Spring 4-25-2023

Elementary Grade Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Adult Behaviors on School Climate

Tameka Walker
walkertameka3@hotmail.com

Elementary Grade Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Adult Behaviors on School Climate

By

Tameka Walker

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of

Education in the Bagwell College of Education

Dr. Chinasa Elue, Chair

Dr. Sheryl Croft, Committee Member

Dr. Nicholas Clegorne, Committee Member

Kennesaw State University

July 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend a special thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Chinasa Elue, for her ongoing encouragement and gentle pressure throughout this process. I am eternally grateful for your advice and assistance during this process. Your encouragement and patience helped to keep me focused and moving forward. Thank you for taking the time to invest in my success.

I would also like to thank Dr. Croft and Dr. Clegorne for serving on my dissertation committee. Additionally, the learning opportunities you provided during your courses were invaluable. I did not realize at the time that my skills and insight were being developed. However, through the intellectual discourse and stimulating assignments you provided me opportunities to grow as a learner and an educational leader.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my *village*. My husband and daughters consistently encouraged me to persevere with kind words and intentional efforts to keep the house quiet so I could focus. My soul sisters provided me words of wisdom, prayed for and with me, and never allowed me to forget my mission. My extended family remained the light at the end of the tunnel by continually addressing me as Dr. Walker. Lastly, to the entire staff of my beloved school that cheered me on throughout this journey. To all my participants and their parents that entrusted me to share your voice. I am a blessed woman because of all these relationships, and as you all know, "I love you, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it."

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the three matriarchs in my life that have loved me unconditionally. First, to my mother, Jeannine Slack, my first cheerleader and supporter. Your high expectations and continued encouragement have been a guiding light during the times I wanted to give less than my best. I am eternally grateful that God placed me under your care. I will always remember to dress for the job I want and not the one I have. Next, to my grandmother, Anita Slack-Jones, who now resides in heaven. The original Madea, who knew how to correct you and love you all at the same time. Words cannot express how much you are missed and how I wish you were physically here to celebrate this time with me. I know that you are watching over me from the best seat in the house. Lastly, my mother-in-law, Elaine Wiley, you welcomed with open arms and have treated me like a valued member of the family. I appreciate all your words of wisdom and your ongoing support. I pray to serve future generations in the same manner.

ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) had become a focus of educators around the world because of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing social unrest that hurled the topic to the forefront of today's educational conversations (Bozkurt, et al., 2020) Despite this recent interest in SEL, it is not a new concept. This research informs educational leaders on students' perceptions of school culture and contributes to literature that has shown that improvements in students' social and emotional skills transfer to other areas of their lives. The teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic is not enough to equip today's students. Social and Emotional Learning objectives are now a part of many districts' curricula, and educators are directly tasked with growing minds and hearts. The purpose of the study is to identify students' perspectives of adults' behaviors that help students feel safe and supported. This was a phenomenographic qualitative study incorporating data from interviews and focus group sessions. The overarching finding uncovered by this study revealed how intentional adult behaviors focused on social and emotional learning can create a sense of belonging for students.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, school culture, belonging

Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 swept across the globe, educational leaders scrambled to support teachers and students. Amid these adjustments, it became painfully obvious that there also needed to be an emphasis on students' social and emotional needs (Azevedo et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2017; Barr & Gibson, 2020). According to Jones et. al, (2020), "Social and emotional development is multifaceted and integral to academics—to how school happens, and to how learning takes place" (p. 5). Welcoming students back into the learning environment during the pandemic placed a spotlight on how schools should address students' affective needs. Darling-Hammond et al., (2020) contend, "Social and emotional skills, coupled with mental health supports and restorative practices, are critical for supporting children, youth, and adults as they cope with the challenges, uncertainty, and stress presented by the pandemic, the economic crisis, and systemic racism" (p.33). Keels (2020) supports this position, emphasizing the need for educators to sharpen their skills and knowledge surrounding social-emotional learning, culturally responsive practices, and social justice concerns. Ultimately, the pandemic resulted in a paradigm shift with social and emotional learning (SEL) at the forefront.

Though SEL has recently taken a front seat, it is not a new educational ideology. Researchers, educators, and parents all understand and acknowledge the importance of educating the "whole" child (Zhao, 2020; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). In a brief by the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social Emotional and Academic Development, scientists endorsed the connection between socio-emotional development and the learning process as evidenced in the statement below:

Decades of research in human development, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, and educational practice and policy, as well as other fields, have illuminated that major

domains of human development—social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic—are

deeply intertwined in the brain and in behavior. (Jones et al., 2017, p. 4)

Barr and Gibson (2020) support selecting a school framework that includes a "whole-child"

emphasis, particularly in high-poverty schools. The research is also clear that an intentional

systemic approach is pivotal in creating a balanced learning environment (Dufour & Marzano,

2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Liew & McTigue, 2010). In essence, adults and students

perform best in a safe and supportive setting.

The SEL conversation was brewing within the educational community prior to the onset

of the global pandemic (Durlak, et.al, 2011). However, since March of 2019, educators have

faced unforeseen challenges ushering in a mood of SEL urgency (Buzkort et al., 2020). The

teaching of reading and mathematics has not been enough to support students during this

unprecedented event (Linney et al., 2020). Districts have begun to allocate additional resources

to professional development in SEL-related domains, including trauma-informed care and

restorative practices (Zhao, 2020). To mitigate the effects of the pandemic, Darling-Hammond et

al., (2020), proposed five initiatives: 1.) Implement a comprehensive system of support; 2)

Ensure opportunities for explicit teaching of social and emotional skills at every grade level; 3)

Infuse SEL into instruction in all classes; 4) Institute restorative practices; 5) Enact policies that

enable SEL and restorative practices. Ultimately, adopting a holistic approach to SEL integration

is recommended throughout the literature (Duncan, et. al, 2016; Jensen & Ratcliffe, 2020;

Durlak, et. al, 2011; Liew & McTigue n.d.).

As school districts prepare to welcome students back, they must address numerous

factors including Covid-19 variants, the impacts of trauma, and a public desire to return to

"normal" while mitigating learning loss. Safety concerns have taken front and center requiring

changes to daily school operations. For example, class sizes, lunchroom procedures, bus seating arrangements, and recess guidelines have been restructured to support social distancing and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In the midst of all these pressing issues, educational leaders must create a safe and supportive learning environment while addressing the factors that have affected traditional schooling. Furthermore, the identification of more variants exacerbates the traumatic impact of the pandemic. With a national mortality rate of over 900,000, the global pandemic would classify as a traumatic event (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The implications from this study have the potential to provide educational leaders with insight into the unspoken needs of students experiencing in-person learning during a global pandemic.

In the wake of world events, today's educational institutions have an obligation to students that extends beyond the adopted curriculum by creating a safe and supportive learning environment. The foundation for building an educational institution focused on social and emotional safety begins with relationships (Milner 2019; Maynard & Weinstein, 2020; Davis & Linton, 2012; Pate, 2020). Individuals, no matter their age, are the best versions of themselves in safe environments. Creating a safe and welcoming environment is a critical component of a positive school culture (Jensen & Ratcliffe, 2020). The interactions between students and teachers are the underpinnings of social and emotional learning (McTighe & Wilson, 2019). Hence, the success or failure of a school is heavily dependent upon the relationships of those being educated and the educators (Zins et. al, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

The interruption to normalcy has had a significant worldwide impact. Mask mandates, social distancing guidelines and anticipated vaccination requirements have significantly impacted the way people navigate within their communities. As protecting individual's physical

safety became a global priority, mental distress spread at an alarming rate (Bozkurt et, al., 2020). Recent research suggests the pandemic caused anxiety, stress, and worry leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2020). Preliminary research has revealed the impact of the pandemic is extremely difficult for parents leading to heightening levels of stress (Pereda & Diaz-Faes, 2020). Hemderon et. al, (2020) assert that parental stress caused by factors such as finances, housing and childcare are potential risk factors for students' emotional health and abuse. Pereda and Diaz-Faes (2020) asserted, "Overall, stressed parents are more likely to respond to their children's anxious behaviors or demands in aggressive or abusive ways." (p.4). Though there is an increased risk to child welfare, the number of reports to the Department of Family and Children's Service (DFCS) are down (Anderson, 2020). In April 2020, Georgia DFCS reported a 40% decline in the number of referrals (Anderson, 2020). Michael Leach, the State Director for the South Carolina Department of Social Services, explained that the decline in DFCS reports is a direct result of students not attending in-person learning (Anderson, 2020). School leaders need to be aware of these facts so they are equipped to support families and identify students who may require assistance beyond the role of the school counselor.

As schools prepare to receive students for the 2021-2022 school year, educators will encounter more students experiencing the effects of COVID-19-related trauma. Studies have shown an increase in the number of adults and children experiencing anxiety and depression (Knopf, 2020; Gazmararian et al., 2021; Loades et al., 2020.) Anxiety may manifest itself in a host of ways. Students may appear fidgety, unfocused, frightened, or tense; they may also exhibit physical reactions such as heart racing, shortness of breath, or muscle stiffness (Figley, 2020). Additionally, students may display unease when separated from caregivers or have emotional

reactions such as anger and aggression (Figley, 2020). In contrast, students struggling with depression can seem distant, sad, hopeless, and disengaged (Kahn & Fawcett, 2008). Signs and symptoms of depression include "loss of interest, unexplained anxiety, inappropriate feelings of guilt, loss of self-esteem, worthlessness, hopelessness, thoughts of death and suicide, tearfulness, irritability, and brooding" (Kahn & Fawcett, 2008, p. 150). Social learning theorists believe these mental health issues can have a significant impact on social and emotional development evidenced by low self-esteem, alienation, and an overall negative outlook (Figley, 2020). Since educators are likely to see students displaying these behaviors, it is critical that they are equipped with resources that will assist them in helping students successfully transition back to a more traditional learning environment.

Purpose and Significance of Study

Wentzel and Ramani (2016) suggest healthy peer and teacher relationships lead to overall favorable outcomes since the power of positive connection enhances students' internal thinking and external behaviors. They suggest that "children who enjoy positive relationships with peers experience levels of emotional well-being, beliefs about the self, and values for prosocial forms of behavior and social interaction that are stronger and more adaptive than those without positive peer relationships" (Wentzel & Ramani, 2016, p. 13). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify students' perceptions of adult behaviors and practices that help students to feel safe and supported.

This research will inform educational leaders on students' perceptions of school culture. This study will also contribute to literature that has shown that improvements in students' social and emotional skills transfer to other areas of their lives. In addition, Newman & Moroney (2019) argue that "effective SEL has the potential to yield a variety of outcomes, revealing what

may work best in both school and out-of-school time settings" (p. 16). Positive learning environments that foster positive teacher-child relationships promote learning because students who are comfortable with their teacher and peers are more willing to participate in the learning process. (Merritt et al, 2012). This study has the power to uncover student-identified best practices which could enable school leaders to strategically address school culture and social and emotional learning. Ultimately, investing in students' social and emotional competency has far-reaching benefits.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study is: How, or to what extent, do students perceive SEL practices during a global pandemic?

This question will be helpful in studying how educational leaders can best support students as we move forward from the impacts of the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the importance of social and emotional learning in the school setting, this study is based upon the principles of social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that individuals pursue understanding of their immediate world, and they create subjective meanings based on their experience. According to Stake (2010), "Two realities occur simultaneously and separately within every human activity. One is the reality of personal experience, and one is the reality of group and societal relationship" (p. 18). This study seeks to identify students' perceptions of adult behaviors that help students to feel safe and supported.

The proposed theoretical framework for this study uses Bandura's social learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn

through social experiences, specifically observations and reinforcements (Bandura, 1971).

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the essential role social communication performs in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, these theories have provided the structure for addressing the research question. This study will focus on SEL and how students perceive intentional adult behaviors designed to create and maintain a positive learning environment. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) begins with educators because they have the power to create an emotionally safe and supportive environment. Schonert-Reichl (2017) states "teachers are the engine that drives social and emotional learning (SEL) and practices in schools and classrooms, and their own social-emotional competence and wellbeing strongly influence their students" (p. 137). Teacher competence is essential because students are watching and learning from their attitudes, actions, and reactions.

Summary

This study is organized into five chapters. In the first chapter, the researcher introduces the topic and identifies the research problem and research question. The study's purpose, relevance, and conceptual framework are also discussed. The first chapter defines important terminology and describes the location in which the study will be performed. In chapter two, social and emotional learning is discussed. Relevant literature that has shaped the foundations of this research topic are unpacked. This chapter also identifies the study's theoretical framework and explores the history of SEL, its benefits, and how it has been used to support students. Chapter three of this study outlines the proposed methodology used to guide this work and the process for data collection, as well as the analytical process. Chapter four will describe the study's findings as related to the research question. This study concludes with chapter five which contains the discussion, conclusions, and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Review of Relevant Terms

The following terms that will be used in this study are defined below.

- **Anxiety-** is defined as, "uneasiness, apprehension and tension that stems from anticipating danger, which may be imagined or real" (Kahn & Fawcett, 2008 p. 48).

- **Belonging-** is a psychological term that refers to a person's perception of the amount of social support and acceptance he or she receives (Keene, 2020).

- **CASEL-** is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and "was formed in 1994 with the goal of establishing high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) as an essential part of preschool through high school education" (History, n.d.).

- **Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH***)-* is a framework focused on creating a positive school culture through intentional practices that are implemented with fidelity. In addition, CKH is focused on developing and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships (Flippen, 2018).

- **School Culture-** "School culture is defined as a dominant pattern of behaviors and beliefs held by school members that act as a frame of reference for the way they interact with others and do their work at the school" (Lee-Piggott, 2016, p. 17).

- **Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS)-** School-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS) is a multitiered support framework for preventing problem behaviors and increasing prosocial behaviors (Lee & Gage, 2020).

- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)-** SEL refers to the "knowledge and skills that children acquire through social and emotional-related education, instruction, activities, or

promotion efforts that help them recognize and manage emotions, engage in responsible

decision making and establish positive relationships" (Zins, 2001, p. 441).

- **Stress-** is "the physiological or psychological response to internal or external event,

  force, or condition. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body,

  influencing how people feel and behave" (American Psychological Association, 2015, p.

  1036-1037).

- **Title I Schools-** Schools in which children from low-income families make up at least 40

  percent of enrollment are eligible to use Title I funds to operate schoolwide programs that

  serve all children in the school in order to raise the achievement of the lowest-achieving

  students (United States Department of Education, 2018).

- **Trauma-**Trauma is defined as an abrupt, possibly fatal incident, that causes an individual

  to have ongoing and disturbing memories (Figley, 2012). Trauma is also described as an

  intense psychological upset that has harmful results (Colman, 2015).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become a focus of educators around the world because of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing social unrest that hurled the topic to the forefront of today's educational conversations (Bozkurt, et al., 2020). Despite this recent interest in SEL, it is not a new concept. From Aristotle to John Locke, early philosophers and educators believed in teaching children to be caring and compassionate in tandem with reading, writing and arithmetic instruction (Lickona, 1993), and they supported the role of education in developing responsible, productive, and moral citizens (Brown, Corrigan, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012). This ideology remains a part of students' educational experiences through SEL programs, direct instruction, curriculum, and school behavioral initiatives (Yang, Bear & May, 2018; Newman & Moroney, 2019).

Even though addressing the needs of the whole child is not a contemporary practice in education, the structure of many SEL initiatives were not designed to address the new struggles faced by today's in-person and virtual learners. Today, educators have been charged with confronting the effects of angst experienced by contemporary learners while also teaching the prescribed curriculum. In recent studies, findings indicate the teacher plays a significant role in SEL development (Yang, Bear, & May, 2018; Wu, et al., 2020; Voith, Yoon, & Brondino, 2020). An increased awareness of teachers' roles in students' non-academic development has led to shifting from an emphasis on academics only to embedding SEL into teachers' daily practices (Newman & Morney, 2019). Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) agree that SEL is 'the missing piece,' since it is closely connected to school success but has often lacked explicit attention. Educators' beliefs are a pivotal component in their ability to support students' SEL

needs. In a focus group conducted by Glennie et. al (2017) it was noted, "these teachers believed that by developing strong relationships with students, they can help them strengthen social and emotional skills" (p. 10). Teachers who are equipped with the right tools can effectively train and support students' social and emotional growth. "Emotionally supportive teachers, by definition, can be observed as warm and kind, sensitive to the social and emotional needs of each child, and thoughtful about the way to respond to children" (Merritt et al., 2012, p. 143). Therefore, this study will explore the explicit and intentional teacher practices that students feel promote a positive learning environment.

Social and Emotional Learning Defined

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been defined in a myriad of ways. According to Zins (2001) SEL is, "the knowledge and skills that children acquire through social and emotional related education, instruction, activities, or promotion efforts that help them to recognize and manage emotion, engage in responsible decision making and establish positive relationships" (p. 441). SEL competence equips students to navigate society. The development of these skills promotes appropriate social interactions and effective management of emotions and feelings. Church (2015) describes SEL, "as the development of the skills children need to understand and manage emotions, become self-aware and self-regulated, develop an understanding of others, create positive relationships, and problem solve" (p. 10). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "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*" (What is SEL?, n.d.).* Despite some variances in verbiage, it is clear that SEL

involves the development of intrapersonal skills that transfer to interpersonal interactions. For the purpose of this study, the researcher is drawing from CASEL's definition due to the fact that CASEL recognizes that SEL development is a *process* that adults and children engage in to facilitate skill development. Since this study is focused on the intentional actions of adults and how they are understood by children, this definition is more closely aligned than those posed by Zins (2001) and Church (2015).

Origin and Evolution of SEL

Since the inception of formal education, there has been an expectation of educators to shape and mold the minds and hearts of those in their charge. According to Lickona (1993) "Down through history, education has had two great goals: to help them become smart and to help them become good" (p. 6). This philosophy has evolved and resurfaced as different educational initiatives. Along with instructions in academic curriculum, educators have long been expected to teach and model exemplary moral behavior (Neitz, 1964; Lickona, 1993). The following table identifies transition in American schools from Bible-based curriculum to social and emotional learning.

Table A: Evolution of SEL

Public Education in the United States begins	Values & Ethics	Character Education	Social and Emotional Learning
17th Century	Mid-19th Century- 20th Century	20th Century	21st Century
Bible-based Curriculum	Moral Lessons	Character Curriculum	Introduction of SEL

| According to Locke (2000), the primary purpose of education is to create virtuous members of society.

The first free public school in the United States was established in Boston and used the Bible as the basis for instruction (Watnick, 2018.) | McGuffey Readers are noted as having a significant impact on United States history, and they were prominent in American Education during this time. (Skrabec, 2009).

According to Neitz (1964), the primary goal of most readers used during this period was to teach morals and effective oral reading. | James Comer, a Yale professor, and child psychiatrist, developed a character education model that focused on child development.

According to Berkowitz (2020), several conferences took place resulting in two key character education initiatives: Character Counts and Character Education Partnership. | Improving America's School Act of 1994 provided grants to 45 states and the District of Columbia that employed character education programs (United States Department of Education, 2012).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in 1994. CASEL is credited with coining the term Social and Emotional Learning (Gresham, 2018). |
|---|---|---|---|

Ethical Behavior

In early schools, the Bible served as the moral curriculum, to later be replaced with the McGuffey Reader (Lickona, 1993). McGuffey Readers are noted as having a significant impact on United States history (Skrabec, 2009). The series, written by schoolteacher William Holmes McGuffey, was a major component in American education. "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" and "Where there's a will, there's a way" are products of McGuffey readers that remain a part of today's vernacular (Skrabec, 2009; Saunders, 1941). According to Neitz (1964), the primary goal of most readers used during this time period was to teach morals and effective oral reading. Therefore, examples and rewards of honesty, integrity and morality permeated the pages of these texts as evidenced in the excerpts below taken from McGuffey Reader (Saunders, 1941, p. 583):

> *A boy finds a handsome pocket-knife but feels so guilty in keeping it that he seeks out its*
>
> *owner. The owner is so impressed by this honesty that he gives the knife to the boy as a*
>
> *reward. George, while playing, carelessly broke a window. Instead of running away,*

however, he sought out the merchant who owned the house and paid for the broken

window with a dollar that he had just received for Christmas. The merchant was so taken

with this honesty that he gave George's father two dollars for George, and also gave

George a job when he finished school. "In a few years, he (George) became the

merchant's partner, and is now rich. "A poor chimney sweep is working in the house of a

wealthy man. He has the opportunity to steal a valuable gold watch, but refrains. The

owner of the house, who has been watching, rewards the honesty by taking the boy into

his family.

Poems and proverbial stories such as these were designed to teach and inspire ethical behavior. Saunders (1941) contends McGuffey's impact extends beyond canonization because it is still present in individuals' everyday speech. In essence, these readers served to lay the foundation for future educational practices.

There were other educational influencers that supported the benefits of teaching the "whole child" by going beyond solely focusing on the academic curriculum. John Locke made significant contributions to this school of thought. In his manuscript describing his thoughts on education, Locke noted the importance of approaching education in a holistic manner. According to Locke (2000), the primary purpose of education is to create virtuous members of society. Locke (2000) stated, "It seems plain to me, that the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them" (Section 39). He further contended that both the gentleman and the farmer are responsible for instilling these values in their children. Though many of his recommendations would now be considered antiquated, some of the thoughts shared in his manuscript are enduring.

Decline in Character Education Support

As the pendulum often swings in education, the support for character training moved from school-based training to home-based training. Lickona (1993) attributes this decline in support of character education to Darwinism, personalism, and pluralism. Specifically, Lickona (1993) notes that pluralist ideals challenged character education because it questioned the origin of the values to be taught in schools and how a separation of church and state would be maintained. Growing support for these ideologies in American society steered schools away from moral education. However, in the 1970's there was a resurgence of character education in the form of values education and Kolhberg's moral ideology (Lickona, 1993; Zizek, Garz, & Nowak, 2015; Meyer, Burnham, & Cholvat, 1975). While values education emphasized a Piagetian approach to moral development and helping students decide their value system, Kolberg's theory placed a great emphasis on having students choose which values were most valuable (Lickona, 1993). Despite ideological differences, there was a need to re-introduce values instruction which led to character education movements.

Multi-layered Approach to Character Education

As an extension to character education, James Comer, a Yale professor and child psychiatrist, developed a multi-layered character education model that focused on child development in schools. For example, in 1968, Comer's School Development Program was implemented in two Connecticut schools resulting in improved student behavior and increased academic achievement (History, n.d.; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Comer's program stresses the importance of placing child development at the center of all decision making through a nine-

part model focused on teams, operation, and principles (Darling-Hammond, et. al, 2019). This multi-layered approach consisted of three school teams, three operations, and three guidelines.

As a part of his model Comer included three school support teams: the School Planning and Management Team [SPMT]), a parent team, and a Student and Staff Support Team. Operations comprises the comprehensive school plan, staff development, and assessment. Lastly, no-fault problem solving, consensus decision making, and collaboration are the guiding principles (Comer, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). The diagram below illustrates Comer's School Development Program process:
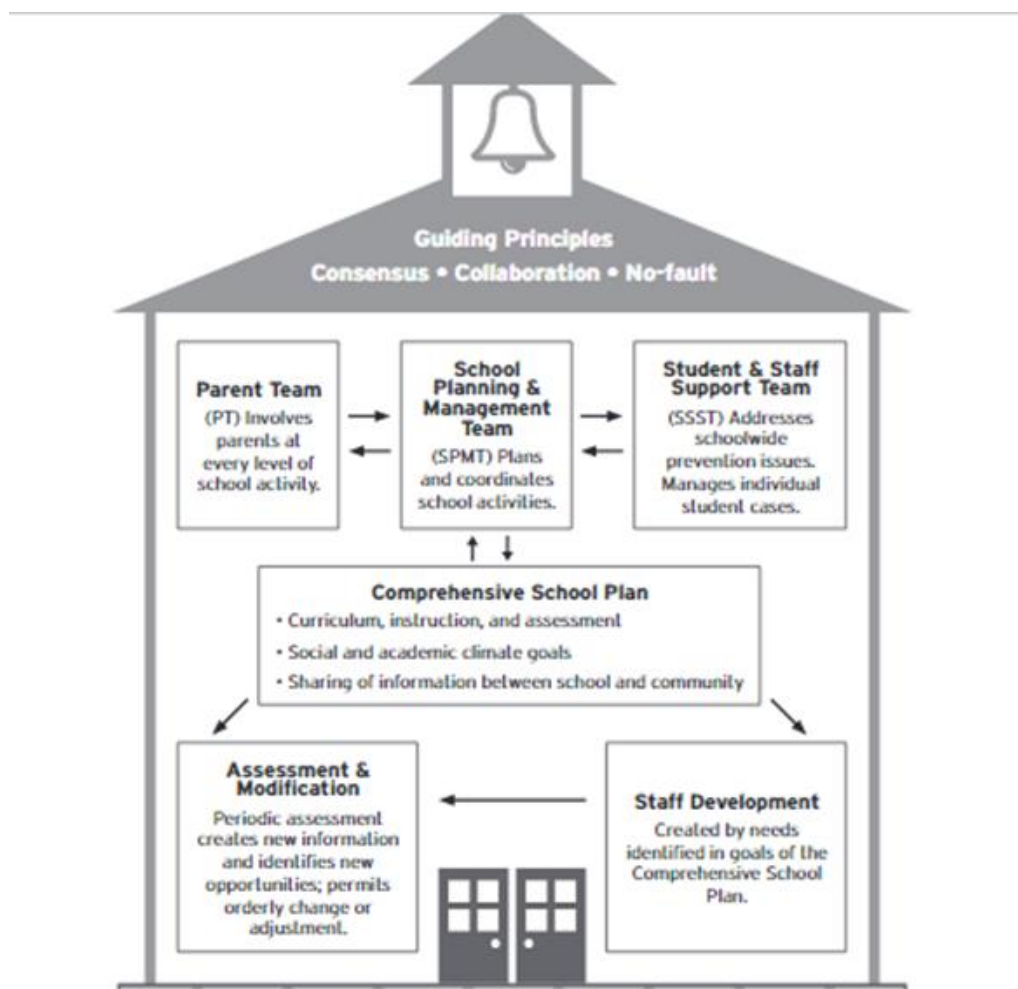
Figure 1. Comer's School Development Program

Comer argues this model is effective because it is student focused rather than systems focused. He contends our current educational structure is a combination of ancient practices and a manufacturing model which has resulted in the mindset that "academic learning as a mechanical process governed solely by genetically determined intelligence and individual will" (Comer, 2004, p. 3). Overall, Comer's plan relies heavily on positive and productive relationships between all educational stakeholders.

Educators and researchers continued to explore the role of education in an individual's comprehensive development. According to Berkowitz et al., (2020), several conferences took place during the 1990s resulting in two key character education initiatives: Character Counts and Character Education Partnership. Character Counts was established in 1992. The program focuses on teaching students six ethical principles: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship ("six pillars of character," 2020). According to Character Counts, trustworthiness is the act of being honest and loyal. Students are taught lessons designed to help them understand the importance of building lasting and meaningful relationships (school and career) by earning the confidence of peers and colleagues (Character Counts, 2020). Respect and responsibility are taught as a recognition of the dignity of all people and taking ownership of one's life. Lastly, Character Counts (2020) emphasizes the importance of caring and citizenship through the concern for the well-being of others and the community by exercising civic and social responsibilities. Fundamentally, Character Counts asserts the importance of the need for individuals to demonstrate these moral qualities in all aspects of their lives.

The Character Education Partnership was established in 1993, then rebranded as Character.org in 2014 (Berkowitz et al., 2020). The organization provides resources for the implementation of character education for families, schools, and non-educational entities

including the Character and Social and Emotional (CSED) National Guidelines. According to the Character.org website, the organization uses the following 11 principles as their guidepost:

1. A set of core values are identified and embedded into the culture of the family, school, sports team, or organization.

2. Character involves understanding, caring about, and practicing your culture's core values.

3. Your character development approach is proactive and comprehensive.

4. Caring attachments and relationships foster a sense of belonging and connection.

5. There are ample opportunities for everyone to live their core values, especially opportunities to serve others.

6. Your culture of character strives to develop everyone's "best self", including the four areas of character (moral, civic, performance, and intellectual).

7. A culture of character emphasizes intrinsic motivation rather than recognition or material rewards.

8. Everyone shares the responsibility to model, practice and uphold the core values.

9. All stakeholders are encouraged to take a leadership role and suggest ways to embed and practice the core values.

10. Your character initiative engages a range of partners (family members, parents, community members, etc.).

11. Core values are reaffirmed or revised each year to ensure that your character initiative is always improving and growing.

Character.org and Character Counts continue to provide support and resources related to character development. These and other character education initiatives gained political support which led to fiscal incentives for states that promoted character education (Berkowitz, et al., 2020; United States Department of Education, 2012). Improving America's School Act of 1994 provided grants to 45 states and the District of Columbia that employed character education programs (United States Department of Education, 2012). This resulted in a host of character-focused programs.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in 1994 as the character education movement was gaining momentum. CASEL is credited with coining the term Social and Emotional Learning (Gresham, 2018). The organization was created due to the collaborative efforts of researchers, child advocates, and educators. It has forged relationships with numerous districts across the United States, and they currently have partnerships in 30 states as a part of their Collaborating States Initiatives. One of the organization's core principles is Collaboration, hence the emphasis on extending SEL strategies beyond classrooms and schools to encompass home and community.

Figure 2. CASEL's SEL Framework

CASEL has identified five SEL competencies. They are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL (2022) clearly defines each of these five skills.

1. Self-awareness- The ability to understand one's emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behaviors across contexts.

2. Self-management: The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations, and to achieve goals and aspirations.

3. Social awareness- The ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.

4. Relationship skills-The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

5. Responsible decision-making-The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

(What is the CASEL Framework?, 2021)

According to CASEL, becoming proficient with these skills is the goal of SEL because it improves students' ability to incorporate essential skills to effectively handle daily tasks and challenges (Core SEL Competencies, 2019). When CASEL began producing program guides in 2003, the purpose of the documents was to provide a resource for educators who were searching for SEL programs to implement. In 2020, CASEL revised their evaluation criteria to better align with their updated SEL definition. The new criteria addressed additional areas such as equity and school partnerships. CASEL continues to support research in the SEL field by "synthesizing the research of others, conducting original research, and spotlighting recent research from our colleagues and collaborators" (SEL Research, 2017). Since its inception, the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has remained a pioneer in the world SEL research and advocacy.

Durlak et al., (2015) expands CASEL's framework to include district SEL and short- and long-term student outcomes, and state and federal policies. The following model is widely accepted as a conceptual model of system wide SEL implementation in an education setting (Durlak, et al., 2015; Oberle, et al., 2016; Greenberg et al., 2017).
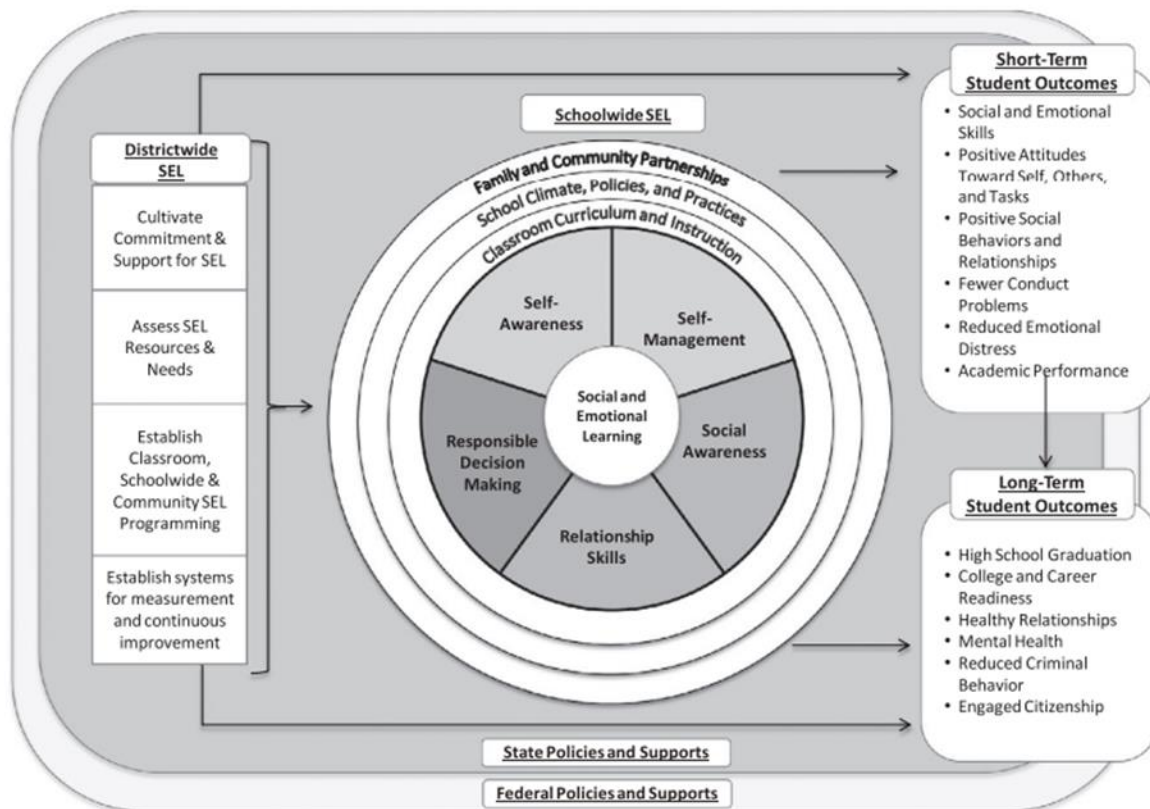
Figure 3. Conceptual model of systemic SEL in educational settings (Durlak et. al, 2015)

However, other models for schoolwide SEL implementation exist. The model offered by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) includes the impact of teachers' school and emotional competence and well-being. Additionally, Jones and Bouffard (2012) places cognitive regulation, interpersonal skills, and emotional processes at the center of their SEL model. Finally, Zins et al., (2004) includes the addition of rewards for positive behavior. Despite variances in approaches, there are several common elements that exist within each model. They are school climate and community connections (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Zins et al., 2004). Fundamentally, each model maintains that SEL implementation will lead to positive student outcomes.

Adoption by School Districts

SEL initiatives were being established prior to the pandemic, and the passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allowed districts to allocate funding to these initiatives (Zhao, 2020). As a result, school districts across the nation have adopted social and emotional learning standards and curriculum. According to Durlak, et. al, (2015) in 2001, Illinois became the first state to create preschool through high school SEL standards. Today, thousands of SEL programs have been implemented in and outside of the school building (Durlak et. al, 2015; Devaney, 2018). SEL's political support has continued to thrive. In 2015, bipartisan legislation H.R. 850: Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2015 was introduced to provide SEL professional development for educators (GovTrack.us., 2021). Though the bill did not pass, it was successful in keeping SEL at the forefront.

Furthermore, there has been a sharp increase in the creation of SEL-focused positions. Several school districts across the nation have created Offices of Social and Emotional Learning. For example, in Chicago, this department has been charged, "Social and Emotional Learning works with schools and networks to establish multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for students' social, emotional, and behavioral development" (Chicago Public Schools, 2022). The Atlanta Public School district states its SEL department's commitment is to connect "hearts and smarts" through a systemic approach (Atlanta Public School, 2022). Other districts have created positions such as SEL coaches, directors, and coordinators to support the implementation of SEL initiatives. Overall, SEL is being accepted as a viable part of students' matriculation.

SEL Resistance No Panacea

Social and emotional learning has not been an undisputed matter. Some consider the fear

of change to be one reason for the opposition (Comer, 2004). Historically, the issue of pluralism

has been at the center of SEL resistance. The ongoing argument of which group decides what

values and morals are taught lies at the root of this issue (Lickona, 1993). For example, Hoerr

(2022) explains, "It is hard to imagine a parent not wanting an offspring to express empathy, but

what that means, and to whom it is shown, will vary considerably" (p. 10). Additionally, others

have outlined a broad list of flaws regarding this topic. For example, some fear SEL is being

presented as a panacea for improving education (Yong, 2020). Even supporters have highlighted

missteps within the SEL movement, including the risks involved with creating one set of criteria

to use as a comparison tool for each individual student and a lack of teaching students to be

independent thinkers rather than merely rule followers (Yong, 2020; Burrough & Barkauskas

2017).

SEL Resistance Perceived Connection Critical Race Theory

In contrast, opponents are more concerned with the topical lessons they fear are

embedded in SEL implementation. Who decides what values are taught? How are these values

defined? Are there topics that should be taught exclusively at home? These questions are at the

center of the SEL debate sparking much political debate. In recent years, SEL has been

connected to critical race theory resulting in national contention (Prothero & Blad, 2022;

Meckler, 2022). Prothero and Blad (2022) state, educational leaders are faced with emotionally

charged discussions with the public since states consider bills to limit teaching about "divisive

subjects" such as racism and sexuality. They further contend that there are instances where right

wing political groups oppose terms like social-learning and equity because they have been linked to critical race theory (Prothero & Blad, 2021). Additionally, SEL has been described by some conservatives as a "trojan horse" for critical race theory (Poff, 2021). Supporters and opponents can agree on the importance of addressing the needs of the "whole" child; however, deciding how this is best achieved continues to remain a matter of contention. SEL can fail to get traction due to low community and parental backing, so it is imperative that school and district leaders are transparent and inclusive when attempting to garner communal endorsement.

Previous Studies Addressing SEL

SEL initiatives and programs are rooted in meeting individuals' affective needs by assessing feelings, emotions, and perceptions; therefore, there is a natural alignment with the goals of qualitative researchers. In a case study conducted by Strahan and Poteat (2020), middle school students shared their perceptions of teachers' efforts to employ SEL strategies. The study identified three ways students experienced SEL connections– "connections with their teachers, connections with their peers, and connections related to their interests, engagement, and accomplishments" (Strahan & Poteat, 2020, p. 6). Alternatively, Lapon (2020) conducted a narrative study that analyzed how the Montessori curriculum, including the emphasis on the whole child, prepared students for transitioning to a public high school. According to Lapon (2020), "All participants discussed how their interpersonal relationships in middle school helped them learn essential social skills, including making friends, resolving conflict, and collaboration" (p. 34). Capel (2020) applied an autoethnographic approach focused on the impact of mindless and mindful classroom approaches on students' experiences. The study's findings supported the use of mindful practices because they improved learners' experiences in the educational environment. Since an authentic relationship exists between social-emotional practices and

qualitative inquiry, a host of qualitative studies have analyzed school climate, restorative practices, and SEL using perception data (Skrzypek, et. al, 2020; Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020; Haymovitz, et. al, 2018). Now there is an increased need to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on students and see how, or to what extent, SEL can be used to mitigate any harmful effects noted by students. In a global qualitative collective case study involving 31 countries, researchers discovered:

> In these traumatic times, psychological pressure and anxiety were prevalent among students, teachers, and families. Among many, the uncertainty and fear of the unknown in every layer of our lives were the main reasons. These concerns, in some cases, were as contagious as the Coronavirus and affected learning climates. Everybody, at a global scale, encountered difficulties and faced traumatic issues caused by the digital divide, social injustice, and inequality, and in some cases, doubled by physical or social loneliness (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 11).

Additionally, the importance of "soft skills" and their role in assisting individuals in managing psychological pressure is recognized outside the formal education setting. Employers seek employees that demonstrate SEL competencies. Wisniewski and Foster (2021) studied the connection between SEL competencies and employability. They discovered, "Research over the past 30 years describes the social emotional learning competencies and employability skills needed to support workplace preparation and success. Adult educators who understand and incorporate a combination of practices reflecting this research could enhance learner success with employment and beyond" (Wisniewski & Foster, 2021, p. 269). Additionally, in a survey of over 600 hiring managers and human resource representatives, the ability to listen, effectively communicate, and attention to detail were the most desirable skills in selecting new employees

(Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Similarly, a research review conducted by Sarfraz et al., (2018), noted that employers from different industries across the globe identified several key employee skills they desired. The ability to work in teams, problem solve, communicate, and computer literacy were ranked among the highest. These soft skills are aligned with SEL competencies. As a result, educators can fully equip future generations by incorporating SEL instruction into students' academic schedule.

SEL Creates a Sense of Belonging

Implementing SEL has the potential to foster a sense of belonging for students in the school setting. According to Keene (2020), "Belongingness is a psychological term that refers to a person's perception of the amount of social support and acceptance he or she receives. As participants described their experiences during the global pandemic, the underlying message emphasized the significance of belonging. Baumeister and Roy (1995) contend:

> We propose that the need to belong has two main features. First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. Ideally, these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future. This aspect provides a relational context to one's interactions with the other person, and so the perception of the bond is essential for satisfying the need to belong (p. 4).

Causton and MaCleod (2020) agree that taking a heartfelt approach to education by focusing on who students are, rather than what they lack, creates an atmosphere of belonging for all students.

Overall, spending the time to create a sense of belonging for students through SEL could yield a meeting of innate needs.

SEL Curriculum

Specific SEL programs and curriculum have also been studied. For instance, the Second Step program has been analyzed to determine its impact on elementary and middle school students' SEL competencies (Low et al., 2019; Wallender et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have reviewed the integration of SEL instruction within the traditional curriculum (Schultz & Baczek, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2020). Some studies have focused on teacher and student perceptions. Soutter (2019) discovered an interesting disparity between participants' viewpoints. This study probed students' and teachers' perceptions of a SEL program. It was conducted over a four-year period in 12 urban and suburban schools with 1,000 4th and 5th grade students. The study found that teachers and administrators viewed the program as a way to empower students. However, the majority of students did not view themselves as empowered; they equated leadership with obedience. Despite these findings, research confirms that an intentional focus on improving students' SEL competencies has a positive impact.

There are many manuals and programs available to school leaders seeking to deploy SEL initiatives. *In Getting to the Heart of Learning: Social-Emotional Skills Across the Early Childhood Curriculum*, Ellen Church (2015) suggests using cooperation, communication, curiosity, caring, contemplation, confidence, and competence to build SEL skills while Hoerr (2020) argues there are five essential interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that individuals need; they are empathy, self-control, integrity, embracing diversity, and grit. Wentzel and Ramani (2016) claim they do not subscribe to any particular SEL practices, but support "SEL approaches that encourage school personnel to operate from a specific mindset about youths' social,

emotional, and character development as they carry out their everyday educational duties and activities" (p. 356). Darling-Hammond (2018) suggests programs that focus on restorative practices are more beneficial because they lead to improved student behaviors and safer schools. This study will incorporate the following SEL initiatives: Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) and Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH). These strategies are selected because each addresses the importance of adult attitudes and modeling in developing students' SEL competencies.

Several organizations provide SEL curriculum comparison charts. CASEL allows individuals to filter SEL curriculum by several factors including grade, implementation support, and school characteristics. Lawson et. al (2019) provided a comparison chart based upon SEL competencies. The following chart was provided by the Wallace Foundation to compare thirty-three of the leading SEL programs. The complete list is provided in Appendix G.

Program	Cognitive	Attention Control	Working Memory & Planning Skills	Inhibitory Control	Cognitive Flexibility	Critical Thinking	Emotion	Emotional Knowledge & Expression	Emotional & Behavioral Regulation	Empathy/ Perspective—taking	Social	Understands Social Cues	Conflict Resolution	Prosocial/ Cooperative Behavior	Values	Ethical Values	Performance Values	Civic Values	Intellectual Values
4Rs	33%	14%	4%	12%	8%	4%	36%	26%	11%	17%	56%	8%	21%	42%	15%	10%	1%	▲ 7%	0%
Al's Pals	26%	4%	0%	18%	6%	0%	45%	36%	16%	7%	61%	12%	20%	38%	13%	12%	1%	1%	0%
Before the Bullying	5% ▼	1%	1%	3%	0%	0%	42%	23%	3%	22%	53%	0%	6%	52%	22%	▲ 21%	1%	4%	0%
Caring Schools Community	2% ▼	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	8% ▼	7% ▼	1%	2%	▲ 94%	0%	1%	▲ 93%	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Character First	27%	7%	13%	10%	1%	1%	10% ▼	2% ▼	3%	4%	58%	1%	6%	57%	▲ 71%	▲ 46%	▲ 35%	5%	1%
Competent Kids, Caring Communities	27%	7%	9%	4%	4%	10%	44%	26%	19%	11%	29% ▼	5%	10%	18% ▼	22%	13%	▲ 10%	2%	1%

Figure 4. SEL Curriculum Comparison Chart (Jones et. al)

Benefits of SEL

Emotionally protected classrooms engage students in many ways. They provide students with a safe space to engage in learning. Schonert-Reichl (2017) noted, "Children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks" (p. 139). Successful SEL interventions must happen in a secure and supportive environment that allows students to practice the desired skills without fear of harsh reprimand (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Merritt et al., (2012) stated, "Social and self-regulatory skills that allow children to build friendships, manage their behaviors, and work well with others are needed, in part, to support learning in classroom settings" (p. 142). Furthermore, these skills are life skills; therefore, they are transferable tools that can be used to help learners navigate within the society's social constructs. When educators neglect students' social-emotional needs, there are lasting effects. Wentzel and Ramani (2016) recount findings from several studies. They noted, a longitudinal study by Ladd (2005) found "that poor social skills and adverse peer relations—as manifested in grade-school classrooms— were among the best predictors of later social, scholastic, and psychological adjustment problems" (p. 305). Additionally, Wentzel and Ramani (2016) point out that other researchers (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Parker& Asher, 1987) discovered similar findings. Considering these factors, it would be inappropriate and ineffective for school leaders to consider developing school improvement plans that do not incorporate specific action steps designed at addressing students' affective needs.

Researchers have investigated social and emotional learning (SEL) in a variety of educational settings as they have sought to explore the benefits of SEL competencies on students' cognitive and affective growth. Participants have included students of all ages, including those in the post-secondary arena. For example, Wang et al., (2012) conducted a study

with college freshmen to explore the impact of implementing a social and emotional learning curriculum on student performance. The study found that students who were exposed to the SEL curriculum earned higher grades than their peers (Wang et al., 2012). Other studies and reviews have been conducted to examine the role SEL skills play in the success of college students (National of Sciences, 2017). Similar studies have also been conducted with younger participants. In a study involving Chicago Public high school students, researchers discovered the value of using students' evaluations of their emotional health and work practices in conjunction with academic indicators such as test scores would provide a more multifaceted illustration of how schools equipped students for the future (Jackson et al, 2021).

In addition to academic benefits, teachers note that improvement in students' classroom behaviors improve when they have strong social skills. Based on a study conducted by Merritt et al. (2012), teachers reported that children who were members of an emotionally supportive classroom demonstrated more self-control than those who were in less supportive instructional environments. Additionally, students who are involved in SEL programs engage in school with decreased anxiety and aggression and are more attentive (Durlak, et al., 2011). Furthermore, Cipriano et al., (2020) noted that implementing SEL strategies can assist the school community in several ways, including providing support for the pandemic's disproportionate impact and anticipating stakeholder needs. This is significant because there is a connection between a secure and supportive learning atmosphere and students' overall wellbeing (Mahoney & Weissberg, 2018).

Limitations of SEL

There are some noted shortcomings associated with SEL implementation. For example, Effrem et al., (2019) notes several drawbacks with SEL, including the lack of an expert

agreement of SEL definition, possibility of brainwashing and corrosion of free thought replaced with government established SEL views, and loss of student privacy due to collection of highly sensitive data. Shriver and Weissberg (2020), also warn that over-exaggerating the impact of SEL is dangerous. Though there have been numerous studies supporting the positive impact of SEL, it would be detrimental to view SEL as a remedy for all educational issues. Some researchers note there is an inherent flaw with SEL based upon the fact that there is a racial divide between the educators and those being taught (Starr, 2019; Love, 2019). Furthermore, Starr (2019) contends, "It's no surprise that many critics have begun to push back on the idea that children of color need White educators to teach them to persevere and regulate their behavior" (p.71). Educational leaders should consider these limitations before embarking on SEL implementation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based upon Bandura's social learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Bandura's (1971) social learning theory purports that learning is impacted by direct experience, observation, and positive and negative reinforcements. In the study's setting, adult behaviors are used as reinforcers to model and reward desired behaviors. Bandura (1971) claims, "Within the framework of social learning theory, reinforcement primarily serves informative and incentive functions, although it also has response strengthening capabilities" (p. 3). Though Bandura acknowledges the influence rewards and punishments have on learning, social learning theory concedes the power of modeling. He further asserts, "a good example is a much better teacher than consequences of unguided actions" (Bandura, 1971, p. 5). The ideologies of social learning theory are appropriate for this study because the study's site relies heavily on the influence of the importance of adult modeling of

desired behaviors. Social learning theory outlines four interrelated subprocesses of modeling; they are attentional processes, retention processes, motoric reproduction processes and reinforcement and motivational processes (Bandura, 1971). This study will focus on reinforcement and motivational processes because Bandura (1971) asserts, "A person can acquire, retain and possess the capabilities for skillful execution of modeled behavior, but learning may rarely be activated into overt performance if it is negatively sanctioned or otherwise unfavorably received" (p.8). Bandura (1977) further suggests when incentives are present rather than negative or indifferent response, observational learning is promptly translated into action.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is also used as a theoretical framework for this study. This theory focuses on the role social interactions play in an individual's development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory is comprised of concepts such as culture-specific tools, speech/language, and the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978; Eun, 2016). Vygotsky reasoned that an individual uses cultural tools to navigate within their environment. Eun (2016) reported, "These cultural tools can take the form of material tools, such as the use of paper and pencil to write a list of things to be remembered, or symbolic and psychological tools, such as the use of various sign systems (e.g., language)" (p. 616). In addition to material and symbolic tools, Vygotsky asserts that individuals also use other people to make cultural adjustments (Eun, 2016). Additionally, Vygotsky identifies language as the most influential and intricate psychological tool (Vygotsky, 1978; Eun, 2016). The zone of proximal development is the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can accomplish with the support of a competent companion (Vygotsky, 1978). This study will draw from the premise

of an individual's tool usage posed by Vygotsky since students will identify the environmental factors that support a positive school culture.

Social learning theory and sociocultural theory recognize the influence environmental factors have on individuals' growth and development, and the primary purpose of SEL is to enhance the social skills of students. By exploring students' perceptions of SEL, framed within the principles of social learning theory and sociocultural theory, this research will provide opportunities for participants to identify environmental factors that promote a safe and supportive learning environment. Identification of these factors will support continued implementation of effective practices and potential adjustments to less successful methods.
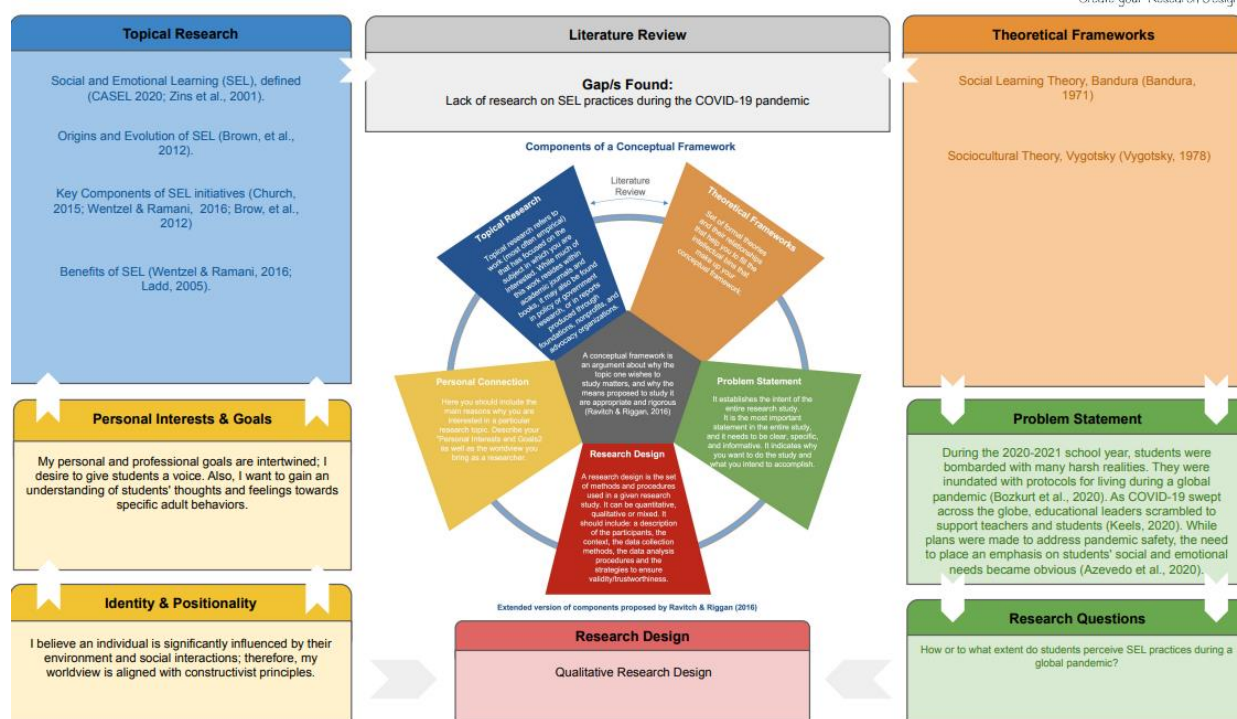
Figure 5. Components of the conceptual framework for this study.

There are gaps in the literature surrounding the effectiveness of specific SEL programs. The challenge is the volume of programs that profess to improve SEL competencies with little or no unbiased data to support their claims. A 2017 report done by The Wallace Foundation and

Harvard School evaluated 25 SEL and character education programs. This report was designed to help schools and program leaders look inside different programs and see what makes them different from one another and to help choose the program that best suits their needs (Jones, et al., 2017). The report was thorough, but it only examined a small portion of SEL programs; therefore, an additional analysis of other programs would be a worthy study. Additionally, there is a lack of research on SEL practices during the COVID pandemic. This study will contribute to the research and provide qualitative data related to students' perceptions of SEL practices.

Chapter Summary

Social and emotional learning has evolved from an era where the teacher was the sole moral repository of learning to the development of specific SEL government funded and endorsed positions. Though terminology has evolved, the importance of engaging students in meaningful cognitive and affective learning experiences remains an integral part of education. Additionally, most initiatives and programs recognize the significance of a comprehensive approach in improving student's SEL competencies. Researchers, educators, and political leaders are recognizing the importance of not solely focusing on students' academic growth. Scherer (2009) contends, "If the experience of "doing school" destroys children's spirit to learn, their sense of wonder, their curiosity about the world, and their willingness to care for the human condition, have we succeeded as educators, no matter how well our students do on standardized tests?" (p. 3). This is the underpinnings of social and emotional learning. Despite SEL resistance, the research is clear that the implementation of social and emotional learning has positive effects on academics, health, and interpersonal skills (Elias, et al, 1997; Zins et al., 2004). In the following section, the research methodology guiding this work will be elaborated on in further detail.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A qualitative approach was selected for this study because it seeks to understand rather than explain participants' experiences related to a specific phenomenon. By contrast, quantitative and mixed-methods studies are structured to have numerical findings. Therefore, these would not be appropriate for this study. Stake (2010) explains there is an epistemological difference between quantitative and qualitative research; one is focused on personal knowledge while the other places an emphasis on objective measurements. A qualitative research design is best for this study because it is intended to uncover rather than quantify participants' thoughts and feelings.

Though SEL is more commonly explored through a qualitative lens, quantitative researchers have tackled the topic. For example, some studies explored the implementation of specific programs, while others were conducted to assess SEL tools. Bradshaw and Kush (2020), sought to test the efficiency and reliability of a teacher observation tool designed to measure students' social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. The study suggested the instrument could be used for several purposes including the identification of students who would benefit from additional services. Burgin, Coli, and Daniel (2021) conducted a mixed-method study using qualitative and quantitative data to assess teachers' perspectives and understanding of SEL following a day of professional development. The result of this study proposes the need for additional staff training. Additionally, Capp et al., (2018) investigated the impact of peer tutoring on academic and socio-emotional growth through surveys and interviews. The findings revealed peer tutoring was impactful because, "Teacher reports indicated small academic improvements,

but many indicated larger social-emotional improvements" (Capp et al., 2018, p.173). These studies focused on the quantifiable effect of SEL practices which is not the aim of this study.

This study will employ a phenomenographic qualitative research tradition. While phenomenology and phenomenography both explore the lived experiences of participants, phenomenography is focused on the participants' lived experiences related to a phenomenon rather than categorizing the construction and connotation of the phenomenon. (Marton, 1981; Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007). Martin (1981) explains, "In phenomenography, we suggest, we would deal with both the conceptual and the experiential, as well as what is thought of as that which is lived" (p. 181). According to Billsberry, et al., (2019) the objective of phenomenography is to understand how people perceive and construct the world related to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenography is important because it aspires to "describe the aspect of the world as it appears to the individual " (Marton, 1986, p 33). Furthermore, Billsberry, et al., (2019), state it goes beyond giving people a voice, instead it is "about making sense of how people make sense of a particular phenomenon" (p. 629). Tackling this topic from a phenomenographic approach is useful because it will provide insight into how different students perceived and experienced SEL initiatives during the global pandemic.

Research Question

For this study, the research question that guided this study is:

How, or to what extent, do students perceive SEL practices during a global pandemic?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify students' perceptions of adult behaviors that help students feel safe and supported. In a comparison between phenomenology and phenomenography, Martin (1981) asserts that phenomenology is methodological while

phenomenography is substance-oriented. Martin explains this comparison using the concept of political power.

"The phenomenology of power" would, for instance, refer to something we arrive at

concerning political power by means of a phenomenological investigation. "The

phenomenography of political power", on the other hand, would refer to anything that

can be said about how people perceive and conceptualize political power (Martin, 1981 p. 181).

He further contends that phenomenology addresses the "conceptual and experiential" (Marton,

1981, p. 181). Since phenomenography is focused on individuals' lived experiences, it is most

fitting for this study because it supports the study's goal and research question.
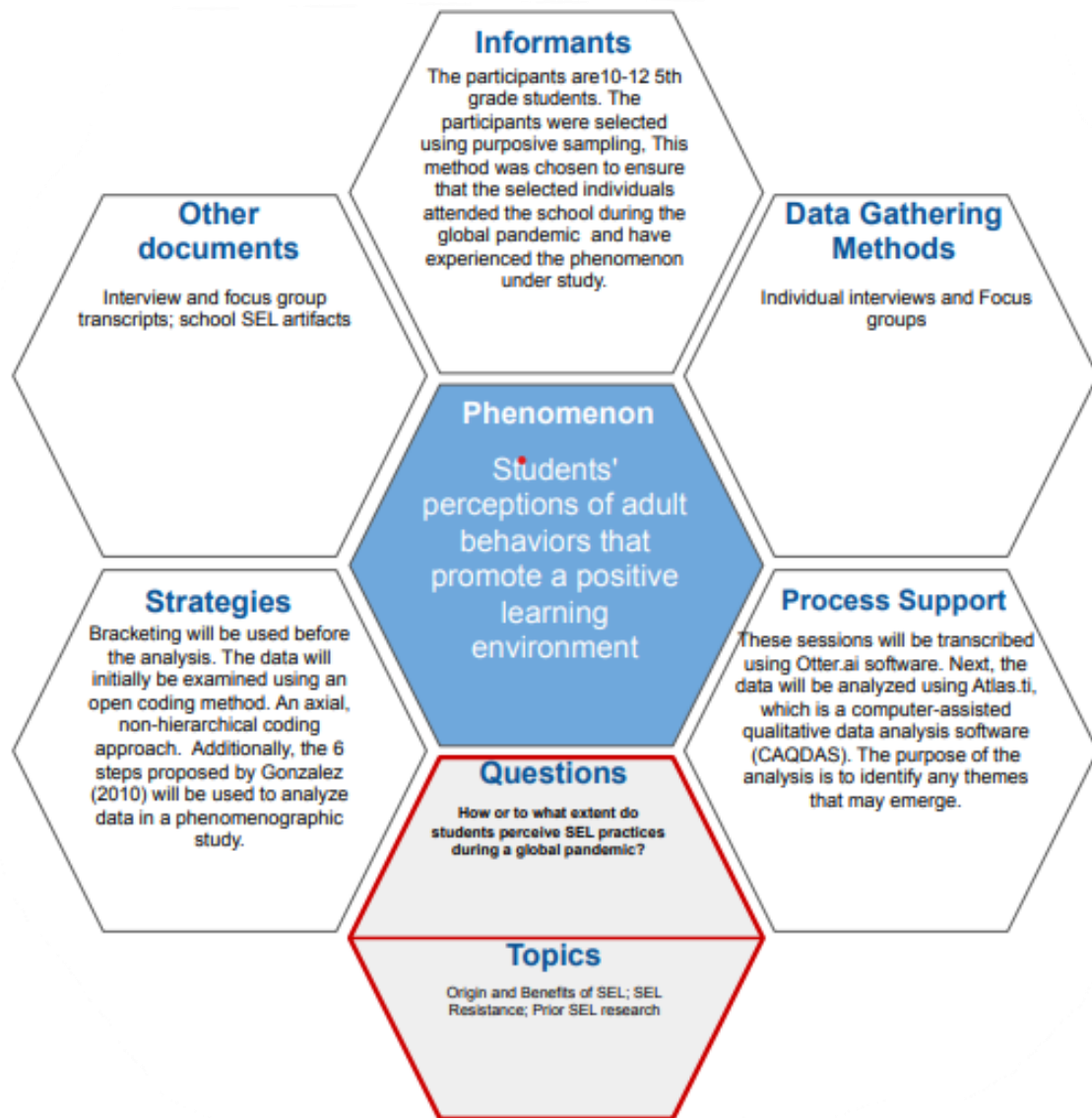
Figure 6. Study of research design

Worldview

The constructivist paradigm is most aligned with the researcher's worldview because knowledge and reality develop through the social interactions coupled with individuals' life experiences. This model acknowledges the reciprocal nature of conducting research. Creswell and Poth (2017) state, "The inquirer and the inquired-into are interlocked in an interactive

process; each influences the other" (p. 19). This quote is directly connected to this paradigm because it represents the very nature of teaching and learning. Additionally, constructivists use different methods (observations, interviews, and document reviews) to conduct their studies (Mertens, 2014). This is important in data triangulation. The researcher will use interviews and focus groups to collect data in this study.

Since constructivists support the idea that understanding is acquired and advanced through social and environmental factors, it is logical to expect that, as educators are studying and assessing their students, students are scrutinizing and analyzing their teachers. Classrooms, by their very nature, are informal studies. For example, in an average kindergarten class, while students are learning to read, write, and compute, they are also learning which classmates are shy, brave, smart, and tough. They quickly determine which students follow the rules, as well as the ones who do not. This process continues throughout a person's matriculation. Stake (2010) states, "There is no one way of qualitative thinking, but a grand collection of ways. It is interpretive, experience based, situational, and personal" (p. 31). My ambition is to peel back the layers of perception to highlight varied views and to think in nonlinear and unobstructed ways.

Positionality Statement

As the researcher, my background informs and shapes how I approach my work. I am an African American, Christian, wife, mother, leader, and educator. I was raised and educated in the southern portion of the United States. At times, I resided in high poverty areas. Hence, my biases are revealed during interactions with individuals that have negative perceptions of individuals who live in poor neighborhoods or who are raised by single parents. According to Peskin (1988), "Whatever the substance of one's persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspect of

our life" (p. 17). The researcher further contends that our influences are ever-present in both our personal and professional lives. This has resulted in all of the previously stated details about my life (plus a million other things that have not been included) and have molded me into the person I am today. Being raised by my family's matriarchs influenced my understanding of responsibility and accountability. These ideals manifest themselves in the researcher's daily work. Creating a family environment for staff and students is one of the researcher's priorities.

My occupation tends to make others perceive me from my current reality (middle class) as my social starting point, and because of this, their perceptions impact how I am regarded. My current social status would be classified as middle class; however, my early background was influenced by poverty. There are several implications associated with this perceived identity. There is a misconception that poor people will not pursue and/or obtain jobs in education. This can be rooted in the belief that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds don't value education. There is also a racial and gender implication that minority women are infrequently seen as leaders. Essentially, there are negative connotations associated with poverty.

Society perceives me as an educated African American woman who lives an American middle-class life. There is a perception that I view the world from this perspective. This implies that society identifies, values, and categorizes people based upon their economic status. Merriam Webster defines poor as, "lacking material possessions." However, society associates poverty (or being poor) with deficiencies that extend beyond economics. Society tends to treat poor people (particularly children) with a "bless your heart" approach indicating an assumption that these individuals have a *less than* life. This is a false assumption. Even though I may have lacked material possessions growing up, I was wealthy in other areas of life. I connect with an interpretivist (constructivist) viewpoint because I believe "the world is socially constructed,

complex, and ever changing" (Glense, 2016, p. 9). This paradigm affirms my positionality as a qualitative researcher. School is a social, multi-faceted, evolving place where students learn academics and social norms. This implies that educators can guide and influence students' behaviors by taking a constructivist approach.

Researcher's Role

I served as a school administrator at the designated study site for this research. I have been employed with the district and school for over ten years and have served in three different leadership roles. Due to the global pandemic, the school transitioned to virtual learning during the fourth quarter of my first year as principal. As a result, during the 2020-2021 academic year, the school district offered parents the option of virtual or in-person learning. One-third of the parents at the study location opted for virtual learning, resulting in less than three hundred students participating in face-to-face instruction. I was responsible for managing and evaluating both in-person and virtual learning while establishing procedures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. During the 2021-2022 school year, the district opened an elementary virtual academy to support parental requests for an online instructional option. Less than fifty families at the study location chose the virtual option; despite this parental selection, the study location has seen an increase in student enrollment.

I have served the school community for more than a decade, resulting in a well-established relationship between me and the community. Creating a family environment for all stakeholders is one of the researcher's priorities. This is rooted in the belief that all individuals (students and staff) are empowered to do their best when they feel safe and supported. My professional beliefs about the people, places, and ideas involved in this study are influenced by personal experiences as a student in a high-poverty school. My agenda is influenced by the

desire to reach back and assist individuals from similar backgrounds. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) contend, an individual's "biases, ideological commitments, theories of action and epistemological assumptions (what constitutes useful or valuable knowledge) are influenced by your social location (race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual identification, nationality, and other social identities), institutional position, and life experience" (p.10).

Context

This study was conducted in a suburban Title I elementary school located in the southeastern portion of the United States. The school is located approximately 25 miles from a metropolitan city area. During the 2020-2021 school year, 250 students received in-person instruction and 150 families opted for virtual learning. The following year, less than 50 families selected to have their students participate in virtual learning. Historically, the school has the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch as compared to the other elementary schools in the district. The school serves students who live in the local housing authority and several income-based apartment complexes. The student population for the school is not racially commensurate with the county's demographics. There are more than double the percentage of African American students compared to the percentage in the entire county. Conversely, the county has more than double the percentage of white residents than the percentage of enrolled white students.

The school serves students from kindergarten to grade 5. Historically, approximately 80% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch; however, as a part of the American Recovery Plan, all students received free lunch during the 2021-2022 school year. This has impacted the number of families who have completed the free and reduced lunch applications. The student population has a 27% transiency rate. During the 2021-2022 school year, the district

used CARES Act funding to create several positions to provide additional school-level and district support. The funds were also used to reduce class size by two students. These changes resulted in the school receiving two additional classroom allotments and an additional special education paraprofessional allotment. The school is considered a small school in the state's thirteenth largest district; its enrollment was under 450 students. Additionally, the school typically performs in the district's bottom ten percent on state and local assessments. However, this school has positive school climate data based on parent, teacher, and student surveys. Overall, the school faces the challenge of using its positive school culture to leverage academic growth.

Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH) and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) are SEL initiatives implemented at the study location. During the first weeks of school, teachers facilitate the development of the class social contract and review school expectations by location (i.e., hallways, cafeteria, and buses.) As a part of SWPBIS, behavioral guidelines are defined for school common areas, such as hallways. During CKH training, teachers are shown how to develop social contracts. The class social contract is an agreement which outlines approved behaviors. All members of the class outline expected classroom behaviors and sign the agreement, signifying communal acceptance and responsibility. Each day the contract is referenced, and a particular attribute is highlighted as the day's focal point. Students "check" each other when there is a violation, encouraging cultural adjustments. At the end of the day, a teacher-selected rater shares their assessment of the class performance as it relates to the focal point. The goal of these practices is for students to adopt socially acceptable behavior. This is known as internalization. Eun (2016) states, "internalization refers to the process in which the use of tools (i.e., mediation) in human-environment or human-human

interactions moves into the intra-psychological plane of the individual" (p. 616). Because individuals can form information through positive and negative stimuli, it is imperative that educators approach this matter with intentionality.

Resources and training were readily available. There was also ongoing support for schoolwide implementation. All school personnel (classified and certified) were required to participate in training because they were responsible for modeling positive and appropriate interactions. They were also provided support when handling difficult situations. The school counselor and Title I Instructional Lead Teacher were responsible for supporting non-academic personnel, and school administration and district personnel provided support and training to certified staff members. Since individuals, no matter their age, are the best versions of themselves in safe environments, it is imperative that school leaders tap into the potential benefits in implementing SEL practices designed at creating safe and supportive learning environments. The following tables provide the demographic background of the school district and student populations of the site studied in this research.

Table B

Racial and subgroup data of school compared to the school district (2020-2021 School Year)

Categorical Labels	School District	School
African American	27%	41%
Asian	1%	1%
Hispanic	11%	13%
Multi-racial	5%	10%
Native American/Alaskan Native	0%	0%

	56%	34%
White	56%	34%
Economically Disadvantaged	40%	70%

Table C

Racial demographic information for school included in the study (2020-2021 School Year)

Categorical Labels	Actual Numbers of Students	Percentage of Student body
African American	177	41%
Asian	4	1%
Hispanic	56	13%
Multi-racial	43	10%
White	147	34%

Table D

Subgroup information for school included in the study (2020-2021 School Year)

Categorical Labels	Actual Numbers of Students	Percentage of Student body
Economically Disadvantaged	302	70%
English Language Learners	13	4%
Gifted	29	6.5%

Table E

Racial demographic Information for 5th Grade Students at study site (2020-2021 School Year)

Categorical Labels	Actual Numbers of Students	Percentage of Student body

African American	37	8%
Asian	0	0%
Hispanic	10	2%
Two or more races	4	‹ 1%
White	26	5%

Table F

Subgroup information for 5th Grade Students at study site (2020-2021 School Year)

Categorical Labels	Actual Numbers of Students	Percentage of Student body
Economically Disadvantaged	39	49%
English Language Learners	2	‹ 1%
Gifted	6	1%
Students with Disabilities	16	3%

Participants

The participants were fifth grade students at a suburban Title I school. Ten students were selected using purposive sampling. According to Andrade (2021), "purposive sample is the one whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study (p. 87). This method was chosen to ensure that the selected individuals attended the school during the global pandemic and have experienced the phenomenon under study. The participants were selected from the school's three 5th grade homerooms. The rosters were reviewed to identify students who attended the school during both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic school year. Also, no more than four students per homeroom were selected. Pseudonyms were used to anonymize participants.

The data collection process began with an informational meeting for parents and students; this meeting was held virtually. Parents were emailed the required consent form. At the beginning of each focus group meeting, students were reminded that their participation was voluntary. Therefore, verbal consent was requested at each meeting. In addition to gaining written and verbal consent, the researcher employed specific strategies to ensure participants were supported throughout the research process. Ward and Delmont (2020) recommend researchers focus on regulations, reflection, and relationships to avoid causing participants any harm.

Lastly, the researcher honored the relationship between the researcher and participant by guaranteeing participants' voices were represented in an agreed upon manner. Equally important was participants' affective needs, so participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings regarding participation in the research process. Finally, the researcher monitored participants' behavior and expressions during interviews and focus groups.

Data Collection

To conduct this study, my data collection process consisted of interviews and focus groups sessions with fifth grade students at the study location. The data was collected during the second semester of school. Focus groups were comprised of the same students that participated in the individual interviews. Since the school had three fifth grade homerooms, initially students were placed in focus groups by their homeroom assignment. However, due to scheduling conflicts, students were placed in focus groups based on their availability. Six students came to the school over the summer for interviews and focus groups sessions. The other students engaged in the process during the fall. The researcher visited them at middle school to conduct the

interviews and focus group sessions. All sessions were transcribed using Otter.ai software. Bracketing was used before the analysis.

Interviews

Interviews are a staple in qualitative research and were used in this study (Sandelowski, 2002). Rowley (2012) defined interviews as "face-to-face verbal exchanges in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to acquire information from, and gain an understanding of, another person, the interviewee" (p.260). This description can be expanded to include virtual interview formats such as Zoom and Teams. According to McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019), "Qualitative interviews afford researchers opportunities to explore, in an in-depth manner, matters that are unique to the experiences of the interviewees, allowing insights into how different phenomena of interest are experienced and perceived" (p. 1002). Additionally, researchers use interviews to compile comprehensive descriptions of participants' ideas, feelings, beliefs, and experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007).

Though interviewing is recognized as a valid data collection method, it is not infallible. Researchers should consider several factors when developing, executing, and analyzing interviews. Galletta (2012) recommends paying attention to ideas and themes that need participant clarification or elaboration. Oltman (2016) argues, "the decision about interview mode should be made carefully and thoughtfully, with appropriate consideration to both the interviewer context and the respondent context" (p. 3). To create dynamic interview protocols and elicit thorough responses, Jacob and Furguson (2012) suggests writing a script that contains open-ended questions, beginning with easy to answer questions, and using prompts. Taking these recommendations into consideration, this study used semi-structured, face to face interviews.

Each participant was interviewed once using the interview questions found in Appendix E. Each interview took fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on the participants' responses.

Focus Groups

I used focus groups with students because focus groups or group interviews have become a common data collection tool in the world of qualitative research though they were originally used in marketing (Hollander, 2004). Subsequently group interviews became prevalent in other areas such as politics, communication, social work, healthcare, education, and sociology (Hollander, 2004; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Frey, & Fontana, 1991). Focus groups are typically composed of four to twelve participants and are facilitated by a moderator. The structure and format of focus groups can vary depending on the purpose (Frey & Fontana, 2000). An informal approach was adopted for this study.

According to Hollander (2004), four types of social contexts exist in focus groups subsequently impacting group members and their interactions. They are associational context, status context, conversational context, and relational context. These interactions offer advantages and disadvantages to researchers. While one clear advantage is for the researcher to observe the groups' interactions and responses, Hollander (2004) reports that problematic silence and problematic speech can pose challenges. Frey and Fontana (2000) concede this "groupthink" can be a challenge, but they maintain group interviews are beneficial because they "often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative" (p. 653). Furthermore, focus groups conversations can stimulate participants by assisting in recall (Frey & Fontana, 2000). Overall, group interviews are recognized as a valid data collection method. The researcher invited the interviewed students to participate in the focus group sessions; therefore, the same purposive method was used to select focus group participants. The researcher conducted three focus group

50

sessions; participants were grouped based upon their availability. Each session was expected to last approximately 30 minutes, and the Focus Script found in Appendix F was used to facilitate the group discussion.

For the focus groups, as recommended by Oliver (2010), parents and students were provided a thorough description of the research, including its purpose. Also, the data analysis process was explained so that participants and parents understood the way the student-provided data was used. During focus groups, participants were asked a series of questions and asked to sort items based on their impact on the learning environment. The categories for the sorting activity were a) had little to no impact, b) had some impact, or c) had a positive impact on the learning environment.

Data Analysis

The data was initially analyzed using an open coding method. First, the data files were organized and transcribed, then the researcher read through the transcriptions and made annotations to identify important statements, stories, and core ideas. Textual and structural descriptions were developed by answering *what* and *how* questions. Next, the data was analyzed using Atlas.ti, which is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The purpose of the analysis was to identify any themes that emerged. Additionally, the six steps proposed by Gonzalez (2010) were used to analyze data in a phenomenographic study. To anonymize participants, fictional names were assigned to the students and school. Data was stored in a secure, password-protected, online platform to maximize privacy and confidentiality. The "crux" of the analysis will be presented as findings including graphic illustrations generated by the Hopscotch software.

Trustworthiness of Research

To establish research trustworthiness, the researcher employed strategies to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln & Guba; 2013; Swales and Feak, 2012; Schmied & Dheskali, 2019).

Credibility

Since interviews and focus groups are well-recognized qualitative research practice, it supports the study's credibility. In addition, purposive sampling was used to guarantee participants were enrolled during the phenomenon. Triangulation was achieved using different methods, including focus groups and individual interviews. Frequent debriefing sessions occurred during the focus group sessions. Furthermore, the researcher wrote a thick description of the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon examined in the study.

Transferability & Dependability

In considering the transferability of the study, the researcher drafted a detailed analysis of the study's setting (broad to specific) including economic, ethnic, racial, and political details. Additionally, the research included demographic information of the school and participants. The researcher created a detailed description of the research design and a detailed implementation plan. I created a blueprint for data gathering and analysis, reflected on the study, and drafted a written valuation assessing the effectiveness of the plan. These steps address the study's dependability.

Confirmability

To achieve confirmability, the researcher journaled throughout the research process. The journal contains recognition and acknowledgement of the researcher's personal predispositions, as well as a record of personal thoughts, ideas, and perceptions that arose throughout the study. Lastly, the triangulation of several data sources and an audit trail was employed.

Educational research poses unique complexities. According to McGinn and Bosacki (2004), "There is no single genre for the conduct or presentation of educational research. This plethora of research approaches has contributed to a complex and evolving ethical landscape for educational research" (p. 2). To address the ethical considerations that may have arisen, the researcher followed a set of guiding principles to adhere to ethical practices and made every effort to mitigate bias. The process began with establishing a rapport with the participants. Lichtman (2012) suggests that this is critical in getting participants to disclose information. In the same vein, the researcher provided participants with full disclosure and gained informed consent. After establishing rapport, it was critical to maintain the established trust by preserving privacy and confidentiality (Lichtman, 2012). All identifying details were removed and kept secure. Mitigating bias is a challenging aspect of research. Bias is present in all individuals, researchers, and reports (Stake 2010); therefore, it is present in all papers, studies, and dissertations. According to Peskin (1988), "Whatever the substance of one's persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspects of our life" (p. 17). The researcher would add that these influences are ever-present in both our personal and professional lives. Therefore, the researcher mitigated bias by using several strategies, including triangulating data from multiple data sources (focus groups and interviews), member checking, allowing participants to review the findings, and reviewing

findings with the dissertation committee. Stake (2010) recommends going beyond the recognition of bias to include checking, "the data gathering and analyses with validation, particularly by critical friends, and by helping our readers to recognize the work that emerges still biased" (p.166). Gonzalez (2010) supports a six-step process for phenomenographic studies. These steps include familiarization with transcripts, compilation through repeated reading to identify relevant data, condensation by deleting unnecessary information, preliminary grouping, and comparison of themes, ending with final outcomes based on different ways the participants experience the phenomenon (Gonzalez, 2010). Despite all these measures, the researcher concedes to Peskin's (1988) point, it is impossible to completely undress from one's bias. Hence, the researcher acknowledged their positionality and worldview to promote bias transparency.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the study's research question and discussed the methodology that was used to investigate the proposed research question. This study employed a phenomenographic qualitative research tradition. Hollander (2004) asserts, "All qualitative methods and, indeed, all methods that rely on individuals' self-reports of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, or beliefs face the dilemma that internal states are knowable only to the individual, who may or may not choose to share them with others" (p. 605). Considering this contention, the chapter discussed the data collection tools (interviews and focus groups) and the efforts the researcher employed to support the participants throughout the research process. A detailed data collection tools is included in this chapter along with a description of the study's context and participants. Lastly, the chapter described the researcher's role, worldview, and data analytical process.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the phenomenographic qualitative study. Specifically, this chapter will discuss students' perspectives of how intentional adult behaviors influence school climate. The purpose of this study was to identify students' perceptions of adult behaviors that help students feel safe and supported. The proposed research question used to guide this work is:

How, or to what extent, do students perceive SEL practices during a global pandemic? In the following section I will elaborate further on the demographics of the participants who engaged in this study.

Participant Descriptions

All participants in the study were 5th grade students who attended in-person instruction at the study location during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. There were a total of 10 participants in the study. A description of each participant is included in this chapter. The table below outlines select demographic information for each participant.

Table G

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Years Attendance at Study's Location Site	Gender	Live in Attendance Zone
Aaron	6	M	N
Breanna	2	F	N
Crystal	3	F	N
Dexter	3	M	N
Elaine	4	F	Y

Florence	6	F	Y
Gwen	4	F	Y
Hannah	6	F	Y
Ingrid	6	F	Y
Kevin	5	M	Y

Aaron

Aaron was a male student who participated in the school's venture program and multiple school activities. He was confident, open, and relaxed. Aaron freely shared his thoughts and opinions. He was popular among his peers and staff members, and he had a jovial demeanor. He participated in community athletics and had an older sibling who previously attended school at the study location. Additionally, one of his parents was an educator. Because he attended school at the study location since kindergarten, he was familiar with the facilitator and was visibly comfortable in the school environment.

Breanna

Breanna was a female student who had attended two other elementary schools not including the study location. She did not live in the attendance zone, and she did not use school-sponsored transportation. She had attended school at the study location for two years. She participated in the school's venture program. Breanna was soft-spoken and reserved. She was confident and openly verbalized differing views. She was an avid reader, and she participated in several extracurricular school activities.

Crystal

Crystal was a female student who had attended school at the study location for three years. She readily shared her opinions. She felt comfortable in the school and noted positive experiences with adults and her peers. However, she did notice discrepancies in how some students were treated. She also had a significantly negative opinion of a specific staff member. She participated in multiple school clubs.

Dexter

Dexter was a male student who attended primary school at a different location before attending school at the study location. He began as a student in the study location in third grade and did not use school-sponsored transportation. Dexter was given the interview and focus group questions individually. During both sessions he was comfortable and freely shared his answers. He displayed a desire to showcase his teachers and peers in a positive light.

Elaine

Elaine was a female student who had attended school at the study location since second grade. She was reflective and open during the interview. Her personality fluctuated from energetic to reserved. She was a member of the school's news team and felt comfortable with public speaking. However, in small group settings she was less outspoken. She focused heavily on how activities connected to learning. Also, she participated in the school's gifted program.

Florence

Florence was a female student who had attended school at the study location since kindergarten. Florence would have a brief conversation with an administrator before school to

discuss her focus for the day, and then follow-up with an administrator at the end of the day to discuss the events of the day. She openly shared her thoughts and would provide specific examples of positive and negative interactions. She identified parent influences as her primary reason for attending school. Florence participated in several school clubs.

Gwen

Gwen was a female student who attended school at the study location since second grade. She was direct and openly shared her thoughts and opinions. She eagerly provided examples of adult behaviors during various school activities, and she also identified undesirable behaviors. She lived in the attendance zone but did not participate in any school clubs.

Hannah

Hannah was a female student. She had attended the study location since kindergarten. She was reflective and reserved. She was empathetic and specifically noted negative behavior (bullying) as a deterrent for attending school. Additionally, she also noted a difference between how some adults interact with students. She openly shared examples of specific interactions and experiences. She lived in the attendance zone but did not participate in any school clubs.

Ingrid

Ingrid was a female student who has attended the school at the study location since kindergarten. She was highly focused on her peer relationships. Ingrid was outgoing and highly social. Ingrid enjoyed her time in elementary school, and she spoke of the experiences during the last few years with nostalgia. She attended school in the attendance zone and did participate in a school-sponsored club.

Kevin was a male student. He attended school at the study location since first grade. He had a quiet temperament and was reluctant to verbalize any negative commentary. Kevin made a conscientious effort to focus on the positive aspects of school. Additionally, he emphasized the role the counselor played in creating a supportive learning environment. He resided in the attendance zone and did participate in a school-sponsored club.

Emergent Themes

Data from the participant interviews and focus groups resulted in five distinct themes: *personal connections, culture crushers, building community, school incentives/rewards and physical and emotional safety*. Participants identified personal connections as the relationships they had with staff members who knew them as individuals. On the other hand, culture crushers were perceived as negative actions, such as yelling and derogatory comments that serve to create barriers between students and adults. When students were afforded opportunities to socially interact, they felt these helped to build a sense of class and school community. School incentives and rewards were tangible items that students received as recognition for adhering to the expected behaviors. Lastly, students identified factors that enhanced or threatened their sense of physical and emotional safety.

Participant responses were reviewed and compared to identify emergent themes as illustrated in Table H.

Belonging			
Relationships	*Building Community*	*Rewards*	*School Safety*

● Personal Connections ● Relevant Experiences	● Culture Crushers	● Social Contract ● Opportunities to share	● School Incentives ● Recognition	● Emotional safety ● Physical Environment

Table H . Belonging Themes Findings

The overarching theme is belonging. This consists of relationships, building community, rewards, and safety, all of which contribute to students' sense of belonging. However, under the theme of relationships, students identified two competing factors: personal connections and culture crushers.

Relationships

Personal connections and culture crushers were the dominant ideas that students expressed. While personal connections consisted of the actions adults displayed to connect with students, in contrast, culture crushers consisted of negative comments from teachers towards students. Additionally, participants identified relevant experiences as a method adults used to build relationships with students.

Personal Connections

Participants' responses to questions related to SEL practices that promote a positive learning environment revealed the importance of relationships through teacher interactions that built personal connections. Student and teacher interactions were identified as one of the foremost contributors to participants' perceptions of belonging. For example, when asked, "How do you feel when you are greeted by someone?", all participants noted this action had a positive impact on the school environment. Breanna remarked, *"Like I belong at school,"* Elaine commented, *"It makes me feel good because they remember me and they and then they are*

trying to be kind to me." Ingrid stated, "*Makes me feel welcome to school instead of like no one saying something to me like acting like I'm a ghost or something.*" The latent message of their words resonates the impact of personal connection.

Relevant Experiences

Relevant experiences also emerged as a theme under relationships and were an outgrowth of personal connections. Real relationships are built through relevant experiences, and rough relationships are formed through turbulent interactions. This idea was infused throughout the findings. Each participant shared at least one experience that either helped or harmed the learning environment. Elaine discussed how her relationship with a teacher was beneficial because the teacher would provide her with headphones on the days the school had fire drills because the teacher knew the alarm frightened her. She further explained that her relationships with her teachers and peers was the primary motivation for her to attend each day, especially during special school events. Aaron described how his teacher would laugh and joke with the class creating a safe and fun learning environment. Kevin also described how his relationship with the school counselor was valuable because it helped him and his brother to have a better rapport at home. Gwen noticed that some teachers made students feel good about themselves, while others *"bring them down saying mean stuff to them, like this is why I don't' want to be in this class and stuff like that."* This sentiment was shared by Florence. She shared that some teachers would make rude comments to students or accuse them of being disrespectful along with taking away their items. Overall, students identified several specific experiences that helped to create a positive learning environment including:

- All students enjoyed having the opportunity to share about themselves within the classroom (i.e. class meetings, sharing Good Things)

- Students enjoyed participating in school events like dress up days, PBIS events and holiday activities.

- Students also felt encouraged when they received school currency and were able to use the currency to purchase desired items.

- In addition, students found school recognition and extra-curricular opportunities supported a positive learning environment.

Culture Crushers

During the interviews and focus group sessions, while participants shared their thoughts on the aspects of a supportive learning environment, they also uncovered counterproductive characteristics. These adult behaviors are described as culture crushers because the impact described by participants had a "crushing" result on the victim and observers. Yelling and making derogatory comments were some of the primary adult behaviors students identified as having a negative impact on the learning environment. During Focus Group 3, Florence explained, "*Pointing people out and like, if somebody does something wrong, she points them out. Well, she points them out or yell at them or, yeah, she points them out in front of the whole class, and they're embarrassed.*" During Focus Group 1, Aaron describes a similar experience with a different adult. Ingrid added, *"And she yells at us because we don't because we don't do it perfect enough. Like sometimes it makes me like feel like, well, everything's not always perfect."* It was noted that student-teacher relationships were more impactful than were consequences in correcting student behaviors. Additionally, consequences given by a trusted adult were more impactful than those given by someone viewed as mean or unkind. Participants also identified favoritism, negative attitude, and unforgiving disposition as adult characteristics that lead to a negative school environment.

Building Community

Participants recognized how specific practices influence building community within the classroom. Students identified two adult practices that facilitated in building a class community: (1) being given opportunities to share about themselves and (2) creating and using a class social contract. While having the opportunity to share was highly regarded in building community, the class social contract had mixed reviews.

Opportunities to Share

In addition to implementing social contracts, teachers are asked to start the day by having select students share positive aspects of their lives. When teachers allocated this time, participants identified this practice as an important part of maintaining a positive school culture. All participants enjoyed being able to share about themselves and learn new things about their peers. Breanna stated, *"it is usually gives a boost,* while Crystal commented, *"It makes me feel that like everyone is like listening to me."* Florence added, "*Because sometimes in the morning, I have something good. And then like, I can't wait until I can tell my teacher and my classroom about it.*" Additionally, Hannah explained, "*Because it lets the teacher get to know other things about other people and the good things about them, and that's why it's called Good Things.*" Aaron, Gwen, Kevin, and Ingrid stressed the emotional relevance of being able to share their lives with others rather than keeping important information to themselves. Dexter maintained, *"I love sharing what happens during my life and you know, just talking to people."* Elaine shared this sentiment. She added, *"Because I'm able to tell people the good things that happened and I can listen to the positive things that happened in their lives too."* Overall, engaging with others (adults and peers) within the school community played a pivotal role in creating a sense of belonging.

Social Contracts

Teachers and students craft a class social contract which defines agreed upon classroom behaviors. The development of the social contract occurs during the first month of school. After the class reaches consensus, all members of the class sign the document and it remains posted in the classroom as a reminder and a reference point. For example, Florence noted, *"When sometimes we used to act out my teacher, she used to tell us about the remind us of the social contract and actually helped."* Gwen noted, "*Some people who signed it, they, they were like bad kids, but then they switch up and change their behavior. When they signed that contract. They want to do better and then start becoming good and stuff like that.*" Breanna concurred, stating that sometimes simply pointing to the contract would rectify a situation. Social contracts were also used as a monitoring tool. Sometimes, classes pick an attribute from the contract that the class needs to improve and, at the end of the day, students rate their intentional efforts to improve. Elaine and Crystal noted that the teacher would use the class social contract to facilitate class discussions regarding problem behavior. Crystal remarked, "*Like, she would just tell us to come down to the carpet and then she just, she'd make us sit in a circle and just talk about it. Because it was becoming a problem.*" Conversely, Aaron and Kevin indicated that the social contract had inconsistent results. Dexter, Hannah and Ingrid did not feel the social contract was an effective tool. Ingrid explained,

> "*Sometimes people like even though they like sign the contract they really don't listen to the contract. Well, they (the teacher) did use it but like they told them, remember you signed the contract, so you have to be respectful and responsible and stuff, but they be like, okay, but they really don't listen.*"

There did not appear to be a clear reason for the conflicting opinions surrounding social contracts.

Rewards

The site location has employed specific practices for rewarding and recognizing students who follow the established school expectations. Throughout the school, signage is used to remind students of these expectations when they are in common areas. The chart is an example of these expectations.

PBIS Matrix	BUS	DINER	WHOA	BATH
Respectful	**B**e on time.	**D**o clean up & don't forget items **I**nside voice at all times **N**ice manners and kind words **E**at and touch only your own food	**W**alk on the line **H**ands by your sides	**B**e quick **A**lways quiet
Responsible	**U**nderstand that safety is important	**R**emain in your seat, and raise your hand	On the line **A**lways silent	**T**rash picked up
Safe	**S**tay Seated			**H**ands washed

Table I. Study location's PBIS Matrix

School Incentives

Students can earn rewards by following the school and class guidelines. Some of the rewards include school dollars, which can be used to purchase items from the school incentive cart or to participate in quarterly incentive events, such as game day. Students can earn tokens that can be used to acquire items (such as small toys) from the token tower. Providing these

incentives and opportunities for encouragement were seen as impactful by study participants. They noted the key to success was having incentives that students wanted. Overall, participants enjoyed being afforded the opportunity to purchase items or engage in entertaining activities.

Recognition

In addition to earning rewards, students could be recognized for their efforts in displaying the expected behaviors. For example, select 4th and 5th grade students host the school's morning announcements, and each afternoon a student is selected to participate in the afternoon announcements. Monthly, each homeroom teacher selects one student to be recognized as their P.A.W.S. (Positive, Adaptive, Wise, and Supportive) recipient. These students earn a medal and certificate. Furthermore, their pictures are displayed in the lobby and in the local newspaper. Each focus group rated these activities as having a positive impact on the learning environment. Hannah contends, *"Some people get a PAWS awards and they will feel like they're special."* However, some participants felt the monthly student recognition was not as impactful because of the limited number of recipients. Student Elaine explains*, "only one person from each class can get it."* Despite this drawback, participants' feedback was favorable regarding receiving recognition.

School Safety

Participants identified two areas of school safety that contributed to a safe and supportive learning environment, which are emotional safety and the physical environment. When discussing emotional safety, participants focused on things adults did that impacted their mental state. The physical environment addressed the actions adults did to keep the environment safe and activities that students felt were potentially harmful to them physically.

Emotional Safety

Most of the participants identified specific safety measures as having an impact on their emotional state. An increased adult attention to safety during the pandemic, including promoting physical separation, mask-wearing and hand washing were identified as some of the top practices that affected the emotional temperature of the school . Additionally, several participants recognized there was a decrease in the number of students attending in-person instruction. Staff changes were also mentioned. It was noted by two participants that the pandemic did impact the "feeling" within the school. For example, one participant noted, *"It was probably like empty because like, you can't really like hug your friends."* Another stated the students and staff were less social. Overall, they recognized the need for safety measures and supported the changes; however, they also identified these as factors that compromised their emotional safety.

Physical Environment

Participants associated physical safety during the pandemic with mask wearing and social distancing. Most students identified little to no change in their personal feelings of safety during the global pandemic. Some students did note seeing the custodians cleaning helped them to feel more comfortable. A mild change in individuals' (students and teachers) dispositions was noted. However, this was most prevalent the first semester with a marked decrease in safety concerns in subsequent semesters.

The classroom was overwhelmingly identified as a safe space within the school. A few stated they felt safe throughout the building. Others identified specific places, such as the playground and the gym, as areas they felt uncomfortable because of their physical safety. Kevin disclosed*, "PE because you can get hurt playing things like dodge ball."* Several participants

mentioned fear associated with school safety drills and being outside the building alone. The following illustration compares students' responses related to school safety.

School Safety	
Safe	*Unsafe*

● Classroom
 	
● Anywhere with trusted individuals (teachers and peers)
	● Anyplace when adult not present
	
	● Physical Safety
	    ○ Playground Equipment
	    ○ Gym-Contact Sports
	
	● During Drills

Table J. Participants' response to school safety

Having a trusted adult present was key in promoting a sense of safety and security. This is especially true during safety drills. Students look to their teachers and other staff members for support and assurance.

Focus Groups

During the focus group sessions, participants were asked to sort school-related items into three categories: has a positive impact on school environment, has somewhat of a positive impact, or has little to no impact. Having a positive impact is defined as facilitating a safe and supportive school environment. Items that inconsistently influenced the learning environment in a positive manner were placed in the category of having some impact. Lastly, items that were identified as having a minimal influence on creating a safe and supportive learning environment were placed in the last category. During sessions, students were asked to sort items that fell in

two categories: people and prizes. The following chart identifies the components of each category.

People	Prizes
Classified Staff (i.e. Café and Custodial)	School Rewards (Token Economy)
Extra-curricular staff (Physical Education, Art, Music, STEM and Media)	School Recognition (Monthly PAWS Awards and News Crew)
Non-instructional staff (Administrators and counselor)	Class Rewards (Dojo Points and Teacher Treasure Box)

Table K. Focus Group Answer Categories

Focus Group Findings

In the individual interviews, I focused on student and teacher interactions. However, during focus groups, the discussion centered around student and adult interactions outside the classroom and school-wide initiatives. The two themes that emerged from the focus groups were the impact of people and prizes. However, the influence of people was clearly greater than the impact of prizes on creating a positive learning environment.

People

Findings from the focus group regarding people outside the classroom indicate several student reactions. Some students experienced the adults positively, while other students experienced the same adults negatively. Below are the groups' findings related to students' interactions with adults outside the classroom.

Group 1

Focus group one included Aaron, Breanna, and Crystal. They were all students who did not live in the school's attendance zone. Additionally, each of the students also participated in at least one school-sponsored club. During the focus group, the students had consensus on most topics. However, Aaron and Crystal had strongly differing opinions from Breanna in reference to specific staff members. Both Aaron and Crystal noted specific negative interactions that shaped their opinion. However, although Breanna acknowledged the events, they did not impact her opinion in the same manner. Non-homeroom staff were classified as having an impact based upon the relationship the students had with the teacher. It should be noted that extra-curricular staff members instruct all students in the school. Overall, the group felt that adults who served in a supportive role were more impactful than rewards in creating a positive learning environment.

Group 2

Elaine and Florence participated in the second focus group. Both students lived within the attendance zone, and both participated in school-sponsored clubs. During the focus group, both students were relaxed and openly shared their ideas. Elaine tended to answer the questions more literally than Florence. Her responses were focused on how people and activities connected directly to the act of learning rather than the learning environment. Additionally, they had differing opinions regarding things adults in the building did to create safety. For example, when asked what were some things that adults do that do not help to create a safe and welcoming environment, Florence discussed being yelled at by teachers for not doing something correctly. However, Elaine responded, *"I can't really think of anything that comes to mind."* Furthermore, in response to the question, "Where do you feel safe in the school?", Elaine responded, *"It's not really a where, it's like with who."* Even though both Elaine and Florence were in the same

homeroom, they had varied experiences. This was most obvious when we discussed the extra-curricular courses, such as art and media. Elaine tended to view these classes in a positive light, while Florence had strong negative feelings. Florence explained, *"You said a positive, a positive environment. That's very not positive like the vibe is just off. It's not right. Pointing people out and like, if somebody does something wrong, she points them out. Well, she points them out or yell at them or, yeah, she points them out in front of the whole class, and they're embarrassed."* Despite some sharp differences, there were common areas of agreement. Both participants felt administrators, most of the teaching staff, and the custodial staff contributed to creating a positive environment. The major take-away from the second focus group was the idea that individuals can be engaged in the same learning activities at the same time but have completely different personal experiences, interactions, and observations.

Group 3

Gwen, Hannah, Ingrid, and Kevin all participated in focus group three. Each of the participants lived within the attendance zone. Two of the members of the group participated in school-sponsored clubs. During the conversation, Kevin was soft-spoken and waited until the facilitator spoke directly to him before sharing comments. The female participants eagerly shared their experiences. In response to the question: "What are some activities that encourage students and support a positive environment?", participants identified specific school activities that created a supportive learning environment. Gwen commented, *"Like, it was one that time where we had, like this week where we would do like different activities for each day like one day will be pajama day."* Hannah and Ingrid referenced the school's field day activities, while Kevin mentioned school-sponsored clubs. It should be noted that all these activities were sponsored and organized by non-homeroom teachers. Additionally, Hannah added that the work done by the

cafe workers and custodians helped the school to feel safe and clean. Kevin stated the counselor was also a person who helped the school environment. When asked about behaviors that adults do that do not support a positive learning environment, most participants mentioned embarrassing experiences. Hannah explains, *"Because like, sometimes when the PE teacher or not well, sometimes there was a then we're have to go do the challenges. Like we have to run around the gym or do push-ups. Sometimes you feel like embarrassed you do push-ups in front of other people."*

Prizes

Prizes were not identified as being as impactful as people were in helping students to feel safe and supported within the school. Each group felt school rewards, such as the token economy and school recognition, did have a positive impact on the school environment. However, it appeared the distribution of class rewards were less prevalent, resulting in the participants identifying these as less impactful. Most participants stated their teacher either did not have a class treasure box or it did not contain (or was not replenished) with desired items. Contrastly, most participants enjoyed being able to use the school's token economy to purchase items from the school store. In Focus Group 1, the participants noted sometimes the items purchased would cause arguments with classmates because students would often trade purchased items. Also, this group shared there was an inconsistency in items available for purchase. In her assessment of the situation, Breanna shared, "*Sometimes it's disappointing sometimes it's amazing!*" Focus Group 2 members rated the school incentives, particularly the token economy system, as having a positive impact. Elaine commented, "*The Bulldog bucks. They're actually I like doing I like doing the Bulldog bucks. That's because because at the end of the year, there's always the Bulldog Bizarre. And if you save enough, up enough Bulldog bucks, you can get some really good expensive*

stuff." Focus Group 3 also rated the token economy system as having a positive impact. Gwen explains, *" Because they had some good stuff. Like they had headphones. They got bookbags, they had crowns and stuff like that. They had candy. Like it was like Dollar General."* Ingrid and Kevin both supported this position. Hannah added *, "So I actually agree with this one. Because like you can, like she said, You she'll count your money for you and the stuff you don't get the buy outside of school that you will get the buy in school."* Participants in Focus Group 3 were more motivated by school rewards than the other focus group participants; however, all participants noted some value in receiving school prizes.

Summary of Focus Group Findings

The following table illustrates how each focus group sorted the various components of SEL initiatives at the study location.

Level of Impact			
School Events or Personnel	*Positive Impact*	*Some Impact*	*Little or No Impact*
Recognition	◊ ☼	□	
Class Rewards		◊ □ ☼	
Non-instructional staff	◊ □ ☼		
Classified staff		◊ □ ☼	
Extra-curricular classes		□ ☼	◊
School Rewards	◊ □ ☼		

Table L. Focus Group Impact Sorting Results

As illustrated in the table above, recognition was seen as having a positive impact by most of the participants, while earning class rewards was seen as having some impact by each group. The school's non-instructional staff, including the school counselor and school administrators, were all identified as having a positive impact on the learning of the school. However, the classified staff and extra-curricular activities were viewed as having some to no impact. Lastly, school rewards were also identified as having a positive impact.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are centered around the number of participants and the specific demographic information and geographical location of the study site. There were ten participants, seven females and three males. It would be beneficial if future research included a larger participant pool with a more balanced gender representation. Additionally, the student interviews and focus group sessions were conducted by an administrator at the study location. A different researcher may or may not have similar findings.

Chapter Summary

This section of the study focused on the participants' lived experiences. They shared their opinions and perceptions of the school's culture created by the faculty and staff. The importance of connections within the school community was what ultimately created a safe and supportive learning environment. Participants discussed how their relationships during the pandemic provided motivation for school attendance and a source of enjoyment. Incentives were identified

as an effective practice; however, they must be appealing for students. Ultimately, adult

behaviors served as either building blocks or barriers for a safe and supportive learning

environment.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Amid the many obstacles educators will face, the desire to address students' emotional needs should be a priority. A focus on students' social and emotional competencies can yield results that extend beyond the classroom because "death and life *are* in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). As participants' responses were analyzed, several components of CASEL's SEL definition were evident. More specifically, participants identified the processes and skills young people and adults apply to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions *(What is SEL?, n.d.).* Specific adult practices such as greeting students at the door, developing class agreements (social contracts), offering incentives, and providing opportunities to build class communities were all examined. This is the pervasive implication from this study's findings. Participants' verbal interactions with adults established the basis for their ongoing rapport. When adults intentionally focused on creating a positive learning environment, participants took note and were appreciative. However, participants also observed damaging behaviors that resulted in negative experiences. Therefore, educators influence and shape students' academic atmosphere.

Discussion of Findings related to Theoretical Frameworks

This study was structured using a constructivist framework. According to Prasad (2023), "Constructivist framework, or the student-centered framework, encourages the students and teachers to interact equally and create such an environment that the student questions, as well as has the freedom to explore alternatives" (p.39). Additionally, two conceptual frameworks were used to frame this study. Bandura's Social learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

acknowledge the power of environmental factors on human growth and development. This research has identified intentional adult behaviors that promote a safe and supportive learning environment.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Humans are continually affected by environmental factors and, as they grow and develop, so does their circle of influence. Social Learning Theory contends "new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experiences or by observing the behaviors of others" (Bandura, 1971, p. 3). Reinforcement and modeling are also key components in social learning theory. These principles were central components of the study's findings. For example, some participants noted changes in the behavior of others during the pandemic specifically centered around mask wearing and social distancing. Additionally, they noted changes in interactions during the pandemic with many individuals being less social. Ingrid described the school as having an empty vibe because she was unable to hug her friends. Breanna also recognized a vacant feeling within the school. However, she attributed this to the smaller class sizes because there were less than 10 students in her class. According to most of the participants, these new patterns of behaviors appeared to dissipate as the school year progressed. It should be noted, during this time, the school district began to adjust restrictions based upon CDC guidelines. Students felt compelled to adjust their behavior to match the expected changes, and they adapted to the new patterns of behaviors displayed by others.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory highlights the role social cues play in mental growth. Vygotsky (1978) rationalized that humans use cultural tools to maneuver within their environment and

build schema. The findings of the study revealed two areas that were directly related to this theory: safety and community. Participants in this study discussed their social interactions within the school and how these exchanges influenced them. Along with mask-wearing and social distancing as previously discussed, several participants discussed the cleanliness of the school as a key element of the learning environment during the pandemic. They also noted that, within the school community, handwashing, using hand sanitizer, and the cleaning of the physical environment became a focal point for teachers. Participants identified these actions as safety measures to protect the school community, and that this had not been emphasized prior to the pandemic.

Learning what is socially acceptable and appropriate is one of the primary functions of school (Lickona, 1993; Neitz, 1964; Locke 2000). This study showed how social interactions can cultivate a communal environment. For example, participants described how sharing personal aspects of their lives helped them to get to know their peers better, resulting in a strong sense of class community. This sense of community transferred beyond the classroom into other areas such as non-academic segments, lunch and recess. The findings also suggested giving students opportunities to engage with their peers in clubs and other extracurricular activities made them feel more connected. Furthermore, participants emphasized the role school events, such as festivals and field days, played in bringing the school together. Principles proposed in Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory are aligned with the study's findings. Adults influence the school's environment which then impacts students' behaviors and sense of belonging.

This study highlights the importance school culture plays in establishing a safe and supportive learning environment. According to Gruenert and Whitaker (2017), "Culture represents the unwritten mission of the school--it tells students and staff why they are there" (p. 30). When all stakeholders are not clear on the why behind the work, disparities exist. It is the principal's responsibility to make the mission and vision transparent, in addition to exposing those things that do not align. Brene Brown (2019) maintains, "If the culture in our school, organization, place of worship, or even family requires armor because of issues like racism, classism, sexism, or any manifestation of fear-based leadership, we can't expect wholehearted engagement" (p. 33). This idea was permeated throughout the study. Participants' feedback heavily supported the premise that adults' behaviors are the foundation of the school's culture. Furthermore, to create a safe and supportive learning environment, schools must first examine the established environment. Gruenert and Whitaker (2017) contend, "Culture uses the past as a template for the present" (p. 142). Choosing to embark on a culture changing journey is the first step in cultivating communal belonging.

Theodore Roosevelt is attributed with stating, "nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." This study's findings would uphold this sentiment. During the interviews, it was clear that the participants instinctively felt they were able to identify the authenticity of adults' behaviors. They were also eager to share their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. For this reason, school leaders should consider asking students school-culture related questions. This data can then be used to address areas of deficiency. The onus rests with the principal to begin this process through crucial conversations. Patterson, Grenny, McMillian and Switzler (2012) define crucial conversations as, "A discussion between two or more people

where: (1) stakes are high, (2)opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong" (p. 3). All these components have been, and will be, present when educators attempt to address school climate and culture. Therefore, it is important to understand that once the pandora's box is open, everyone must be ready for what follows. It will not be easy for some stakeholders to receive students' feedback, and excuses may abound. However, we must move in this direction because students are the why behind the work.

The overarching principle uncovered by this study was how intentional adult behaviors that focused on social and emotional learning can create a sense of belonging. According to Keene (2023), "belonging is an evolutionary need for safety, support and connection" (p. 1). However, this need to connect with others is a matter of quality over quantity. Therefore, this study was relevant because it affirmed the importance of teaching the heart while instructing the head (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Merritt et. al, 2012). The findings from this study would suggest a sense of belonging is created by engagement in real relationships in which participants have relevant experiences.

Relationships

It was repeatedly reported by participants how adult interactions either helped to support a positive learning environment or served as a catalyst in creating unhealthy connections. In this sense, adults could be either cultural supporters or "culture crushers". Participants discussed the methods adults used to create an inclusive environment, including creating a class community by having a specific time for students to share about themselves, adults spending time talking with them about their personal lives, being greeted in the morning, as well as non-academic engagement, such as playing with the class during recess. These intentional practices were seen as impactful and beneficial, and ultimately served a larger purpose by establishing the basis for

everyone to feel a sense of belonging. As referenced by Baumeister and Leary (1995) this study demonstrates that students are acutely aware of adults in the building who either build relationships or support a positive climate. They are also aware of adults in the building who, rather than support a positive climate, damage the school culture.

As some educators at the study location followed protocols and procedures outlined by the school's SEL initiatives, they simultaneously worked to foster a sense of belonging. Making positive and encouraging comments to students helped to build a strong relationship; however, careless, negative remarks severed connections. Ultimately, impactful relationships are built over time through consistent, caring interactions. By making these types of emotional deposits, educators establish bonds with their students that extend beyond the curriculum reach into students' hearts. This study also revealed the importance of teachers providing relevant experiences for students to build personal connections. Students felt that, when teachers took time to get to know them, they also constructed more meaningful and relevant classroom and school experiences. This intentionality helped to foster a deeper sense of belonging.

Implication for Teachers

Teaching, in its purest form, is the transfer of knowledge. In a natural environment, this is a reciprocal process with the teacher and learner trading places based on who has the knowledge. Therefore, the major implication from this study for educators is to trade places with the students and become the learner. Discover what your students need beyond the curriculum. This process can begin with professional development. Schonert-Reichl (2017) recommended that teachers sharpen their SEL competencies to effectively infuse SEL into the classroom. Additionally, Jennings (2018) supported the use of mindfulness to encourage educator self-care, which results in a healthy classroom environment. Often educators spend hours disaggregating academic data

to uncover the root cause analysis and develop a plan based on what is inside their sphere of influence. Time should also be spent learning students as individuals and allowing them to teach us some things about their preferred learning environment. Based on this research, the following steps could lead to some great A.H.A. moments:

1. **A**sk questions that can lead to critical conversations.

2. **H**ear the answers without judgment.

3. **A**pply next steps that align with the feedback.

This study suggests that students recognize real relationships and that relevant experiences enhance the learning environment. Each classroom teacher should conduct their own inquiry to uncover their students' SEL needs.

Implications for Principals

A principal's leadership sets the tone of the learning environment for all stakeholders. If the principal views SEL as an important facet of students' daily education, then they will provide the training and monitoring necessary to bring this ideal to fruition. For principals, the shift to embrace SEL practices will begin with making the changes necessary to shift the school's climate and culture. According to Gruenert and Whitaker (2015), "Culture is not some mystical power that thrives on superstition; the locus of control is within the scope of leadership" (p. 111). In a culture that is focused on SEL, school leaders have empowered stakeholders to address things that oppose the school's shared mission and vision. Therefore, principals should consider conducting periodic informal SEL checks with students and staff throughout the school year so that identified course corrections, if any, can be made in a timely manner. Another implication for building leaders is the role all staff members should play in creating a positive learning environment. This would include individuals who interact with students outside the classroom,

82

including custodial, cafeteria and front office staff. This finding is important because it stresses the important role all staff members play in creating a positive school culture.

Implications for Teacher Preparatory Programs

Teacher preparatory programs must train new educators to be ready to educate beyond the prescribed curriculum, while also equipping them with teacher efficacy. Empowered educators can be change agents for SEL initiatives, which result in empowered students. Baines, Medina and Healy (2023), support providing new educator candidates with the tools and training needed to amplify students' voices. They contend:

The main takeaway is that these opportunities need to be intentionally designed, timed, and communicated to invite different voices to speak. This process involves four primary Expression-Drive Teaching practices (1) facilitating relationships, (2) facilitating the fundamentals, (3) facilitating choice and agency and (4) facilitating growth. (p. 65).

Ideally, teacher educator programs prepare new teachers to create a safe and supportive environment. However, this study would imply taking this a step further would be valuable. New teachers should also be outfitted with the skills to empower their students. Overall, it would be beneficial for colleges and universities to provide courses focused on effective SEL practices and practical and natural methods of SEL integration.

Implications for Practice for Educational Leaders

The implications for educational leaders from this study indicate a need to have an ongoing student perception data collection process, implement research-based SEL practices, provide job-embedded SEL professional learning and monitor the implementation of these initiatives. Having a consistent process to collect and analyze students' perceptions of the school

83

environment would provide leaders with timely and valuable information. Utilizing a digital platform to develop and deliver student surveys would be a realistic and judicious way to execute this process. Next, district and school leaders should research SEL programs that align with their core values and identified needs. In order to have consistent and pervasive implementation, training should be job-embedded and monitored by both building and district leaders.

Additionally, SEL goals should be added to school improvement plans, so they can be monitored by district and building leaders. Employing a "plan, do, check, act" cycle would be favorable. Plan the actions that should be taken based on relevant data. Do the plan. Check the implementation of the plan to see if the desired results are being achieved, and act on any changes that are deemed necessary. Leaders on both levels should also have a well-planned onboarding process for new employees to ensure that initiatives continue to be implemented with fidelity as staff changes occur. This process of continuous improvement would allow educational leaders to monitor SEL implementation because, in education, "what gets monitored is what gets done."

<h3 align="center">Recommendations for Future Research</h3>

A recommendation for future research would be to conduct a study in two differing demographical locations. For example, future research could be conducted at both a Title I and non-Title I location or in an urban and suburban setting. Furthermore, future research could explore how older students in middle and high school perceive SEL practices. This study could explore whether students notice a difference in teacher SEL practices as they matriculate through school. Since older students have more life experiences, they may provide a more comprehensive look at SEL practices. Since students grow and mature as they progress through school, conducting a longitudinal study with the same participant pool would provide valuable insight.

84

Researchers would be able to explore the impact of students' changing needs along with the staff's ability to recognize and meet those affective needs. It would also be noteworthy to explore this topic from the educator's perspective or from students' viewpoints considering factors such as gender or race. Below is a list of some possible future research questions:

1. How, or to what extent, do teacher's feel prepared to implement SEL initiatives?

2. How do educators' beliefs impact their implementation of SEL practices?

3. How do students from different races and genders perceive the school's learning environment?

This topic has the potential to be explored from a host of different avenues. Spending time delving into the nuances of SEL is noteworthy because it can provide educational leaders with data for crafting school improvement plans, facilitating critical conversations, and shifting school culture.

Chapter Summary

Actions, reactions, and interactions of students shape their conduct and how they explore and navigate their world. School is a microcosm of the world where students get to practice and adjust their behaviors. Throughout this study, participants shared how their lived experiences with peers and adults impacted their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. The predominant theme centered around students' sense of belonging. For that reason, teachers, school leaders, and the entire school community must understand how their words and behaviors shape students' sense of belonging and that the benefits are creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Educators have the power to bolster or break soft skill development and a sense of belonging. Though there is some debate on the role that educators should play in instructing non-academic skills, the benefits are clear. When students feel comfortable in school, they perform

better academically, have positive peer relationships, and enjoy an overall sense of wellbeing (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Merritt et. Al, 2012; Mahoney & Weissberg, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that effective SEL practices be employed intentionally, consistently, and pervasively. Over 150 years after the words of Frederick Douglas were spoken, the sentiment still reigns true today, "It is easier to build strong children than fix broken men." Investing in the social and emotional needs of learners should go alongside teaching reading, writing and arithmetic because teaching the "whole" child is the best chance at building strong children.

References

AACAP. (2020, February). Screen time and children.

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-
Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx

American Psychological Association. (2015). APA dictionary of psychology.

https://dictionary.apa.org/

Anderson, M. (Reporter). (2020*). I-TEAM: DSS, DFCS* calls are down during COVID-19
pandemic, but that's not good news [News Report]. August, GA*: WRDW/WAGT.*

Andrade, C. (2021). The Inconvenient Truth About Convenience and Purposive Samples. Indian
Journal of Psychological Medicine, 43(1), 86–88.

Atlanta Public Schools. (2022). Social and Emotional Learning. Retrieved April 9, 2022 from
https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/53072

Azevedo, J. P., Hasan, A., Goldemberg, D., Geven, K., & Iqbal, S. A. (2021). Simulating the
Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes:
A Set of Global Estimates. *World Bank Research Observer*, *36*(1), 1–40.
https://doi.org/https://academic.oup.com/wbro/issue

Bandura, A. (1971) Social Learning Theory. General Learning Press, New York.

Bandura, A. (2002). Social Cognitive Theory in Cultural Context. *Applied Psychology: An
International Review*, *51*(2), 269–290. https://doi.org/10.1111/1464-0597.00092

Barr, R. D., & Gibson, E. L. (2020). Building the resilient school: Overcoming the effects of
poverty with a culture of hope (a guide to building resilient schools and overcoming the
effects of poverty). ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Bauer-Wolf, J. (2019). Survey: Employers want 'soft skills' from graduates. Inside Higher Ed.

https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/01/17/survey-employers-want-softskills-graduates

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*(3), 497–529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Benninga, J. (2020). *Journal of Character Education: Vol. 16 #2*. Information Age Publishing.

Berkowitz, M. W., Lickona, T., Nast, T., Schaeffer, E., & Bohlin, K. (2020). The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education: A Brief History. *Journal of Character Education*, *16*(2), 1–10.

Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V., Garrido-Lopez, M., & Stiles, D. (2019). Toward a Non-Essentialist Approach to Management Education: Philosophical Underpinnings from Phenomenography. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 1*8(4), 626–638. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2017.0401

Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., & Paskevicius, M. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, *15*(1), 1-126.

Bradshaw, C. P., & Kush, J. M. (2020). Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation-Checklist: Measuring Children's Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Functioning. Children & Schools, 42(1), 29–40.

Brinkmann, S. (2013). Qualitative Interviewing. Oxford University Press.

Brown, B. (2019). Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts. *Rotman*

Management, 28-33.

Brown, P., Corrigan, M., & D'Alessandro, A. (2012). Handbook of Prosocial Education.

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Brown, C., Maggin, D. M., & Buren, M. (2018). Systematic Review of Cultural Adaptations of

School-based Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Interventions for Students of Color.

Education & Treatment of Children (West Virginia University Press) 41(4), 431–455.

https://doi.org/10.1353/etc.2018.0024

Burgin, X., Coli, S., & Daniel, M. C. (2021). Exploratory Study of Ecuadorian Teachers'

Understanding of Social Emotional Learning: An Examination of Primary School

Teachers. GIST: Education & Learning Research Journal, 22, 125–146.

Cairns, R.B.,& Cairns, B.D. (1994). Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time.

New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Capel, C. M. (2012). Mindlessness/mindfulness, classroom practices and quality of early

childhood education: An auto-ethnographic and intrinsic case research. International

Journal of Quality & Reliability Management, 29(6), 666–680.

Capp, G., Benbenishty, R., Astor, R. A., & Pineda, D. (2018). Learning Together:

Implementation of a Peer-Tutoring Intervention Targeting Academic and Social--

Emotional Needs. *Children & Schools, 40*(3), 173–184.

Causton, J. & MaCleod, K. (2020). From Behaving to Belonging: The Inclusive Art of

ASC Supporting Students Who Challenge Us. ASCD.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Covid Data Tracker Weekly Review*. Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/

Character Counts. (2020). *Character Counts! Critical Educational Outcomes.* Retrieved April 4,

    2022, from http://charactercounts.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Model-Standards-

    102320.pdf

Character Counts. (2021, November 18). The six pillars of character. Retrieved January 14,

    2022, from https://charactercounts.org/character-counts-overview/six-pillars/

Chicago Public Schools. (2022). Office of School and Emotional Learning. Retrieved April 9,

    2022 from https://www.cps.edu/about/departments/office-of-social-and-emotional-

    learning/

Church, E. B. (2015). *Getting to the Heart of Learning : Social-Emotional Skills Across the*

    Early Childhood Curriculum. Gryphon House Inc.

Cipriano, C., Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G., & Brackett, M. A. (2020). Supporting school

    community wellness with social and emotional learning (SEL)

    during and after a pandemic. Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research

    Center, Pennsylvania State University

Colman, A. M. (2015). *A dictionary of psychology* (Fourth edition.). Oxford University Press.

Comer, J. P. (2004). Leave No Child Behind : Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World.

    Yale University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014) Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods

    Approaches. SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing

    Among Five Approaches (4th ed). SAGE Publications, Inc.

    Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : choosing*

    among five approaches (Fourth edition). SAGE.

Darling-Hammond, L. Cook-Harvey, C. Flook, L., Gardner, M., & Melnick. H. (2019). *With the Whole Child in Mind : Insights from the Comer School Development Program*. ASCD.

Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., Edgerton, A. K., & Learning Policy Institute. (2020). Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond. In Learning Policy Institute. Learning Policy Institute.

Davis, B. M., & Linton, C. (2012). *How to teach students who don't look like you:Culturally responsive teaching strategies*. Corwin Press, a SAGE Company.

Devaney, E. (2018). Social and Emotional Learning in Out-Of-School Time: Foundations and Futures. Information Age Publishing.

DuFour, R., & Marzano, R. J. (2008). Leaders of learning : How district, school, and classroom leaders improve student achievement.

Duncan, R., Washburn, I. J., Lewis, K. M., Bavarian, N., DuBois, D. L., Acock, A. C., Vuchinich, S., & Flay, B. R. (2016). Can Universal SEL Programs Benefit Universally? Effects of the Positive Action Program on Multiple Trajectories of Social-Emotional and Misconduct Behaviors. In Grantee Submission. Grantee Submission.

Durlak, J.A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R.D., Weissberg, R. P., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405–432.

Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Gullotta, T. P. (Eds.). (2015). *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice*. Guilford Publications.

Dyson, B., Howley, D., Shen, Y., & Baek, S. (2021). Educators' Experiences of Establishing Social and Emotional Learning Pedagogies in an Elementary School with At-Risk

Students. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 13(5), 625–638.

Effrem, K., Robbins, J., & Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research. (2019). Social-Emotional Learning: K-12 Education as New Age Nanny State. White Paper No. 192. In *Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research*. Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research.

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M. E., Shriver, T. P., & Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, A. V. (1997). *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*.

Engels, N., Hotton, G., Devos, G., Bouckenooghe, D., & Aelterman, A. (2008). Principals in Schools with a Positive School Culture. *Educational Studies*, 34(3), 159–174.

Frederick Douglass Quotes. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from BrainyQuote.com Web site:

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/frederick_douglass_201574

Figley, C. R. (2012). Encyclopedia of trauma : an interdisciplinary guide. SAGE Publications.

Fitzgerald, M. S. (2020). Overlapping opportunities for social-emotional and literacy learning in elementary-grade project-based instruction. *American Journal of Education*, 126(4), 573–601.

Flippen, F. (2018). We need a bigger clicker. *Leadership*, *48*(1), 32–37.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (2nd ed., pp. 645-672). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Frey, J. H., & Fontana, A. (1991). The group interview in social research. *Social Science Journal,*28(2), 175.

Galletta, A. (2012). Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond : From Research
Design to Analysis and Publication. NYU Press.

Gaudet, S. & Robert, D. (2018). Choosing an approach to guide methodological decisions. In A
journey through qualitative research (pp. 40-76). SAGE Publications Ltd,
https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529716733

Gazmararian, J., Weingart, R., Campbell, K., Cronin, T., & Ashta, J. (2021). Impact of COVID-
19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Students From 2 Semi-Rural High Schools in
Georgia. *The Journal of School Health*, 91(5), 356–369.
https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13007

Getting started. Center on PBIS. (n.d.). Retrieved January 21, 2022, from
https://www.pbis.org/pbis/getting-started

Glennie, E. J., Rosen, J. A., Snyder, R., Woods-Murphy, M., Bassett, K., National Network of
State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY), Education Counsel LLC, & RTI International.
(2017). Student Social and Emotional Development and Accountability: Perspective of
Teachers. National Network of State Teachers of the Year.

GovTrack.us. (2021). H.R. 850 — 114th Congress: Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
Act of 2015. Retrieved from https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hr850

Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. R., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and
Emotional Learning as a Public Health Approach to Education. *Future of Children*,
27(1), 13–32.

Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2017). School culture recharged : strategies to energize your staff
and culture. ASCD.

Haymovitz, E., Houseal-Allport, P., Lee, R. S., & Svistova, J. (2018). Exploring the Perceived

Benefits and Limitations of a School-Based Social-Emotional Learning Program: A

Concept Map Evaluation. Children & Schools, 40(1), 45–54.

Hoerr, T. R. (2020). *Taking Social-Emotional Learning Schoolwide: The Formative Five*

Success Skills for Students and Staff. ASCD.

Hollander, J. A. (2004). The Social Contexts of Focus Groups. *Journal of Contemporary*

Ethnography, 33(5), 602–637. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604266988

Jackson, K. C., Porte, S. C., Easton, J. Q., Blanchard, A., & Kiguel, S. (2021). Linking

Social-Emotional Learning to Long-Term Success: Student survey responses show

effects in high school and beyond. Education Next, 21(1), 65.

Jacob, S. A., & Furgerson, S. P. (2012). Writing Interview Protocols and Conducting Interviews:

Tips for Students New to the Field of Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Report*, 17.

Jennings, P. A. (2018, October 1). Bringing Mindfulness to Teacher PD. *Educational*

Leadership, 79(2). 64.

Jennings, P. A. & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and

Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes. *Review of*

Educational Research, 79(1), 491–525.

Jensen, P., & Ratcliffe, K. (2020). Redefining School Culture with Listening: The authors

vouch for a process that hears the voices of students, teachers and administrators

equally for building a responsive climate. *School Administrator*, 77(6), 40–43.

Jones, S. M., Bouffard, S. M., & Society for Research in Child Development. (2012). Social and

Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies. Social Policy Report.

Volume 26, Number 4. In Society for Research in Child Development. Society for

Research in Child Development.

Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. (2017). Navigating SEL From the Inside Out Looking Inside & Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers. The Wallace Foundation. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Navigating-Social-and-Emotional-Learning-from-the-Inside-Out.pdf

Jones, S. M., Kahn, J., & Aspen Institute, N. C. on S. E. & A. D. (NCSEAD). (2017). The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists. In Aspen Institute. Aspen Institute.

Jones, S. M., McGarrah, M. W., & Kahn, J. (2019). Social and Emotional Learning: Principled Science of Human Development in Context. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 129–143.

Kahn, A. P., & Fawcett, J. (2008). The Encyclopedia of Mental Health: Vol. 3rd ed. Facts on File, Inc.

Keels, M. (2020). Building Racial Equity Through Trauma-Responsive Discipline: In these unprecedented times, educators need to strengthen their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices. *Educational Leadership*, 78(2), 40–51.

Keene, B. M. (2020). Belongingness (sense of belonging). *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

Knopf, A. (2020, August 1). Prepare for increased depression, anxiety in youth due to COVID-19 lockdown. The Brown University Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology Update, 22(8), 1.

Kochhar-Bryant, C. A., & Angela Heishman, A. (2010). Effective Collaboration for Educating the Whole Child. Corwin.

Ladd, G. (2005). Children's Peer Relations and Social Competence: A Century of Progress. Yale

University Press. Retrieved July 16, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bq3q

Lambert, S. D., & Loiselle, C. G. (2008). Combining individual interviews and focus groups to enhance data richness. *Journal of advanced nur*sing, 62(2), 228–237.

Lapon, E. (2020). Montessori Middle School and the Transition to High School: Student Narratives. *Journal of Montessori Research,* 6(2), 26–38.

Larsson, J. & Holmström, I. (2007) Phenomenographic or phenomenological analysis: does it matter? Examples from a study on anesthesiologists' work*, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 2 (1), 55-64. DOI: 10.1080/17482620601068105

Lawson, G. M., McKenzie, M. E., Becker, K. D., Selby, L., & Hoover, S. A. (2019). The Core Components of Evidence-Based Social Emotional Learning Programs. *Prevention science: the official journal of the Society for Prevention Research*, 20(4), 457–467. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0953-y

Lee, A., & Gage, N. A. (2020). Updating and expanding systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(5), 783–804. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22336

Lee-Piggott, R. (2016). New principals' leadership and school culture: A study of three primary schools facing challenging circumstances in Trinidad and Tobago. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham, Nottingham.

Lickona, T. (1993). The return of character education. *Educational Leadership*, *51*(3), 6.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (2013). *The Constructivist Credo*. Routledge.

Liew, J., & McTigue, E. M. (2010). Educating the whole child: The role of social and emotional

development in achievement and school success. Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Lloyd, B. P., Carter, E. W., Hine, M. C., Davis, A. D., Lanchak, E. R., Ferrell, M. A., Axelroth, T. L., Shuster, B. C., Haynes, R. L., Higgs, J., & Chauvin, C. B. (2022). Student Perspectives on Implementation and Impact of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in Their Middle Schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 1. https://doi.org/10.1177/10983007221082961

Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A.,

Linney, C., McManus, M. N., Borwick, C., & Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 5*9(11), 1218–1239.e3. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009

Locke, J. (2000). Some thoughts concerning education. Generic NL Freebook Publisher.

Low, S., Smolkowski, K., Cook, C., & Desfosses, D. (2019). Two-year impact of a universal social-emotional learning curriculum: Group differences from developmentally sensitive trends over time. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(2), 415–433.

Mahoney, J. L., & Weissberg, R. P. (2018, October 1). SEL: What the Research Says. Educational Leadership, 76(2), 34.

Mahoney, J. L., Weissberg, R. P., Greenberg, M. T., Dusenbury, L., Jagers, R. J., Niemi, K., Schlinger, M., Schlund, J., Shriver, T. P., VanAusdal, K., & Yoder, N. (2020). Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students. *American Psychologist*. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000701

Maslowski, R. (2001). *School culture and school performance: an explorative study into the*

organizational culture of secondary schools and their effects. Twente University Press (TUP).

Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography — Describing Conceptions of the World around Us. *Instructional Science*, *10*(2), 177–200.

Marton. F (1986). Phenomenography—A Research Approach to Investigating Different Understandings of Reality. Journal of Thought, 21(3), 28–49.

Maynard, N., & Weinstein, B. (2019). Hacking School Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice (Hack Learning Series). Times 10 Publications.

Merritt, E., Wanless, S. B., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Cameron, C., & Peugh, J. L. (2012). The contribution of teachers' emotional support to children's social behaviors and self-regulatory skills in first grade. *School Psychology Review*, *41*(2), 141-159.

Meyer, J. R., Burnham, B., & Cholvat, J. (1975). *Values Education: Theory, Practice, Problems, Prospects*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

McGiboney, G. W. (2016). *The Psychology of School Climate*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

McGrath, C., Palmgren, P. J., & Liljedahl, M. (2019). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. Medical Teacher, 41(9), 1002–1006.

McIntyre, A. (2019). Elementary Students Practicing Mindfulness: A Meeting of the Minds. Lexington Books.

McTighe, J. & Willis, J. (2019). *Upgrade Your Teaching Understanding by Design Meets Neuroscience.* ASCD.

Meckler, L. (2022, March 28). In 'social-emotional learning,' right sees more critical race

theory. The Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/28/social-emotional-learning-critical-race-theory/

Millan, J. (2020). California educators: beacons of hope: Never has social and emotional wellbeing been more central to the national conversation. *Leadership*, *50*(1), 22–25.

Milner, H. Culturally Responsive Classroom Management. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education. Retrieved 21 Jan. 2022, from

https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-782

Mischel, J., & Kitsantas, A. (2020). Middle school students' perceptions of school climate, bullying prevalence, and social support and coping. Social Psychology of Education, 23(1), 51–72.

National Academies of Sciences, E. and M., Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Board on Testing and Assessment, Committee on Assessing Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Competencies, Margaret Hilton, & Joan Herman. (2017). Supporting Students' College Success : The Role of Assessment of Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Competencies. National Academies Press.

Newman, J., & Moroney, D. (2019). Reading Between the Lines of Social and Emotional Learning: Discover what SEL is all about and why it's important to consider when designing and implementing teen services. *Young Adult Library Services, 17(2),* 16.

Nietz, J. (1964). Why the Longevity of the McGuffey Readers? *History of Education Quarterly*, *4*(2), 119–125. https://doi.org/10.2307/367453

Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C. E., Meyers, D. C., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Establishing systemic

social and emotional learning approaches in schools: a framework for schoolwide

implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(3), 277–297.

Oliver, P. (2010). The Student's Guide to Research Ethics: Vol. 2nd ed. Open University Press.

Oltmann, S. (2016). Qualitative Interviews: A Methodological Discussion of the

Interviewer and Respondent Contexts. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 17(2).

Our history. CASEL. (2021, September 9). Retrieved December 21, 2022, from

https://casel.org/about-us/our-history/

Our History. (n.d.). CASEL. https://casel.org/about-us/our-history/

Parker, J. G., & Asher, S. R. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment are

low-accepted children at risk? Psychological Bulletin, 102(3), 357–389.

https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-2909.102.3.357

Pate, A. (2020). The Innocent Classroom: Dismantling Racial Bias to Support Students of Color.

ASCD.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2012). Crucial Conversations. McGraw

Hill.

Pereda, N., & Díaz-Faes, D. A. (2020). Family violence against children in the wake of COVID-

19 pandemic: a review of current perspectives and risk factors. Child & Adolescent

Psychiatry & Mental Health, 14(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00347-1

Peshkin, A. (n.d.). In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own. *Educational Researcher*, *17*(7), 17–

21. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X017007017

Poff, J. (2021, November 19). Conservative activists call "social emotional learning" a Trojan

horse for critical race theory. Restoring America.

https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/community-

family/conservative-activists-call-social-emotional-learning-a-trojan-horse-for-critical-race-theory

Prasad, B. A. M. (2023). Pedagogy and Teaching. *Language in India*, *23*(1), 38–45.

Prothero, A., & Blad, E. (2022). Schools Face Fears of "Critical Race Theory" As They Scale Up Social-Emotional Learning. *Education Week*, *41*(18), 10–11.

Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). Reason & rigor : how conceptual frameworks guide research (Second edition.). SAGE.

Rhea, A., Singh, M., & Wake County Public School System, W. D. R. and A. D. (2020). Capturing Kids' Hearts: A Three-Year Program Evaluation, 2016-17 to 2018-19. In *Wake County Public School System*. Wake County Public School System.

Roulston, K. (2019). Interactional Studies of Qualitative Research Interviews. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Rowley, J. (2012). Conducting research interviews. *Management Research Review*, 35(3/4), 260–271.

Salkind, N. J. (2008). Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Saracho, O. (2020). Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children: Vol. Fourth edition. Routledge.

Sarfraz, I., Rajendran, D., Hewege, C., & Mohan, M. D. (2018). An exploration of global employability skills: A systematic research review. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion,* 9(1), 63–88.

Saunders, D. (1941). Social Ideas in McGuffey Readers. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *5*(4), 579–589.

Scherer. M. (2009). Engaging the Whole Child : Reflections on Best Practices in Learning,

Teaching, and Leadership. ASCD.

Schmied, J. J., & Dheskali, J. (2019). Credibility, Honesty, Ethics & Politeness in Academic and Journalistic Writing. Cuvillier Verlag.

Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Teachers. *The Future of Children*, *27*(1), 137–155.

Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Hymel, S. (2007). Educating the Heart as Well as the Mind: Social and Emotional Learning for School and Life Success. *Education Canada*, *47(2)*, 20–25.

Schultz, A., & Baczek, A. (2020). Using Read Alouds to Target Social-Emotional Learning. *Michigan Reading Journal,* 52(2), 18–28.

Schuylkill Technology Center (n.d.) School Climate Focus Group Script. Retrieved April 9, 2022 from https://www.stcenters.org/cms/lib/PA01916724/Centricity/Domain/114/Focus%20 Group %20Script.pdf

Self, B. (2021). Conducting Interviews During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 22(3), 1–18.

Shriver, T. P., & Weissberg, R. P. (2020). A Response to Constructive Criticism of Social and Emotional Learning. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, *101*(7), 52–57.

Skrabec, Q. R. (2009). *William McGuffey : Mentor to American Industry*. Algora Publishing.

Skrzypek, C., Bascug, E. W., Ball, A., Kim, W., & Elze, D. (2020). In Their Own Words: Student Perceptions of Restorative Practices. Children & Schools, 42(4), 245–253

Soutter, M. (2019). Unintended lessons of SEL programs. Phi Delta Kappan, 100(5), 59–62.

Stake, R. (2010). Qualitative research – Studying how things work. The Guilford Press.

Starr, J. P. (2019). Can we keep SEL on course? *The Phi Delta Kappan*, *100*(8), 70–71.

Stolp, S. (1996). Leadership for school culture. Emergency Librarian, 23(3), 30.

Strahan, D. B., & Poteat, B. (2020). Middle Level Students' Perceptions of Their Social and

    Emotional Learning:An Exploratory Study. Research in Middle Level Education Online,

    43(5), 1–15.

Taylor, J., Branscombe, N., Burcham, J., & Lilli Land, L. (2011). *Beyond Early Literacy :*

    A Balanced Approach to Developing the Whole Child. Routledge.

Theodore Roosevelt Quotes. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from

    BrainyQuote.com Web site:

    https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/theodore_roosevelt_140484

Tewell, E 2019, 'Reframing Reference for Marginalized Students: A Participatory Visual

    Study', *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, p. 162.

US Department of Education (ED). (2012, February 17). State Pilot Projects, 1995-2001:

    Lessons learned--the partnerships in character education project program. Home.

    Retrieved December 21, 2021, from

    https://www2.ed.gov/programs/charactered/lessons.html

US Department of Education (ED). (2018, October 24). *Title I, Part A Program*. United

    States Department of Education.

        https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html#:%7E:text=Schools%20in%

    20which%20children%20from,of%20the%20lowest%2Dachieving%20students

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society : Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

    Harvard University Press.

Wallender, J. L., Hiebel, A. L., PeQueen, C. V., & Kain, M. A. (2020). Effects of an Explicit

    Curriculum on Social- Emotional Competency in Elementary and Middle School

    Students. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 86(3), 32–43.

Wang, N., Wilhite, S. C., Wyatt, J., Young, T., & Bloemker, G. (2012). Impact of a College Freshman Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum on Student Learning Outcomes: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 9(2), 1–20.

Ward, M. R. ., & Delamont, S. (2020). Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education: Vol. Second edition. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Watnick, B. (2018). Education Today: Issues, Policies & Practices. Salem Press.

Wentzel, K. & Ramani, G. (2016). *Handbook of Social Influences in School Contexts: Social-Emotional, Motivation, and Cognitive Outcomes.* Routledge

What is the Casel Framework? CASEL. (2021, October 11). Retrieved April 9, 2022, from https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#interactive-casel-wheel

Wisniewski, R., & Foster, L. R. (2021). Addressing the Social-Emotional Needs of Adult Learners to Ensure Workplace Success: Combined Practices That Integrate Social Emotional Learning and Employability Skills. American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 2020.

Yang, C., Bear, G., & May, H. (2018). Multilevel Associations between School-Wide Social-Emotional Learning Approach and Student Engagement across Elementary, Middle and High Schools, 47(1), 45-61.

Zhao, Y. (2020). Another education war? The coming debates over social and emotional learning. *Phi Delta Kappa*n, 101(8), 42–48.

Zieher, A. K., Cipriano, C., Meyer, J. L., & Strambler, M. J. (2021). Educators' implementation and use of social and emotional learning early in the COVID-19 pandemic. *School Psychology*, 36(5), 388–397. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000461.supp (Supplemental)

Zins, J. (2001). Examining Opportunities and Challenges for School-Based Prevention and

    Promotion: Social and Emotional Learning as an Exemplar. *Journal of Primary*

    Prevention, *21*(4), 441–446.

Zins, J., Weissburg, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, J. (2004). Building Academic Success on Social

    and Emotional Learning : What Does the Research Say? Teachers College Press.

Zins, J., & Elias, M. (2007). Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All

    Students. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Cons*ultation, 17(2/3), 233–255.

Zizek, B., Garz, D. & Nowak, E. (2015). *Kohlberg Revisited*. Brill.

APPENDIX A

KSU IRB Approval

Date: 3-15-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY22-528
Title: Elementary Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Adult Behaviors on School Climate
Creation Date: 5-10-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Tameka Walker
Review Board: KSU IRB 2022-2023
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	**Review Type** Expedited	**Decision** Approved
Submission Type Modification	**Review Type** Expedited	**Decision** Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member Chinasa Elue	**Role** Co-Principal Investigator	**Contact** celue@kennesaw.edu
Member Tameka Walker	**Role** Principal Investigator	**Contact** twalke20@students.kennesaw.edu
Member Tameka Walker	**Role** Primary Contact	**Contact** twalke20@students.kennesaw.edu

APPENDIX B

SCHOOL DISTRICT APPROVAL

District Employee Application to Conduct Research

Paulding County School District

Title of Research: Elementary Students' Perspectives on the impact of Adult Behaviors on School Climate

Date Submitted: 5/12/22   Researcher's Name: Tameka Walker

Targeted Audience: Doctoral Research Study   Dates of the Research: 5/23-7/31/22

(Start date must be after approval date.)

University/Sponsoring Agency: Kennesaw State University

By signing below, you agree that you have completed all items on the checklist, read and meet the guidelines as outlined in Policy KIB and Administrative Procedure KIB-R Special Interest Materials Distribution. You also agree to submit any significant changes in the procedures of your project to the Superintendent's Office for prior approval.

Tameka Walker   Dallas Elementary School

Name of Researcher(s) [Type or Print]   Name of Department/School

Signature(s)   5/12/22

                                                        Date

This research involving human participants, if approved will be under the direct supervision of the following representative of sponsoring University/Agency.

Dr. Chinasa Elue   Educational Leadership

Faculty Advisor/Agency Representative [Type or Print]   Name of Department

Chinasa Elue   May 13, 2022

Signature   Date

By signing below, you agree to allow the above researcher(s) to conduct research within your building.

Signature of Principal   Ex. Dir El. Ops.   5/13/2022

                              School   Date

For Office Use Only

Date Received: 5-13-22

The attached request was reviewed by: Dr. Cynthia Davies

Recommendation: X Approved   _____ Deny

Reason:

Dr. Cynthia Davies 5-16-22   Director of Accountability & Assessment

Signature   Date

· For Superintendent's Use Only ·

Your recommendation has been accepted. Please notify the requestor of the status of their request. A copy of their research findings should be submitted to the Office of the Superintendent at the time of completion. 3236 Atlanta Highway, Dallas, Georgia 30132

Superintendent's Signature

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

Parent Consent to Participate in Research

Your child is being asked to participate in a research project entitled "**Elementary Grade Students' Perspective on the Impact of Adult Behaviors on School Climate**." This research project is being conducted by Tameka Walker, a student in the Educational Leadership Department at Kennesaw State University. The researcher has explained to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask the researcher any questions you have to help you understand this project and your possible participation in it. A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this carefully and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. The University asks that you give your signed agreement if you wish to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the Research: This study involves research. The purpose of the study is to identify students' thoughts regarding effective things adults do to help students feel safe and supported.

Procedures: Your child will be asked to participate in an individual interview and focus group during this study. Both will be conducted after school. Twelve students will participate in the focus group. The researcher will serve as the facilitator. The facilitator is someone that manages the group to make sure everyone has a chance to share their ideas. Both the interview and the focus group will be recorded using an audio recorder. The recording will allow the researcher to review the information that was shared by your and the other participants. There are no alternatives to the experimental procedures in this study. The only alternative is to choose not to participate at all.

Your child will be asked to come to the front office conference room to participate in the interview. The interview will take approximately 20 minutes.

For the group session, your child will be asked to come to the media center. The focus group discussion is a group interview, and it is estimated to last an hour.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks. If you find you need community services, you can contact the Georgia Crisis Hotline at 1-800-715-4255. This is a free service. By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Kennesaw State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: Although your child may not benefit directly from this research, his/her participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of what adults can do to help students feel safe and supported in school. This knowledge gained may contribute to addressing future concerns related to school climate.

Costs and Compensation: There are no costs to you and there is no compensation (no money, gifts, or services) for participation in this research project.

Assurance of Confidentiality: Kennesaw State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.

All research documentation will be retained for three years following the completion of the research. After this time has expired, all archived data will be destroyed. All audio and electronic files will be deleted when the documents have been transcribed and coded and are no longer needed for this study.

To mitigate confidentiality pseudonyms will be used to protect participants' identities. These identifiers will be used during the individual interviews and focus group sessions. A special code not including names will be used to help identify the participants. All the data collected and analyzed will not include any names or identifying information. Further, during the focus group, participants will only address each other and themselves by their given pseudonyms. Additionally, the identification of the school, school district, and any other information that will give the identity away will also be kept confidential through a given pseudonym. Assigned pseudonyms will also be used through the study including in the final research documentation and presentation.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision for your child to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participation and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you or your child have or any services he/she is otherwise entitled to. He/she may skip any questions that your child does not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw after data collection is complete, your child's information will be deleted from the database and will not be included in research results.

Information Contacts:

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Tameka Walker at 770-334-1631 or twalke20@students.kennesaw.edu. This study has been approved by the Kennesaw State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 470-578-4636 or irb@kennesaw.edu

---

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my child's role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study:

_____ *Yes*   _____ *No*

Mailing Address: _____

Email Address: _____

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

KSU Research Study Assent Form (7-10 Year Age Range)

Name of Child: _____

Parental Permission on File: ☐ Yes   ☐ No**

**(If "No," do not proceed with assent or research procedures.)

Study Title: Elementary Grade Students' Perspective on the Impact of Adult

Behaviors on School Climate

Researchers: Tameka Walker

My name is Tameka Walker. I am from Kennesaw State University.

- I am inviting you to be in a research study about how students feel about specific things adults do to create a safe and supportive learning environment in school.

- Your parent knows we are going to ask you to be in this research study, but you get to make the final choice. It is up to you. If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you to do an interview that should take about 15 to 20 minutes. During the interview you will be asked your opinion about the school environment and how has it has felt at school during the pandemic. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group or group interview with several other 5th grade students. The focus group will take about an hour. During this time, you and your peers will be asked about specific school events and procedures. Both the interview and focus group will take place after school on different days.

- The interview and focus group session will be recorded using an audio recorder. We will not record you without your permission.

- Although, there may not be a direct benefit for you to participate in this study, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of what adults can do to help students feel safe and supported in school. This knowledge gained may contribute to addressing future concerns related to school climate.

- Although, we don't think anything bad would happen if you decide to take part in this research study, but some kids might get tired of sitting still while they answer questions. We will let you take a break about every 15 minutes or more often if you need to. At any point you can ask for a break.

- If anything in the study worries you or makes you uncomfortable, let me know and you can stop. There are no right or wrong answers to any of our questions. You don't have to answer any question you don't want to answer or do anything you don't want to do.

- Everything you say and do will be private. We won't tell your parents or anyone else what you say or do while you are taking part in the study. When we tell other people about what we learned in the study, we won't tell them your name or the name of anyone else who took part in the research study.

- You don't have to be in this study. It is up to you. You can say no now, or you can change your mind later. No one will be upset if you change your mind.

- You can ask us questions at anytime and you can talk to your parent any time you want. We will give you a copy of this form that you can keep. Here is the name and phone number of someone you can talk to if you have questions about the study:

    Name *Tameka Walker* Phone number *770-334-1631*

- Do you have any questions now that I can answer for you?

IF YOU WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY, SIGN OR PRINT YOUR NAME ON THE LINE BELOW:

_____   _____

Signature of Minor   Date

Check which of the following applies Child is capable of reading and understanding the assent form and has signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

☐   Child is not capable of reading the assent form, but the information was verbally explained to him/her. The child signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher obtaining assent   Date

Interview Protocol

Personal Information

Welcome and thank you for coming today to participate in this interview. We appreciate your taking the time to discuss the topic of the climate and culture at your school. The reason for this interview is to get your opinion on the impact of specific things adults do in your school. My name is Mrs. Walker, and I will be facilitating this focus group. A facilitator is someone who guides a group. They help others take the lead. The primary role of a focus group facilitator is to listen. Within the context of listening, I will encourage accurate and honest feedback. I want to remind you that our discussion today will be audio recorded. This is so I can go back and listen to your responses so I can accurately document your thoughts and opinions. Please complete the following sheet that asks personal identification information such as gender and race. Please notice there is another option and a choice not to identify for each question.

Personal Information

Students will be given the following

1. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other
   - Choose not to identify

0. What is your race?
   - Asian
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Black/African American
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Other
   - Choose not to identify

0. Do you have a Hispanic or Latino background?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other
   - Choose not to identify

After students have completed the paper form, the interview will begin using the following script.

The following are some rules to remember as we engage in the discussion.
- All of your comments and opinions will be recognized as important, and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Please be open and honest with your responses even if they do not reflect how others may feel.
- This is a safe space, so what is said in this room stays here.
- All school and class rules apply during the focus group discussion.
- We know your time is valuable and we appreciate it. We will keep on a schedule so we can discuss all of the important topics and we will end this focus group at 3:30 pm
- Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?
- Ok. Since there are no more questions, we are going to begin. Please remember that all of your answers should be based on your experience at since 4th grade.

School Environment

0.   How has the school environment changed, if at all, during the pandemic?
0.   How do the adults in your school treat students?
0.   Describe what you see and hear when you arrive at school each morning.
0.   Describe adult behaviors in the hallways, at lunch and recess.
0.   Where do you feel safe at school?
0.   Where do you feel unsafe on your school campus?
0.   What motivates you to come to school every day?
0.   What prevents you from attending every day?
0.   How do you feel about being greeted by someone with hello or good morning?
0.   How often do you talk to an adult in the school about yourself? For example, about your interests, hobbies, or family?

For each of the following questions, pick the one answer that best describes how you feel.

0.   Do you feel that your classroom is a safe place? Please explain your answer.

0.   Do you feel like your classroom social contract is used to help the class follow the expectations we agreed on? Please explain your answer.

0.   Does sharing "Good Things" in the mornings, helps to start your day in a good way? Please explain your answer.

0.   Does receiving incentives like Bulldog Bucks and Dojo Points, helps your classroom environment to be positive? Please explain your answer.

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Interview Protocol

- Student will sign in upon arrival
- Refreshments are available at the sign-in table.
- Students will create name tents at their seats

Welcome and thank you for coming today to our school climate focus group. We appreciate your taking the time to discuss the topic of the climate and culture at your school. The reason for this focus group is to get your opinion on the impact of specific things adults do in your school. My name is Mrs. Walker, and I will be facilitating this focus group. A facilitator is someone who guides a group. They help others take the lead. The primary role of a focus group facilitator is to listen. Within the context of listening, I will encourage accurate and honest feedback. I want to remind you that our discussion today will be audio recorded. This is so I can go back and listen to your responses so I can accurately document your thoughts and opinions.

We are going to do a quick ice breaker before we get started to help everyone relax. You may also learn something new about each other.

Please take a second to introduce yourself by telling us if you have attended any other elementary schools, your favorite part of the school day one thing you plan to do this summer.

The following are some rules to remember as we engage in the discussion.
- All of your comments and opinions will be recognized as important, and all participants will have the opportunity to address the questions.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Please be open and honest with your responses even if they do not reflect those of the other respondents.
- Please be respectful to everyone in the room including students and adults.
- Do not interrupt anyone. There is paper and pens in front of you, so you can write down your thoughts to share when it is your turn.
- This is a safe space, so what is said in this room stays here.
- Make sure your body language is appropriate.
- Only one person at a time may speak.
- All school and class rules apply during the focus group discussion.
- We know your time is valuable and we appreciate it. We will keep on a schedule so we can discuss all of the important topics and we will end this focus group at 3:30 pm
- Does anyone have any questions before we begin our focus group?
- Ok. Since there are no more questions, we are going to begin. Please remember that all of your answers should be based on your experience at since 4th grade.

Script adapted from: Schuylkill Technology Center (n.d.)

5th Grade Student Focus Group

For each of the following questions, pick the one answer that best describes how you feel.

1. What are some school activities that encourage students and support a positive school environment?
2. Please describe things that adults in the school do to create a safe and welcoming learning environment.
3. Please describe things that adults in the school do that do not help the school feel safe and welcoming.
4. Using the chart, sort the following things into three categories.

Creates a supportive learning environment	Has some impact on the learning environment	Has little or no impact on the learning environment

- Bulldog Bucks
- Bulldog Cart
- Bulldog News
- Bulldog Bazaar
- Class Social Contract
- Dojo Points
- PAWS Awards
- Teacher Treasure Box
- Counselor
- Assistant Principal
- Principal
- Cafe
- Custodians
- Media Center
- Art
- PE
- Music
- STEM

0. Is there anything that you would like to add, about our school environment.

Appendix G

Program	The Incredible Years	I Can Problem Solve	Good Behavior Game AIR	Girls on the Run	Getting Along Together	Conscious Discipline	Competent Kids, Caring Communities	Character First	Caring Schools Community	Before the Bullying	Al's Pals	4Rs
Cognitive	23%	43%	91% ▶	18%	50%	10% ◀	27%	27%	2% ◀	5% ◀	26%	33%
Attention Control	6%	5%	0%	2%	11%	0%	7%	7%	1%	1%	4%	14%
Working Memory & Planning Skills	2%	7%	73% ▶	4%	26% ▶	2%	9%	13%	0%	1%	0%	4%
Inhibitory Control	5%	3%	0%	7%	17%	4%	4%	10%	0%	3%	18%	12%
Cognitive Flexibility	6%	31% ▶	0%	1%	5%	2%	4%	1%	0%	0%	6%	8%
Critical Thinking	7%	2%	18% ▶	5%	13%	3%	10%	1%	1%	0%	0%	4%
Emotion	32%	56% ▶	0% ◀	15% ◀	37%	58% ▶	44%	10% ◀	8% ◀	42%	45%	36%
Emotional Knowledge & Expression	26%	50% ▶	0% ◀	13%	26%	46%	26%	2% ◀	7% ◀	23%	36%	26%
Emotional & Behavioral Regulation	14%	1%	0%	6%	11%	36% ▶	19%	3%	1%	3%	16%	11%
Empathy/Perspective—taking	4%	39% ▶	0%	1%	19%	5%	11%	4%	2%	22%	7%	17%
Social	77%	56% ▶	91% ▶	51%	55%	61%	29% ◀	58%	94% ▶	53%	61%	56%
Understands Social Cues	6%	16%	0%	1%	7%	15%	5%	1%	0%	0%	12%	8%
Conflict Resolution	19%	33% ▶	0%	11%	18%	9%	10%	6%	1%	6%	20%	21%
Prosocial/Cooperative Behavior	66%	18% ◀	91% ▶	50%	45%	47%	18% ◀	57%	93% ▶	52%	38%	42%
Values	4%	3%	0%	27%	3%	3%	22%	71% ▶	3%	22%	13%	15%
Ethical Values	2%	3%	0%	9%	0%	2%	13%	46% ▶	2%	21% ▶	12%	10%
Performance Values	1%	0%	0%	9% ▶	2%	0%	10% ▶	35% ▶	0%	1%	1%	1%
Civic Values	1%	0%	0%	13% ▶	0%	0%	2%	5%	0%	4%	1%	7% ▶
Intellectual Values	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Perspectives	0%	0%	0%	6%	1%	0%	5%	16% ▶	2%	5%	0%	3%
Optimism	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Gratitude	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	6% ▶	2%	4%	0%	1%
Openness	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	5%	6% ▶	0%	1%	0%	2%
Enthusiasm/Zest	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Identity	4%	1%	18%	43% ▶	5%	7%	12%	3%	2%	8%	24%	6%
Self-Knowledge	3%	1%	18% ▶	16% ▶	2%	2%	7%	0%	1%	1%	3%	5%
Purpose	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Self-Efficacy/Growth Mindset	0%	0%	0%	16% ▶	2%	2%	5%	1%	0%	6%	1%	0%
Self-Esteem	1%	0%	0%	23% ▶	1%	2%	4%	2%	1%	5%	22% ▶	1%

Program	Second Step	Sanford Harmony	RULER	Responsive Classroom	Positive Action	Playworks	PAX Good Behavior Game	PATHS	Open Circle	Mutt-I-grees	MindUP	Lions Quest	Leader in Me	Kimochis
Cognitive	61%	17%	22%	32%	14%	33%	29%	23%	32%	21%	46%	44%	23%	9%
Attention Control	30%	2%	1%	12%	0%	6%	18%	0%	3%	3%	32%	4%	2%	1%
Working Memory & Planning Skills	9%	1%	0%	7%	9%	5%	0%	7%	8%	4%	6%	12%	9%	0%
Inhibitory Control	30%	4%	5%	9%	1%	20%	15%	12%	4%	7%	5%	2%	6%	8%
Cognitive Flexibility	13%	6%	3%	4%	1%	4%	0%	2%	9%	11%	6%	3%	3%	0%
Critical Thinking	4%	6%	14%	10%	5%	4%	9%	6%	17%	7%	10%	32%	7%	1%
Emotion	53%	44%	91%	9%	39%	16%	12%	61%	43%	51%	48%	29%	14%	63%
Emotional Knowledge & Expression	39%	37%	71%	4%	33%	11%	12%	53%	33%	38%	23%	22%	7%	59%
Emotional & Behavioral Regulation	27%	6%	33%	4%	12%	3%	0%	21%	19%	16%	26%	7%	3%	22%
Empathy/Perspective—taking	24%	21%	15%	5%	7%	7%	0%	17%	15%	23%	11%	10%	7%	18%
Social	57%	81%	30%	58%	30%	75%	85%	46%	71%	61%	24%	66%	62%	85%
Understands Social Cues	17%	12%	11%	13%	1%	9%	15%	13%	15%	29%	4%	8%	7%	40%
Conflict Resolution	25%	16%	5%	3%	1%	15%	0%	14%	26%	7%	1%	9%	5%	23%
Prosocial/Cooperative Behavior	36%	71%	16%	55%	30%	61%	79%	30%	52%	40%	20%	60%	58%	67%
Values	6%	22%	5%	5%	38%	6%	3%	8%	11%	17%	10%	34%	26%	8%
Ethical Values	5%	19%	3%	1%	19%	2%	0%	5%	7%	15%	1%	12%	10%	5%
Performance Values	1%	2%	1%	2%	14%	1%	0%	1%	3%	1%	2%	7%	12%	2%
Civic Values	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	3%	3%	2%	1%	2%	4%	18%	3%	0%
Intellectual Values	0%	5%	1%	3%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%	5%	1%
Perspectives	0%	3%	5%	0%	7%	1%	0%	4%	4%	3%	24%	7%	1%	6%
Optimism	0%	1%	4%	0%	5%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	8%	3%	0%	3%
Gratitude	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	7%	3%	0%	0%
Openness	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	3%	2%	2%	11%	0%	1%	3%
Enthusiasm/Zest	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Identity	2%	11%	14%	4%	65%	6%	6%	2%	5%	14%	11%	27%	22%	11%
Self-Knowledge	0%	6%	5%	4%	15%	5%	3%	1%	2%	7%	1%	12%	9%	4%
Purpose	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Self-Efficacy/Growth Mindset	2%	6%	7%	0%	19%	0%	3%	1%	4%	4%	8%	4%	7%	0%
Self-Esteem	0%	1%	4%	0%	52%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	2%	14%	8%	7%

Program	SECURe	Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program	Social Skills Improvement System	Too Good for Violence	Tools of the Mind	We Have Skills	WINGS	Average Across All Programs
Cognitive	54% ▶	38%	32%	36%	52% ▶	36%	26%	31%
Attention Control	28% ▶	14%	9%	7%	13%	11%	2%	8%
Working Memory & Planning Skills	24% ▶	11%	0%	12%	31% ▶	12%	2%	9%
Inhibitory Control	28% ▶	14%	8%	10%	13%	26% ▶	9%	10%
Cognitive Flexibility	8%	9%	1%	10%	11%	0%	2%	5%
Critical Thinking	9%	6%	16%	12%	5%	0%	16%	8%
Emotion	34%	42%	48%	48%	7% ◀	13% ◀	37%	36%
Emotional Knowledge & Expression	27%	32%	34%	28%	2% ◀	10%	31%	27%
Emotional & Behavioral Regulation	10%	11%	10%	15%	1%	11%	16%	12%
Empathy/Perspective-taking	17%	9%	19%	25%	5%	2%	7%	12%
Social	55%	54%	88% ▶	58%	19% ◀	62%	54%	60%
Understands Social Cues	10%	24%	30% ▶	14%	5%	13%	5%	11%
Conflict Resolution	21%	9%	15%	32% ▶	2%	7%	2%	12%
Prosocial/Cooperative Behavior	43%	44%	75% ▶	42%	13% ◀	60%	53%	49%
Values	9%	3%	18%	24%	1%	16%	19%	14%
Ethical Values	1%	2%	14%	16% ▶	0%	5%	18%	8%
Performance Values	8%	1%	0%	12% ▶	0%	11% ▶	6%	4%
Civic Values	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Intellectual Values	0%	3%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Perspectives	1%	1%	6%	10% ▶	0%	1%	3%	4%
Optimism	0%	0%	4%	7% ▶	0%	1%	0%	1%
Gratitude	0%	0%	3%	2%	0%	0%	2%	1%
Openness	1%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Enthusiasm/Zest	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Identity	4%	4%	21% ▶	12%	1%	33% ▶	19%	13%
Self-Knowledge	2%	3%	18% ▶	7%	0%	1%	16% ▶	6%
Purpose	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Self-Efficacy/Growth Mindset	1%	0%	7%	4%	0%	32% ▶	1%	4%
Self-Esteem	0%	1%	0%	5%	1%	0%	10%	5%