the intervention programs in surveys, but it was not supported well in program descriptions. Nevertheless, survey and interview responses made it clear that the development of a strong sense of self was identified in this study as crucial to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. Specifically, student self-esteem was a strong emphasis of practitioners in the study as was the self-confidence to self-advocate, take risks, and make mistakes with a growth mindset. Some interviews identified practices that supported the development of self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, such as AVID's practice of having students identify and/share problems with peers who then coach the student to problem solve to resolve confusion. Techniques like this can build self-confidence while utilizing relationships, an interrelationship worthy of pointed program design.

It should be noted that cultivating student self-confidence and advocacy is also reflective of a relational technique involving a trusting culture cultivated among peer groups. This is another example of the confluence between self-identity and interpersonal/relational skills. In fact, the two areas have significant intersections that can be mutually beneficial to student development if supported thoughtfully through constructive program design. The interrelationship of self-identify and relational identify can be a powerful target to significantly impact the positive development of students experiencing underperformance.

## **Equity Considerations**

It is also noteworthy that survey responses identified several key SEL skills among the communalism category which was an addendum to the EASEL coding framework specifically due to its importance in addressing equity-related issues. Adapting to challenging contexts and community connectedness are skills of particular importance to marginalized communities in order to successfully navigate inequitable and underrepresented environments (Berg, 2017; Jagers et al., 2018). Conflict resolution, an SEL interpersonal skill unanimously identified in this study as significant to student positive development, is another skill of particular importance to students who may be marginalized or lacking in experiences of privilege. Such circumstances increase the experience of conflict between perception of self and perceptions of success in one's environment. This study suggests that an equity lens is an important consideration in cultivating positive development of students experiencing underperformance and an added area of consideration in identifying SEL skills of significance.

Given that the student profile of students in the intervention programs indicated an overrepresentation of low-income, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latinx students and given the strong identification of SEL skills in the framework associated with equity-issues, program design that explicitly builds upon SEL skills vital to marginalized populations would be advantageous to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. Despite its potential in scaffolding success for this student population, this area was not indicated in program design at all.

## **Being Seen: Additional Teacher Attention**

One unexpected element that emerged from interviews was the benefit of additional teacher attention that students received from being in the intervention programs. This aspect was

a dimension of relational capacity, but it also involved the teachers talking with one another about students and, potentially allowing for more attention to the students as individuals of unique circumstance and experience. Black/ African American and Hispanic/Latinx students generally experienced higher identification as underperforming in the program schools, as indicated in data regarding the opportunity gap for these students. There is dissonance between historical normative experiences in schools and the cultural and racial identity of these student populations. This dissonance can be magnified for marginalized students if they are situated in a school centered on Whiteness, which can be characterized by a predominantly Caucasian teaching force, literature canon dominated by White male authors, historical narratives emphasizing Eurocentric contributions, a media dominated by White depictions of affluence, and a refrain of materialism and distorted images of beauty in social media. Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens describe how marginalized students can be marked as damaged “without consideration of the complex cognitive, political, and social ecologies dominated by Eurocentric bias” (2020, p. 59). Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon occurrence for marginalized students. Thus, the importance of being seen cannot be overlooked as an important finding from this study.

The additional attention by teachers who are focusing on students’ lived experience in these intervention programs is important, as noted by practitioner interviews. Though this aspect may be categorized as another element of interpersonal, it is also unique in that it does not reflect the development of a student skill, but the development of teacher skills, supported through the structure of the intervention program which provides the opportunity for these additional interactions. In short, efforts to assure students are seen, receiving attention to their circumstances and lived experiences by their teachers, is an important aspect of relational capacity that schools should consider in developing programs as supported by study findings.

### **The Dissonance with SEL's Significance**

Finally, one must note the dissonance between the findings and the approach to academic success. The construction of intervention programs does not reflect the importance of capitalizing on a broad spectrum of SEL student assets in order to harness strengths towards more success with academic outcomes. SEL development is not structured as an integral, targeted goal with established systems of cultivation. Though some program structures strengthen particular SEL skills, practitioners identified teachers as primarily cultivating SEL on an individualized basis. In short, this study suggests that good teachers are cultivating self-identity and relational capacity regardless of program intent.

While program design remains fixated on academic skills, it risks redundancy with the program approaches that spawned underperformance in the first place. Development of SEL skills cannot be an add-on to academic skill development if these intervention programs are to be best positioned to positively impact students experiencing underperformance. It must be a core component of intervention program design, even when those intervention programs are geared towards academic advancement.

The tendency to silo subject matters is pervasive in school structures and may lay at the heart of this matter as SEL is treated as another silo and not the intended target of the academically-oriented intervention program. Such a silo is short-sighted. SEL's power lies not as another subject matter but as an infrastructure to learning. Capitalizing on SEL assets is foundational to supporting students who are not experiencing optimal performance through their present school systems. Until SEL is viewed as a vehicle of academic success rather than another subject or an add-on, its significance to student development may not be realized.

## Summary

Students experiencing underperformance in schools may greatly benefit from targeted development of SEL skills, particularly those related to self-identity and relational-identity. Fostering self-esteem, self-confidence, self-advocacy, risk-taking and a growth mindset are crucial to self-identity, which, findings indicate, has a positive association with students' positive development. Moreover, interpersonal and communal relationship skills were identified in this study as SEL factors associated with positive student development. Specifically, conflict resolution, relationships with teachers and peers, adjustment to different contexts, and connecting with community are SEL factors identified as benefitting student outcomes. Unfortunately, programs in the study sample included a narrow SEL focus on cognitive regulation, which also is an SEL skill of importance, but not to the exclusion of other less cultivated SEL skills. School programs might benefit from thoughtful consideration regarding the cultivation of additional SEL skills in order to positively impact students not currently reaching potential. Moreover, consideration of an equity lens regarding marginalized students is needed so program structures provide opportunities for understanding students' circumstances and lived experience, assuring these students are truly seen. Study findings suggest that historically marginalized populations are overrepresented as students experiencing underperformance, and an SEL focus that centers these students through SEL development has potential to shift this paradigm and better support positive development.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Contribution of this Study

This study provides supportive evidence that specific SEL factors may positively impact the development of students experiencing underperformance, and that interpersonal skills and self-identity development are particularly helpful to this student population, which is overrepresented as marginalized. Prior research has established the benefits of SEL without drilling down to specific SEL skills most beneficial to underserved populations. This study identifies particular points of emphasis within SEL that can be leveraged for more optimal effect with a student population left most in need by current school systems.

Moreover, the development of self-identity and relationships with others, including conflict management, are interrelated SEL skills that can be targeted through integrated approaches. Cognitive regulation, which is the SEL skill most often integrated into interventions, may also be helpful, but may be overemphasized compared to other SEL strategies. Teacher attention to students both directly and through collaboration with colleagues was also identified as beneficial to students experiencing underperformance. Intentionally building on the SEL assets of students has promise to be a more effective way to leverage increased academic performance while contributing to the development of the whole child/person.

Program design for intervention programs can benefit from directly targeting SEL development. Ideally, the entire school program should build the SEL assets of students in a more purposeful manner, giving additional attention to the ways in which marginalized students may be undervalued or isolated within current school systems.



### **Study Overview**

This convergent mixed methods case study focused on four intervention programs in four different schools to determine whether specific SEL skills were identified by practitioners as particularly significant to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance. Examining program goals through document analysis, student profile data regarding marginalization and opportunity gaps, and interviews and surveys with program coordinators identifying SEL factors of significance, it was established that SEL skills were not a primary goal of the programs, but a spectrum of SEL factors nonetheless had a positive impact on the development of students experiencing underperformance. SEL skills of particular note involved the development of relationships, conflict management skills, self-esteem, and a strong personal and communal identity with the support of caring adults and peer supports.

### **Reflection**

This research study was conceived with a focus on students experiencing underperformance. In creating the study design, I had an awareness that marginalized student populations are often overrepresented in the population experiencing underperformance and that was a student group I hoped to positively impact. Nevertheless, I did not initially collect data on marginalization. The student focus for the research required only that students have involvement in the intervention program.

And yet this lack of centering on marginalization exemplifies what the study findings suggest. The fact that the students who are historically marginalized are overrepresented in intervention programs is not simply additional information but central to their lived experience as students caught in the opportunity gap. During analysis of the data, it became clear that having data regarding the student profile would serve interpretation of findings, so demographic

data related to race, low-income, and school opportunity gaps were analyzed as an additional aspect of the study, indicating the overrepresentation of marginalized student populations in the group identified as experiencing underperformance. In recognizing the marginalized student profiles, the study's findings became a potential SEL prescription for deconstructing the damaging impact of students not centered in their own school experiences due to marginalization.

Marginalization as a term acknowledges a lack of being center, an existence on the margins, a lack of centrality. Critiques of schools as too centered on Whiteness or affluence are rampant as ratified by visual representations in textbooks, media, curricular content, and common discourse that leaves students who identify as BIPOC and/or low-income on the edges of their own educational experience.

Looking over the themes of the study suggest some compelling considerations: the program coordinator narratives of student positive development center on opportunities to be seen, to be a focus, to be in relationship with community and a caring adult, to be given attention centered on them and their development, to be empowered and central to their own learning environment. Findings from this study suggest that the development of academic skills for marginalized students experiencing underperformance must deconstruct their marginalization rather than solely focusing on the development of their academic skills. Assisting these students academically should be much more than repeating the dissonance of their classroom academic experience.

Relationships with peers that foster a sense of self-identity as well as communal connection, relationships with teachers who collaborate with the student and with other teachers to focus on the student's lived experience, attention to the tools for academic proficiency with an

emphasis on organization and note-taking, and tools to manage the conflicts of their marginalization through conflict resolution skills and self-advocacy with a growth mindset—these are the findings this study suggests can be a catalyst for improved academic achievement. Even more so, these are the elements that will help students too often marginalized to be central on an educational journey towards success that supersedes academics.

We may not be able to change a world rife with marginalization, but we can tap the assets of marginalized students by seeking ways to assure they are centered in their learning. Social emotional learning has unique potential to aid in this process. Such a focus will be advantageous to student experiencing underperformance, whether identifying as marginalized or not. The following recommendations include attempts at addressing the marginalization of students identified as experiencing underperformance.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Prioritize SEL**

Schools should consider embracing social emotional learning on par with subject matter competencies. As noted in shared research, social emotional learning aligns with school mission, funding streams, and school needs while having a positive impact on academic achievement.

The need for SEL prioritization has never been clearer. School stressors from the Covid-19 pandemic spotlight the essential role of social emotional skills as well as ritual, routine, and relationships in supporting student success for disengaged students or those suffering trauma (Schlund & Weissberg, 2020). SEL as a precursor to learning or a vehicle for academic success has emerged in sharp relief during the isolation of remote learning. This study affirms the efficacy of such a focus on SEL for students experiencing underperformance.

As noted in the literature review of this study, prioritizing SEL can take many different forms: free-standing lessons, embedded within academic content, integrated into classroom or schoolwide initiatives, or facilitated as a school-wide SEL effort (Dusenbury et al., 2015). Research also has surfaced some program elements worthy of consideration as schools create these plans of prioritization. Often referred to as SAFE practices (Dymnicki et al., 2013, p. 10), the following elements can be considered in creating an implementation plan:

- **Sequenced.** Use a sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives.
- **Active.** Use active forms of listening.
- **Focused.** Include a program component focused on developing personal/social skills.
- **Explicit.** Target a particular personal/social skill for development.

In fact, a multitude of approaches can be embraced as part of an SEL implementation plan. Yet this study suggests that it should be clearly articulated as a priority in order to fully leverage SEL as a catalyst for student success, particularly for those experiencing underperformance. The prioritization of SEL should also embrace an understanding that some specific SEL skills are indicated as more significant to students experiencing underperformance.

Social emotional learning impacts all learning as social relationships and emotions directly impact learning processes—for the positive or the negative (Darling-Hammond & Harvey-Cox, 2018). Social emotional skills, as this study indicates, can be utilized to positively impact student learning and should take its rightful place at the table of educational priorities.

### **Create Belonging School Cultures**

Schools should consider adopting strategies that foster a culture of belonging for all students. Unfortunately, a 2006 study indicated that only 29% of students felt their school provided a caring encouraging environment, which undermines motivation and negatively

impact learning processes; students have more positive learning outcomes when safe and supported versus fearful or traumatized (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Positive school climates improve academic achievement and reduce disengagement, as supported by a positive psychology framework. Creating a culture with a success mindset with student social-emotional and character development centered can have a profoundly positive effect through improved school culture (Elias et al., 2014). This study indicates that caring environments through cultivated relationships and the development of self-identity has particular significance to the positive development of students experiencing underperformance.

Research into belongingness indicates that it arises through connectedness as an active social process of everyday life and is always relational (Halse, 2018). Interaction of individuals with people, things, institutions and socio-cultural contexts all impact a sense of belongingness (Halsie, 2018). The ecological perspective of this study emphasizes the interaction of individual with environment as an important aspect of development, and positive psychology presumes an intention by individuals to live lives of meaning and flourishing. Cultivating belonging amidst marginalized student populations requires cultivation of social emotional competencies grounded in the interpersonal and communal. But systemic shifts in the institution are also needed. School cultures must recognize the centrality of each student most especially those marginalized by race or income. This study indicates the positive effect of several SEL factors which are reflected in research regarding the positive impact of school culture or climate:

The elements of school climate contributing most to increased achievement are associated with teacher-student relationships, including warmth, acceptance, and teacher support. Other features include high expectations, organized classroom instruction, effective leadership, and teachers who are efficacious and promote mastery learning goals; strong interpersonal relationships, communication,

cohesiveness, and belongingness between students and teachers; and structural features of the school, such as small school size, physical conditions, and resources, which shape students' daily experiences of personalization and caring. (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018, p. vii)

As noted, there are many parallels between the elements identified in research for school climate and the findings in this study about SEL factors of significance to students experiencing underperformance.

### **Adopt Culturally Transformative SEL**

Schools should consider embracing culturally transformative social emotional learning to effectively implement SEL. Too often SEL efforts do not acknowledge the unique positionality of marginalized students which, some of the findings in this study suggest, is quite relevant to building upon their SEL assets. Initially this study's design did not include investigation of data related to student marginalization, yet that information proved crucial to deeper understandings regarding study findings. Nevertheless, a review of 66 SEL studies indicated that few incorporated culturally responsive strategies and none addressed racism and its role in student mental well-being (Barnes, 2019).

Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL), is a form of SEL that centers promotion of equity in its approach to the core SEL competencies, recognizing its centrality to cultivating belonging, identity, agency, engagement, and other SEL assets (Jagers et al., 2019). It promotes SEL skills for creating communities able to engage in courageous conversations across differences and confront hate and injustice (Simmons, 2019). Supportive relationships with adults, self-efficacy, empowerment, self-regulation paired with self-advocacy when confronted with inequity and adversity, and environments that routinely monitor student needs to

nurture well-being (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018) are just some of the characteristics of environments cultivating culturally transformative SEL. In confronting marginalization, SEL programs need culturally sustaining pedagogy and cultural relevance integrated throughout an interdisciplinary lens (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

This study affirms that acknowledgment of the marginalization of students within the study was important to understanding findings. Adopting culturally transformative SEL acknowledges that marginalization impacts effective implementation of SEL. Four dimensions to consider in effectively implementing transformative SEL can be adapted from dimensions to address educational equity first suggested by Rochelle Gutierrez (2012) yet revised for the purposes of transformative SEL: (a) Access --whether to resources or open dialogue of lived experience, (b) Achievement, which acknowledges participation and success thus tending to the opportunity gap, (c) Identity, which involves supporting students and the realization of their better potential through relationship and self-identity, and (d) Power, which acknowledges social transformation including systemic changes. Transformative SEL can be better achieved through specific practices, like these dimensions which allow for thoughtful implementation of SEL that centers student experience and assets. In this manner, transformative SEL can promote opportunities to reflect on identity and equity, interrogate power and privilege, surface *-isms*, and consider changes that can be realized both within self and the world (Simmons, 2019).

### **Integrate Asset-based Relational Pedagogy**

From institutional prioritization of SEL, to fostering a culture of belonging, to adopting culturally transformative SEL, this final recommendation moves from the macro to a commitment any educator can employ: the integration of asset-based relational pedagogy.

This study was positioned in the positive, learning from narratives of students who were achieving success despite their prior experiences of underperformance. It tapped the knowledge and insight of practitioners to identify specific SEL factors that were particularly beneficial to positive development. This study encourages the same asset-based approach to cultivating SEL development in the classroom as well as an emphasis on relational development.

Marginalized students are all too familiar with deficit framing. They are consistently overidentified in the opportunity gap, experience underperformance, and live the short end of power differentials. An asset orientation is important to cultivating SEL development in the classroom that will leverage academic achievement. Strengths-based coaching is but one technique that can be employed in this process. Even the students most mired in underperformance has positive abilities and capacities that can be “mobilized in the service of growth and recovery” (Cox, 2008, p. 19).

So, too, relational pedagogy must be adopted as central to classroom and school culture. As this study indicates and research affirms (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018), responsive relationships with caring adults and a learning community that appreciates and understands the student’s lived experience can positively impact the self-identity and relational capacity needed for success. Fostering relationships with peers and adults can catalyze positive development and learning, as students communicate, problem-solve, struggle, advocate, debate, and resolve conflict on a path to stronger self-identity and self-esteem.

### **Future Work**

Of course, this research is an initial study in need of further investigation. There are multiple avenues for additional study based on the results of this study.



Future studies could expand on this foundation by expanding its scale, following the same design or expanding the survey tool so it can include opportunities for verifying responses through multiple queries. Such an approach would allow for computation of statistical significance from the quantitative data collected via the survey. A larger scale would allow for purposeful gathering of diverse data sources with demographic data pertaining to rural, urban, suburban, and class size to indicate if such variance had any impact on results. Such a larger quantitative study could compliment the analysis in this study that was dominated by qualitative analysis to surface points of tension and consensus in a convergent manner.

Another avenue for additional study would be to use similar tools with the students to add their voice to the voice of practitioners of the intervention programs. In this study, the students are speaking through the narratives shared by program coordinators, but an additional study could share their own perspectives. Given that so many students in the intervention program are part of marginalized populations, it is essential to consider student voice as a dimension of study. A study design centered on students identified as experiencing underperformance would provide convergent data to cross analyze to practitioner perceptions. This additional prism would be a rich additional source of data to pursue and could include interrogation of marginalization's relationship with underperformance.

Yet another consideration would be a comparative study of programs. A comparative study of programs emphasizing strategies indicated in this study versus one emphasizing cognitive regulation and one more generalized in terms of SEL would also be an interesting way to dig deeper into the significance of particular SEL elements. So, too, a study of classrooms with varied SEL emphasis could provide comparative data of interest regarding the impact of

stressing specific SEL through analysis of its impact on marginalized students or populations previously experiencing underperformance.

Nevertheless, this first stage of research provides rich opportunities for reflection and consideration in program design for students experiencing underperformance. Further interrogation of these findings through additional avenues has rich potential for informing schools that better meet the needs of students. While considering some of these rich research opportunities, it also seems fitting to contemplate how this study informs considerations in the classroom.

### **The Final Word**

Many consider it the fun part. Teachers chatting with students as they arrive before getting to the lesson may seem an enjoyable pre-teaching activity, yet it turns out that time might have been the most important part of the lesson.

Taking an interest in the individual talents and strengths, facilitating community in the class and relationships among students, helping students discover their own identity within the intersectionality of power, place, culture, and institution—these efforts are not only a goal but a means for increased academic achievement. This study does not simply speak to institutional changes or to program design. It speaks to the educator reading this page, urging consideration of the next encounter with students. While teachers are constantly considering content and lesson plans, assessments and data-driven decision-making, this study gives reason for pause. Scaffolding content may not be as essential as scaffolding SEL. Academic presentations may not be as important as building relationships. Seeing student standardized test scores may not matter as much as seeing the student who feels unseen in a system that does not center their lived experience. The conversation before class may actually be targeting the most important tools for

underserved students. Or at least, it may be a start to dismantling constructs of marginalization through SEL cultivation.

This dissertation began with the comment, “He will be fine if he can just get through school.” For too many, school has not been the enabler of potential, but an obstacle to be overcome. This study suggests the power of social emotional learning as a tool for leveraging student assets. Building student SEL assets and cultivating an environment to cultivate their social emotional well-being may, in turn, support their academic accomplishment. This study identifies some specific SEL assets which may be catalyzed to better realize the potential of students experiencing underperformance and

## Appendix A

### Recruitment E-mails/ Phone Scripts

I am honored that I have been able to learn from you regarding your efforts serving students experiencing underperformance in school. I am hoping you might be able to recommend other intervention programs that I could investigate to learn more about the impact non-cognitive factors can have on the development of students experiencing underperformance.

Specifically, I am conducting research as part of my doctoral program at DePaul University regarding the role of social-emotional and other non-cognitive factors in intervention programs.

Information on the study is available through this link:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wR4JhWzUvtOhFGuGp64HeIIOh2XiR4bnuHKpvrl-S3I/edit?usp=sharing>

Do you know of some school programs that are well constructed to meet the needs of underperforming students? They would need to be programs that have been around for at least one year and have been meeting program goals. If so, could you let me know the name of the school and program so I can contact the administrator via their website contact information? I will then be sharing with them the e-mail provided below.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kathleen King

Dear Program Director:

My name is Kathleen King, an assistant professor of education at North Central College, but I am contacting you today about a dissertation I am working on through DePaul University regarding the impact of social-emotional factors on underperforming students. I am hoping you will consider forwarding this correspondence to any faculty/staff who work in intervention programs designed to assist underperforming students--provided they have worked in the program for at least one year and the program has been meeting its goals.

Thank you for your consideration.

---

Dear Intervention Program Educator,

I am conducting research regarding the intersection of non-cognitive factors, such as social-emotional learning, on underperforming students. My study is focused on learning from the perspectives of practitioners serving students in intervention programs, whether during the day, after school, or during the summer. These practitioners need to have worked with students in the program for at least one year and the goal should be succeeding in meeting its goals. If this description applies to you, I would love an opportunity to learn from your insights!

I am attaching an information sheet with details of the study for your review and consideration or you can view it at the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wR4JhWzUvtOhFGuGp64HeIIOh2XiR4bnuHKpvrI-S3I/edit?usp=sharing> You may download or print it for your records.

You will see from the information sheet that I would like to come to your school and interview you for no more than one hour on your insights regarding what best helps students in your intervention program succeed. Specifically, I am interested in learning about any SEL-related factors that make a difference. All collected information will not include program names and you will not be specifically identified in the sharing of my data. After the interview, I would then send you a brief (less than ten minutes) survey to rate the importance of non-cognitive factors from your experience and identify whether they are program elements.

I am very hopeful that I can learn from your successes to better inform program design for underperforming youth. If you are willing to participate, please e-mail me at [kbking1408@gmail.com](mailto:kbking1408@gmail.com) or by phone at c.708-373-2779.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

In appreciation,

Kathleen B. King

## Appendix B

### Information Sheet

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

#### **Untapped Potential: Non-Cognitive Factors & Intervention Programs**

**Principal Investigator:** Kathleen B. King  
**Institution:** DePaul University, USA  
**Faculty Advisor:** Andrea Kayne, JD, Education Department

#### **Study Purpose:**

We are conducting a research study to learn more about how non-cognitive factors such as social-emotional skills impact underperforming students. We want to learn from the experiences of practitioners working with students in intervention programs to gain their perspectives. Specifically, we want to find out what non-cognitive skills, if any, you find helps underperforming students positively develop and whether your intervention program includes development of these skills. The information from this study is intended to inform program design to better aid the development of underperforming students.

#### **Study Participants:**

We are asking you to be in the research because you have been identified as working with students for at least one year in an intervention program for underperforming students that has been meeting goals. Participants must be age 18 or older to be in this study. This study is not approved for the enrollment of people under the age of 18.

**Study Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study...

- I would like to come to your school and interview you about your work with students in an intervention program. In the interview I will ask questions about your intervention program, students who you have seen benefit from the program, what social-emotional skills (or other non-cognitive elements) your students have benefitted from and your insights regarding what best helps underperforming students positively develop. Though I will look at information on your school from public websites, I will not collect demographic data about you or your specific students in the program. If at any point in the interview there is a question you do not want to answer, you may skip it. The interview will be limited to one hour. I will ask if I can record the interview to aid in my note-taking. The recording will be kept on a password-protected device, transcribed, labeled with a code keyed to your program, and then destroyed.
- After the interview, I will send you a link to a brief survey you can complete confidentially to rate non-cognitive factors you find helpful to students who experience under-performance and whether they are factors in your program. Specifically, it will ask you about seven types of non-cognitive factors identified through research-generated models--designated as cognitive regulation, emotional processes, interpersonal processes, values, perspectives, identity/self-image, and connectedness. The survey is intended to take less than ten minutes.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed to aid my note-taking.

These recordings will be destroyed after the transcription process is completed and coded so your name is not identified. The entire process of this study, interview and survey, should take less than 90 minutes of your time.



**Confidentiality:**

Research data collected from you will be collected in an identifiable way and then be de-identified later. When you first give us your information it will be linked to you with a code number and we will have a key that tells us who that code number belongs to, so--for a period of time--it is possible to link this information to you. However, we have put some protections in place, such as storing the information in a secured computer under password protection and with encrypted files. After the study is completed (in about 12 months), we will remove all the identifiers and make the data de-identified, keeping the information for an undetermined period of time in the de-identified way, since there should be no risk to you should someone gain access to the data.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later after you begin the study.

For the interview, you can withdraw your participation at any time up to the point that I de-identify participants, by contacting me at c.708-373-2779 or ("Snowball sampling," n.d.).

For the survey, you can withdraw your participation at any time prior to submitting your survey.

If you change your mind later while answering the survey, you may simply exit. Once you submit your responses to the e-survey, I will be unable to remove your data from the study because all data is anonymous and I will not know which survey response belongs to you.

Your decision on whether or not to be in the research interview or survey will not affect your employment at your school and is purely voluntary. There is no monetary compensation associated with this study.

**Questions/ Concerns:**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, please contact Kathleen King at [kbking1408@gmail.com](mailto:kbking1408@gmail.com) or c.708-373-2779.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Services at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu). You may also contact DePaul's Office of Research Services if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

**Agreement to Participate:**

By contacting me to arrange details for the interview, you are indicating your agreement to be in the research.

By completing the survey, you are indicating your agreement to be in the research.

*You may download or print this information for your records.*

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Protocol**

July 2019 ver/ IRB approved

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Kathleen King

- I. Welcome/ Information Sheet Reminders
  - a. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research study looking at SEL and other non-cognitive factors specifically in terms of its impact on underperforming students. Your perspective as someone working in an intervention program is very valuable.
  - b. Just a quick reminder about the Information Sheet previously shared with you about the study. Do you have any questions about the study or about how this information will be used before we begin? Can you confirm that you are at least eighteen, have worked in an intervention program for at least one year, and that the program has been meeting its goals?
  - c. I also want to remind you, as mentioned in the Information Sheet, you can choose not to answer any of my questions today.
- II. Recording Permission
  - a. Can I also get your permission to record this interview for my own note-taking purposes. Is that okay?

- b. I'm going to ask you that same question after I turn on the recorder just so I have that consent on record. Thanks.
- c. You've given me consent to record this interview for my note-taking purposes. Is that correct?  
Thanks. And thanks for allowing me to have this time to talk to you and learn more about the great work taking place with this program.

### III. Interview Questions

- a. Program Background Information
  - i. Can you tell me a little about your intervention program and its design?
  - ii. How are students identified for the intervention program?
  - iii. What are the program's goals?
  - iv. Can you tell me about a student who you think particularly benefited from the program?  
What made the greatest impact on that student's development?
- b. Questions related to Research Question: *How do program facilitators perceive the impact of non-cognitive skills to the success of students in these programs/interventions?*
  - i. Based on your experience, what SEL or other noncognitive skills do you think help students in the program to positively develop?
  - ii. When you think of particular student success stories--students meeting program goals--can you describe any SEL skills that have been particularly helpful to assuring that success? How so?
  - iii. Are there student SEL or non-cognitive strengths that can be built upon to help students succeed in the school program?
- c. Questions related to Research Question: *What, if any, non-cognitive skills are noted as targeted in intervention programs?*
  - i. Have any particular non-academic skills, including social-emotional skills, been targeted for development through this program?
  - ii. If so, how? If not, do you know if SEL skills were considered? Do you know if these aspects are emphasized in the regular academic program?

- iii. Are there any particular SEL skills you would like your program to target to better help these students that are not currently targeted?
- iv. Do you think any students in the program not experiencing academic success in the regular program have particular non-cognitive strengths--like strengths in social-emotional or interpersonal skills--that could be better tapped? If so, what are some of these strengths? Why do you think they aren't translating into success in academic programs?

#### IV. Closure/ Appreciation

- a. Please share anything else you think is important I know about positively impacting youth through your intervention programs.
- b. Thank you so much for your time and this opportunity to learn from you!

## Appendix D

### Survey

#### E-Survey

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The survey can be found at the following link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/V9WD5BK>

It is also copied below for review purposes.

#### **Untapped Potential: Non-Cognitive Factors & Intervention Programs**

#### **A Research Study conducted by Kathleen King**

---

Thanks so much for participating in our survey. Please help us better understand how social-emotional skills and other non-cognitive factors can impact the development of students who have been identified for intervention programs. The following competencies are based on the Taxonomy Project, led by Stephanie Jones at Harvard University, and a 2017 AIR study of 50 SEL frameworks. Your feedback is appreciated.

**\* 1. At first glance, which of the following competencies do you find most positively impact the development of students experiencing under-performance?**

- Interpersonal:** conflict resolution, understanding social cues, cooperative/prosocial behavior
- Values:** ethical, performance, civic, intellectual
- Perspectives:** gratitude, openness, optimism, enthusiasm

- Self-image/ Identity:** self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose
- Cognitive Regulation:** attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility
- Emotional Processes:** emotional knowledge, empathy/perspective-taking, emotional & behavioral regulation
- Communalism:** bias/privilege awareness, adapting to challenging contexts, community connectedness, cultural responsiveness

**2. Which, if any, of the following Interpersonal competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- Understanding social cues
- Conflict resolution/social problem-solving
- Pro-social & cooperative behavior
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**3. Which, if any, of the following Values competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- ethical values: compassion; courage; gratitude; honesty; humility; integrity; justice; respect.
- performance values: confidence; determination; motivation; perseverance; resilience; teamwork

- civic values: citizenship; civility; community awareness; neighbourliness; service; volunteering
- intellectual values: autonomy; critical thinking; curiosity; judgement; reasoning; reflection;
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**4. Which, if any, of the following Perspectives competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- gratitude
- openness
- optimism
- enthusiasm/ zest
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**5. Which, if any, of the following Self-image/Identity competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- self-knowledge
- purpose
- self-efficacy/growth mindset
- self-esteem
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit



**6. Which, if any, of the following Cognitive Regulation competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- attention control
- working memory/ planning skills
- inhibitory control
- cognitive flexibility
- critical thinking
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**7. Which, if any, of the following Emotional Processes competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- emotional knowledge/expression
- emotional & behavioral regulation
- empathy/ perspective-taking
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**8. Which, if any, of the following Communalism competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)**

- bias/privilege awareness
- adapting to challenging contexts

- community connectedness
- cultural responsiveness
- None of the above are distinctive in their benefit

**\* 9. Identify the competency areas that includes aspects your intervention program targets for student development, if any. Select all that apply.**

- Interpersonal:** conflict resolution, understanding social cues, cooperative/prosocial behavior
- Values:** ethical, performance, civic, intellectual
- Perspectives:** gratitude, openness, optimism, enthusiasm
- Self-image/ Identity:** self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose
- Cognitive Regulation:** attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility
- Emotional Processes:** emotional knowledge, empathy/perspective-taking, emotional & behavioral regulation
- Communalism:** bias/privilege awareness, adapting to challenging contexts, community connectedness, cultural responsiveness
- None of these areas or sub-areas are included in program design

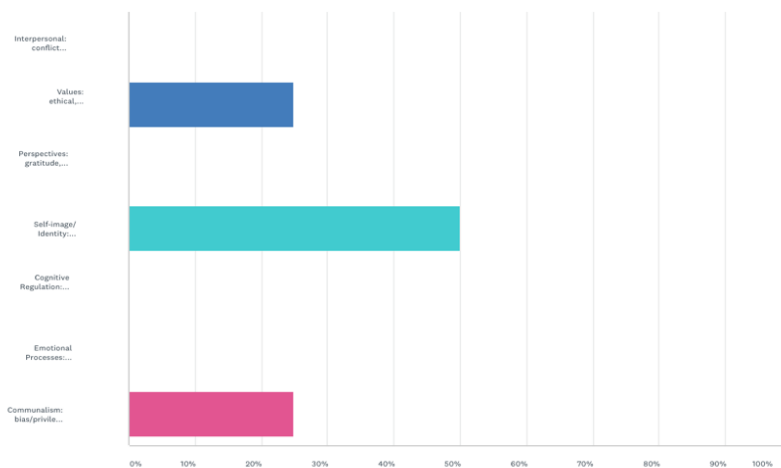
## Appendix E

### Survey Results

#### Question 1

At first glance, which of the following competencies do you find most positively impact the development of students experiencing under-performance?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

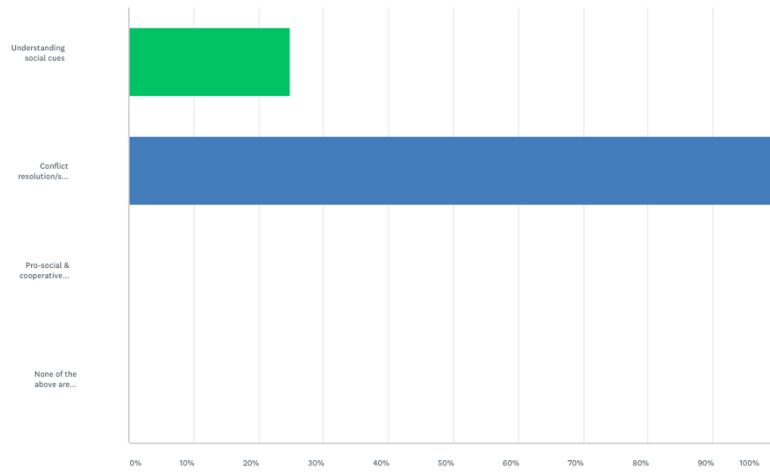


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Interpersonal: conflict resolution, understanding social cues, cooperative/prosocial behavior	0.00% 0
Values: ethical, performance, civic, intellectual	25.00% 1
Perspectives: gratitude, openness, optimism, enthusiasm	0.00% 0
Self-image/ Identity: self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose	50.00% 2
Cognitive Regulation: attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility	0.00% 0
Emotional Processes: emotional knowledge, empathy/perspective-taking, emotional & behavioral regulation	0.00% 0
Communalism: bias/privilege awareness, adapting to challenging contexts, community connectedness, cultural responsiveness	25.00% 1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>

## Question 2

Which, if any, of the following Interpersonal competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

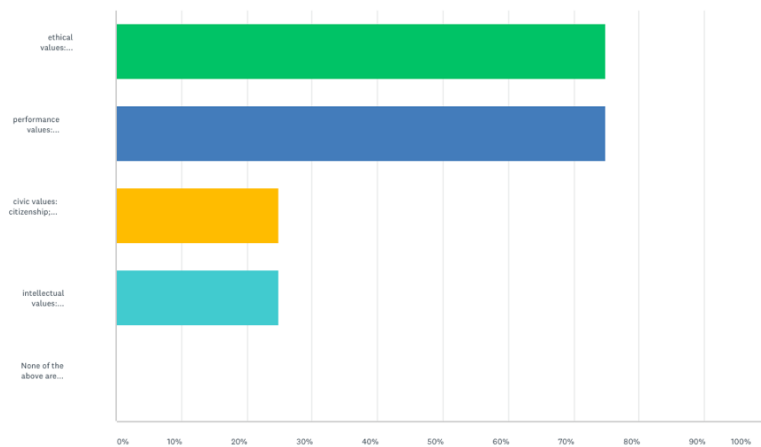


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Understanding social cues	25.00% 1
Conflict resolution/social problem-solving	100.00% 4
Pro-social & cooperative behavior	0.00% 0
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	

### Question 3

Which, if any, of the following Values competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

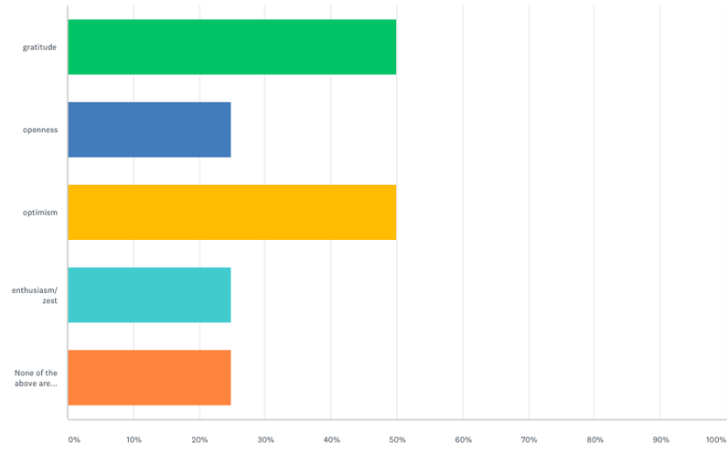


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
ethical values: compassion; courage; gratitude; honesty; humility; integrity; justice; respect.	75.00% 3
performance values: confidence; determination; motivation; perseverance; resilience; teamwork	75.00% 3
civic values: citizenship; civility; community awareness; neighbourliness; service; volunteering	25.00% 1
intellectual values: autonomy; critical thinking; curiosity; judgement; reasoning; reflection;	25.00% 1
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	

### Question 4

Which, if any, of the following Perspectives competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

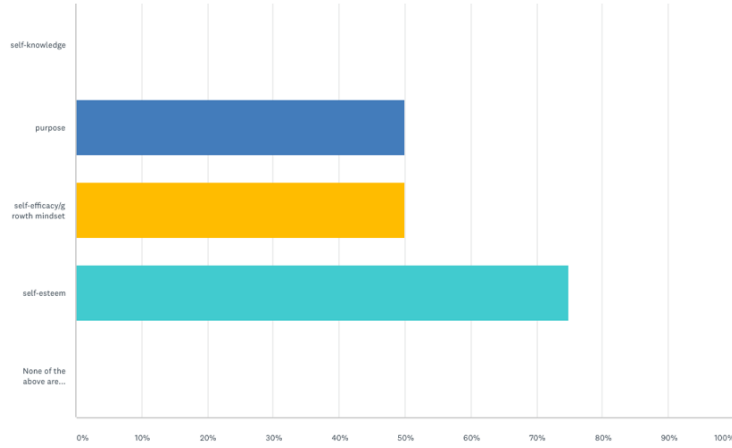


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
gratitude	50.00% 2
openness	25.00% 1
optimism	50.00% 2
enthusiasm/zest	25.00% 1
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	25.00% 1
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	

### Question 5

Which, if any, of the following Self-image/Identity competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

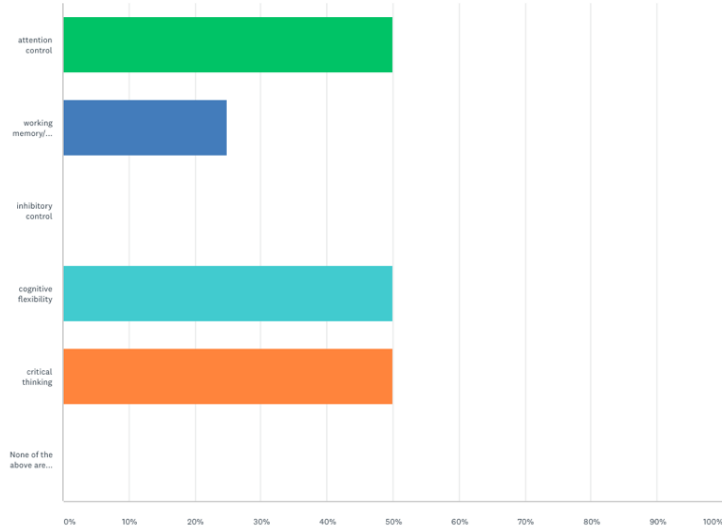


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
self-knowledge	0.00% 0
purpose	50.00% 2
self-efficacy/growth mindset	50.00% 2
self-esteem	75.00% 3
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	

### Question 6

Which, if any, of the following Cognitive Regulation competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0



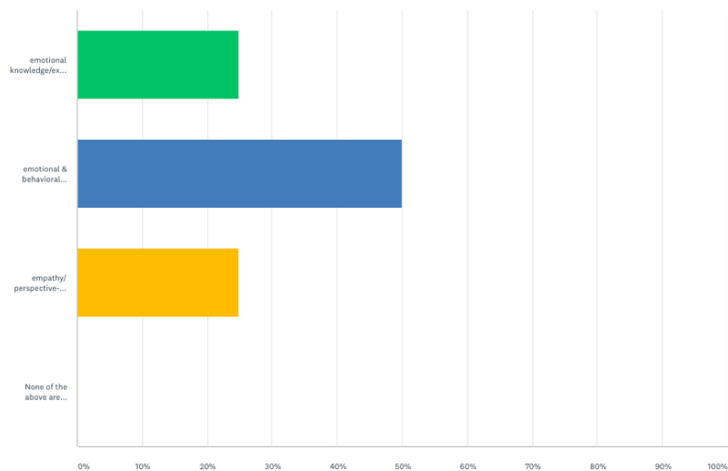
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
attention control	50.00% 2
working memory/ planning skills	25.00% 1
inhibitory control	0.00% 0
cognitive flexibility	50.00% 2
critical thinking	50.00% 2
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	



## Question 7

Which, if any, of the following Emotional Processes competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

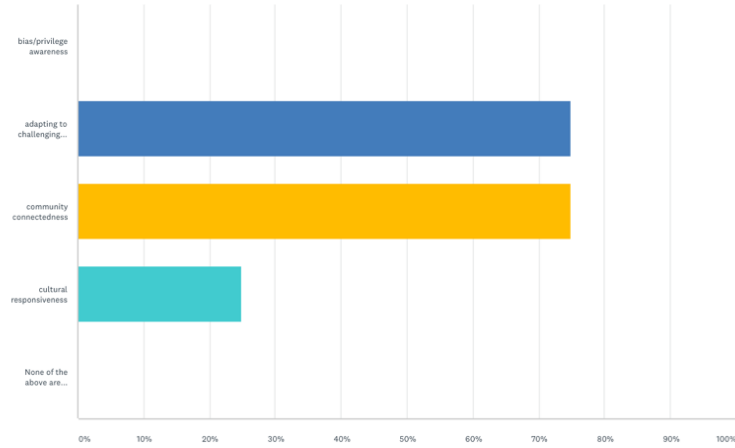


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
emotional knowledge/expression	25.00% 1
emotional & behavioral regulation	50.00% 2
empathy/perspective-taking	25.00% 1
None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
Total Respondents: 4	

### Question 8

Which, if any, of the following Communalism competencies do you find particularly helpful to the positive development of students experiencing under-performance? (Please select any/all that apply.)

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

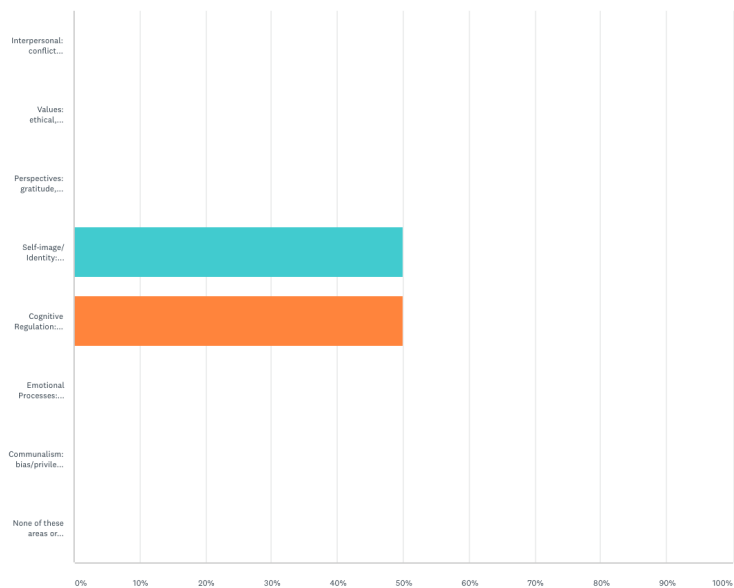


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ bias/privilege awareness	0.00% 0
▼ adapting to challenging contexts	75.00% 3
▼ community connectedness	75.00% 3
▼ cultural responsiveness	25.00% 1
▼ None of the above are distinctive in their benefit	0.00% 0
<b>Total Respondents: 4</b>	

### Question 9

Identify the competency areas that includes aspects your intervention program targets for student development, if any. Select all that apply.

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Interpersonal: conflict resolution, understanding social cues, cooperative/prosocial behavior	0.00% 0
Values: ethical, performance, civic, intellectual	0.00% 0
Perspectives: gratitude, openness, optimism, enthusiasm	0.00% 0
Self-image/ Identity: self-knowledge, growth mindset, self-esteem, purpose	50.00% 2
Cognitive Regulation: attention, planning, self-regulation, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility	50.00% 2
Emotional Processes: emotional knowledge, empathy/perspective-taking, emotional & behavioral regulation	0.00% 0
Communalism: bias/privilege awareness, adapting to challenging contexts, community connectedness, cultural responsiveness	0.00% 0
None of these areas or sub-areas are included in program design	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>

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**Degrees**

Ph.D. Educational Leadership, Naperville Cohort, DePaul University /expected November 2021

M.Ed. Educational Leadership, DePaul University

B.A. Elementary Education, English Literature, English Writing, Secondary Ed, Loras College

**Professional Licensure**

State of Illinois Professional Educator License (PEL)

*Endorsements:* Superintendent; General Administrative; Elementary Education (K-9):

Middle School: Language Arts and Social Studies; Secondary Education (7-12): English

**Higher Education Teaching & Supervision**

Associate Professor of Education, Educational Leadership Internship Coordinator

*North Central College, Naperville, Illinois (2006 - present)*

*Graduate Courses:* Educational Leadership Internship I & II; School, Home, & Community; Supervision & Instruction; Teacher Leadership Capstone; Educational Leadership Capstone; School As Learning Community; Curriculum & Program Assessment; School Operations & Management; Politics of Education

*Undergraduate Courses:* Residency Seminar; Pre-Residency Seminar; Literacy III (Elem); H.S. Assessment of Learning; Classroom Management; Introduction to Education; First-Year Experience; Clinical Supervision; Student Teaching Supervision

**PK-12 Administrative Experience**

Midwest Coordinator/Education Consultant

*Ventures Education Systems*

High School Principal

*Maria High School, Chicago, Illinois*

Elementary School Principal

*St. Margaret of Scotland, Chicago, Illinois*

High School Principal

*Longwood Academy, Chicago, Illinois*

District Technology Coordinator/ Teacher

*Sandridge SD 172, Chicago Heights, IL*

Curriculum Director, Assistant Principal

*Providence-St. Mel School, Chicago, IL*

**Sampling of Publications**

Mahfouz, J., King, K. & James, L.D. (2021). Lessons from the storm: Emotions, meaning-making & leadership during transition. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*.

Black, K., Kincaid, M., King, K., Bonus, P., Brown-Sims, M., Clifford, M. (2019). Modeling innovation into principal preparation. *Reforming principal preparation at the state level: Perspectives on policy reform from Illinois*. Routledge.

Ressler, M.B., King, K., & Nelson, H. (2017). Ensuring quality teacher candidates: Does the edTPA answer the call. *Teacher performance assessment and accountability reforms*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. (2017 AESA Critic's Choice Book Award)

King, K. (2002). Students realize they can shape the world. *Momentum*, v.33 n3, 61-64.

**Conference Presentations**

American Educational Research Association

University Council of Educational Administration

National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for Research