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Our Words Matter: The Impact of Professional Development on Positive Teacher Language

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OUR WORDS MATTER: THE IMPACT of PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT on

POSTIVE TEACHER LANGUAGE

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Abstract

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TEACHER LANGUAGE

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Research shows that quality student-teacher relationships contribute to students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes. During phase 1 of this Improvement Science study, Buck Mountain Elementary School adults expressed concern with student-adult relationships. Specifically, adults indicated that connectedness with students has deteriorated since the onset of learning in a COVID 19 impacted context. Next, phase 2 investigated the impact of professional development on positive teacher language as an effective strategy to increase quality student-teacher relationships. Using a participatory-classroom action research method, participants engaged in a five-session intervention cycle of professional development focused on positive teacher language to support teachers in rebuilding quality student-teacher relationships. The scholarly practitioner performed pre-and post-intervention observations with participants to evaluate if professional development is a viable intervention to increase positive teacher language. Additionally, each participant engaged in a process understanding survey to identify how to improve the professional development process if results indicated a viable intervention. The scholarly practitioner found that professional development is a viable intervention to increase positive teacher language. The quantitative data collected during the pre and post-intervention observations supported the results, demonstrating an average change of +21. Furthermore, results of a paired sample t-test indicated a statistically significant increase in participants' use of positive teacher language from pre-intervention ($m = 1.99$, $sd = .89$) to post-intervention ($m = 4.09$, $sd = 1.35$). The mean increase of positive teacher language was 2.1 $t (8)$ $= -8.91$, $p < .001$. The process understanding survey concluded that professional development could be improved by providing additional instruction on adult and student social-emotional

competencies, additional collaboration among staff members, and additional professional development that is applicable, can be embedded over time, explicit delivery methods, and supports the collaboration of staff. Results analyzed during phases 1 and 2 of this Improvement Science study imply that professional development is a viable intervention to increase positive teacher language. Recommendations for future research and practice include studies investigating the impact of positive teacher language on supporting quality student-teacher relationships, utilizing professional development as an intervention for a different problem of practice, and implementing the theory of improvement in a different educational setting. Finally, professional development should be developed for an explicit purpose with a specific framework to increase professional learning.

Dedications

There are no perfect words to thank my husband Stephen and children Olivia and Stephen II for their unconditional love, patience and support they have shown me while I pursued my educational endeavor.

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"let all you do be done in love."

- 1 Corinthians 16:14

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: The Problem of Practice

Teachers' relationships with their students are a critical component in students' development of social-emotional skills. Students who have strong relationships with their teachers feel connected to their classrooms, are more engaged in school, and feel safe navigating academic and social challenges (Durlak et al., 2016). In a recent survey of 3rd- 5th-grade teachers during the COVID 19 Pandemic at Buck Mountain Elementary School (BMES) in Warwick, CT, data showed that the teachers felt that forming relationships with their students was more difficult during the 2020-2021 academic year compared to previous academic years. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2021) states that healthy and supportive relationships are ones in which there is effective communication, the ability to resolve conflict, collaboration when problem-solving, and the ability to ask or provide support to others. Durlak et al. (2016) define student-teacher relationships as connections formed between students and teachers in a school setting that directly impacts students' trajectory for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth. Gutierrez and Buckley (2019) state that students who have healthy relationships with their teachers are more engaged within the classroom and demonstrate greater social-emotional and academic growth. Interestingly, over that same course of time, an increase in technology as a tool for academic instruction rose exceedingly. Teachers at BMES found that forming relationships with students was more difficult as technology usage increased in the classroom as a tool for instruction.

Background

On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID 19 a pandemic. School closures in the United States due to the COVID 19 Pandemic began on March 16, 2020 (Education Week, 2021). After a brief period of closing, schools transitioned to online learning. As districts across Connecticut

began transitioning to online learning in mid-March of 2020 due to the COVID 19 pandemic, district leaders, teachers, students, and parents were unprepared for the quick transition to online learning and what that meant for education. As a result of school building closings, students could no longer participate in in-person instruction. Therefore, teachers turned to technology to support and engage student learning in a virtual environment. Google Classroom was the most highly utilized digital resource used in WPS. One hundred percent of teachers in the WPS district established Google Classrooms or joined a google classroom to guide students in accessing educational resources. In less than two weeks, teachers, students, and families had to adapt from in-person learning to distant learning. Google Classroom and other digital platforms played a critical role in connecting teachers, students, and families.

Technology began to replace educational components. Wireless fidelity (WIFI) and the internet became critical factors in allowing students and teachers to connect; as teachers used additional virtual educational resources, teachers and students began to communicate and interact, with technology being the primary communication medium. Before the COVID 19 pandemic closings, a regular school day looked different from distance learning. When students arrived at school, adults greeted the children, headed to their classroom, found their seats, and learned with classmates and their teacher in the same room. Once schools reopened for academics during the pandemic, students either virtually interacted with classmates and teachers or learned through an asynchronous learning approach. Teachers created asynchronous lessons using digital resources, including Epic (thousands of online leveled readers), Braining camp (math manipulatives), and BrainPOP (an online educational resource). According to the WPS Director of Educational Technology, there was approximately a 25% increase in technology subscriptions from the start of the COVID 19 Pandemic until the current 2021-2022 school year

compared to the three school years pre COVID. The Director of Educational Technology explained that the 25% increase in technological subscriptions did not include programs that provided free resources during the pandemic or private staff subscriptions.

Teachers' instruction has continued to revolve around digital tools and available resources to create Common Core State Standard-based lessons. In addition to the increase in technology, students and staff continued to practice social distancing by staying three feet apart, wearing face masks and sitting behind plexiglass barriers per Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) guidelines. During the 2020-2021 school year, students remained in their homeroom classrooms for art, music, and media instruction, eating lunch, and having recess when the weather was inclement.

The Buck Mountain Elementary School staff faced several challenges that the COVID 19 pandemic had exacerbated. Based on the BMES 2021-2022 Fall Staff SEL Survey, 100% of the staff was slightly concerned to extremely concerned about students' social-emotional well-being. Additionally, 67.7% of staff stated that they were slightly concerned to extremely concerned about adult-student relationships. Hamre and Pianta's (2001) results indicated that a quality student-teacher relationship is an early indicator of how students perform academically and behaviorally. Teachers have heavily relied on technology during the last year and a half to meet students' academic needs. BMES teachers reported that the increased use of technology created barriers to developing strong student-teacher relationships. Tiara, a fifth-grade teacher at BMES, expressed concern about connecting with her students due to new protocols during COVID-19 to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Due to COVID 19, she stated that students and teachers could no longer greet each other on the carpet in the morning to connect. Tiara explained that all carpets at BMES had been removed from shared spaces to comply with Connecticut State

Department of Education's (CSDE) COVID 19 regulations. In the past, it was common practice at BMES for all teachers to greet students each morning during Morning Meeting and wrap the day up with a Closing Circle in the afternoon. Morning Meeting and Closing Circle was a time for students to greet each other and discuss their days through handshakes, high fives, and language. Since students were socially distanced and sitting in rows with plastic barriers to prevent the spread of COVID-19, they could no longer touch when greeting, and most students could not see each other's faces due to sitting in rows. Students' and teachers' inability to make eye contact during instruction and social interactions created a perception of relationship and academic barriers.

The BMES staff engaged in professional development (PD) with the BMES SEL team to develop stronger relationships between staff and students within the school community. One goal of the BMES staff for the 2021-2022 school year was to establish connections between staff and students and to provide each student at BMES at least one adult whom they felt connected to. In addition, the BMES SEL team has provided Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions through WPS Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) to staff to support students' academic and social-emotional well-being and target student-teacher connectedness throughout the school day. MTSS is WPS' framework utilized to provide all students with high-quality instruction and frequently monitored interventions to meet individual student needs. WPS provides students interventions through a tiered system of support. All learners have access to Tier 1, Tier 2 interventions impact approximately 20% of the population, and Tier 3 is the most intensive level of support provided to approximately 5% of the population. Tier 1 SEL instruction at BMES includes Responsive Classroom and The RULER approach components. The MTSS team develops Tier 2 support utilizing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to meet individual student needs.

The BMES building social worker and psychologist meet with students in a small group to develop social-emotional competencies. Tier 3 is the most intense level of support, and staff provides Tier 1 and Tier 2 support along with Tier 3. At the Tier 3 level, students have one-on-one meetings with the building social worker or psychologist. Staff and students continue to follow CSDE guidelines and protocols while providing all Tiered instruction.

The SEL Team at BMES used several sources to evidence the problem of practice. The scholarly practitioner validated the problem of practice through classroom observations, end-user consultations, and survey results. During individual interviews with teachers, there were multiple recurring themes. Themes included the social-emotional burden contributed by the COVID 19 pandemic importance of social-emotional competencies, a decrease in strong student-teacher relationships, and the importance of a positive climate and culture. Additional themes included increased technology usage to support learning, and a student focus group evidenced students' lack of engagement while using devices and multitasking during instruction. The teacher participants completed three surveys containing four to five questions from the Panorama Back to School Survey. One question on the Panorama Back to School (2020) teacher survey asked, "compared to past years, how much harder or easier is it to form relationships with your students right now?" The survey used was a seven-point Likert-type scale that ranged from much easier to much harder. Seven of the eight teachers who participated in the study indicated that forming relationships with students during the COVID 19 pandemic was harder than in years past.

Statement and Definition

The scholarly practitioner engaged in a root cause analysis with primarily existing data to define the problem of practice. Improvement Science is a problem-solving approach focused on repeated inquiry and learning used in educational practices. The scholarly practitioner identified

a problem of practice developed an intervention based on research and expertise in the field; interventions are implemented in rapid cycles, resulting in an assessment of intervention to provide feedback to the educational community to inform system improvements during the time of the interventions (Perry et al., 2020). The root cause analysis included existing data obtained from end-user consultations, classroom observations, existing school climate, social-emotional learning survey measures, and publicly available data on the district, town, and state databases. All data has been de-identified and did not include any direct or indirectly identifying information of teachers or students.

This study aimed to examine a possible solution to how the increase of technology as an educational tool has highlighted distance in teacher-student relationships. The increased use of technology in the classrooms has impacted students across the United States. To allow students access to education during the COVID 19 pandemic, educational systems have accelerated using digital learning programs and platforms to support online learning (Teras et al., 2020). Due to this increase in educational programs and online platforms, students across the United States have been affected by the increased use of technology in education academically, behaviorally, and social-emotional. In the spring of 2020, teacher instruction changed from in-person learning to asynchronous learning. In-person learning is instruction provided "in person" in a school building with a teacher and student present providing daily instruction. The CSDE (2020) defines asynchronous learning as a student-centered, self-paced approach where students complete assignments independently through recorded lessons, discussion threads, and interactive tasks. Teachers at WPS also introduced distance learning (learning in a secondary location, remotely) through a synchronous approach during the 2019- 2020 school year. In March of 2020, WPS published a Continuity of Learning Plan for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year. WPS (2020)

defined synchronous learning as learning in a digital community with teachers and students in real-time. The administration introduced teachers to a hybrid in-person and distant learning model at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. A hybrid model was students who participated in in-person and remote learning at different times of the school day or on different days of the week, depending on student cohort models.

The different learning models used throughout the 2020-2021 school year ranged from in-person to asynchronous learning. During 2020-2021, teachers were to teach four different cohorts within three different risk schedules, using one or a combination of the different teaching models. Cohorts, teaching models, and risk models could change daily if needed for staff and teachers during the 2020-2021 school year. District leaders split classrooms into four cohorts, Cohort A, Cohort B, Cohort C, and Cohort D. First, students were sorted into cohorts A and B by their last name to divide students into groups to attend school during different risk models. Cohort C was all students whose parents chose to keep their children home to learn virtually regardless of the risk model. Cohort D attended school daily Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday with Cohorts A and B for extra support due to individualized education programs (IEPs) or 504 plans for students with a disability identified under the law. Each cohort model depended on the risk model based on the COVID 19 pandemic. Warwick Public Schools presented the Board of Education (BOE) a Reopening of Schools Plan on July 22, 2020. WPS defined school risk models and student cohort schedules within the reopening plan. Figure 1 & 2

Figure 1:

Warwick Public Schools Risk Models of Instruction

Low Risk:
Full In-Person Model
- Students attend school for 5 days each week
- Reduced school day by 20 minutes at the start and end of the day, 40 minutes shorter in total
- Total length of school day will be 6 hours 10 minutes
- Classrooms spread out as much as is possible around the school
- RHS will utilize hybrid model from first month of school

Moderate Risk:
Hybrid Model
- Students attend in-school for 2 days and remote learning at home for 3 days
- Reduced school day by 20 minutes at the start and end of the day, 40 minutes shorter in total
- At home learning follows daily schedule with live instruction
- Home learning kits distributed

High Risk:
Full Remote Learning
- All buildings closed, full remote learning at home
- At home learning follows a modified daily schedule with live instruction
- Home learning kits distributed

Figure 2:

Warwick Public Schools Moderate Risk Model Schedules for Students in Cohorts A-D

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Group A: In-person	Group A: In-person		Group A: Remote Learning	Group A: Remote Learning
Group B: Remote Learning	Group B: Remote Learning	Groups A, B, C & D	Group B: In-person	Group B: In-person
Group C: Remote	Group C: Remote		Group C: Remote	Group C: Remote
Group D: In-Person	Group D: In-Person	Remote Learning	Group D: In-Person	Group D: In-Person

Note. The gray boxes indicate students learning in-person and the light blue indicates students learning remotely

Depending on the risk model, student cohorts attending school could change weekly or daily. District Leadership based each of the school day's schedules and risk models on COVID 19 data. Additionally, district leadership created three different schedule models, daily classroom schedules, low risk, moderate risk, and high risk. If the district placed schools in a low-risk model, all students could attend in-person classes five days a week. A moderate risk schedule allowed Cohort A to attend school on Monday and Tuesday, while Cohort B attended on Thursday and Friday, and all buildings would be closed on Wednesdays for deep cleaning in between cohorts. On Wednesday, of the moderate risk schedule, all students engaged in online instruction that was synchronous and asynchronous. When the district moved to a high-risk schedule model, all students took part in distant learning. As of the early summer of 2021, WPS shifted risk models nine times at BMES elementary school; these shifts did not include individual classroom quarantines.

This study aimed to provide staff professional development to increase positive teacher language (PTL) to the whole class and individual students in the classroom. Teachers who attended professional development (PD) utilize a balance of technological instruction, student-teacher interactions (feedback), and social-emotional learning, all guided by the human element and synchronous instruction. The scholarly practitioner guided the Improvement Science study by the following questions in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Improvement Science study.

Phase 1:

RQ1: Adult perceptions of the student-teacher relationship

What are teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships in the context of learning impacted by a pandemic?

Phase 2:

RQ2: Increasing utilization of positive teacher language

Does engaging in professional development result in a significant difference in teachers' utilization of positive teacher language?

$H1_0$ There is not a significant difference in teachers' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in professional development.

$H1_a$ There is a significant difference in teachers' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in professional development.

RQ3: Understanding the impact of increasing positive teacher language

What are teachers' perceptions on how engaging in professional development to increase utilization of positive teacher language influences social awareness of teachers and engagement of students?

RQ4: Understanding the efficacy of professional development

What are teachers' perceptions of how to improve the efficacy of the professional development intended to increase the utilization of positive teacher language?

Setting and System

Buck Mountain Elementary School is a public school located in Warwick, CT. Warwick is a small suburban town that serves 4,439 students, approximately 450 certified teachers, and approximately 250 non-certified teaching staff and school nurses. Buck Mountain Elementary is one of the six Pre-kindergarten to fifth-grade schools in Warwick. Warwick Public Schools has established partnerships between stakeholders, including community members, educators, students, and parents, to achieve the district mission. The mission of the district is to

foster academic, social, and emotional growth for all students, promote

wellness of body and mind, build an inclusive climate of trust, safety, and

respect, value diversity by cultivating global competencies, and to attract,

support, and retain talented educators who embrace continuous learning

(WPS, 2020).

As the staff of BMES worked to increase PTL to support building a climate of

trust, safety, and respect, students would become more connected to teachers. As

students began to trust their teachers and feel safe at school, their relationships

will grow due to a sense of belonging (CASEL, 2021).

Additionally, WPS's vision statement focused on the graduate. Stakeholders, including

BOE members, community members, educators, families, and students, believe WPS schools'

graduates should be collaborative, innovative, mindful, communicative, knowledgeable, and

resilient. The district planned to progress towards its mission and vision statements during the

2021-2022 school year.

Key components of the WPS mission and vision statements have been affected by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers in the district felt it is more challenging to build relationships

with students now than in past years. In addition, there was an increase in teacher concern about

student academic and social-emotional growth. Staff and student collaboration have also been

affected by COVID 19 protocols put in place in March 2020, which has affected the climate and

culture of the school as well.

Pre COVID 19 staff met weekly to collaborate and engage in professional development,

to guide and support students' academic and social-emotional growth. COVID 19 restrictions

prevented staff members from gathering in a shared space; therefore, staff engaged in all

professional development and collaboration virtually using Google Meets. In addition, protocols established by the CSDE and WPS limited student interactions. The protocols mandated that students be six feet apart and not share materials. Therefore, other components of the vision statement shifted to the forefront, including knowledge, resilience, innovation, and mindfulness. In addition, stakeholders focused heavily on fostering academic, social, and emotional growth for all students to promote body and mind wellness and build an inclusive climate of trust.

After reviewing attendance data collected through the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) posted on their secure website EDsight, the scholarly practitioner concluded that there had been a steady increase in chronic absenteeism beginning in the 2015-2016 school year and continuing up through the 2019-2020 school year. The CSDE (2021) defines chronic absenteeism as students who miss ten percent or more of the school year based on the total number of days that the student was enrolled in school. Table 1illustrates the increase in chronic student absenteeism beginning in the 2016-17 school year.

Table 1

Increase in Student Chronic Absenteeism

School Year	Total Student Body	Student's Chronically Absent	Increase from Previous Year
2016-2017	321	6	
2017-2018	329	14	4.6%
2018-2019	373	16	4.9%
2019-2020	341	36	12.1%
2020-2021	326	*	*

Note. "For the 2019-2020 school year, chronic absenteeism calculations are based only on in-person school days until mid-March 2020" (EdSight, 2021).
*Note. * No available data*

The CSDE data indicates that there was a 21.6 percent increase in chronic student absenteeism from 2016-2017 to the 2019-2020 school year.

The study Causes of Student Absenteeism and School Dropouts by Şahin et al. (2016) studied elementary, secondary, and high school absenteeism. The research concludes with 15 overarching themes from the study. Under the category "Causes of Absenteeism and School

Dropout Originating from Administrator and Teacher Behaviors," the second central theme was teacher-student relationships. Teachers that were "unable to make students love classes and school, had negative attitudes towards students, unable to make students love them and not giving love to students" (Şahin et al., 2016, p.199) were more likely to have students absent from class.

Purpose of Study

This Improvement Science study aimed to examine a possible solution to strengthen quality student-teacher relationships that have been impacted by COVID-19 protocols, policies, and adaptations in education. The researcher aimed to employ professional development (PD), focusing on PTL. The PTL PD focused on building student-teacher relationships, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills. The PD incorporated Denton's (2018) Power of Our Words PTL guidelines and strategies. The five guidelines include

1. Be direct and genuine
2. Convey faith in children's abilities and intent
3. Focus on actions
4. Keep it brief
5. Know when to be silent

and the four targeted PTL strategies include

1. Pausing and Paraphrasing
2. Reinforcing Language
3. Reminding Language
4. Redirecting Language

This Improvement Science study has the potential to add to existing theories on positive teacher language in educational systems and professional development as a learning tool.

This Improvement Science study's target population included certified public-school teachers in grades 3-5 and special area teachers, including physical education and art. The study used a convenience sampling to select participants. The scholarly practitioner invited all grades 3-5 and special area teachers at Buck Mountain Elementary School (BMES) to participate in the study. There were 363 students enrolled at Buck Mountain Elementary School for the 2021-2022 school year. During 2021-2022, WPS did not separate students into cohorts or provide different learning models. However, the WPS provided students placed in quarantine due to a positive COVID 19 test exposure or students presenting symptoms with remote instruction with an educator hired to focus solely on instructing students online.

There are a total of 51 certified employed in grades PreK-5 at BMES. The scholarly practitioner invited the certified educators who teach all students in grades 3-5 and the four certified specialist teachers who teach art, music, physical education, and media to participate in this Improvement Science study. BMES certified teachers in grades PreK-5 have a range of experience from 1 year to 30+ years. Participants' median years of teaching experience within BMES is 6.25 years, and the mean is 8.8 years. All teacher participation was voluntary, and they had the right to decline participation. The scholarly practitioner aimed to have at least nine certified staff members participate in the Improvement Science study intervention phase to support positive teacher language.

The scholarly practitioner first invited staff with a recruitment letter. The recruitment letter explained the study's purpose, why the teachers were invited to participate, an overview of what was involved in participating, and possible risks and benefits. The scholarly practitioner

then provided teachers who stated they would participate in the study with a letter of informed consent. The letter stated that all participants were free to withdraw at any time and explained the data collection process and how the results would be published. The sampling frame for the qualitative portion of the study is participants who took part in end-user consultations, observations, open-ended survey questions, and the process understanding component. The sampling frame for the quantitative portion included participants who engaged in the Phase 2 interventions, pre and post observations, and the process understanding component.

In this Improvement Science study, the scholarly practitioner performed a Participatory-Classroom Action Research project at BMES. Classroom Action Research takes place within the participants' classrooms through an iterative process of developing a plan, implementing the plan, and then reflecting on the process to revise, adapt, and adjust to create improvement for the identified problem of practice. The scholarly practitioner examined the independent variable professional development (PD), and measured PD's effect on the dependent variable, Positive Teacher Language. The researcher measured positive teacher language with a behavioral, frequency assessment classroom observation tool during a specific timeframe. Confounding variables that possibly affected the dependent variable included years of teaching experience, past social-emotional professional development, utilization of continuous support, classroom tools used to support communicating effectively, and developing positive relationships. The scholarly practitioner invited participants to participate in four sessions of PTL PD.

The ten teachers at BMES who agreed to be part of the study were invited to participate in an initial end-user consultation, four PD sessions, and a process understanding interview. Providing initial interviews and a process understanding survey provided detailed information about perceptions, opinions, and feelings about teacher-student relationships and professional

development as a tool to increase PTL. The Researcher held 11 end-user consultations in the fall of the 2021-2022 school year and provided the participants with the final process understanding survey in January of 2022.

According to CASEL (2021), A supportive and equitable classroom environment is the foundation for all students' academic and social-emotional learning. "At the core of a supportive classroom is a caring, engaging teacher who establishes authentic and trusting relationships with each student" (CASEL, 2021). This Improvement Science study is critical because students' relationships with their teachers lead to increased student engagement and a positive social environment. If teachers can increase PTL, they can strengthen their student-teacher relationships, therefore creating a more engaged community that will directly impact students' academic and social-emotional learning.

According to Georgia's Department of Educations (GADOE), high leverage practices are needed to establish that the problem of practice will "likely result in improved outcomes for ALL students (GADOE, 2021). According to GADOE (2021), criteria for high leverage practices include:

1. Focuses directly on instructional practice

2. Occurs with frequency

3. Research-based and known to foster student engagement and learning

4. Broadly applicable and useable in any content area or approach to teaching

5. Skillful execution is fundamental to effective teaching.

In agreement with the five criteria listed by the GADOE, teacher language is a high leverage practice that should be addressed to improve student outcomes academically and social-emotionally.

When determining the problem of practice, Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states the importance of performing a Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to identify the problem of practice the study will address. Gathering information from different stakeholders allows the researcher to explore different perspectives and then determine the fundamental issues causing the problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The root cause analysis of this Improvement Science study uncovered four root causes affecting the quality of student-teacher relationships.

Root Cause Analysis

The theoretical proposition guided the root cause analysis that students who have access to high-quality student-teacher relationships have better educational outcomes. A problem of practice is the underlying cause of disconnected student-teacher relationships. However, educational leaders can mediate the problem by thoroughly examining the behaviors that impact the practices. The scholarly practitioner designed this study to collect data that could be used to elucidate the root causes and verify that the problem of practice is an issue at this location. Additionally, the study considers the contextual factors that can be intervened upon to see if the practice problem can be improved.

An exploratory case study provided the platform to access this information. Yin (2014) suggests that evidence for case studies may come from many sources of evidence. Consistent with a case study design, the primary sources of information for Phase 1 of this Improvement Science study included interviews with various stakeholders, observations of teachers, and a document review (Yin, 2014). Through semi-structured interviewing, the study extracted insights into the phenomenon of educators' perceptions of student-teacher relationships and the students' social-emotional well-being (Yin, 2014). The interviews lasted 15-20 minutes on average and were conducted in English. In addition to interviews, systematic document analysis was utilized

as a triangulation process to examine and interpret the findings. Triangulation was employed to support claims interpreted from semi-structured interviews and document analysis (Glesene, 2016).

Interviews with the school principal and teachers. The researcher conducted interviews with the BMES school principal, teachers in grades 3-5, and the art and the physical education teacher were scheduled and conducted in the fall of the 2021-2022 school year. Table # 2 provides the demographic data for the principal and teachers who participated in Phase 1 of the Improvement Science study. Teachers in Phase 1 engaged in individual end-user consultations to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships in the context of learning impacted by a pandemic? All teacher participants in Phase 1 were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study

Table 2
End-User Consultation Participants' Demographics   *Responses (EA = Euro-Americans)*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Role	Education Level	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	Years at BMES	Years in Education
Jalen Rogers	3rd-Grade	Master's	25-35	EA	5.5	10
Kiara Dempsey	3rd-Grade	Master's	35-45	EA	17	17
Margot Morris	3rd-Grade	Master's +60	50+	EA	18	29
Tiara Zucker	4th-Grade	Master's	25-35	EA	7	8
Sandra Taylor	4th-Grade	Master's +45	50+	EA	19	20
Alyssa Pound	4th-Grade	Master's	25-35	EA	.5	2
Diane Swift	5th-Grade	Master's	25-30	EA	4.5	5
Blair Palmer	5th-Grade	Sixth Year	35-45	EA	.5	8
Emily Ross	Art	Master's +15	45-50	EA	1.5	21
Leah Montana	P.E.	Master's +45	50+	EA	18	34
Molly Grace	Principal	Sixth Year	35-45	EA	1.5	17

With a mix of veteran, novice teachers, and leadership, the 11 educators that participated in the study - all females – have completed an average of 15.5 years of service in education and 8.5 years at BMES. All participants serve as full-time faculty members, and 100% have attained an

advanced degree. While the participants do not represent a diverse group, they are representative of the school population.

Each stakeholder agreed to a date and time that was convenient. The interviews took place individually in their respective office or classrooms. Interviews were, therefore, conducted within regular work hours during the fall of 2021. The interviews lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The researcher used the interview guide and protocol to guide the discussion (see Appendix C). The scholarly practitioner asked participants to sign a consent form, and all participants signed and agreed to have the interview audiotaped and later transcribed. The interview consisted of multiple questions to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of student-teacher relationships, students' social-emotional well-being, and how COVID 19 has impacted educational practices and relationships. (Appendix C for interview questions).

Observations. The researcher utilized observations in classrooms, school events, a tour of the school environment, staff meetings, and professional development as an element of triangulation for the research. Direct observation occurred onsite to perceive relevant behaviors or environmental conditions relevant to the study (Yin, 2014). The observations were non-participatory and allowed the researcher to be an outsider; and therefore, the researcher recorded without direct involvement (Creswell, 2013). The researcher specifically looked at interactions between staff members, students, and students and adults at BMES.

Document Review. Documentary information explored was in the form of the school and district's family handbook, district climate surveys, weekly district and school-wide newsletters, the district's strategic plan, 2020 Continuity of Learning Plan, the 2021 Safe Return to In-Person Instruction, the district's website, and the BMES school website on both the computer and phone application versions. In addition, the scholarly practitioner reviewed the

Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) EdSight. This platform provides detailed data about schools and districts in Connecticut and information on state-measured assessments. The researcher, therefore, used a consistent protocol to review documents. Based on the purpose of the research, the areas that were considered were (a) the original purpose of the document; (b) terminologies – was there reference to students and staff's social-emotional well-being, student-teacher relationships, learning models, instructional protocols, and policies, curriculum, educational programs, COVID 19 and technology;" (c) was the document current or outdated; d) was the document focused on student's social-emotional well-being, classroom instruction and student-teacher relationships; and (e) was the document connected to the larger vision of the district's strategic plan, district mission, WPS' Vision of a Success.

Historical, attitudinal, and behavioral evidence aimed to corroborate the same phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The advantage of using multiple sources of evidence was to develop converging lines of inquiry and enhance finding more convincing conclusions (Yin, 2014). Rossman and Rallis (2016) explain that using multiple sources also allows the reader to interpret and decide the applicability of the case learnings to another setting.

Confidentiality. The researcher conducted the study with care and sensitivity by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants (Yin, 2014). The researcher approached the participants with respect and dignity and assured them that all information would be non-identifiable. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, along with the study procedures, that the interview would be recorded and transcribed and that the recorded session would be secured with a passcode on the electronic device which was used. The researcher also informed participants that taking part in the study was not mandatory, and withdrawal could occur at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

Phase 1 of the data analysis process included two environmental informant interviews, eleven end-user consultations, nine classroom observations, and a document review. The document review included a review of BMES SEL surveys, climate surveys, and the Connecticut State Department of Education's data portal EdSight. The environmental informant interviews and the end-user consultations were semi-structured (Appendix D). During the environmental informant interviews, the researcher asked participants to share their opinions, perceptions, and experiences on the student-teacher relationships during the COVID 19 pandemic. Participants also shared systems, curriculum, and structures utilized to support student and adult SEL and student-teacher relationships. The end-user consultations allowed participants at BMES to express their opinions, perceptions, and experiences of student and adult SEL and provided an opportunity for participants to share their perceptions of student-teacher relationships during a pandemic. After consulting with the participants, coding the interviews for themes, and reviewing the literature, the scholarly practitioner concluded that providing participants professional development during a rapid cycle intervention would allow for evaluation of the intervention.

The root cause analysis of this Improvement Science study was guided by the theoretical proposition that led to a concern about the decrease of quality student-teacher relationships as a problem of practice that can be intervened upon once the systems are deeply analyzed and confirmed (Yin, 2014). Rossmann and Rallis (2016) present a generic process for analyzing data: organizing the data, becoming familiar with the data, generating themes, coding the data, interpreting, searching for alternative interpretations, and finally, writing the report.

Organizing the Data. The researcher used several methods to keep data organized throughout the collection process. As the scholarly practitioner completed each interview, the participants were thanked and departed; the researcher immediately recorded filed notes on the end-user semi-structured interview protocol. These field notes were typed up, time-stamped with place and date of interview, and participants were given a pseudo name (see Appendix C End-User Consultation Protocol). The researcher organized recorded interviews with the pseudo name of the interviewee, date, time, and place on a secure password-protected device. The reviewed documents were arranged according to where they were obtained, from whom, date of preparation, and purpose.

     Generating Categories and themes. The researcher began by reading through the printed paper transcripts for each interview and then extracted significant statements that pertained to the research questions and meanings formulated. The expressed meanings were sorted into categories and themes using the literature review as a guideline. The difference between a category and a theme is that the category provides direction for gathering data. In contrast, the theme emerged as a sentence, word, or phrase that described the subtler and tacit processes (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

     Coding. "Coding is the formal representation of analytic thinking" (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 245). This means that the scholarly practitioner devoted meticulous attention to the data so that she could symbolically assign summative, salient, or evocative attributes to the data (Saldaña, 2013).

     Interpretation and Finding Alternative Understanding. Interpreting the data involves moving from thematic analysis to attaching significance, offering explanations, making inferences, and making sense of the findings (Patton, 2015). The researcher paid meticulous

attention to the language used by each participant to be immersed in profound reflections on the

emerging patterns and meanings of the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2013). The findings

were validated from the research participants, observations, and documents and then compared to

the researcher's results.

Writing the Report. There is no universally accepted format for writing up a case study,

and it is not separate and apart from the analysis process (Hancock et al., 2021; Rossman &

Rallis, 2016). Nevertheless, the researcher chose a thematic presentation to report the findings.

The root causes are visually presented in Figure 3 and discussed individually in the following

sections.

Figure 3
Fishbone Diagram to Represent Root Causes of Lack of Quality Student-Teacher Relationship

Decreased Student Teacher-Relationships

Learning Environment
- Increase usage of technology
- Internet connection unstable
- Lack of manipulatives
- Plastic barriers on tabletops
- Increased student absenteeism
- Different learning models

Health of Individuals
- Anxiety due to unpredictable exposures
- Unpredictable COVID Exposures
- Heightened stress levels
- Increase in school quarantines

Classroom Management
- Daily changes in schedules and routines
- Student and teacher quarantines
- Increase planning time
- Reteaching
- Procedure changes

Connections and Student-Teacher Interactions
- Students lack of connection with peers, staff and school
- Increased difficulty in building relationships
- Interactions impacted by COVID
- Social distancing
-

Discussion of Root Causes

Root Cause # 1 Learning Environment

The first root cause contributing to the lack of quality student-teacher relationships at BMES was the inconsistencies within the learning environment. The BMES SEL Committee provided three surveys for staff in grades 3-5 during the 2020-2021 school year. During staff meetings, teachers participated in semi-structured dialogue to discuss teaching concerns during the 2020-2021 school year. The Student Engagement Survey showed that teachers felt that students online and in-person were only somewhat engaged in daily instruction. Teachers stated during staff meetings that the increase in technology to support learning was distracting for students, and connection at home and in school was unstable and caused gaps in teaching and learning. Teachers were also presented with the inability for students to share educational materials and participate in small group instruction. A third environmental obstacle was the plastic barriers placed on individual desks. The barriers created a proximity barrier in engaging students in learning. The learning models and student cohorts also contributed to the disturbance of the learning environment.

Further, student and staff quarantine due to COVID 19 exposure and infection increased student absenteeism, which has been rising since the 2017-2018 school year. Students' increased absences yielded engagement and learning gaps that were heightened due to different learning models and learning cohorts.

The district COVID 19 Committee created three learning models during the 2020-2021 school year (See figure 2). Additionally, the district leadership placed students into cohorts. The individual cohorts followed a specific weekly schedule district provided 1.5 days a month to staff to plan for learning models and student cohorts. However, teachers identified a lack of time to

develop appropriate lessons for all students as one of the main reasons they felt the learning environment was chaotic. The chaotic learning environment led to difficulties in the management of learning structures.

Root Cause #2 Classroom Management

End-user consultations and surveys presented data that the constantly changing learning environment increased teachers' inability to manage daily schedules. Scheduling and learning management were continuously impacted by the teacher and student quarantines, technology issues including connectivity and lesson development, and the teacher's increase of planning needed to develop digital and in-person resources to accommodate all students. It was concluded that all staff members had to pivot instruction and reteach lessons due to students losing connectivity, missing instructions, not understanding instruction, and quarantining multiple times during the school day. Teachers also lost instructional time due to changes in various procedures, including arrivals, dismissal, snacks, lunch, recess, and added mask breaks.

Root Cause #3 Health of Individuals

The third root cause is the health of individuals (including students, families, and staff). For this Improvement Science study, the Researcher defines health as physical, mental, and social-emotional well-being. Teachers expressed in interviews done in the fall of the 2020-2021 school year by the SEL team that they did not feel safe working in conditions with constant unknown exposures and risks due to COVID 19. As of November 2020, the BMES building nurse sent home a total of 16 of the 65 BMES staff members to quarantine for 14 days. As of December 1, 2020, RPS changed quarantine guidelines from 14 days to 10 days based on the newest protocol established by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). A total of 51 BMES teachers and staff members were placed in quarantine due to exposure outside the

school (several teachers had to quarantine more than once. Thirty-seven staff members were sent home to quarantine due to in-school exposures (several teachers had to quarantine more than once. Additionally, the BMES nurse sent 527 BMES students (several students were sent home more than once) home due to COVID 19 symptoms and quarantined 131 students due to potential exposures at school.

Unpredictable exposures and quarantines due to the COVID 19 pandemic directly impacted teachers, students, and families, mental and social-emotional health. Teachers in grades 3-5 participated in several surveys during the 2020-2021 school year. One survey was based on students' needs for the 2020-2021 school year. The student's need survey utilized components of Panorama's Back to School Survey (2021). One question on the survey asked teachers how concerned they were about students' social-emotional well-being right now? The survey asked teachers to choose concern levels based on a five-point Likert-type scale. The scale ranged from not at all concerned to extremely concerned. One hundred percent of teachers who participated in the survey were slightly concerned to extremely concerned, and 87.5% of teachers were somewhat concerned to extremely concerned.

Another concern for teachers, students, and families was not having the ability to control when an exposure could occur. It was difficult for teachers to develop lesson plans with continuity for unknown quarantines for themselves and their students. Similarly, students indicated heightened stress levels when the district decided to quarantine them unexpectedly due to exposures or COVID 19 symptoms. It was challenging for students to prepare for the constant changing of instructional models, and parents had difficulty navigating child-care for their children.

Root Cause #4 Connections and Student-Teacher Interactions

The researcher identified the final root cause connections and student-teacher interactions through data collected by the BMES' Social-Emotional Team in the fall of the 2020-2021 school year. The BMES' SEL Team surveyed teachers and students in grades 3-5 to better understand teacher-student relationships due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. The survey indicated that students felt disconnected from the classroom, teachers, and other students. The Panorama Education Back to School Survey asked students, "Are there adults at your school you can go to for help if you need it right now?" Approximately 90.2% of 132 students who participated in the Student Relationship portion of the survey felt there was an adult(s) they could go to for help if they needed it. Two additional survey questions utilized a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from not connected to extremely connected. Approximately 43.2% of students indicated that students felt not at all connected to somewhat connected to adults in the school. In addition, 39.4 % of students felt not connected to somewhat connected to the other students in the school.

The teacher's survey asked a similar question utilizing a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from much easier to much harder to understand student-teacher relationships. The staff relationship portion of the Panorama Survey asked teachers, "Compared to past years, how much harder or easier is it to form relationships with your students right now?" The survey results illustrated that 62.5% of participants felt it was somewhat harder, 25% felt it was much harder, and 25% felt it was about the same. At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, teachers in grades 3-5 participated in a post-survey with the same questions. At that time, 87.5% of teachers still felt that forming relationships with their students during COVID 19 instruction was slightly harder to much harder to in years past.

Open-ended questions in the survey and end-user consultations provided the scholarly

practitioner a deeper understanding of why the students and teachers alike felt it was harder

overall to build relationships within the school. Both teachers and students expressed that adult-

student, student-student, and adult-adult interactions were impacted by policies and procedures

implemented during the COVID 19 Pandemic. Students expressed it was difficult to

communicate and interact with friends and teachers during instruction, lunch, and recess due to

masks, social distancing, desk barriers, and hybrid instruction. Teachers expressed similar

concerns and additional fears of being exposed and becoming physically ill. Students and

teachers felt that the number of interactions decreased as well as the quality. Therefore, creating

a sense of disconnect and decline in strong student-teacher relationships.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

The scholarly practitioner implemented an Improvement Science framework approach for this

Improvement Science study. In an Improvement Science dissertation in practice, the researcher

utilizes a methodical skillset to examine viable solutions to a problem of practice and support

practice as a professional (Perry et al., 2020). The researcher adhered to the improvement science

methodology. The first step was to define an actionable problem of practice within a school

system; next, the researcher created a change based on creditable research and knowledge of the

problem of practice (Perry et al., 20202). The scholarly practitioner implemented the change

utilizing a 45-day systematic intervention and reported findings to the dissertation committee and

stakeholders, including district leadership, building leadership, and BMES staff members.

The researcher used an ethnography qualitative method and a quantitative method to

collect data. Qualitative research is defined as research that focuses on analyzing the setting in

which certain behaviors occur, not just that the behaviors that occur" (Marella et al., p. 294,

40

2013). Qualitative data collection for this Improvement Science study included surveys and classroom observations. Ethnographic research is a form of qualitative research that collects more than one type of data collection to achieve a holistic perspective of the natural setting the researcher is observing (Martella et al., p. 24, 2013). Quantitative research methods are based on numerical data collected that can be analyzed to predict, explain, and test hypothesis (Hinnant-Crawford, p.14, 2020. The scholarly practitioner analyzed all data to substantiate the conclusions of the improvement science study.

Research Partners

The participants were employees of BMES, an elementary school located in the suburban town of Warwick, Connecticut. The scholarly practitioner used a convenience sampling to select participants at BMES. Martella et al. (2013) define a convenience sampling as one that the researcher can easily access individuals to participate in the study. The scholarly practitioner invited all certified teachers in grades 3-5 and special area teachers who teach at BMES to participate in the study. The participants were invited to participate in the study through a digital recruitment letter sent by email. The recruitment letter explained participants' role, data collection usage, and the voluntary nature of the school improvement research. There are 363 students enrolled at BMES for the 2021-2022 school year. The scholarly practitioner aimed to analyze the usage of positive teacher language in the classroom to support building strong student-teacher relationships.

Data Collection

The scholarly practitioner collected quantitative data during structured classroom observations before and during the 90-day intervention cycle. The researcher observed specific interactions between the participants and students. The scholarly practitioner used the Positive

Teacher Language Observation Tool developed by the scholarly practitioner utilizing components of Yoder's instrument and Delton's Power of Your Words. The scholarly practitioner electronically inputs observations after each classroom observation to evaluate specific behaviors centered around teacher language.

The researcher collected qualitative data through one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, and electronic surveys. Participants took part in a structured interview, where they were asked the same series of questions (see Appendix C). The interview time frames ranged from 15 – 20 minutes. Additionally, the scholarly practitioner provided participants with post-electronic surveys, and the researcher used the survey to collect information on the intervention process. Furthermore, the researcher took descriptive notes to later analyze during observations (Glesne, 2016). The scholarly practitioner strived to be nonjudgmental accurate and avoid vague adjectives using specific and descriptive language (Glesne, 2016). Classroom observations were audio recorded for later transcriptions and thematic analysis. According to Glesne (2016), a thematic analysis researcher categorized the data by themes and codes to determine themes within the data.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the root causes that serve as generative mechanisms for understanding teachers' perception of student-teacher relationships. In understanding the individual and structural drivers that impact quality student-teacher relationships, it was theorized that the analysis would validate the problem of practice and provide guidance for an intervention that is specific to the localized context. This section presents the findings for the instrumental case study that explored student-teacher relationships and social-emotional educational resources and strategies. All sources contributed to a rich and

in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive student-teacher relationships. The researcher was able to identify shared or contradictory values, visions, and conditions around student-teacher relationships at BMES in Warwick, Connecticut. The researcher discusses these narratives through main categories and themes, and sub-themes that emerged. The final section of the chapter provides a summary of the findings.

Discussion

Through end-user consultation interviews with administration and teachers, classroom observations, and a thorough document review, the researcher concluded that the root causes contributing to the lack of quality student-teacher relationships include (1) the change in the learning environment due to the COVID 19 Pandemic, (2) managing the learning schedule with a high increase of disruptions, (3) physical, mental and social health of students, families, and staff, (4) and the importance of strengthening quality student-teacher relationships.

Implications

The study raised implications regarding policy and practice as it connects to the current research. As mentioned in the statement of the problem, school districts need to explore and develop a culture around improving professional development to support professional learning. After analyzing the data gathered in the root cause analysis, there are several recommendations relevant to the school district. It looks to increase quality student-teacher relationships, including implementing a social-emotional curriculum, using a social-emotional program, and providing staff explicit professional development. The scholarly practitioner discusses recommendations in greater detail in chapter two in relationship to the literature and current practices.

Recommendations

After analyzing the data gathered for this research, there are several recommendations relevant to the school district as it considers strengthening quality student-teacher relationships.

Recommendation 1: Implementation of a structured social-emotional curriculum

Recommendation 2: Incorporating components of social-emotion programs into daily routines and curriculum.

Recommendation 3: Explicit professional development focused on increasing Positive Teacher Language.

Positionality

Various factors drive my passion for building relationships. My first job out of college was at an emergency youth shelter; from the first day I walked in the doors, I knew the only thing that mattered was that the children knew I cared. Since that day, I have never stopped caring. Shortly after, I applied for graduate school to obtain a Master of Education. I have worked in urban and suburban districts, and while the problems may appear different and resources were not the same, what was the same was my need to connect with students.

As I continued in the education profession, I relied more and more on my ability to connect with students, parents, and colleagues to provide students with the best possible learning experience. As I welcome new students into my classroom each year, I have a conversation about my purpose. I explain to the students that my first priority is to keep them safe and then to love them, and once I can provide them a safe space where they are loved and not judged for mistakes, I can teach them. Each year I have grown more passionate about working in a community where students, families, and teachers feel part of something bigger than themselves. The realization of wanting to build a deeper connection throughout the school community led me

to earn a degree in educational leadership. I have struggled with the idea of staying in the classroom or leaving for a leadership position.

I am still in the classroom as I try to navigate what role fits my purpose best, connect with a larger population to support relationships on a larger scale, or be grateful for the new community I get to build each year that is built on love, trust and understanding that making mistakes is part of the process. While I navigate my personal and professional journey, I have taken on leadership roles that I believe have allowed me to give back, love big, and be loved.

It is my hope that this improvement science study will support educational systems in creating professional development that leads to professional learning. Most importantly, I hope this study illuminates how critical it is to build a community in and out of the classroom built on safety and trust. I was the data collector and the conductor of the data analysis for this improvement science study. I recognize that I should not reflect my personal experiences and opinions should within this study but rather used to gain rapport with participants.

Chapter Summary

This Dissertation in Practice followed an Improvement Science framework, utilized a Participatory Classroom Action Research Method, along with qualitative and quantitative data analysis that sought to increase teachers' utilization of Positive Teacher Language through professional development. Educators' intentional use of positive teacher language strengthens the student-teacher relationship (Nolan, 2020). Students that have quality student-teacher relationships are more connected, engaged, and show positive academic and behavioral growth (Yassine et al., 2020; Rucinski et al., 2017). The scholarly practitioner gathered past and present data from teachers, students, and performed a thorough document review, in her role as an SEL

committee member and fifth-grade teacher identified the problem of practice as a lack of connectedness within the school and a focus on this Improvement Science study. The scholarly practitioner recognized that individual and group experiences lead to a multitude of perspectives and contributes to the problem of practice within a system. A root cause analysis, a component of the Improvement Science framework, identified several causes that impacted individual's connectedness and sense of belonging. The root cause analysis drove the scholarly practitioner to select professional development as a possible intervention to increase positive teacher language. The aim of this Improvement Science was to examine a possible solution to strengthen quality student-teacher relationships that have been impacted by COVID-19 protocols, policies, and adaptations in education. The scholarly practitioner chose professional development as an intervention to increase positive teacher language based on a literature review, understanding of adult actions and evaluation of programs that supported that increasing positive teacher language leads to quality student-teacher relationships. The data collected and analyzed in this study could provide valuable insights to increase positive teacher language, improve professional development and increase connectedness within educational structures and systems. A critical component of this Improvement Science study was the participants input, perceptions and understanding of the intervention process and impact on the classroom culture.

As part of the Improvement Science framework, the scholarly practitioner examined peer-reviewed literature and conducted environmental consultations with public school principals. The literature review and end-use consultations provided a thorough understanding of research and current best practices that could potentially address the problem of practice. The next chapter of this dissertation focuses on the review of literature, end-user consultation, and analysis of programs.

Definitions of Key Terms

Continuous Support: In the context of this study continuous support refers to resources the staff is provided after each professional development session. The resources support learning by providing easy to access tools, strategies and practices that encourage improvement.

Positive Teacher Language: Verbal and nonverbal interactions between a teacher and a student that encourages positive interactions between both parties that leads to a sense of connectivity. PTL is utilized by educators to enhance the educational setting, encourage student engagement, and foster students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth.

Quality Student-Teacher Relationships: Quality student-teacher relationships are developed and built within the school setting that is deemed trusting, safe and loving. Positive interactions between the student and the teacher throughout the school day leads to a sense of connectedness between the student and teacher. Quality student-teacher relationships lead....

Professional Learning is the process through which adults acquire, develop, and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectually facilitate teaching and learning in an educational context. Professional learning may be a result of professional development but occurs through many avenues, such of professional development, professional collaboration, individual learning, etc.

Professional Development - refers wide variety structures that leaders utilized to enhance professional learning and may include a combination of specialized training, formal education, etc. The purpose of Professional development is to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their knowledge, skill, and attitudes that impact the effectiveness of instruction.

Student-Teacher Interactions: In the context of this study student-teacher interactions refers to an exchange between two parties. The exchange can be in the form of verbal, or nonverbal each interaction or exchange can be qualified as positive, negative, or neutral.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In Phase 1 of the study, the purpose was to understand teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. In Phase 2, the scholarly practitioner examined how educators could use effective professional development as a support to increase positive teacher language (PTL). To understand if professional development was a successful intervention, the scholarly practitioner analyzed the teacher's perspective regarding context, content, and professional development opportunities on positive teacher language as an effective teaching strategy to increase the quality of student-teacher relationships at the elementary level.

Scholarly practitioner designed this study to contribute to the growing body of knowledge concerning teacher language in developing strong student-teacher relationships to impact student outcomes. This study may aid district educational leaders and educators in implementing strategies to improve professional development aimed at supporting student and teacher social-emotional competencies with a focus on relationship skills.

The literature review begins with an overview and synthesis of research on how the problem of practice impacts students' outcomes. In addition, the scholarly practitioner conducted two environmental informant consultations with elementary principals, Michelle, and Miles, to further examine student-teacher relationships in nearby districts. The data collected included observations, behaviors, and knowledge that further informed the research. Michelle has worked in her district for 16 years and has been the building principal for ten years. The location of Michelle's school is in an urban town with suburban areas on the east coast of Fairfield County, CT. Michelle's school is a PreK- 6 school with 465 students. It is a diverse community of students with a high transient population. Miles also is an administrator in an urban town with suburban areas. Miles' district is located on the southeastern edge of New York State. The district has employed Miles for 20 years, and in year 15, he became a principal in a K-5 building with approximately 900 students five years ago. The following section explores the problem of practice through the student lens, investigation of adult actions, the working theory of

improvement, the root cause analysis, and explores interventions utilized in research and nearby school districts.

The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning has been researched, discussed, and implemented as early as the 1960s by Professor James Comer at Yale Universities Child Center. It has continued to progress throughout the decades as a critical component in teaching the whole child (Comer, 1988). In most recent years, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded to support educators in utilizing high-quality, evidence-based SEL to support student social-emotional growth in and out of the classroom for students in preschool throughout high school (CASEL, 2021). The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (2021) defines SEL as an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.

CASEL supports communities, families, schools, and educators in providing students with the needed skills to support the five-core social-emotional competencies outlined through the CASEL organization (CASEL, 2021). The five core competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL places the classroom as the core environment in developing social-emotional competencies along

with an evidence-based program that is sequenced, active, focused, and explicit in teaching SEL competencies (CASEL, 2021). Additionally, CASEL (2021) defines an SEL-focused classroom as one that demonstrates one or all the following components a supportive classroom climate, integration of SEL into daily academic instruction, and explicit SEL instruction.

A supportive classroom climate serves as a platform for all academic, social, and emotional learning. According to Durlak (2015), educators need to establish a physically and emotionally safe climate where educators challenge students to learn; teachers develop respectful and trusting relationships to build a solid academic and social-emotional foundation. Positive teacher-student relationships help students have long-lasting academic and social-emotional significance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, Kincade, 2020). One of the principals interviewed recognized the increased need for social-emotional learning within the building and rethought structures to support this need. Miles and his SEL team reviewed curriculum, interventions, and tiered support at the grade and school levels. The team decided to implement a five-year plan, focusing on student and staff social-emotional well-being. The 2021-2022 school year was the first year of implementation, and the focus was on the social-emotional competency of self-awareness.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Throughout the last several decades, the importance of teacher and student social-emotional competencies have risen to the forefront of education (Kincade et al., 2020). Durlak et al. (2010) implemented a study at an afterschool program that focused on students' social-emotional competencies and measured the participants' ability to become proficient in mastering social-emotional skills. The mastery of social-emotional skills benefited students in becoming connected to the school, increased positive behavior, and increased achievement scores. The afterschool program's focus on social-emotional skills provided students with strategies to

succeed at school. Michelle stated, "the teachers who develop quality student-teacher relationships have better classroom management, students are engaged, and teachers need less administrative support." Michelle explains that teachers who take the time early in the school year to connect and build a community with their students have a stronger foundation; therefore, the students are more on task and have fewer behavioral problems, which decreases administrative intervention.

Lippard et al. (2018) categorize student-teacher relationships by connections made through social interactions established in the classroom between teachers and students during the school year (Lippard et al., 2018). The impact of teacher-student relationships on the student is a well-researched construct (Yassine et al., 2020; Poulou, 2017; Quin, 2017). Studies link the benefits of student-teacher relationships to positive social-emotional, behavioral, and academic growth within the classroom (Yassine et al., 2020; Rucinski et al., 2017). As such, students who reported positive teacher-student relationships based on teachers' experiences performed better academically and behaviorally (Hamre et al., 200; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). A different study indicated a high correlation between students' classroom behavior and the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Lippard et al., 2018). Finally, the Hamre & Pianta (2001) study found that the quality of student-teacher relationships in the early elementary years influences students' success later in school.

The COVID 19 pandemic also served as a catalyst in revealing the significance of being connected to others (Pantell & Shields-Zeeman, 2020). Educational structures at all levels, starting from early childhood to higher education, were impacted by COVID 19 (Daniel, 2020; Engzel, 2020; Tarkar, 2020). Miles explains that when students were home learning virtually, they were responsible for their personal microsystem. Since the students have returned to school,

they struggle to be part of a larger macrosystem. As the students try to become part of the larger macrosystem, they continue to struggle to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Miles also expresses concern that in years past, it was a small portion of students who needed social-emotional tiered support, and now it is the vast majority. Likewise, Michelle explains that she notices a considerable change in teacher-student relationships. "We are a Responsive Classroom school. We thrive on relationships and having multiple meetings during the day. I feel like COVID put us a step behind."

During the global pandemic, states and districts transitioned schools to remote learning to prevent the spread of COVID 19; as such, students were unable to attend in-person instruction. Through distance learning, students accessed their education utilizing technology that afforded asynchronous and synchronous teaching practices. To date, there are relatively few studies published on distance vs. in-person learning. Still, a study done by Almanar (2020) concluded that approximately 50% of the participants felt it was more challenging to communicate with teachers virtually rather than in person. Additionally, the participants felt that in-person meetings were more effective than communicating virtually (Almanar, 2020). As stated previously, one of the five core social-emotional competencies is relationship skills. Relationship skills involve the ability to communicate openly through active listening collaboration to solve problems and to seek or provide support (CASEL, 2021). Based on Almanar's (2020) study, teachers could only communicate effectively through active listening and collaboration with 50% of the student population during virtual instruction.

Adult Actions

This study aimed to intervene with the problem of practice characterized as a decrease in student-teacher connectedness due to COVID 19 policies and practices and an increase in the use

of technology in the classroom to support students learning in-person and virtually. Educators'

behaviors in and out of the classroom impact the problem of practice. If a teacher participates in

their social-emotional well-being and self-care, these practices can influence their ability to

connect with students and promote quality relationships (Boogren, 2018; Brown & Olson, 2015).

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, an individual must meet the bottom level needs,

physiological and safety, before the higher levels of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization can

be met (Boogren, 2018). Additionally, instructional strategies, classroom management, and

social-emotional and academic programs impact students' academic, behavioral, and social-

emotional outcomes, leading to improved student-teacher connectedness (Kincade, 2020).

Educators' teaching practices and strategies directly impact student-teacher relationships

(Kincade et al., 2020). However, students in the same classroom may experience different

relationships with the teacher based on classroom structures and individual student emotional

support (Lippard et al., 2018). Michelle explains that more students were not connecting with

their teachers before her staff's cultural responsiveness training. She states, "I feel that the

culturally responsive training has allowed teachers to be more understanding of cultural

differences and able to support students using a lens of equity."

Additionally, the teacher's self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness

competencies influence the student-teacher relationship. Teachers' inability to connect with

students is associated with students' difficulty developing emotional intelligence and learning

social-emotional skills (Poulou, 2017). Learning is based not only on academic instruction but

also on how the brain responds to the environment and students' ability to be resilient and

effective learners through quality student-teacher relationships (Cantor et al., 2020). Miles

explained that in the past, classroom routines would be lockstep by November, and while

teachers understood there would be delays coming back from last year, they continue to become frustrated that classroom routines are not where they have been in past years. Michelle describes a similar experience in her building.

Teachers are so focused and concerned about students' academics that they rushed through The First Six Weeks of School. The First Six Weeks of school is a critical component in the Responsive Classroom approach that supports teacher-student relationships at the beginning of the school year. Due to the acceleration of implementation, teachers are struggling with their relationships and classroom management and are trying to backtrack.

Contemporary Context

While investigating the student-teacher relationships and the impact on student outcomes, it is essential to consider the contemporary context of this Improvement Science study. The COVID 19 outbreak caused governments to transition from in-person learning and redirect educational practices to virtual settings that included synchronous and asynchronous instructional practices. Furthermore, during the COVID 19 pandemic, racial tensions rose internationally as high-profile cases of government brutality over minoritized individuals unfolded one after another. This brutality drove national and international headline sentiment on the disparity of defined civil rights between European Americans, African Americans, and Latinx populations.

COVID 19 is an infectious respiratory virus that has infected millions of human beings globally, caused more than 700,000 deaths in the United States, and had an immeasurable economic impact on the global markets (World Health Organization, 2021). In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to transition to virtual learning to reduce the spreading of the virus (Tarkar, 2020; Engzell et al., 2020). Virtual learning affected teachers' pedagogy and

assessment practices; consequently, students' academic outcomes and social-emotional growth were impacted (Tarkar, 2020; Engzell et al., 2020). Engzell et al. (2020) concluded that students were learning less in reading, writing, and math in a virtual setting. Studies connected students learning loss to the disruption in the established educational systems and structures (Tarkar, 2020).

The increase in technology impacted teachers' curriculum, methodologies, and assessment frameworks to access learning (Tarkar, 2020; Daniel, 2020). Daniel (2020) conveys that districts utilized virtual learning in locations where students had access to the internet and technology (Daniel 2020). The education system was not the only child-centered resource impacted by closures due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020), closures also impacted other essential services, including nutritional balance, child welfare, prevention of violence against children, and an increased likelihood of students not returning to traditional school settings. Overall, the pandemic impacted students, families, and communities' educational frameworks and contributed to a sense of social disconnection, loss, and stress (Tarkar, 2020). Further, the CDC explored the economic impact of parental restriction from the workforce because children are not in a traditional academic setting. While the research outlines the negative effects of COVID 19 on humanity, children, and economics, the crisis did cause a rise in rapid technological cultivation to meet the academic demand and address the other critical services provided to students through traditional academic models (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

March of 2020 marked the beginning of the national impact of COVID-19 on people's lives. Teachers at all levels converted to virtual teaching (Goldschmidt, 2020). During the pandemic, technology was heavily dependent on resources to support students' social, physical,

emotional, and academic well-being (Goldschmidt, 2020). As districts began to depend on the internet and computers to support students' needs during COVID-19, the disparities in access to digitally-based learning tools for students in low socioeconomic and rural communities were more evident (Lai & Widmar, 2020). Researchers colloquially termed the disparities in access the digital divide, which Dijk (2020) states is a separation between individuals who have access to the internet and devices to communicate and retrieve information. As districts, schools and educators increased technology usage to support learning caused, other problems arose.

A descriptive study completed in Turkey concluded that many problems arose for teachers during virtual teaching (Korkmz & Toraman, 2020). During distance learning, problems that occurred for students included teacher and students' ability to interact and communicate, clarification of instructions, and time management (Almanar, 2020). Miles commented, I have observed a strain on the student-teacher relationships since the beginning of COVID 19. The increase in technology has made it more difficult for teachers to connect with students and students to connect with teachers. The lack of connections is problematic and most evident in the classrooms where teachers use increased technology compared to pre-COVID 19. It is not when the students are using technology that is challenging, but when they are not on devices, they are portraying more problematic behavior.

Before the COVID 19 Pandemic, several challenges confronted educators in addressing virtual learning. Additional challenges educators faced when incorporating virtual learning in the educational process included the lack of teachers' professional learning around virtual instruction, individuals' outlook, beliefs about the effectiveness of technology in education, and ongoing support of systems (Johnson et at., 2016). Not all districts were prepared to provide students with the necessary equipment and wireless connectivity to effectively work in a virtual

setting (Lai & Widmar, 2020). Teachers across the United States were teaching students in school buildings in February of 2020; by mid-March, a global school transition to virtual learning forced educators to rethink instruction (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). As educators reassessed instructional practices, teachers redesigned lessons to teach students utilizing synchronous and asynchronous activities through digital platforms. Virtual instructional practices are not new; however, in March of 2020, educators exclusively used virtual instructional practices to teach and connect with students during the COVID-19 school closures (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Talakoub, 2020). Educators worldwide have utilized digital platforms and virtual settings in the past, but due to COVID-19, they were dependent on these sources to deliver instruction (Talakoub, 2020).

As teachers shifted educational practices to meet the needs of students during a pandemic, one tool for learning was synchronous instruction. Researchers define synchronous instruction for online learning as a scheduled class, and instructors and students meet during the designated time using a digital platform to connect virtually (Hrastinski, 2008; Rehman & Fatima, 2021; Worthington, 2013).

Another virtual learning tool includes asynchronous instruction, which does not require the instructor and students to be virtually present at a specific time. Students can better manage daily learning schedules while incorporating asynchronous learning (Almanar, 2020). While schooling through an asynchronous approach, students do not need to meet instructors online at designated times (Hrastinski, 2008; Worthington, 2013). Rehman & Fatima (2021) explain that students are guided through online learning with pre-recorded instruction, uploaded assignments, and interactive digital platforms. Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway (2020) suggests that despite

teachers' lack of experience teaching online and training to teach online, they remained optimistic while adapting to a new way of instructing.

Districts turned to technology to instruct students. Educators utilize different types of virtual instruction and digital platforms to connect with students. Teachers overhauled curriculum, lessons, and teaching strategies to include synchronous and asynchronous instruction. While these practices and programs are not new to education, educators did not widely integrate these practices until the school closures began due to the pandemic. School closings happened abruptly and left no time for proper professional development to prepare teachers to use the various technology necessary to support student learning. As educators redesigned lessons, structures, and daily routines to take place virtually, they had little time to build student-teacher relationships and lost connection with students (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The use of technology increased the physical distance between teachers and students, and the physical distance between teachers and students impacted their relationships. Educators now realized the necessity to focus on students' social-emotional skills and rebuild relationships with students.

In addition to COVID 19, the scholarly practitioner examined the impact that continuous institutional and governmental racism has had on relationships and individuals' social-emotional well-being. After the murder of George Floyd, a survey completed by Gallup showed an increase in anger and sadness among the US population (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). Furthermore, the US Census revealed a much higher rate of African Americans who felt depressed and anxious compared to European Americans after the death of George Floyd (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). Eichstaedt (2021) found that the trauma associated with governmental racism within the African American community significantly impacts their social-emotional health. Educators who learn

about different traumas and experiences students of color experience will be better able to form quality relationships with students (Gilliam, 2017).

Working Theory of Improvement

      This literature review began with a broad examination of understanding the complexity of student-teacher relationships and the impact on student outcomes through the review of past studies, literature, and environmental consultations**.** The next area of the literature review will explore the working theory of improvement. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states that the working theory of improvement assists the scholarly practitioner in answering, "What change might I introduce to solve my problem of practice and why" (p. 116)? The scholarly practitioner based the development of the working theory of improvement on the literature review, environmental consultations, and a root cause analysis completed by the scholarly practitioner. Phase 1 of this research identified that increased technology during the school closures due to COVID-19 decreased the perceived connection between teacher-students. Both environmental consultation participants felt that teachers struggled to develop quality student-teacher relationships since the COVID-19 school closures. After a thorough review, the scholarly practitioner arranged PD focused on positive teacher language (PTL) to support teachers in rebuilding quality student-teacher relationships.

Root Cause Analysis

      The four root causes impacting the problem of practice include the learning environment, relationships, health of individuals, and classroom management. During end-user consultations, teachers expressed inconsistent student experiences during virtual learning and hybrid instruction. Students often lost digital connectivity in the form of unexpected network failures due to internet loss, slow network speeds, and weak Wi-Fi. In addition, some students learning in

a virtual setting lacked the necessary knowledge to navigate through learning management systems and access the necessary material for instruction.

Teachers stated that students at home were distracted by additional factors outside of the typical educational setting, including other family members, pets, and surroundings. Students' inability to stay connected, access material, and environmental distractions increased student and teacher anxiety. Teachers and students began to feel more disconnected during this time.

When teachers and students returned for the 2020-2021 school year after learning remotely for three months, the changes in learning practices and structures created feelings of relational disconnect between teachers and students and weakened student-teacher relationships at BMES. A 2020-2021 survey highlighted that 43.2% of students in grades 3-5 at BMES felt not all connected to somewhat connected to adults at school. Individuals' health (physical, mental, and social-emotional well-being) also influenced teachers' and students' ability to build relationships. Adults at BMES attributed a second cause for the increase in relational disconnects to having students quarantined due to exposure. Contact tracing occurred in all classrooms when a teacher or student had been exposed to a positive COVID-19 individual within six feet for 15 minutes or more (CDC, 2021). The district quarantined exposed individuals for 7-10 days based on exposure and vaccination status. Finally, teachers struggled to maintain classroom routines and procedures due to the high number of quarantine students during different school year periods. Constant student and teacher quarantines began to impact classroom management due to a lack of consistency in classroom procedures.

To better understand the process leading to the problem of practice and to identify causes, the scholarly practitioner constructed a Driver Diagram (Figure 5) to focus on efforts for improvement. The Driver Diagram is a tool that visually illustrates the working theory of

improvement; the scholarly practitioner tested the theory during the research cycle, called Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Programs and Strategies to Promote Student-Teacher Relationship

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning provides educators with an in-depth overview of evidence-based SEL programs. The programs can be classified and sorted to best meet the needs of a specific school and student characteristics (CASEL, 2021). Additionally, CASEL categorizes the programs by students' developmental stage, grade level, approach utilized, and different instructional approaches implemented. The teaching approaches include teaching practices, academic integration, lesson-based and organizational structures. Findings from an ongoing evaluation of SEL district-wide have shown that students have beneficial outcomes if they engage in SEL instruction (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Identifying a program that best fits a district can be challenging. Utilizing CASEL can provide districts, schools, and classrooms insight into programs such as the RULER approach (Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence, 2022) or the Responsive Classroom (Responsive Classroom, 2022) that will best support students' social-emotional needs. BMES utilizes the RULER approach and Responsive Classroom for social-emotional instruction.

The RULER Approach

The RULER approach is not a social-emotional program but an approach to support students' social-emotional development. Bracket developed the RULER approach around the theory that students who establish social-emotional competencies perform better behaviorally, socially, and academically than students who did not receive RULER instruction (Durlak et al., 2017). The Feeling Word Curriculum is a component of the RULER approach and provides social-emotional

lesson plans. To gain a specific understanding of how the implementation of the RULER approach Feeling Word Curriculum affected students, Brackett et al. (2010) completed a pre-and post-quasi-experimental study. Students that participated in the study demonstrated higher academic growth and social-emotional competence than students in classrooms that did not utilize the RULER Feeling Word Curriculum. In addition, students were able to identify supports to manage different emotions.

The literature on social-emotional learning highlights the correlation between students who can regulate emotions with positive academic and behavioral growth (Hoffman et al., 2020). Explicit teaching of the RULER Feeling Word Curriculum and RULER tools produced positive student outcomes. However, the RULER approach has not demonstrated significant evaluation outcomes in school connectedness (CASEL, 2021). Compared to Responsive classrooms, the RULER approach provides evidence of a significantly improved school climate.

Responsive Classroom

Responsive Classroom is a comprehensive program utilized at BMES and categorized by CASEL as an effective program. Responsive Classroom is an evidence-based social-emotional program that supports students' overall academic, social, and behavioral growth (Brock et al., 2008; Responsive Classroom, 2021). Responsive classroom targets four key domains, engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmentally responsive teaching. In addition, Responsive Classroom centers its program around positive teacher language (Stearns, 2015). Elliott (1995) evaluated students' academic and social-emotional behaviors in two different settings. The results indicated that teachers of students in classrooms using the Responsive Classroom approach identified a higher improvement in students' social skills (Elliott, 1995). Whereas the teachers in classrooms not implementing Responsive

Classroom techniques noticed an overall decrease in students' social skills. Additionally, research has indicated that educators that utilized the Responsive Classroom approach with fidelity developed stronger student-teacher relationships (Barody et al., 2014). Barody et al. (2014) research indicated that teachers trained in RC and utilized RC practices, including Positive Teacher Language, regularly developed stronger student-teacher relationships.

Additional Programs

During the environmental consultations, the scholarly practitioner became well-informed on several other programs and interventions to support the social-emotional well-being of students and staff members. Michelle's building resources include Responsive Classroom, RULER, and a culturally responsive component. Since the addition of the cultural responsiveness training, she has observed a significant impact on student-teacher relationships as we are trying to adjust our protocols of what is deemed acceptable to the students. Michelle also remarked, "that it is not just programs alone that support the teacher-student relationship but the teacher's ability to be a good listener and use appropriate teacher language." Miles' building has not utilized Responsive Classroom or RULER but has inputted a daily 25-minute daily block to allow for SEL lessons developed by the building SEL team. Furthermore, the staff implements PBIS, Mindfulness, and Second Step as a tiered intervention for 4th grade.

Teacher Language

Teacher Language is an essential component in developing students' social-emotional skills (Yoder, 2014). Educators that communicate with students to provide academic and non-academic support strengthen student-teacher relationships by building connections with students on a personal level (Nolan, 2020). Educators who initiate positive verbal interactions with students before they enter the classroom provide students a strong foundation for instruction

(Cook et al., 2018). Greeting students increases instances of positive student-teacher interactions throughout the day (Cook, 2016). Students are more engaged during instruction if they have consistent and positive interactions with teachers, therefore perform better academically and have fewer behavioral responses (Cook, 2016). Educators develop quality student-teacher relationships by utilizing many teaching practices that include positive teacher language and fidelity of implementation. Providing educators opportunities to participate in professional development on social-emotional strategies and practices is an effective way to master skills and strategies.

High Impact Strategy: Teacher Professional Development Sessions

Professional Development (PD) expands teachers' knowledge of instructional practices, academics, and social-emotional strategies that best support student learning (Learning Forward, 2021). Effective professional development should focus on teachers' engagement in learning strategies and new content (Elmore, 2002; Peneul et al., 2007; Svendsen, 2020). Svendsen (2020) classifies key factors in establishing effective professional development into different categories. Categories of effective professional learning include applicable teaching strategies that teachers can embed over time, delivery methods, support collaboration of staff members, and a safe and trusting climate that allows individuals to grow professionally and student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002; Svendsen, 2020). Michelle expresses the need for PD to be consistent with training and frequent refreshers. Michelle also discusses that "the district invests in programs and upfront PD, but then does not follow through with additional learning opportunities, which directly impacts new staff and the transient student population." Educators should evaluate the implementation of professional development using a specific rubric to ensure effectiveness for student outcomes. Guskey (2002) developed *Five Levels of Professional Development*

Evaluation based on five levels. Table 3 outlines Guskey's evaluation of professional

development utilizing five levels aligned to specific implications in each level.

Table 3

Guskey's Five Critical Levels of Professional Development Evaluation

Level	Implication
Level 1: Participants' Reaction	Helps improve the design and delivery of programs.
Level 2: Participants' Learning	Validates the relationship between what was intended and was achieved
Level 3: Organizational Support and Change	Some of the best and most promising improvement strategies have been seriously stifled or halted completely because of seemingly immutable factors in the organization's culture (Fullan, 1993).
Level 4: Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills	Are participants using the new knowledge and skills to implement the practice as it was intended to be implemented?
Level 5: Student Learning Outcomes	Changes in teacher practices are sustained only when professional development and implementation is combined with evidence of improved student learning (Guskey, 1982, 1984).

Note. Adapted/Retrieved and Reprinted from: ascd.org/el/articles/does-it-make-a-difference-

evaluating-professional- development

Guskey's professional development evaluation process directly connects to Bandura's (1994)

self-efficacy research. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as:

> people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that
>
> exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how
>
> people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse
>
> effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective, and
>
> selection processes (p. 71).

Providing educators with the necessary skills, similar role models of success, encouragement, and self-management strategies increases an individual's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). The scholarly practitioner presenter incorporated Bandura's four self-efficacy sources into Guskey's critical levels of professional development to increase teachers' self-efficacy to successfully move through each level (Bandura, 1994; Guskey, 2002).

Chapter Summary

Implementing SEL is essential in the development of quality student-teacher relationships. Teachers who create a safe, loving environment where students are free to take risks, make mistakes, and self-reflect on academics and social-emotional learning form stronger connections with students. When teachers utilize positive teacher language, they empower students to take risks and make mistakes during learning. Students who develop quality student-teacher relationships yield better academic, behavioral, and social outcomes. Professional development that is well planned, organized, and structured promotes teachers' mastery of new learning.

The scholarly practitioner developed a working theory of improvement based on the literature review, environmental consultations, and end-user consultations that included PD. This Improvement Science study utilizes professional development as a high-impact strategy that will support the participants' success during the intervention period and long-term success in using the PD to provide the participants with skills and resources to develop self-efficacy.

CHAPTER 3: Research Method

This research intended to enact a rapid cycle intervention to test the viability of using professional development to increase the utilization of positive teacher language. It also examined the participants' opinions, perceptions, and experiences of the intervention cycle. The purpose of this study was to increase PTL through professional development and to strengthen student-teacher relationships.

Chapter 3 details the theory of improvement, research design, and methods utilized to answer Phase 1 and Phase 2 research questions. This chapter includes the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, participants, procedures, data collection instruments, data analysis, and threats to validity.

Theory of Improvement

Based on the literature review and an environmental scan, the scholarly practitioner concluded that if an intervention of professional development is implemented through a participatory classroom action research design, teachers will increase the use of positive teacher language within their classrooms and strengthen student-teacher relationships.

Purpose of the Study

To provide participants with professional development to increase positive teacher language to impact student outcomes established in Phase 1. During Phase 1, the scholarly practitioner identified a decrease in student-teacher connectedness due to COVID 19 policies and practices and increased the use of technology in the classroom to support students learning in-person and virtually as the problem of practice. Consequently, the researcher engaged in a root-cause analysis to verify the problem of practice within this setting. The root cause analysis

included a document review, end-user consultations, and the use of existing data and identified the problem of practice as the lack of quality student-teacher relationships.

Improvement Science is a problem-solving approach centered on continuous inquiry and learning used in educational practice (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The Improvement Science process begins with identifying a problem of practice through a root cause analysis, then creating a change idea that tests in rapid cycles (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry, Zambo, & Crow, 2020). Next, the researcher implements the change ideas and collects data resulting in efficient and valuable feedback within the community of practice to inform system improvements during the intervention phase (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020Perry, Zambo, & Crow, 2020). A core principle of Improvement Science is that a system's performance results from the design and operation of its improvement plan, not simply a result of individuals' efforts within the system. Building on this foundation, Improvement Science helps organizations build a shared understanding of how their systems work, where breakdowns occur, and what actions the organization can take to improve overall performance (Perry, Zambo, & Crow, 2020).

In Phase 2, the researcher designed a research-based intervention that could address the verified problem of practice. Based on an in-depth review of the literature and two environmental scans, the scholarly practitioner provided participants with professional development to increase PTL. Phase 2 is vital, as it requires the researcher to freely shift change ideas if progress is not occurring during the rapid implementation cycles (Bryk et al., 2015; Perry et al., 2020). The specific aims for Phase 2 of this Improvement Science study were to:

1. To increase positive teacher language through professional development that leads to professional learning (4, 30-minute sessions).

2. Observe participants in the classroom followed by the professional development cycle (1, 20–30-minute observations per participant).

3. Evaluate the teacher's level of understanding and the efficacy of the intervention phase through process understanding interviews (1, 20–30-minute interview per participant).

Research Questions

The primary line of inquiry within the study was to understand if professional development geared to increase teachers' capacities and knowledge of positive teacher language would increase the teachers' use of positive teacher language in the classroom? The scholarly practitioner addressed the answers through the following subsidiary questions in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Improvement Science study.

In Phase 1, the scholarly practitioner performed a root cause analysis to understand:

What are teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships in the context of learning impacted by a pandemic?

In Phase 2, the intervention phase of the Improvement Science study, the researcher provided professional development to participants to determine:

Does engaging in professional development result in a significant difference in teachers' utilization of positive teacher language?

What are teachers' perceptions on how engaging in professional development to increase utilization of positive teacher language influences social awareness of teachers and engagement of students?

What are teachers' perceptions of how to improve the efficacy of the professional development intended to increase the utilization of positive teacher language?

Research Design

The scholarly practitioner utilized a participatory- classroom action research design for this Improvement Science study. Classroom action allows the participants to collaborate around a common purpose or goal (Ary et al., 2010). Classroom action research occurs within the participant's classrooms through an iterative process of developing a plan, implementing the intervention, and then reflecting on the process to revise, adapt and adjust to improve the identified problem (Ary et al., 2010). The process utilized in Action Research has characteristics related to the Improvement Science process. Improvement science is also an iterative process of planning, implementing, reflecting, and revising (Perry et al., 2020). The scholarly practitioner broke down the research design for this Improvement Science study into two phases (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Research Design of Improvement Science Study
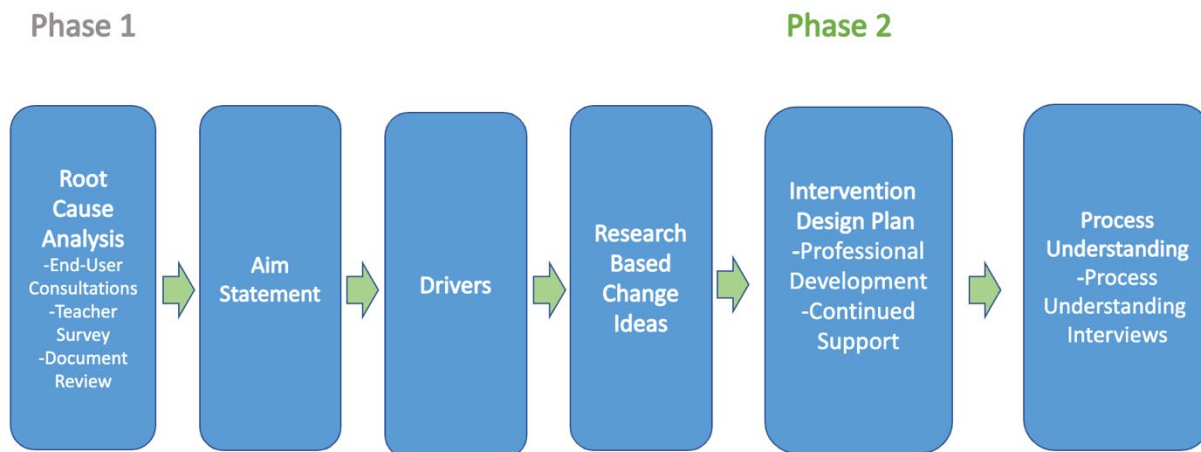
This Improvement Science study aimed to identify a problem of practice, review literature,

develop a theory of improvement to create change, develop measures and test the theory in the specified setting of the problem of practice (Perry et al., 2020).

Target Population

Warwick is a New England town founded in 1709. Warwick is an urban town that has many rural settings. The population of Warwick is approximately 25,000, the Warwick School District serves about 5,000 students, and Buck Mountain Elementary School serves 363 of the 5,000 students.

The participants of this Classroom-Participatory Research are certified teachers at Buck Mountain Elementary School in Warwick, CT. BMES has employed 86 staff members for the 2021-2022 school year. Eighty-three of the eighty-six employees are female, and 80 identify as European American.

The researcher invited all staff members at BMES to participate in the professional development sessions. However, the scholarly practitioner only observed the participants during the pre-intervention and post-intervention phases. Additionally, there are 51 staff members with educational certifications. Therefore, the researcher invited 12 certified staff members of the school community to participate in the Improvement Science study. The 12 staff members invited to participate in the study engaged in a previous SEL intervention done by the BMES SEL team to support students' self-awareness and self-regulation. BMES SEL pilot for RULER. Ten of the 12 invited participants accepted the invitation to participate in the study.

The ten participants included three third-grade teachers, three fourth-grade teachers, two fifth-grade teachers, the physical education teacher, and the building art teacher. All participants were female and of European American descent. Experience ranged from novice teachers with one to three years of experience to the veteran teacher with five or more years of experience.

Nine out of the 10 participants were veteran teachers. There were no risks to participants as the data collected is part of normal processes within primary education, and they did not identify participants.

Participants provided information about their level of education: All participants indicated they hold a bachelor's and master's degree. One participant earned a second master's degree. One participant earned 15 additional credits and passed a master's, and three participants earned 45 + additional credits and passed a master's degree. None of the participants were working on additional degrees or teaching certifications at the time of the study.

A typical case sampling represents what is typical or normal in a particular setting (Glesne, 2016). This Improvement Science study used a typical case sampling to select the BMES population's participants (Glesne, 2016). Therefore, a typical case sampling allowed identified participants to represent the population directly. Furthermore, the scholarly practitioner intentionally focused on teachers with a teacher contract and a valid teaching license. The scholarly practitioner also ensured that all the participants currently served in a role designated as a "teacher" and not in any other educational role, including the administrator, paraprofessional, or secretaries. The scholarly practitioner sent all invited participants an email that explained the study, procedures, and the participants' roles and placed recruitment letters and participant consent forms in teachers' mailboxes. In addition, the researcher provided information during the initial end-user consultations. All individuals who signed, completed, and returned the consent forms by October 1, 2021, were eligible to participate in the study.

Study Procedures

In Phase 1 of the Improvement Science study, the scholarly practitioner performed a root cause analysis utilizing end-user consultations, teacher surveys developed to support BMES'

SEL Team's implementation of the RULER approach, and a document review to define the problem of practice. Next, the scholarly practitioner explicitly developed an aim statement to describe the researcher's desired outcome. The aim statement should follow the guidelines of a SMART Goal (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely) (Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012). After establishing the aim statement, the researcher constructed and utilized a driver diagram to build a working theory of improvement (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Driver Diagram
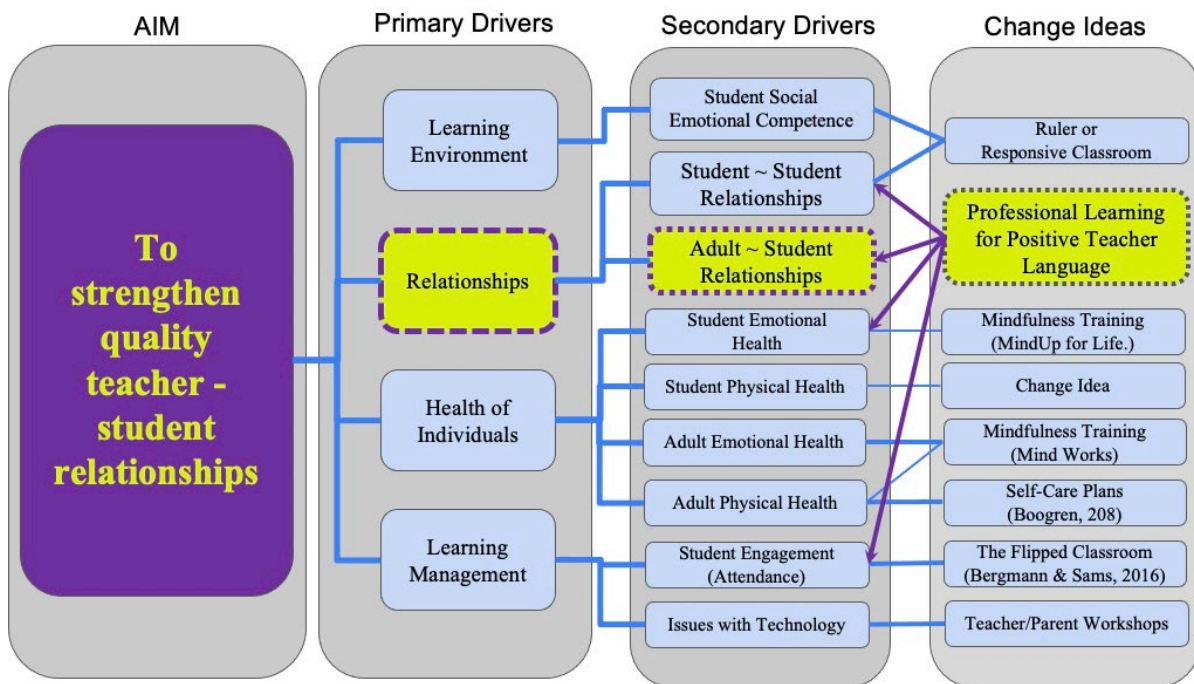
Additionally, a literature review supported the development of the theory of improvement through providing the scholarly practitioner additional knowledge in understanding the problem of practice (Perry, Zambo & Crow, 2020). A deeper understanding of knowledge allows for a deeper understanding of how the problem of practice has been identified and investigated in different settings (Perry, Zambo & Crow, 2020).

After the completion of Phase 1, the scholarly practitioner developed an intervention process that included five sessions. The first session consisted of an overview of data, goals, research, and session 1 of the professional development (Figure 5). Each professional development session began with a topic introduction, an activity, an actionable step, and a breakout for participants to collaborate with each other and other colleagues. All staff members and participants received continuous support in the form of a presentation that reviewed all material introduced during the professional development and anchor tools to support classroom implementation of PTL.. The subsequent three sessions were intervention-based and followed the same structure as the professional development component of the initial session. The intervention phase's fifth and final session of Phase 2 included process understanding surveys and participant post observations. Figure 6

Figure 6

Phase 2: Intervention Sessions
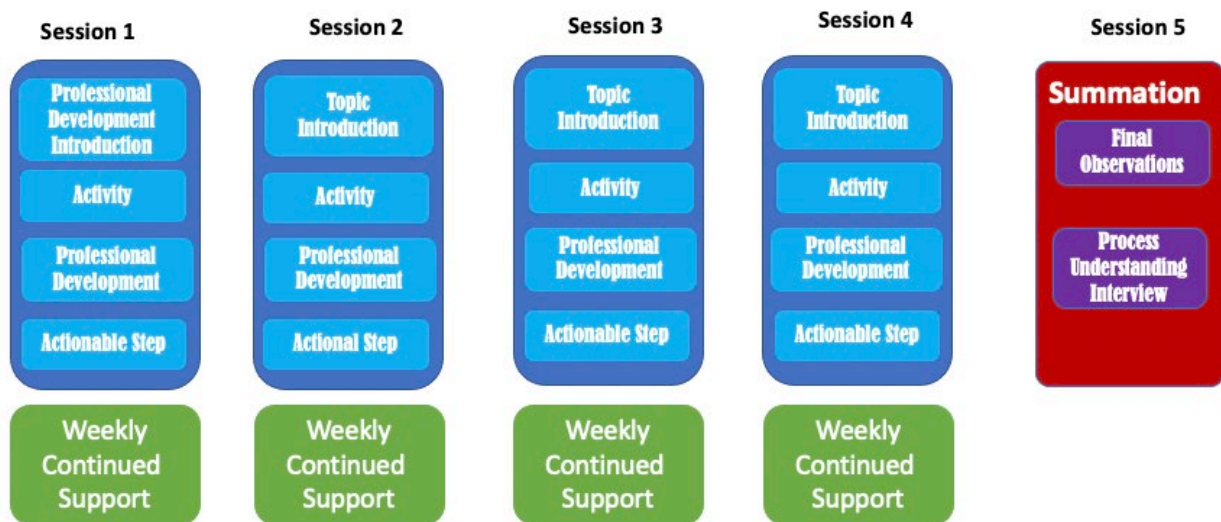
Data Collection Instruments and Measures

The Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board approved Phase 1 of the study in September 2021. The researcher engaged in 11 End User Consultations, including the ten research participants and the building principal. Additionally, the researcher completed a thorough document review and conducted classroom observations to collect data on participants' usage of positive teacher language. During Phase 1, the scholarly practitioner identified and verified the problem of practice.

The Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board approved Phase 2 of the study in November 2021. During Phase 2 of the study, all participants participated in a final classroom observation, four professional development sessions, and a professional understanding survey after the interventions phase.

End-User Consultations (Interviews)

It is common practice for teacher leaders to engage with several stakeholders throughout the day to gather information about how best to provide an educational program that meets the needs of every learner. End-user consultations are semi-structured interviews with the participants to understand different perspectives, opinions, and feelings regarding the problem of practice in a specific setting (Perry, Zambo & Crow, 2020). The end-user consultations included a combination of descriptive, reflective, and action-oriented information.

- **Descriptive information** accurately documents factual data [e.g., date and time] and the settings, actions, and behaviors.
- **Reflective information**, ideas, questions, and concerns during the conversation.
- **Action-oriented information**, ideas about next steps, including follow-up expectations, other stakeholders to contact, etc.

Document Review of Existing School Data

The scholarly practitioner engaged in a document review to collect and interpret qualitative data and acquire a deeper understanding of the problem of practice through a thorough analysis of public records, personal documents, and physical evidence (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2017). The document review included a comprehensive analysis of existing school data, including discipline, attendance, climate, and SEL surveys. Analysis of extant data provided information about trends that indicated students' level of social-emotional supports and skills. In addition, through analysis of existing school climate and social, emotional learning (SEL) survey measures and publicly available data on the district, town, and state databases, the scholarly practitioner investigated the root causes.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations are non-participant observations designed to understand the phenomenon of the classroom social-emotional culture by entering the social system involved while staying separate from the activities the researcher is observing(Macfarlan, 2020). Classroom observations are a method of recording and measuring teacher behavior and mastery by systematically observing them in action (Macfarlan, 2020. The Observation tool included components of the American Institute of Research teacher self-assessment tool (Yoder, 2014). Yoder (2014) designed the self-assessment tool to help educators reflect upon (1) their current teaching practices that impact student SEL and (2) their SEL competencies to implement those teaching practices. The scholarly practitioner created an observational tool to gather evidence of practice using portions of the Yoder Teacher Self-Assessment Tool published by the American Institute of Research and the Power of Our Words Teacher Language that Helps Children Learn (Denton, 2007; Yoder, 2014). The two resources of the observation tool provide validity to the

constructs of the observation tool based on the literature (Denton, 2007; Yoder, 2014). However, as this is a tool created to assess the impact of professional development in the current study, reliability measures are not available.

Professional Development (PD)

The researcher invited all participants to participate in four sessions of PTL PD during Phase 2 of the study. Each PD session included a brief review of the previous session, topic introduction, activity, actionable step, and a collaborative breakout component. In addition, the researcher designed each professional development to inform and provide teachers with current and relevant knowledge to increase their professional awareness and competency.

Process Understanding Interview

The scholarly practitioner digitally collected and evaluated data through the process understanding survey. Then the scholarly practitioner assessed the data to understand the effectiveness of professional development, implementation of learning, relevance, and quality. In addition, the researcher developed a deeper understanding of participants' comprehension of the practices that support student SEL.

Data Analysis

Phase 2 of the data analysis process included nine post-classroom observations after the intervention cycle to gather information on teachers' use of PTL. The final component was a digital process understanding survey with the 9 participants who completed the intervention phase. The scholarly practitioner invited participants to share their opinions, perceptions, and experiences about the professional development as a support for teacher learning. The process understanding survey allowed the scholarly practitioner to understand better the effectiveness of the professional development, implementation learning, relevance, and quality. In addition, the

researcher developed a deeper understanding of participants' comprehension of the practices that support student SEL. Finally, the researcher provided participants an opportunity to share suggestions for other learning supports.

The qualitative data collected were separated into different classifications and then analyzed through content analysis, first and second-level coding for themes and trends to better understand the culture (Glesne, 2016). Coding labels data to determine themes, understand processes, make comparisons, and develop theoretical theories (Glesne, 2016). The scholarly practitioner collected quantitative data during the classroom observations and analyzed data through descriptive and inferential statistics. The data illustrations include information such as percentages and proportions of responses. The researcher presented mean scores and standard deviations when relevant. Aggregate data were analyzed for patterns and trends and presented in tables, graphs, figures, and narrative format. Microsoft Excel, SPSS, Google Forms, and Google Sheets were utilized in the data analysis.

Research Questions

The multitude of data collected included demographic information, survey responses based on scaled-choice questions, end-user consultations, environmental informant interviews, pre, and post-intervention classroom observations, and process understanding surveys to answer both Phase 1 and Phase 2 questions.

The primary question studied in Phase 1, What are teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships in the context of learning impacted by a pandemic, was directly answered through the coding and categorizing themes of end-user consultations and environmental informant interviews. Phase 2 questions, does engaging in professional development result in a significant difference in teachers' utilization of positive teacher language? what are teachers' perceptions on

79

how engaging in professional development to increase utilization of positive teacher language influences social awareness of teachers and engagement of students? what are teachers' perceptions of how to improve the efficacy of professional development intended to increase utilization of positive teacher language? were answered through pre-and post-intervention classroom observations and data analysis of the percentages, proportions, means, and standard deviations of the researchers' observations PTL instrument and thematic coding of the process understanding survey. In addition, participants provided their opinions, perceptions, and experiences of the intervention cycle to allow the researcher better to understand the strengths and weaknesses of Phase 2.

Data Protection

All data collection ensued in a manner that did not allow identification of the human subjects, utilization of pseudonyms occurred throughout for both the human subjects, the school, and the school district. De-identification of all data was completed and does not include any direct or indirectly identifying information on teachers, students, school, and school district. Participants were assigned number codes to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, de-identification included any direct or indirectly identifying information on teachers, students, schools, and districts. All the data was password protected. The researcher transcribed the digital recordings of the end-user consultations and then deleted the digital files. The electronic transcriptions are password protected. All hard copies of data remained secure in the scholarly practitioner's office.

Threats of Validity and Limitations

This study's three weaknesses or limitations include bias, generalizability, and time constraints. The scholarly practitioner needed to be aware of the study's bias, as a fifth-grade

teacher at BMES has collaborated on educational practices with each participant. However, the researcher built rapport with participants due to a similar experience in the classroom and understanding of the challenges of teaching students during the COVID 19 Pandemic. The research design assisted in minimizing bias using different data collection tools, end-user consultations, environmental informant interviews, observational tools, and a thorough document review.

The second possible limitation, sample bias, can impact the transferability of results into other educational settings. However, Improvement Science aims to develop interventions to create change by addressing an area of need in a specific educational setting. The final possible limitation was time constraints. The Improvement Science research design focuses on a Plan, Do, Study, Act theory (PDSA). Plan, Do Study, Act theory of improvement involves iterative cycles to improve the problem of practice (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Therefore, the time allocated to this study should not significantly impact the investigation.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 provides an overview and description of the methods and procedures utilized to understand student-teacher relationships during COVID 19, if professional development could support teachers in using PTL more frequently in the classroom setting, and the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development cycle. The first section of Chapter 3 provided an introduction, theory of improvement, purpose of the study, research questions, research design, and target population. Next, the researcher reviewed study procedures, data measurement tools, and data analysis procedures. Lastly, the scholarly practitioner reported credibility, threats to validity, and limitations. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data for Phase 1 and Phase 2

questions and a summary of the results. Finally, chapter 5 will summarize the findings and

discuss the results, limitations, recommendations for practice, and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Chapter 4 presents a brief review of the study, description of participants, statement of results, analysis details, and a summary of the results. The purpose of this study in phase 1 was to examine the participants' perceptions, opinions, and experiences of student-teacher relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The scholarly practitioner accomplished this through a root cause analysis utilizing end-user consultations, document reviews, and survey data collected by the BMES SEL team. The primary question guiding phase 1 of this Improvement Science study was: What are teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships in the context of learning impacted by a pandemic?

During Phase 2 of this study, the scholarly practitioner designed an intervention plan to support participants' usage of positive teacher language in the classroom. First, the scholarly practitioner investigated if professional development was a viable intervention in increasing participants' positive teacher language through a pre-observation and a post-observation after the intervention cycle. The final session of the intervention phase comprised the post-observations and a process understanding survey. The process understanding survey provided qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the participants' understanding and efficacy of the intervention phase. The primary questions guiding Phase 2 of this Improvement Science study were: Is professional development is viable support for educators to use as an intervention to increase positive teacher language? And if professional development is viable, how can the process and outcomes be improved? The scholarly practitioner invited 12 BMES teachers to participate in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Improvement Science study. Ten teachers agreed to participate in the study; however, only nine participants completed Phase 1 and Phase 2. The tenth participant

engaged in the end-user consultation but not in any other study components due to maternity leave.

This Improvement Science study had one hypothesis and one null hypothesis associated with the Phase 2 research questions:

$H1_0$ There is not a significant difference in teacher' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in professional development.

$H1_a$ There is a significant difference in teacher' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in professional development.

Description of the Sample

All participants engaged in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study are employees of WPS' at BMES. In addition, each participant holds a Connecticut State Teaching Certification, has earned a master's degree or higher, and ranges in teaching experience from novice (1-3 years) to veteran (5+ years). Table 4 displays participants' characteristics who engaged in Phase 2, the intervention phase of the study. Table 5 presents participants' engagement within the studies intervention phase along with participants' previous SEL training.

Table 4
Participants' Demographic Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Role	Education Level	Age Range	Years at BMES	Years in Education	CT State Cert
Jalen	3rd	Master's	30-40	5.5	10	1
Kiara	3rd	Master's	30-40	17	17	1
Margot	3rd	Master's +60	50+	18	29	1
Tiara	4th	Master's	30-40	7	8	1
Sandra	4th	Master's +45	50+	19	20	1
Alyssa	4th	Master's	20-30	.5	2	1
Diane	5th	Master's	20-30	4.5	5	1
Blair	5th	Certificate of Advanced Studies	30-40	.5	8	1
Emily	Art	Master's +15	40-50	1.5	21	1
Leah	P.E.	Master's +45	50+	18	34	1

Phase 2 participants ranged in experience from veteran to novice teachers. The 10 educators that accepted an invitation to participate were - all females – have completed an average of 22 years of service in education and 10 years at BMES. All participants serve as a full-time faculty member, and 100% have attained an advanced degree. While the participants do not represent a diverse group, they are representative of the school population.

Table 5
Participant Engagement in Improvement Science Study   Responses (Yes=1, No =2, N/A=0)

Participant (Pseudonym)	Phase 1:	Phase 2:	Total PD Sessions attended	Use of Continuous Support	Ruler Trained	R.C. Trained
Jalen	1	1	3	1	1	2
Kiara	1	1	4	2	1	1
Margot	1	1	2	1	1	1
Tiara	1	2	0	0	1	1
Sandra	1	1	2	1	1	1
Alyssa	1	1	4	1	2	2
Diane	1	1	2	2	1	2
Blair	1	1	4	1	2	2
Emily	1	1	1	1	1	1
Leah	1	1	4	1	1	1

One of the 10 participants who accepted the invitation did not attend the professional development intervention, utilize continuous support, or partake in the process understanding interview due to an earlier pregnancy leave. All the participants who engaged in the intervention phase attended one or more professional development sessions 78% utilized the continuous support. Additionally, 78% of the nine participants are RULER trained and 44% are Responsive Classroom trained.

Statement of the Results

Phase 1: Root Cause Analysis Findings and Analysis

The scholarly practitioner collected Data to answer the phase 1 study guiding question through end-user consultations, a document review, and surveys distributed to the staff by the SEL team to support SEL. Each participant engaged in individual end-user consultations conducted in their classrooms during their free class periods and before or after school. These end-user consultations were transcribed, coded, and triangulated to generate a series of statements of commonalities or themes among the participants' responses.

During level 1 coding, the scholarly practitioner transcribed all end-user consultations audio recordings and generated initial codes by analyzing each line of the transcripts (Glesne, 2016). Level 1 codes included adult and student social-emotional well-being, student-teacher relationships, increase in technology, classroom management, and building culture and climate. For example, Margot, a veteran third grade teacher, stated, "the last time my students worked in partnerships, shared materials, negotiated leadership was in February of first grade, until this year." In addition, the interviews demonstrated that students and adults had missed opportunities to build relationship skills since the onset of Covid-19.

Next, the scholarly practitioner completed level 2 coding to sort level 1 codes into categories and themes. While performing level 2 coding, the scholarly practitioner utilized Dedoose, a digital qualitative analysis tool to organize data into categories and themes. Three overarching themes emerged from the coding: The need to support adults and students in building social-emotional competencies, A decrease in quality student-teacher relationships due to COVID-19 policies protocols, the increased usage of technology as an educational instrument, a decrease in buildings climate and culture due to additional work and lack of connecting with staff. Sandra, a fourth-grade teacher at BMES, described the different ways that increasing her positive teacher language has impacted her relationships with her students. "I definitely think that the mask is such a barrier. When you are talking about developing relationships with students and seeing their faces, and I think social distancing has created distance, I occasionally will give a hug, they need that, and I need that." She went on to explain that "the increased use of technology and computers to teach students has created an additional layer to navigate student-teacher relationships." The various statements by participants highlight the significant impact on quality student-teacher relationships due to COVID 19 restrictions and increased technology usage. Finally, the scholarly practitioner triangulated the data through a convergent method to limit bias from one data source (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Phase 2: Intervention Analysis Results and Process Understanding Survey Findings

Intervention Analysis Results. As stated previously, the scholarly practitioner utilized the Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool (Appendix E) to ascertain any quantifiable changes in participants' usage in positive teacher language after four professional development sessions. For this Improvement Science study, the scholarly practitioner utilized the Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool during pre and post observations of the nine remaining

participants. In the final session of the intervention phase, the scholarly practitioner provided all participants the process understanding survey to gain a deeper understanding of professional development as a viable support for increasing positive teacher language.

The scholarly practitioner examined each participant's pre-observation PTL average to their post-observation PTL average collected during 20-minute observational sessions. Table 6 demonstrates the results collected pre and post intervention utilizing the Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool.

Table 6
The Results of the Pre and Post Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool

Participant (Pseudonym)	Pre-Positive Teacher Language Observation	Post Positive Teacher Language Observation	Change	Relative Percent Range (%)
Margot	24	47	+23	64.79%
Kiara	31	62	+31	66.67%
Jalen	23	56	+33	83.54%
Sandra	16	34	+18	72.00%
Alyssa	14	34	+20	83.33%
Diane	9	21	+12	80.00%
Blair	9	30	+21	107.69%
Emily	19	34	+15	56.60%
Lea	34	50	+16	38.09%
		Average Change	**+21**	
		Average Relative Percent Range		**72.52**

Nine of the nine participants exhibited an increase in PTL according to the Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool. The average increase in PTL was + 21 points, equal to 72.52%. To establish individual participants, range the maximum total subtracted the minimum total. Next, the range was divided by the participants' average total and multiplied by 100 to establish the relative percent range (Martella et al., 2013).

The scholarly practitioner conducted a paired sample t-test to evaluate the impact of the professional development interventions designed to increase the participants' use of positive teacher language in the classroom (see Table 6). The nine participants were observed once for 20 minutes before the intervention phase and once after the intervention phase for 20 minutes. There was a statistically significant increase in participants' use of positive teacher language from pre-intervention (m = 1.99, sd = .89) to post-intervention (m = 4.09, sd = 1.35). The mean increase of positive teacher language was 2.1 t (8) = -8.91, p < .001. There was an overall statistical significance in the Responsive Classroom domain, and four criteria within the Responsive Classroom Domain showed a statistically significant increase in participants' positive teacher language. The pre-intervention Responsive Classroom average (m = 2.56, sd = 1.05) to post-intervention (m = 5.29, sd = 1.66). The mean increase in the Responsive Classroom domain was 2.73 t (8) = -8.08, p < .001. The four criteria within the Responsive Classroom domain that showed a statistically significant increase in positive teacher language were reinforcing language, redirecting language, reminding and cultural responsiveness. The pre-intervention reinforcing average (m = 2.33, sd = .87) to post-intervention reinforcing average (m = 6.44, sd = 2.01). The mean increase in participants' use of reinforcing language in the classroom was 4.11 t (8) = -5.74, p < .001. The pre-intervention redirecting average (m = 3.44, sd = 2.01) to post-intervention (m = 6.33, sd = 2.55). The mean increase in participants' use of redirecting language in the classroom was 2.89 t (8) = -5.12, p < .001. The pre-intervention reminding average (m = 3.11, sd = 2.15) to post-intervention (m = 9.00, sd = 4.44). The mean increase in participants' use of reminding language in the classroom was 5.89 t (8) = -4.96, p < .00. The pre-intervention cultural responsiveness average (m = 1.56, sd = 1.67) to post-intervention (m = 3.11, sd = 2.42). The

89

mean increase in participants' use of cultural responsiveness in the classroom was 1.55 t (8) = -3.09, p < .02.

Furthermore, there was an overall statistical significance in the Yoder domain, and one criterion within the Yoder Domain showed a statistically significant increase in participants' Positive Teacher Language. The pre-intervention Yoder average (m = 1.42, sd = .90) to post-intervention (m = 2.89, sd = 1.44). The mean increase in the Yoder domain was 1.47 t (8) = -3.50, p < .01. The one criterion within the Yoder domain that showed a statistically significant increase in positive teacher language was appreciating individual students. The pre-intervention appreciating individual students average (m = 2.33, sd = 2.60) to post-intervention reinforcing average (m = 8.56, sd = 6.02). The mean increase in participants' use of appreciating individual students in the classroom was 6.23 t (8) = -3.72, p < .00. There were no significant results under other criteria. Table 7 includes all data analyzed including overall observation averages, domain averages and individual criteria averages pre- and post-intervention. The table includes pre- and post- intervention mean scores for each domain and criteria, and the difference between the two scores, and p value.

Table 7

Paired t-test for Pre and Post Intervention Observations

Criteria		Mean	Std Dev	Paired *t-test*	
				t value	*Sig (two-tailed)*
Observation Averages	Pre	1.99	.89	-8.91	.00
	Post	4.09	1.35		
Yoder Domains	Pre	1.42	.90	-3.50	.01
	Post	2.89	1.44		
Responsive Classroom Domains	Pre	2.56	1.05	-8.08	.00
	Post	5.29	1.66		
Promotes Positive Social skills	Pre	1.00	1.00	1.05	.33
	Post	1.78	1.99		
Promotes Positive Work Habits	Pre	1.67	1.80	-.33	.75
	Post	1.89	1.83		
Student Effort	Pre	1.00	1.00	-.36	.73
	Post	1.11	.93		
Appreciate Individual Students	Pre	2.33	2.60	-3.72	.00
	Post	8.56	6.02		
Student Interests	Pre	1.11	1.17	.00	1.00
	Post	1.11	.60		
RC Listens Pauses Paraphrases	Pre	2.33	2.06	1.00	.35
	Post	1.56	1.51		
RC Reinforcing	Pre	2.33	.87	-5.74	.00
	Post	6.44	2.01		
RC Reminding	Pre	3.11	2.15	-4.96	.00
	Post	9.00	4.44		
RC Redirecting	Pre	3.44	2.01	-5.12	.00
	Post	6.33	2.55		
RC Cultural Responsiveness	Pre	1.56	1.67	-3.09	.02
	Post	3.11	2.42		

The Responsive Classroom Domain showed the largest overall growth in Positive Teacher Language. Some of the largest gains within the Responsive Classroom domain were in reinforcing, redirecting, reminding and cultural responsiveness.

The statistical analysis of the data supports the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in teacher' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in the professional development of teachers in grades 3-5 and special area teachers who participate in

four sessions of professional development that provides applicable teaching strategies, coached overtime with concise delivery, supports the collaboration of staff in a safe and trusting environment, and utilize the continuous supports will increase their usage of positive teacher language in the classroom.

Process Understanding Survey Findings. The scholarly practitioner utilized the process understanding survey findings to guide the second, third, and fourth research questions: Does engaging in professional development result in a significant difference in teacher' utilization of positive teacher language?, What are teachers' perceptions on how engaging in professional development to increase utilization of positive teacher language influences social awareness of teachers and engagement of students? and What are teachers' perceptions of how to improve the efficacy of the professional development intended to increase utilization of positive teacher language?

The design and organization of the professional development sessions were based on four categories of effective professional learning. Guskey (2002) specifies that professional development that leads to professional learning includes applicable teaching strategies that can be embedded over time, methods of delivery, support, and collaboration of staff members in a safe and trusting climate that allows individuals to grow professionally, and student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002; Svendsen, 2020).

The nine participants engaged in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study completed the online process understanding survey. The survey was created using Google Forms and included eight demographic questions and eight open-ended questions (See Appendix F). The scholarly practitioner analyzed the open-ended survey responses through level 1 and level 2 coding and triangulation with the nominal survey questions.

The initial level 1 coding of all the open-ended survey question responses were manually coded line by line to develop broad codes (Glesne, 2016). The scholarly practitioner highlighted over 25 Level 1 codes. Level 1 codes included collaboration, time management, choice, self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship skills. Next, the scholarly practitioner performed level 2 coding of the qualitative findings and developed themes relevant to research questions 2 and 3.

Research Question #3: Findings

The level 2 coding first allowed the scholarly practitioner to develop themes and a deeper understanding of why professional development impacted teachers' usage of positive teacher language. Data analysis yielded two overarching themes that highlighted why professional development is a viable intervention. The first overarching theme that substantiated that professional development was a viable intervention was teacher outcomes supported by adult social-emotional competencies, collaboration with colleagues, and applicable resources. The second overarching theme supporting professional development as a viable intervention was student outcomes that strengthened social-emotional competencies and engagement outcomes.

Teacher outcomes

Educators generally characterize teacher outcomes as the ability to apply, demonstrate, and deliver knowledge based on the teachers' understanding of concepts with the ability to understand the different learning styles of individual students. The participants' experience of teacher outcomes was based on three themes adult social-emotional competencies, collaboration, and professional learning.

Adult social-emotional competencies. Adult social-emotional competencies are a sub-theme highlighted by the participants in the process understanding survey. All of the participants

agreed that the professional development allowed them to be self-reflective on their ability to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions. Additionally, participants identified that their self-awareness directly impacted their social awareness and relationships with students. For example, Jalen, a 3rd-grade teacher at BMES, expressed how changing her language allowed her to connect with her students, "having different ways of communicating with my students that did not include my facial responses as COVID and masks have made that difficult." Emily, the BMES art teacher, noted how the professional developed increased her self-awareness of her language, tone, and body.

> I am more aware of the way that I deliver instruction. Sometimes I say things that are in line with PTL, BUT my body language does not align with the words that I am saying. (i.e., I might be expressing frustration for the class being too loud with my posture, but my words are PTL.)

Similarly, Alyssa, a fourth-grade teacher, explained how being more self-aware allowed her to reflect on her behaviors. Alyssa stated, "I find that I really love to talk, and I have to stop myself at times and let my students do the talking. I have to sit back and listen.

Collaboration. Collaboration is a subtheme related to colleagues' collective influence on each other's growth. During the process understanding surveys, participants reflected on the effectiveness and positive takeaways of the professional development. The majority (5) of participants included statements on how collaborating with colleagues assisted their learning. For example, Jalen, a 3rd-grade teacher, expressed that "it was very beneficial as well to have time to discuss with my colleagues across grade levels as to what they do, say in their classrooms." Additionally, Diane, a fifth-grade teacher, articulated that "seeing examples of positive teacher

language and hearing stories from other classroom teachers was helpful and having the ability to collaborate and share among grade levels was great."

Professional Learning. Professional learning is related to participants' takeaways and the ability to use new learning to support instruction. The professional development was structured utilizing categories that effectively achieve professional learning. Categories of effective professional learning include applicable teaching strategies that can be embedded over time, delivery methods, support, and collaboration of staff members, a safe and trusting climate that allows individuals to grow professionally, student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002; Svendsen, 2020). Sub-theme collaboration highlighted the impact in providing participants time to share experiences, reflect on strategies, and work together to develop new supports. Several participants expressed how professional development provided her with applicable teaching strategies. For example, Kiara, a 3rd-grade teacher, stated, "the information is accessible and easy to follow and use." Another 3rd-grade teacher expressed that "the access to information sent is a resource I can review and continue to work on my positive teacher language." A different participant, Alyssa, 4th-grade, agreed, stating:

> The strategies taught were very manageable and easy to implement. It was nice how it
> was broken up into the five areas. They connect directly to my daily teaching, and it was
> an area that I definitely needed to focus on.

Student Outcomes

Educators generally characterize student outcomes by a student's ability to show growth in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional areas based on explicit and implicit instruction. Two sub-themes, student social-emotional competencies, and student engagement emerged as noticeable factors that impacted student outcomes through the professional development.

Student social-emotional competencies. Student social-emotional competencies is a sub-theme that emerged in the student outcome's theme related to students' abilities to recognize, name, understand, and manage their emotions. A second social-emotional competency is social-awareness, the ability to maintain relationships and make responsible decisions. Eight of the nine participants acknowledged how changing their language supported their ability to build a safe and trusting environment, strengthen students' emotional intelligence, and change students' behaviors. Sandra, a 4th-grade teacher, commented on "the importance of building trust with students and that this is a continuous process. Along with the importance of listening and giving more wait time." Blair, a 5th-grade teacher, acknowledged how changing her language allowed the students to be more self-aware and manage their behaviors.

> I am encouraging students by giving brief directions and trying to refer back to
> expectations to adjust student behaviors that are not following the rules. Instead of say
> things like, "Johnny, don't do that." I use reminding or redirecting language and say,
> "Johnny go back to your seat and take out your book." I keep my tone neutral and the
> redirection brief. This empowers the student to manage his behavior.

Similarly, Jalen's went on to express how her students' ability to be more self-aware and self-regulate has allowed them to be more socially aware of their environment. She reflected, "I have noticed that my students are taking more responsibility for themselves in the classroom and are encouraging each other to be more independent and to problem solve."

Lea, the physical education teacher at BMES, noticed her "students respond well to a positive environment." She went on to say, "it is good for students to have tools to regulate their social-emotional learning." Finally, Margot, a 4th-grade teacher, observed changes in students since she has been consciously using the strategies taught at the professional development to

increase her positive teacher language. Margot stated, "I notice students are able to problem-solve and reach a quiet internal space in less time."

Engagement. Engagement is a sub-theme that emerged under the student outcome's theme. The engagement sub-theme is related to students' ability to stay focused, participate, interact with materials and others, and complete tasks to achieve academic, social-emotional, and behavioral growth. Participants mentioned that student engagement levels changed as they increased their usage of positive teacher language in the classroom. Alyssa, a 4th-grade teacher, observed her students "have started to transition a little faster since my directions have been more direct and explicit." Blair, a 5th-grade teacher, added that students spend "more time on task." Finally, Lea, the physical education teacher, states, "they seem more content."

Research Question #4: Findings

Additional level 2 coding enabled the scholarly practitioner to develop themes on how to support teachers in the future when providing professional development as an intervention for change. Three themes emerged from the process-understanding surveys on improving the outcomes and process of professional development. Theme one was additional collaboration with colleagues. The second theme identified was additional instruction on adult and student social-emotional competencies. The third theme was additional professional development

Additional Collaboration with Colleagues

As stated earlier, collaboration is the collective influence colleagues have on each other's learning and growth. The participants noted that collaborating with staff members in different positions at BMES assisted in connecting the professional development by providing authentic experiences within the classrooms and strategies utilized by colleagues. Most importantly, sharing ideas created a culture of trust and safety among the participants. Even though the

participants discussed the positive impact of collaboration on their success with implementation, it was evident that the participants felt that more time to collaborate moving forward would increase professional development success. Sandra, 4th-grade teacher, and Jalen, 3rd-grade teacher, both agreed that collaboration through observation of other teachers in their classrooms would provide an opportunity for growth. Sandra stated, "having an opportunity to see others in action would be beneficial." Jalen theorized:

> That having the opportunity to have time to observe another teacher and observe their teacher language and vice versa. I think this would have been beneficial to myself and the other teacher because we could have a chance to exchange feedback and collaborate on solutions to use in the classroom.

Additional Instruction on Adult and Student Social-Emotional Competencies

Adult and student social-emotional competencies was the second theme extracted from the findings while coding to gain insight into what professional development components were beneficial in leading to professional learning. Through self-reflection, participants became more self-aware and socially aware of their needs and others' needs. Although social-emotional instruction was embedded in the professional development to provide participants background knowledge on why positive teacher language is critical to support students' social-emotional growth, participants expressed the need for more SEL. Blair, a 5th-grade teacher, stated that "it can be challenging to form new habits and change your language. When initializing, you have to make a conscious choice." Lea, the physical education teacher, went on to suggest that additional "discussion on positive teacher language focused on students who are experiencing greater behavior concerns" would support teachers' ability to build relationships with all students. Lastly,

Kiara, a 3rd-grade teacher, expressed the desire to learn how to implement "positive teacher language when you are upset with a kid."

Details of the Analysis

Quantitative. The quantitative data collected for this Improvement Science study demonstrated that 100 % of the teacher participants in the study significantly increased their use of positive teacher language after participating in professional development and utilizing continuous support as measured by the Positive Teacher Language Observational Tool. Therefore, proves the study's hypothesis that there is a significant difference in teacher' utilization of positive teacher language based on participating in professional development for teachers in grades 3-5 and special area teachers who participated in professional development that provided applicable teaching strategies, coached overtime with concise delivery, supports collaboration of staff in a safe and trusting environment, and utilized the continuous support would increase their usage of positive teacher language in the classroom. However, the scholarly practitioner noted that not all participants engaged in the four professional development sessions, and two of the participants did not access the continuous support.

Qualitative. The qualitative findings in this Improvement Science study supported the hypothesis that professional development is a viable intervention to increase positive teacher language. The analysis of the process understanding survey revealed two overarching themes teacher outcomes and student outcomes. Theme one, teacher outcomes, was divided into three sub-themes: adult social-emotional competencies, collaboration, and professional learning. The second theme, student outcomes, was divided into two subthemes: student social-emotional competencies and engagement. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis extracted findings from the data guided how to improve future professional development to increase application and success

within the classroom. The three themes included additional collaboration with colleagues, additional instruction on adult and student social-emotional competencies, and additional professional development.

Summary of the Results

The scholarly practitioner utilized the Positive Language Teacher Observational Tool to examine teachers' use of positive teacher language pre-intervention and post-intervention. Additionally, the process understanding survey provided a more profound understanding of the viability of professional development as an intervention and how to improve the process. These tools were developed and validated by the scholarly practitioner following the review of the literature.

One hundred percent of participants engaged in the intervention phase increased their usage of positive teacher language in the classroom. Furthermore, the participants experienced professional development that was precisely planned and designed to embed collaboration and applicable teaching strategies in a safe and trusting climate that allows for professional learning (Guskey, 2002; Svendsen, 2020). Participants' responses in the process understanding survey provided insight for improving professional development.

Based on the data collected and presented in this Improvement Science study, the scholarly practitioner feels confident in reporting that professional development is a viable intervention to increase positive teacher language while supporting adult and students' social-emotional well-being. This determined outcome will be discussed further in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This chapter presents an overview of the entire Improvement Science study. It begins with a restatement of the problem of practice and the purpose of the study, followed by a summary and discussion of the study and implications of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

In Phase 1 of this study, the purpose was to understand teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. In Phase 2, the scholarly practitioner examined if effective professional development could be used as an intervention to increase positive teacher language. After the intervention, the participants engaged in a process understanding survey to understand how to improve professional development. A participatory classroom-action research methodology was utilized due to the connection to the Improvement Science study process. The scholarly practitioner and the participants worked together to understand the problem of practice and engaged in an iterative process of research (Macbeth, n.d.).

The scholarly practitioner used the Positive Teacher Language Observation Tool and a process understanding survey to collect pre- and post-intervention data from a convenience sampling of nine certified educators who work for the school district of WPS in Connecticut.

Summary of the Results

This study transpired during the COVID 19 Pandemic, and educational policies and procedures were in constant change to meet the needs of students, families, and staff. During the Pandemic, state and local school systems put precautions into place to prevent exposure and spread of COVID 19. Precautions included social distancing, masks, transparent plastic barriers to prevent the spread, scheduling changes, and different learning structures to decrease contact.

The scholarly practitioner identified that students and teachers felt there was a deterioration in connections between student-teacher, student-student, and adult-adult during this period. The scholarly practitioners aimed to strengthen quality student-teacher relationships. After a thorough root cause analysis, literature review, environmental consultations, and examination of SEL programs, the scholarly practitioner followed a Participatory Classroom Action Research design. This Improvement Science study provided participants with four professional development sessions to support teachers in increasing their Positive Teacher Language. The scholarly practitioner collected both quantitative and qualitative data during the study. Pre- and Participants completed post-intervention observations to collect quantitative data on ten criteria taught in the intervention sessions. Additionally, the participants engaged in a process understanding survey that provided the researcher with qualitative to understand the impact and efficacy of professional development. The quantitative data showed an overall statistically significant increase in teachers' usage of Positive Teacher Language and a deeper understanding of the direct impact and efficacy of professional development.

Discussion of the Results

This Improvement Science study was based on the premise that quality student-teacher relationships are a key factor in students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success throughout their education (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Considering the cultural context of the COVID 19 pandemic and the increase in technology as an educational tool, this study explored teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Findings in Phase 1 indicated that participants perceived a decrease in quality student-teacher relationships due to COVID-19 policies and protocols and the increased usage of technology as an educational tool. Participants identified the need to support adults and students in building social-emotional competencies to

102

rebuild connections. The scholarly practitioner developed a theory of improvement based on end-user consultations, environmental consultations, and a literature review. Participants in Phase 2 of the study engaged in four professional development sessions to increase positive teacher language, strengthening student-teacher relationships.

The Positive Teacher Language Observational tool indicated that all the participants engaged in the professional development intervention phase showed a statistically significant increase in positive teacher language used within their classrooms. Pianta et al. (2016) found that "teachers' interactions with children can be significantly and systematically improved through targeted and sustained professional development" (p.119). The scholarly practitioner created professional development to meet specific criteria that have been studied and proven successful. Duong et al. (2019) reported that professional development designed to be brief and provide ongoing support improved student-teacher relationships. The intervention phase sessions of this Improvement Science study were designed around the framework of effective professional development. The sessions were brief, explicit, and provided an opportunity for participants and other staff to collaborate, provide applicable teaching strategies, and provide continuous support to participants after each session (Duong, 2019, Guskey, 2002, Svendsen, 2020). The process understanding survey also supported the quantitative data with similar findings that indicated that the participants noticed a change in their behavior, their student's behavior, or the teacher and students' behavior. How students and teachers internalize others' behaviors will decide the quality of their relationships.

Teachers that build quality student-teacher relationships within their classroom communities use language to strengthen their connections with students (Kincade et al., 2020). Teachers who consciously use language to improve student-teacher relationships beyond

academic exchange create connections with their students on different levels (Nolan, 2020).

Relationships are built on individuals' ability to use language, listen, collaborate with others, navigate conflict, and understand others' points of view (CASEL, 2022). All participants recognized that professional development has changed the way they think about teacher language and have made a conscious effort to use language that supports students in academic growth, social-emotional competencies, and building a sense of community through relationships (Denton, 2015).

The process of understanding survey findings illustrated the importance of collaboration during professional development to provide meaning to the learning. Five of the nine participants indicated that additional collaboration would increase the professional learning gained during the professional development. There was also a desire from participants to have additional professional development. Recent studies have examined past research on professional development, and the focus to deliver and evaluate has been replaced with a new focus on authentic experiences and reflection (Karacabey, 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Webster-Wright, 2009). The process understanding survey allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on challenges, positives, what they would want to change, what they would want to keep, and what would best support learning in future professional development. Providing participants, the opportunity to voice their opinions allows for future professional development to provide authentic experiences that meet individuals' needs.

Limitations

Improvement Science is a problem-solving approach developed to implement change in rapid cycles based on knowledge of a setting and research (Bryk et at., 2017). Due to the specific

design of Improvement Science research, it is inherent to certain limitations. Limitations in this study include personal bias, generalizability, time constraints, and small sample size.

Implicit bias can occur when the researcher is a community member where the study is being done. The scholarly practitioner was a fifth-grade teacher at the building where the Improvement Science study occurred. However, the scholarly practitioner tried to avert personal bias using the Improvement Science research design. The Improvement Science research design prescribes a thorough root cause analysis that involved a document review, review of past data sets, end-user consultations, environment informant interviews.

Improvement Science is specific to the setting where change is needed, and therefore, generalizability is not a concept that is expected within the design. The scholarly practitioner developed an intervention based on the problem of practice established at BMES. Even though the scholarly practitioner developed for a specific problem of practice, it does not mean that the intervention is not transferable to another setting.

Furthermore, based on the philosophy of improvement, science is grounded in rapid cycles of change. The period between intervention and implementation was short but did not impact the study. However, a recommendation for future studies would be to continue the professional development intervention with a larger sample size.

Moving forward, the implications of findings support professional development as an intervention to support professional learning when developed utilizing a specific framework and explicit intentions.

Recommendations for Policy

As the nationwide awareness of the seriousness of adult and student social-emotional well-being continues to grow, policies inclusive of social-emotional learning must be developed

at the federal, state, and local levels to have structures in place to support teachers and students. The development, integration, and alignment of federal, state, and local policies could generate funding that enables states and school districts to build a coherent academic and social-emotional curriculum to meet students' needs. Establishing unity at the federal, state, and local level would demonstrate to the public a united commitment.

Although some states have standards, all states should establish pre-k-12 social-emotional standards and provide districts and educators with ongoing professional development that effectively leads to professional learning. According to the research, effective professional development should be developed and evaluated using specific criteria (Gusky, 2002; Shaha, 2004). State policy should provide social-emotional professional development to support adults and students. Adults with well-rounded social-emotional skills leads to empathetic educators that can support students' development of social-emotional skills.

Recommendations for Practice

It is essential to have federal, state, and local levels in support to prioritize the implementation of social-emotional instruction. Due to the large number of initiatives taken on by states, districts, and individual schools, educators' stress and anxiety levels have risen. State and local school districts feel compelled to participate in initiatives that provide additional resources, including money for students. However, educators have seen initiatives come and go, are disheartened by the process, and suffer from initiative fatigue. Before recommendations can be given, it is essential that all levels of leadership are in agreement about the importance of adult and student social-emotional learning. Teacher buy-in will happen over time when they have received consistent support and student resources. Social-emotional learning cannot be another fleeting initiative.

If districts want their teachers to buy in, they will first need to invest in the teachers' social-emotional. Teachers with high emotional intelligence become models for their students on communicating effectively, regulating emotions, and making responsible decisions while being aware of others' perspectives (Lam & Wong, 2017). Furthermore, they can effectively build relationships with students, parents, and colleagues.

Building quality student-teacher relationships increases students' classroom engagement and improves student behavioral, social-emotional, and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2016; Gutierrez &Buckley, 2019). An effective way to build quality student-teacher relationships is through language (Denton, 2015; Nolan 2020). Language is a powerful tool accessible to educators and students. Even though teachers have access to language, it is critical that they are trained in using language most effectively. Teacher training should be through authentic professional development that meets the needs of the teachers and students in a specific district.

For professional development to be impactful, individual schools should establish a culture that feels safe and trusting. The school culture should be built around staff and students feeling a sense of belonging through a shared mission and vision. In a community built upon trust and belonging, it is critical to allow staff the opportunity to voice their professional learning needs.

In terms of the professional development delivery model and format, a series of shorter sessions (20-30 minutes) allows teachers to process the information provided without feeling overwhelmed. Providing shorter sessions allows teachers to process what they learned and utilize delivery methods and applicable teaching strategies in between sessions (Gusky, 2002; Svendson, 2020). In between professional development sessions, staff should be provided with

continuous support to assist in applying new skills and knowledge. When staff comes together for continual sessions, it allows collaboration on strategies, challenges, and successes.

It was evident in the findings that participants felt that collaborating with staff in various positions was a component that made professional development successful. Colleagues sharing stories of success and failure presenting challenges to each other provided participants an opportunity to share strategies and support each other while navigating real-world scenarios within their classrooms. Through collaboration, connecting with colleagues supports a safe culture built on trust and allows staff to build meaningful relationships. Although each professional development session had an embedded collaboration component, participants stated they would like additional opportunities to collaborate through observing their peers and reflecting on practices.

Educators should view professional development as a pathway to professional learning. Professional learning involves gains or changes in knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Professional development should be evidence-based structured to include applicable teaching strategies delivery methods that can be implemented over time and allow for collaboration. Intentionally designed professional development will link research and practice and be adaptive to different learning styles.

Recommendations for Future Research.

During a thorough root cause analysis, including a document review, end-user consultations, environment informant interviews, it was evident that teachers were concerned about the quality of student-teacher relationships due to COVID-19 and the increase in technology as an educational tool. Due to the rapid intervention cycle, the scholarly practitioner focused on implementing change through professional development to increase positive teacher

language. In theory, the increase in positive teacher language would bridge the student-teacher relationship.

Based on the findings of this Improvement Science study, future researchers might study the long-term impact on positive teacher language based on teacher and student perspectives, do additional research on the professional development intervention with a control group and experimental group, a study with a larger sample size, and a study with a diverse population or a population with different needs to examine transferability of the findings

Since this study has been conducted, there have been significant changes in the public-school systems around COVID-19 policies and practices. Many districts have removed the plastic barriers on tabletops and have reduced technology as an educational tool. Considering these recent changes, a study can be conducted based on the Improvement Science research model utilizing professional development as an intervention, with the same framework presented in this study with a different problem of practice.

New research can develop a longitudinal inquiry to follow two cohorts of students throughout their elementary experience. One group would be the control group and the other the experimental group. Teachers in the experimental cohort would receive explicit professional development on positive teacher language. The control group teachers would not be provided the positive teacher language professional development and evaluate the impact of positive teacher language on quality student-teacher relationships based on student and teacher perceptions.

A correlational study with a larger sample size could analyze if there is a relationship between the number of professional developments attended, continuous support utilized, previous social-emotional learning, years in education, and level of education to change in positive teacher language. Furthermore, a study with different demographics including

ethnicities, socioeconomic status, student needs, different backgrounds, and different disadvantages will provide data on if the professional development is transferable, and if teachers and students respond differently.

The next logical step in this line of research is to continue developing a professional development structure that is impactful and authentic for individual schools. Additionally, a tool to evaluate the professional development, the professional learning achieved, and its impact on students would ensure more successful professional development.

Conclusions:

This Improvement Science study supported the staff at BMES who expressed concern with student-teacher relationships. In Phase 1 of this Improvement Science study, the scholarly practitioner aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. In Phase 2, the scholarly practitioner focused on if professional development was a viable intervention and if it was viable how the process and outcomes can be improved. Based on past research, positive teacher language strengthens the student-teacher relationship. Quality student-teacher relationships are vital in students' behavioral, social-emotional, and academic success.

In the BMES setting, this inquiry study has established a viable professional development plan that leads to successful professional learning to increase student outcomes. Additionally, a sizable percentage of staff who were not participants in the study engaged in professional development to increase their positive teacher language to strengthen their student-teacher relationship. The professional development structures will continue to be used as a tool to address problems of practice within the BMES community.

Beyond the specific BMES context, this study has added to existing research in the field of education that suggests professional development can be utilized as an effective tool for

intervention. The scholarly practitioner, with the help of the participants, has developed a viable professional development format that is evidence-based and structured to include applicable teaching strategies and delivery methods that can be implemented over time, allows for extensive collaboration, including peer observations and continuous support for in between professional development sessions and after the sessions. In addition, this study has added to the previous studies that analyze specific professional development components. Lastly, this Improvement Science study has inspired the scholarly practitioner and BMES staff to continue their professional and personal development journey with a focus on social-emotional well-being for adults and students.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

August 1, 2021

Dear Educator,

My name is Jen Hilderbrand, and I am a graduate student in the Isabelle Farrington College of Education at Sacred Heart University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about positive teacher language to improve student outcomes. As a researcher, I am hoping to understand practices that educators utilize to support social emotional learning in the classroom.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- An interview which will last about 45 minutes to an hour.
- Agree to participate in two interview/focus group session to help determine_____.
- Agree to participate in weekly observation and coaching sessions designed to develop educator capacity to utilize teaching practices that are supportive of students' social and emotional development
- Agree to participate in a professional learning session designed to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of social and emotional teaching practices on student outcomes including behavioral and academic.

The information gathered in this these activities will be used for the completion of a dissertation study towards the award of a graduate degree. All information will be completely confidential and no identifiable information will be revealed in reports.

This is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in this study or not. If you would like to participate, need additional information about the study, and or have further questions, please contact me at 203-249-6910 or email me at bemontej@mail.sacredheart.edu.

With appreciation,

Jennifer Hilderbrand
Ed.D. Candidate
The Isabelle Farrington College of Education
Sacred Heart University

The Isabelle Farrington College of Education

Title of Research Study:

Researcher(s):	Jennifer L. Hilderbrand	
Phone:	Email:	
203-249-6910	Bemontej@mail.sacredheart.edu	
	E-mail:	

Study Site: ███████████████████████████

Purpose

You are being asked to participate in a research study. By doing this research we hope to learn about how positive teacher language increases student outcomes.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the following tasks:

- Agree to participate in an end user consultation session to help determine the proactive strategies that educators use to assist students social emotional learning (SEL)
- Classroom observations to observe participants and nonparticipants interact in a classroom setting.
- Surveys

Voluntary Participation

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to participate in interviews for any reason without penalty. If you choose to participate in the study, you do not have to answer any question during the interview if you do not want to answer. You will be audio recorded during the interview/focus group process. If you do not want to be audio recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the interview.

Risks or Discomforts

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; inconvenience associated with this study would be the time involved in participation in interview.

Confidentiality

The researcher will securely store all identifiable data collected (participant names and contact information) to keep your information safe throughout this study. Your individual identity will be kept confidential when information is presented or published about this study. Audio recordings of interviews will have identifiable data removed before storage and will be destroyed three years after completion of the study.

The research records are held by researchers at an academic institution; therefore, the records may be subject to disclosure if required by law. The research information may be shared with federal agencies or local committees who are responsible for protecting research participants, including individuals on behalf the Sacred Heart University.

Questions

Researcher will take the data from the interviews to identify themes related to positive teacher language and SEL. These findings will also be presented at an academic conference and possibly be published. If published all data will be presented in a way to ensure the confidentiality of all participants and no names will be attached to any specific data.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. This decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, you can contact the Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board at alpf1@sacredheart.edu or 203-396-8241.

If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact me, Jennifer Hilderbrand, at bemontej@mail.sacredheart.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, you can contact the Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board at alpf1@sacredheart.edu or 203-396-8241.

Options for Participation

Please **initial** your choice for the options below:

_____ The researchers may audio record or photograph me during the interview process of this study.

_____ The researchers may NOT audio record or photograph me during the interview process of this study.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____ _____
Participant Signature   **Date**

_____
Participant Printed Name

_____ _____
Researcher Signature   **Date**

Appendix C: End User Consultation Protocol

End User Consultation Protocol

Participant IDNO |__|__|__|__| Gender: □ Male □ Female   Researcher Initials |__|__|__|
Date |__|__/__|__/__|__|
Introduction
I am _____ from _____
⇒ General purpose of the study ⇒ What will happen with the collected
Warm up [demographic & work history]
Can I ask some details about you and your job?
Job Title _____
Years worked at this school |__|__|yrs|__|__|mths
Now I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences as a teacher in this school.

Domain	Topic and Probes
Successes	1. Tell me about the success you have had in supporting students' social-emotional skills in the classroom.
Practices	2. Has the last couple of years impacted your teaching instruction, and classroom management style? ⇒ Please describe how it has impacted your instruction ⇒ How have you been able to maintain your instructional practices and classroom management

Introduction bullet points:
- ⇒ General purpose of the study
- ⇒ Aims of the interview and expected duration
- ⇒ Who is involved in the process (other participants)
- ⇒ Why the participant's cooperation is important
- ⇒ What will happen with the collected information and how the participant/target group will benefit
- ⇒ Any questions?
- ⇒ Consent

	3. In what way do you implement a variety of practices that influence students' social, emotional, and academic skills?
	4. In what areas do you need more support to best assist in student's social, emotional, and academic growth?
	5. What SEL strategies do you feel will best support student's overall growth/outcomes/Why?
Self-Awareness	6. Has the last couple of school years impacted your ability to develop student-teacher relationships? ⇒ How have you been able to maintain your student-teacher relationships? ⇒ What has impacted your ability to maintain quality student-teacher relationships? 7. In thinking about your own social and emotional competencies and how those competencies influence your ability to implement social teaching practices, what strategies do you use when you have a strong emotional reaction (e.g. stress, anger)?

Closing

Is there anything else you think is important about your school climate and culture that we have not talked about?

- Summarize
- Thank participant
- Provide extra information and contacts to participants

Appendix D: Environmental Informant Consultation

Environmental Informant Consultation Protocol

Participant IDNO |__|__|__|__| Gender: □ Male □ Female   Researcher Initials |__|__|__|

Date |__|__/__|__/__|__|

Introduction

I am _____ from _____

- ⇒ General purpose of the study
- ⇒ Aims of the interview and expected duration
- ⇒ Who is involved in the process (other participants)
- ⇒ Why the participant's cooperation is important

- ⇒ What will happen with the collected information and how the participant/target group will benefit
- ⇒ Any questions?
- ⇒ Consent

Warm up [demographic & work history]
Can I ask some details about you and your job?

Job Title _____

Years worked at this school |__|__|yrs|__|__|mths

Now I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences as a teacher in this school.

Domain	Topic and Probes

Social-Awareness	1. What have you noticed now in your school about student-teacher relationships since the COVID 19 pandemic compared to Pre COVID?
	
	   ⇒ Why do you feel this change has occurred?
	   ⇒ Do you feel COVID 19 has had a direct impact on student-teacher relationships? How? Why?

Systems and Programs	2. What systems and programs are being utilized to support student social emotional growth? ⇒ How do feel the systems and programs are impacting students?

	⇒ What other strategies, techniques can be used by adult staff to support student's social-emotional growth? 3. What strategies does the staff use to increase positive student-teacher relationships? ⇒ How have these strategies impacted student-teacher relationships? ⇒ Why do you feel these strategies have impacted or not impacted student-teacher relationships? ⇒ What strategies do you feel would help teachers connect with students?

Closing

Is there anything else you think is important about your school climate and culture that we have not talked about?
- Summarize
- Thank participant
- Provide extra information and contacts to participants

Appendix E: Classroom Observation Form

Classroom Observation Form

Participant IDNO |__|__|__|__| Date |__|__| / |__|__| / |__|__|

No of students Present: _____   Observation Start time: _____
                                                                   Observation End Time: _____

Subject/Activity: _____

Teacher vs. Student talk
- Most by teacher
- Some Student
- 50/50 student and teacher
- 80/20 student and teacher

Student Grouping
- Whole Class
- Small group instruction
- Smaller Groups
- Independent Instruction
- Independent Practice

Student Engagement
- All students
- 90% student engaged
- 75% students engaged
- 50% students engaged
- Less than 50% engage
- Almost no student engagement

Domain	Criterion	Tally	Observation Notes
Teacher Language Instructional Practices	Promotes positive behaviors by encouraging students when they display good social skills (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).		
	Promotes positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good work habits (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).		
	Let's students know how their effort leads to positive results with specific affirmation.		
Warmth and Support Instructional Practices	Demonstrates to students that they are appreciated as an individual (e.g., appropriate eye-contact, greeting each child by name).		
	Uses the interests and experiences of my students when teaching.		
Power of Our Words Teacher Language	Teacher listens, pauses, and paraphrases		
	Teacher uses reinforcing language (e.g., replaces general praise with specific description)		
	Teacher uses reminding language that use natural wording and tone. (e.g., "How will you clean up?")		
	Teacher uses redirecting language. (e.g.., uses direct and specific language)		
	Teacher uses culturally responsive language that is gender neutral and is respectful and reinforcing of student's culture.		
	Total		

Appendix F: Process Understanding Survey Questions

1) How did you utilize the continuous support?

2) Are you noticing you are using more positive teacher language with your students since participating in the professional development? Explain?

3) Have you noticed any changes with your students? Explain?

4) What was challenging? Why?

5) What was a positive take away from the professional development? Why?

6) What was something you would have changed? Why?

7) What was something you would keep? Why?

8) If we were to do additional professional development is there anything you would like me to know?

Appendix G: District Approval Letter

July 8, 2021

Jennifer Hilderbrand
5 Buck Mountain Court
New Fairfield, CT 06812

Dear Mrs. Hilderbrand,

This letter is to inform you that ██████ Public Schools has approved the project titled "A Study of Root Causes in a ████████ Elementary School to Define Student Researcher's Hypothesized Problem of Practice: Teacher-Student Connectedness and Relationship Skills Competencies in Relation to the Use of Positive Teacher Language." This approval is contingent on the IRB approval from the Sacred Heart University. We have determined that this project conforms to the district's standards regarding informed consent and FERPA regulations. This letter should be available upon your first communication with school staff as it assures that the study meets the district's research policy. District approval does not ensure research participation from the faculty, given that research subjects have the right not to participate and withdraw from the research study at any point. Also, please keep the office appraised of your progress and the final findings. To publish using the district's name, you will need previous consent in writing.

Reach out if you require additional assistance. Good luck with your study.
Best Regards,

Assistant Superintendent

Appendix H**: CITI Training Certificate**

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 15-Sep-2019
Expiration Date 14-Sep-2022
Record ID 32848221

This is to certify that:

Jennifer Hilderbrand

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Sacred Heart University, Inc.

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wff1934ac-f9e4-41c0-bfe2-2ce1b9c2c4c5-32848221