

A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and
Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship

by

Felicia Shenee Spratt

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University

2024

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
LEARNING SKILLS VIRTUALLY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

by Felicia Shenee Spratt

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

School of Behavioral Sciences
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

TO BE APPROVED BY:

Courtney Evans-Thompson, Ph.D., M.S., Committee Chair

Richard L. Green, Ed.D., Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological research design seeks to investigate the experience of teachers in Illinois urban school districts who have virtually implemented Social-Emotional Learning skill sets and describe any impact virtual implementation has had on the teacher-student relationship. This data was viewed through teachers who implemented the social and emotional learning skill sets in an urban middle school. Social-emotional learning is often implemented in a classroom while teaching students regular academic requirements. The theory used to guide this study was Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with self-actualization being the ultimate achievement goal on the pyramid. The theory explained the connection between the basic needs in Maslow's pyramid and social-emotional learning, as explained by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). Five research questions guided this study. The study used purposeful sampling to select 10 participants from Illinois urban middle schools. The data was collected using individual and group interviews. Three overarching themes emerged from the study, and five sub-themes were generated. This research aimed to bring knowledge and add to the limited research on the lived experience of urban middle school teachers in Illinois regarding implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic and describe any impact it has had on the teacher-student relationship. Future research should investigate how parents' and students' perceptions differ from teachers regarding implementing social-emotional learning skill sets virtually and its effectiveness in establishing and keeping the teacher-student relationship intact.

Keywords: middle school teacher, SEL, social-emotional learning, skill sets, CASEL, teacher perception, teacher-student relationship, urban, virtual learning

Copyright Page

© 2024 by Felicia Shenee Spratt

No part of this work may be reproduced without permission except as indicated by the “Fair Use” clause of the copyright law. Passages, images, or ideas from this work must be properly credited in any written or published materials.

Dedication

I dedicate this to each student in an urban school district who was left behind because of the classroom's lack of social, emotional learning. Without the firsthand experience of how the lack of social, emotional learning in the classrooms indirectly affected the lives of my deceased brother (Daniel) and my son (Elijah), it has made a significant impact on the academic success of my niece (Anisha), I would not have the compassion and determination to write this text on this journey called "life." Without the need for advocacy on behalf of Elijah and Anisha, I may not have been allowed to succeed or bring awareness to others about the importance of implementing social, emotional learning, especially when interacting with children in urban area schools.

Acknowledgments

I want to honor God for ordering my footsteps in and through this process in life. When I felt like going in a different direction, I was reminded of Proverbs 19:21 (ESV) “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” Because of His purpose in my life, I would like to give a special thanks to my parents, Dr. Kelvin and Rena McNeil, for holding me accountable and setting high expectations for me from the foundation of my youth. Thank you to my son, Elijah, for all the years I had to sacrifice time and could not give you 100%. Thank you to my siblings for lending your support and understanding through the years. I truly appreciate each of you in your special way as I worked through writing this manuscript for our future generation.

I would remiss not to acknowledge my aunts, cousins, and close friends who had encouraged me to keep going and not give up when the task became more than I could bear. A special thanks to Emmie “Emma” ... Thank you! I especially want to recognize and thank Doctoral Candidate Tiffany Lacy Clark. She took a chance on me and pushed me further into my destiny within the corporate world of community care and counseling. It was because of this push that I was able to think outside the box and finish strong.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those who spent many hours reviewing my work and providing feedback to perfect this manuscript, which was none other than Dr. Evans-Thompson (Committee Chair), Dr. Green (Committee Reader), and Tameisha Williams (Editor). Without the help, guidance, support, and encouragement of my committee, I would not have completed this study in the spirit of excellence; therefore, I am forever thankful.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	12
Overview.....	12
Social Emotional Learning	16
Situation to Self.....	17
Problem Statement.....	19
Purpose of Study.....	21
Significance of the Study	21
Research Questions.....	24
Definition of Terms.....	29
Summary.....	31
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	33
Overview.....	33
Theoretical Framework.....	33
Related Literature.....	37
Social-Emotional Learning Studied.....	37
Social-Emotional Learning Socially.....	38
Social-Emotional Learning Concept.....	39
SEL and Academics.....	41
Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning.....	44
Social-Emotional Learning Linkage to Teacher-Student Relationships.....	51
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	54
Overview.....	54

Design	54
Research Questions	56
Setting	57
Participants.....	58
Ethical Protection.....	59
Procedures.....	59
The Researcher’s Role	62
Data Collection	64
Participant Interview.....	64
Open-Ended Individualized Interview Questions.....	65
Participant Post Focused Group.....	67
Data Analysis	69
Data Organization and Memoing.....	70
Reduction and Coding.....	71
Trustworthiness.....	72
Credibility	73
Dependability and Confirmability	74
Transferability.....	75
Ethical Considerations	75
Summary.....	76
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	77
Overview.....	77
Participants.....	78

Results.....	83
Interviews.....	83
Significant Statements and Themes	84
Classroom Implementation.	89
Virtual Implementation.....	91
Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation.....	94
Learning Process.....	98
Resources.	99
Focus Group Responses.....	106
Focus Group Question One.....	106
Focus Group Question Two	109
Focus Group Question Three	112
Summary	116
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	120
Overview.....	120
Summary of Findings.....	120
Research Questions.....	123
Discussion.....	130
Theoretical Literature.....	131
Empirical Literature	135
Implications.....	138
Theoretical Implication.....	139
Empirical Implication	140

Practical Implication	142
Delimitations and Limitations.....	143
Delimitations.....	143
Limitations	144
Recommendations for Future Research	145
Summary	146
REFERENCES	149

List of Tables

Table 1 Illinois Social Emotional Standards – Middle/Jr. High	27
Table 2 Participant Interview Profiles.....	79
Table 3 Themes and Sub-themes of Virtual SEL Implementation Experience	85
Table 4 Significant Words and Phrases.....	86
Table 5 Personal Initial Experience of Implementing SEL Skills	89
Table 6 Challenges in Implementing Illinois-Mandated SEL Skills Common Themes	102
Table 7 Teacher-Student Virtual Relationship Building Common Themes	106
Table 8 Advice for Future Teachers Implementing SEL Skills Virtually.....	108
Table 9 Themes Related to Research Question Three	125
Table 10 Themes Related to Research Question Three	126
Table 11 Themes Related to Research Questions Four through Six.....	129

List of Abbreviations

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE)

School-To-Prison-Pipeline (STPP)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

A young person's overall success in school and life appears to be linked to their social and emotional development (Reyes et al. 2012; Wang & Degol 2014; Belfield et al., 2015; Barksdale et al., 2021; 2019). Social-emotional development is fostered when students experience a sense of belonging and purpose, work to solve problems effectively with others, get along with their peers, plan and establish goals, and endure challenges (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Because a young person's social, emotional, and academic advancement are interlinked, Blad (2017) suggested that beyond the student's academic success, cognitive skills and emotional competence are needed, and social and interpersonal skills to gain maximum success in life. This strongly supports a need for the use of Social Emotional Learning in schools.

Social-Emotional Learning is a skill set which can be learned and utilized by adults and children. SEL has been defined as a process in which individuals can acquire and apply awareness, outlook, and skills needed to effectively manage emotions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). SEL programmatic structure has been centered on understanding students learn best when caring relationships are developed which in essence create an atmosphere for learning to be interesting, appealing, and meaningful (Jones et al., 2013). Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) suggested social and emotional skills as being critical components to excelling as a student, citizen, and worker in society. Interestingly, in 2012, Farrington et al. proposed several outcomes that has been proven to be effective after analyzing a study of 75 SEL programs. The seven major outcome areas consisted of social skills, positive self-image, prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, mental health, and academic achievement. Others who have explored the benefits of SEL

has found similar findings suggesting its positive effects on student behavior and academic performance (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004).

Social Emotional Learning is important and can be fostered in schools. If educators integrate Social Emotional Learning skill set component into current educational standards (even with small 10-minute daily activities), students could gain social and emotional skills which in turn could increase academic outcomes. Social Emotional Learning is so important for youth development and can develop students social, emotional, and interpersonal skills. Jones and Kahn (2017) highlighted the benefits of including SEL skill sets within general education learning. Throughout history, research has shown the benefits of SEL including but not limited to improved academic performance, substance use reduction, lessen verbal and physical aggression as well as a decrease in other antisocial behaviors (January et al., 2011). Recognizing these benefits with students, we must also raise awareness of how schools as a whole benefit from reduction of negative behaviors related to SEL. Chung and McBride (2015) hinted at schools' reduction of time and resources being spent on non-academic issues has ultimately contributed to school experiencing a safe and positive environment. The incorporation of SEL skill sets early in development has shown to provide both deterrence outcomes (Harrell, Mercer, & DeRosier, 2009) and avert emotional difficulties in children later in life (Aviles et al., 2006). CASEL (2021) indicated that SEL being beneficial in long-term improvements in every area of a student's development not only in school years, but also as they enter adulthood and thereafter.

CASEL (2021) suggested that in addition to academic success reported by educators, employers also have identified SEL skill sets as a vital piece in preparing the future generation to enter the workforce with life skills that employers desperately need and value (Jones & Kahn, 2017). As Social Emotional Learning has the potential to bring so many positive benefits to

students, it seems important that teachers do integrate this. However, this is not always the case.

Background

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2 which has affected millions throughout the world (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). COVID-19 was thought to be spread predominately through close contact from person to person, including but not limited to individuals within approximately 6 feet of one another (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; CDC, 2021). The first reported case of COVID-19 in the United States of America was from an individual traveling home to Washington state from Wuhan, China where COVID-19 is believed to have started. On March 12, 2020, roughly 1,645 individuals from around 47 states had been affected with the virus which caused COVID-19; therefore, with COVID-19 cases being on the rise, President Trump issued the proclamation on declaring a national emergency concerning the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, declaring a national state of emergency (The White House, 2020). With COVID-19 spreading rapidly, public schools began announcing school closures throughout the United States.

COVID-19 has brought the world's economy to a halt. In addition to usual high unemployment, many parents suffer under the strain of underemployment, not having enough work to make ends meet despite working more than 40 hours each week. According to a Pew Research study (2020), 41% of children living in households earning less than \$30,000 annually do not have access to high-speed Internet and, 30.7%, or 295,499 students, lack sufficient internet access, and 31.2%, or 302,160 students, lack access to a device (MAISA, 2020). In the economically depressed spaces where many of families reside, 25% lost their jobs due to conditions created by COVID-19. The COVID 19 pandemic of 2020-2021 has also intensified gaps in education which has included students having a place where they belonged and having

caring relationships within schools which were once accessible (Miller et al. 2021). Kamei and Harriott (2021) explained the unexpected closing of the schools nationally because of the coronavirus pandemic and transitioning to virtual learning has threatened to aggravate the problem of isolation as students' self-reported of increased anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

On March 13, 2020, Governor J.B. Pritzker announced the closing of all schools in Illinois to combat the increasing number of coronavirus cases beginning March 17 (5 Chicago, 2020). With the doors of the schools being closed, schools quickly moved to develop plans to implement e-learning (virtual) programs to avoid students being in buildings during the outbreak; however, according to Panchal et al. (2021), this major disruption as a result to provide public health safety measures has impacted students including school closures, social isolation, financial hardship, and gaps in health care access compromising mental health services.

The JED Foundation and Fluent Research partnered together to study the emotional and mental health challenges during COVID-19 pandemic. This study was the first to examine youth mental health nationally during the pandemic. The results of this study ranged from two-thirds of U.S. parents reporting their child experiencing challenges mentally or emotionally varying from social isolation (23%) to suicidal thoughts (5%); one-third of the parents also shared that their child emotional health was worse than before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Gregorian, 2020). With parents reporting poor mental health outcomes in their children throughout the pandemic, Calderon (2020) reported 29% [three in ten] parents described their child's mental and emotional health being already harmed, shortly after the pandemic began. With the increase of adolescents experiencing poor mental health, it remains unclear how school officials are developing and implementing programs virtually to target the worsening of emotional and cognitive health

during this time. Although the state of Illinois has mandated its schools to incorporate a SEL into its educational standard to foster the development of social-emotional learning skills in students, the question then becomes what social-emotional learning is and why is it important to implement the skill set virtually during the COVID-19 crisis.

Social Emotional Learning

Social-Emotional Learning is a curriculum of skill sets taught by teachers providing the opportunity for students to learn and develop self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills within the framework of learning general education (What is Social-Emotional Learning section, para. 2). In 2004, the Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) developed standards around Social Emotional Learning skill sets in response to the Children's Mental Health Act of 2003. Teaching Social-Emotional Learning skill sets in classroom settings is also mandated in Illinois in partial response to the "zero-tolerance" policy built around the need for safety in the public school system, especially to protect and provide supports to minority students. During this time, the ISBE also partnered with the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to integrate SEL into the classroom experience to combat the misuse of the "zero-tolerance" policy. Therefore, ISBE (n.d.) concluded, integration of SEL into systems and practices is highly recommended; therefore, integration should occur by:

- Examining existing systems and structures to determine how Social-Emotional Learning efforts can be integrated into them.
- Embedding SEL instruction into existing curricula.
- Taking advantage of teachable moments that occur naturally throughout the day.
- Promoting students' feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence; and

- Providing opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies (School Wellness: Social-Emotional Learning, para. 3).

In understanding the need for SEL in Illinois schools, Prewitt (2017) stated, “Consistent with being the first state to adopt standards for social emotional learning (SEL) in the country, Illinois recently passed legislation to require social and emotional screenings for children as part of their school entry examinations” (para. 1). This bill was in fact signed on January 20, 2017, and went into effect on June 1, 2017. While acknowledging the potential impact of Social Emotional Learning skill sets being incorporated in the classroom, qualitative research investigating the experiences of teacher’s implementation is lacking. In the time of COVID 19, it also seems important to seek to understand how teachers perceive the implementation of Social Emotional Learning skill sets in a virtual classroom setting.

Situation to Self

As a mother and licensed mental health therapist, I have observed adolescents who seem to thrive better when focusing on their social-emotional development. I also found that when individuals, specifically adolescents, behaved inappropriately during the school year, focusing on self-awareness and coping skills seemed to manage their emotional outbursts appropriately. The experience of working with juvenile delinquents for over ten years gave me the tools needed to not only aid teachers and parents with assisting adolescents in social and emotional development. It also allowed adolescents I have counseled in the past to stay out of the juvenile system, return into the community, obtain jobs, attend college, and become productive citizens within their community. After recognizing the need for more focus on development's social and emotional stages, I began incorporating it into my son and niece's life. As a result, both individuals would

stop and think about their actions and how they would affect them and those around them if their responses were in an unhealthy way.

My experiences alongside family members, adolescents, parents, and teachers have led my current research to be of a fundamental ontological assumption. In my attempt to understand the core details of the lived experiences from various teachers' perspectives when implementing Social-Emotional Learning in the classroom as mandated in Illinois, a concern that follows the overall missing piece considered Social-Emotional Learning emerges the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning being conducted virtually. The suggestion of undertaking a fundamental ontological assumption will lay the foundation proving that multiple realities (teachers' perceptions) would include the inclusion of many forms of evidence when themes are created using actual words by not only different individuals but also the different perspectives of the individuals who participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Social-Emotional Learning is a developmental experience, and therefore, significance can be affixed to such an experience. This experience's significance can be pinned by myself as conducting the research or assigning those who participate in the study. This evidence of the experience should be given an epistemological assumption. This would be useful because the researcher relies on the quotes and individual views of the participants and a collaborative team. The researcher becomes an insider within the group instead of an outsider who observes from a distance with no invitation. Social constructivism worldview will be used in this study to understand teachers' experience with implementing social-emotional learning virtual and its impact on the teacher-student relationship is sought after for clarity.

In conclusion, I would argue for a thorough research study into how teachers perceive implementing SEL virtual and its impact on the teacher-student relationship. Adolescents are

especially social. Pierson (2013) stated that the value and importance of human connections (relationships) are never discussed. With most individuals affected by a teacher or an adult, one should understand that significant learning would be far between without a meaningful relationship. Pierson sums up the importance of a teacher-student relationship with these words of hope, “Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can be” (7:12-7:24). Pierson’s quote could be an additional part to the missing piece (Social-Emotional Learning), which Illinois stated in found within the education system; therefore, each teacher, parent, and community should strive to become a living example of what a champion represents in the lives of the children who will soon be adults. The overarching problem is that there is little to no research on how teachers perceive implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually. There is no clear picture of the connection between Social-Emotional Learning and its impact on the teacher-student relationship, specifically in virtual learning.

Problem Statement

The problem to be investigated is a lack of qualitative research concerning urban middle school teachers’ experience with implementing social and emotional learning skill sets virtually amid a pandemic and this lack of information inhibits the success of implementing social and emotional learning remotely in urban school districts within the state of Illinois. Most schools moved to virtual (remote) learning since January 2020 because of COVID-19. With students already facing various barriers, the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional barriers against students' academic success (Black, 2015; Berlowitz et al., 2017); such barriers oftentimes include lack of access to internet, but also lack of social interactions and lack of parental support (Black, 2015; Berlowitz et al., 2017; Humphies et al., 2018; Poulou et al., 2018; Spievack & Gallagher,

2020). Dorn et al. (2020) suggested how the pandemic is likely to increase social and emotional disruption by “increasing social isolation and creating anxiety” (p. 6).

Some states have required the use of Social Emotional Learning skill sets in educational standards while others have not. Specifically, the state of Illinois has mandated that SEL skills become part of their educational standards in response to the disproportionality of suspensions and expulsion among African American students and acknowledgement of the capability to cause continual damaging outcomes in the academic success of persons of color students (Krezmien et al. 2006 and Skiba 2014). Even with such a specific concern influencing a requirement on implementation of Social Emotional Learning skills, there is still little to no research on implementing SEL, and no research even more so on implementation of Social Emotional Learning skills virtually.

With adolescents, young children, LGBTQ youth, children of color, Latino, and low-income students already being at risk of experiencing low school connectedness, likely to be excluded from online learning environments, and being most exposed to damaging mental health consequences since the pandemic; the need for SEL should be a priority and not an option only during this crisis (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Miller et al., 2021; and Panchal et al. 2021). As Social Emotional Learning skills focus on increasing social, emotional, and interpersonal development, it may affect as a buffer against the barriers potentially experienced by students learning in a virtual world. The way by which Social Emotional Learning skills are implemented might also positively impact the student – teacher relationship. This is important as it is important for students to feel cared for at school (Zins et al., 2007; Carroll et al., 2020 and Miller, 2021); therefore, school effectiveness diversely implies belonging, engagement, bonding,

and attachment (Panayiotou et al., 2019) which can be experienced through relationships built at school.

While Social Emotional Learning skills have been used in some classrooms, research investigating the effects have been predominately quantitative, with focus on the relationship with classroom discipline (Bear, 2010; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). It seems then, important to qualitatively explore how teachers perceive their experience teaching social-emotional learning skills. In the time of COVID 19, it also seems important to seek to explore how teachers perceive the implementation of Social Emotional Learning skills in a virtual classroom. Due to the system reported effort to protect and provide supports to minority students, it is also important to specifically investigate the impact of Social Emotional Learning skills in a virtual classroom and the impact on the teacher-student relationship especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explain how urban middle school teachers perceive their experience teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic. During participant interviews, questions will be asked pertaining to any impact on the teacher-student relationship. The sample will consist of schoolteachers who serve a high percentage of minority students.

Significance of the Study

Empirically, this study will focus on a present gap in literature through investigating Illinois, middle school teachers virtual experience with implementing social-emotional learning in urban schools and how the absence of data surrounding this experience hinders successful implementation of SEL (Gerics, 2019). As COVID-19 had impacted everyone's life in one

capacity or another, those students who are most vulnerable have been affected in receiving equal educational opportunities (Reza, 2020) because of lack of technology. This study will gain urban middle school teachers in Illinois a view on the disparity in implementing social-emotional learning virtually. In doing so, the impact of understanding teachers experiences with implementing SEL will provide awareness in overcoming challenges that may exist within a middle school if another pandemic would occur.

In theory, this study will bring an urban middle school lens within the state of Illinois as aligned with Maslow's hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1943) which provides initial skills for social-emotional learning and the standards outlined in Illinois education (Humphries, 2018; Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE] (2016). This study will provide future support to Maslow's theoretical approach to human motivation as aligned with Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] five core competencies (2015) and its implementation of social-emotional learning within an urban middle school.

In retrospect, this study will give voice to teachers who represent students that are under-represented within the research (African American students) and give awareness on urban middle school teachers' mastery of implementing social-emotional learning virtually. Since the onset of COVID-19, educational differences between whites and blacks are being exposed as it pertains to distance learning and underprivileged students (Reza, 2020). Understanding the difference in racial inequality, Dorn et al. (2020) determined such school closing in urban areas amid the pandemic would cause further "disproportionate loss in learning for disadvantaged students and may also increase dropout rates" (p. 68). In gaining insight from this study, challenges will be looked at specifically regarding how the disproportionate loss in learning affects social-emotional learning within the virtual classroom experience of urban middle school teachers.

Potential challenges to effectively implementing SEL virtually include students' lack of satisfaction, happiness, wellbeing, opportunity and contribution to humanity as described by Zhao and Jim (2021) along with technology resources (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In specifically focusing on these challenges faced in a virtual learning setting with an urban school district, parents, educators, district administrators could develop strategies and support to address the concerns (Gerics, 2019). In hindsight, developed strategies and support could provoke those in higher authority to allocate additional funding for resources that would strengthen both the teachers and student's ability to implement and access social-emotional learning virtually.

Hargreaves (2001) suggested that teaching is a job requiring emotional labor. Minimum research has shown a linkage between educators' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and their response with others, including students (Poulou, 2017). Understanding this linkage would allow for others to decipher the effectiveness of EI alongside implementing social-emotional learning with students in middle school. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) provided a model of how the social and emotional competent educator can set the tone of their classroom and ensure the students are receiving SEL when they stated how this model is accomplished:

Developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of prosocial behavior. (p. 492).

In adjusting the tone of our nations' new norm' of remote learning, Williams et al. (2020) suggested a need for educators to adapt their perceptions and expectations of students who

exhibited anti-social behaviors and those who “Perceived student behavior and performance differently based on the race/ethnicity of the student” (p. 1064). While data does not prove reduction in classroom disruptions or school climates with the implementation of zero-tolerance policy; the significance of this study will focus on the impact social and emotional learning has on students in middle school who have learned remotely. The assumption is Illinois teachers are implementing Social-Emotional Learning amid the pandemic since it has proven to be effective in the development of the teacher-student relationships, academics, and a decrease in classroom discipline. Nevertheless, this study is birth out of lack of evidence urban, middle school the teachers' perception of implementing social-emotional learning virtually and its impact on the teacher-student relationship.

Research Questions

The five research questions guiding this study:

RQ1. How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceived their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills in a traditional classroom setting? Teachers are the engine that drives the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning skills in a classroom setting (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Bandura (1977) explains how experience and effectiveness as a theoretical concept are related to one another. Therefore, knowing and understanding the experience of the teachers' role in how SEL was implemented in a regular classroom setting is vital in understanding the difference in how their experience is implementing the skills virtually. Schonert-Reichl (2017) suggested that the effectiveness of the development of SEL skills is when the implementation of the educational standard is done in a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment.

RQ2. How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills in a non-traditional way, such as virtually, amid COVID-19? Elias (2019) described SEL as a set of skills that form the core of human interaction. This human interaction was conducted in a traditional classroom setting for students; however, with classrooms being moved to virtual learning, it is important to gain teachers' perspective in teaching SEL in a non-traditional way. Because SEL is here to stay (Elias, 2019) and has shown to be effective in a traditional classroom setting; it is vital to this study to describe the teachers' experience in implementing SEL which supports the students' development and lets them practice the skills they learn (Schonert-Reichl, 2017)

RQ3. How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skill sets to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19? Given that the conception of the House of Representatives put a focus on SEL in schools, Illinois became the first state to execute stand-alone SEL standards to be implemented in K-12 education (CASEL, 2015; ISBE, n.d.). However, while SEL implementation can take on many forms, according to Philippe (2017), there is limited to no research on how SEL meeting the ISBE standards virtually.

Philippe (2017) explained that to successfully implement and practice and SEL to meet the ISBE standards, an individual must possess methods in teaching that support the development of SEL, fosters a safe and caring classroom setting (CASEL, 2015). In understanding education standards, Conley (2014) concluded standards as being a specific set of expectations on a students' learning throughout the duration of their schooling. Illinois has developed goals and SEL standards for all grade levels (these are assessable at

<https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Social-Emotional-Learning-Standards.aspx>). Table 1 “Removed to comply with copyright”

RQ4. *How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after virtually developing a teacher-student relationship amid the COVID-19 pandemic?* Today's classroom experience is no longer considered to be heterogeneous. According to Asim et al. (2020), classrooms today are,

An Amalgamation of students who vary in learning abilities and represent different socioeconomic classes, races, genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. It becomes important for teachers to differentiate instruction to recognize the many identities of 21st-century students and ensure meaningful and effective instruction (p. 19).

Recognizing the changes in how education is being delivered, virtual educators face the unique task of planning the daily lessons and considering that not all students learn in the same way (Asim et al., 2020). With SEL being mandated in Illinois, the question then becomes SEL effective since it is being taught in a non-traditional way such as virtual. In understanding the shift of a traditional classroom setting to a class conducted online, one should know which skills are being taught and if it can be done with minimal to no disturbance in modeling the skills effectively.

Schonert-Reichl (2017) suggested that students' SEL skills encompass the following, "Knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions, to feel and show empathy for others, to establish and achieve positive goals, to develop and maintain positive relationships, and to make responsible decisions" (p. 139). These skills are like that of CASEL's five competencies at the center of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL 2015; Elias 2019; Asim et al. 2020). Identifying these skills leads us to know if the teacher-student relationship is being impacted by the shift in how education is being taught.

RQ5. *What do teachers perceive in their experience as the most significant impact on the teacher-student relationship teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills virtually in an Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) amid COVID-19.* In 2012, Merritt et al. stated, “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 they respond to children” (p.143). One of the most important people involved in SEL implementation is the teachers (Philippe 2017, Merritt et al. 2012, Asim et al. 2020).

In remaining intact with the teacher-student relationship and addressing the various needs of the student, Asim et al. (2021) suggested, “educators must move beyond the environment and into instruction” (p. 22); therefore, the same energy and tenacity demonstrated in person should be just as effective teaching virtually. It is important to understand the teacher-student relationship from a teacher’s perspective because middle school is where students are at a greater risk of becoming disengaged from the learning; therefore, active engagement with middle-schoolers is important as it has a direct influence on how they learn (Bahr & Pendergast, 2012). This influence comes from teachers and parental guidance, which in hindsight allows for the skills associated with SEL to be focused on educating students holistically (Philippe, 2017).

Definition of Terms

Pertinent to this phenomenological study are definitions of the following terms:

African American, Black, Person of Color - *The terms used to characterize individuals in this study will be used interchangeably depending on the context and the participant’s voice.*

Emotional and Behavioral Disability (EBD)- *The student is powerless in their attempt to recognize, interpret, control effectively, and express their emotions, which ultimately affects their ability to function in various areas, including academics.*

Emotional Competence – This term refers to individual differences in identifying, understanding, expression, regulation, and use of one’s own emotions and those of others (Brasseur et al., 2013, p. 1).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) – This term is also known as emotional competence, which is better described as how individuals deal with intrapersonal or interpersonal emotions (Brasseur et al., 2013, p. 1)

Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) – Defined as the administrating of public education in Illinois.

Illinois School Code Restrictions on Suspensions and Expulsions – This term was formerly known as Senate Bill 100, Public Act 99-0456, amends several provisions of the Illinois School Code in efforts to reduce exclusionary discipline practices by the school district (ISBE, 2016)

Core Personal Competence – Identified as problem-solving strategies, empathy, emotional repair, self-esteem, and values (Lázaro-Visa et al., 2019, p. 7).

Social Competence – The ability to manage emotions in self and others; interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional regulation is considered to intertwine given the two's contagious intertwining. Others catch it in a social gathering (Lopes et al., 2012).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) – The understanding and managing of emotions (self- and social regulation), setting and achieving positive goals, the ability to feel and show others empathy (becoming more aware of self and others), positive relationships being established and maintained over a long period, and the capability to make responsible decisions (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2020, “What is SEL?” section).

Educator-Student Relationship Bias – The relationships established and influenced through the educator's perception and expectation about the student (Parnell, 2007, p. 5).

Zero Tolerance – the dismantling of violence in schools by not tolerating it (Kodelja, 2019).

Summary

This dissertation study contains five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an overview, the background of the problem, and the purpose of the study. In this chapter, the following were also presented: research questions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, and significance of the study, as well as definitions of key terms central to the dissertation topic. Chapter 2 will present a review of related literature pertinent to the study. This chapter aims to first provide the reader with an understanding of the theoretical and conceptual framework that drives the study and should lead one to comprehend teachers' perceptions or have implemented social learning virtually and its effects on the teacher-student relationship, if any at all.

Chapter 2 will be divided into five parts: Part 1 addressing the history of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and its connection to a middle schooler's social and emotional aspects. Part 2 includes an overview of what Social-Emotional Learning is, who it is most effective with, and why it is believed to be the missing piece in Illinois relating to students' academic success, specifically individuals of color. Part 3 will include examining the literature, if any, on individuals such as school officials, teachers, parents, students, or community officials and their perception of Social-Emotional Learning. Part 4 examines the linkage between Social-Emotional Learning and the teacher-student relationship. Finally, part 5 explores the literature that discusses the research gap on what methods are used when implementing Social-Emotional Learning to students outside the classroom settings.

Chapter 3 will describe the approach and plan for researching teachers' perception of implementing Social-Emotional Learning remotely during a pandemic. The effect, if any, it has on the teacher-student relationship. Research design elements, participant selections, sampling procedures, reliability, validity, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics will be discussed. In Chapter 4, I will present the results based on an analysis of data. I will then summarize the problem statement, chosen methodology, and the findings in Chapter 5. Conclusions such as implications of findings and recommendations for future research will be reviewed in this concluding chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The overall purpose of this literature review is to identify the gap in research related to virtually implementing Social-Emotional Learning with urban middle school students during COVID-19. This literature review also seeks to add to the existing but minimal data by pursuing a meaning and significance into how, if at all, do urban, middle school teachers implement Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) generally and gain insight into any impact described of the teachers' virtual implementation of SEL and the relationship they have with their students.

Theoretical Framework

The basic needs known to man are physical, emotional needs, and social needs. The categories on Maslow's hierarchy of needs closely relate to what individuals need daily compared to basic needs. The importance of the basic human need is not centered on an individual's physical and safety only. However, according to Maslow (1943), it is also guided by emotional and social needs. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is equated to love, belonging/esteem and recognition (emotional need), and self-actualization (social need) as suggested. While all human beings' needs are important, Maslow (1943) believed self-actualization was the highest need an individual should obtain.

On the other hand, Prera (2020) suggested that although self-actualization is the highest because of its location on the pyramid, not every individual reaches it. Maslow's hierarchy of needs clarifies the need for Social-Emotional Learning, allowing teachers to assist their students in reaching their potential, full development, and appreciation for life, which is self-actualization (Goldstein, 1940; Maslow, 1943, 1954, 1962). What is self-actualization? Self-actualization was originated by Goldstein (1940) and was the term by which man used to describe the desire for

self-fulfillment. Although Goldstein coined the term self-actualization, Maslow (1954) is known for its use and argues that an individual's ability to obtain this level of satisfaction varies. It is determined by the level possessed by the hierarchy of needs. Still, Maslow (1954) reveals that self-actualization is only contained once the individual has experienced earlier gratification in the areas of physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs. Considering the hierarchy of needs (lower verse higher), Maslow's (1948) conclusion is based on human needs aligning themselves in order on the pyramid by established effectiveness.

What determines 'established' effectiveness? Maslow explains it as a higher-order (self-esteem and self-actualization) and a lower-order (physiological, safety, and love). In 1943, Maslow advised that one must progress from the bottom up by first satisfying the needs identified as deficit (lower four) before progressing to growth need (highest level). Maslow (1987) further explained, for clarification purposes, that one does not need a 100% satisfaction in need deficiency before the next need begins. Over 30 years later, McLeod (2020) stated, "When a deficit need has been more or less satisfied, it will go away, and our activities become habitually directed towards meeting the next set of needs that we have yet to satisfy" (p. 2). Thus, in addition to adults, children alike must also have their lower order of needs met before reaching and obtaining social-emotional stability.

The method by which Social-Emotional Learning can help middle-schoolers reach their full potential rests on the strength of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943). Although all the basic needs are related to one another, they are dominant (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow (1943), social-emotional stability can only occur when the person experiences fulfilling psychological and safety needs first. However, for the student, Social-Emotional Learning is only motivating once their safety needs have been fulfilled. Maslow

(1962) embarks upon a belief of children and adolescents be given a defense choice (safety or growth). Maslow insists that only “A child who feels safe dares to grow forward healthy. His safety needs must be gratified. He can't be pushed ahead, because the ungratified safety needs will remain forever underground, always calling for satisfaction” (1962, p. 42); therefore, Maslow concluded that once the child feels safe and nonthreatened, then he can work out and articulate less significant pleasures such as hostility, co-dependency, etc.

Maslow (1962) considered the natural supporters (parents, teachers, and therapists) to help the child move from safety to social-emotional stability; nevertheless, Maslow argues that the child must choose. Maslow alluded that the natural supporters of the child can:

- a. Gratify his basic needs for safety, belongingness, love, and respect so that he can feel unthreatened, autonomous, interested, and spontaneous and thus dare to choose the unknown.
- b. It can help make the growth choice positively attractive and less dangerous and make the regressive choice less attractive and costly (1962, p. 56).

Maslow's self-actualization is the highest level of human functioning. Moody (2006) further suggested that this degree of fulfillment goes beyond the traditional material success many seek to gain. However, if mastered, it can impact the goal of an individual's fulfillment in life. Thus, the theory of human motivation would clarify the process an individual must take starting in childhood to obtain the social-emotional development needed to succeed (Bland et al., 2020). Therefore, Bland et al. (2020) proposed that Maslow's motivation theory should serve as a forerunner to healthy human development. Although Maslow is not considered a developmental psychologist, Bland et al. (2020) suggested that Maslow was affiliated with it because of Maslow's safety versus growth integration with human development and maturity.

When examining the significance of the hierarchy of needs in teaching, one should understand its holistic approach to education and learning. Maslow's (1962) holistic approach has impacted teaching and how teachers manage their classrooms. Maslow used this holistic approach to explore the extensive physical, emotional, social, and intellectual character of an individual and the impact on their ability to learn. Considering children spend much of their day in schools, McLeod (2020) suggested that before their cognitive needs can be met, one must be willing and available to fulfill the physiological needs; therefore, "Students need to feel emotionally and physically safe and accepted within the classroom to progress and reach their full potential" (McLeod, 2020, Educational applications section). Social-Emotional Learning should empower one to aim at the highest level on the hierarchy of needs and integrate the competencies described by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] (2020).

Social-Emotional Learning is a means of increasing one's understanding by making connections with Maslow's (1954) need for belonging and esteem and the basic human social-emotional need (love, respect, belonging, education) as further explained by Goodenow and Grady (1993). The motivation for Social-Emotional Learning in adolescents is found in the need for interpersonal relationships and respect. Maslow (1972) indicated there is a need for students to be shown they are valued and respected within a classroom setting; therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to create a supportive environment for students to move from the need for safety to the next hierarchy of needs: belonging and esteem. McLeon (2020) suggested that children with low self-esteem will not advance academically until their self-esteem is strengthened. McLeod (2020) hinted at respect and reputation preceding authentic self-esteem and dignity for both children and adolescents, which ultimately leads one to ponder the

heightened connection to Social-Emotional Learning as the foundation to climbing Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid.

Related Literature

A study has shown the need for Social-Emotional Learning and the effectiveness of students. I present the correlated literature for this research study in five categories: Social-Emotional Learning, perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning, Social-Emotional Learning linkage to the teacher-student relationship, and approaches to implementing Social-Emotional Learning. In these categories, we will identify the lack or non-existence of literature in response to the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning in middle schoolers who reside in urban areas.

Social-Emotional Learning Studied

Gordon et al. (2011) explained that a person with high Social-Emotional Learning is skilled at "Recognizing and managing emotions, caring for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically" (p. 69). These are fundamental skills needed for students and educators to be effective in schools, working environments, relationships, and individual progress. Two decades ago, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) coined and defined SEL as "The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020, "What is SEL?" section). Social-emotional learning in a classroom setting should promote awareness of how students engage academically. As a result of emphasizing SEL, the overall school climate

and classroom management should provoke future data into the school's success or lack thereof using SEL (Zins & Elias, 2006).

Calkins (2019) implied that having the skills identified in the Social-Emotional Learning educational standard is vital to “building peer relationships, achieving academics, and developing healthy psyche” (p. 1). Knowing and understanding these vital components that have only been researched in classroom settings, what is the possibility of incorporating virtually these same skills? To what extent are students comprehending and practicing what is being taught? While the pandemic has caused a drastic change in how education is delivered, virtual teaching and learning have become increasingly America's new norm. Teaching and implementing the Social-Emotional Learning skill sets presented by CASEL has only been done in a classroom setting and not virtually. There is a need for research on implementing Social-Emotional Learning from a virtual learning aspect. It is unknown if implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually is the same as incorporating it into lessons virtually. The problem with teaching SEL virtually has not been done before the COVID-19 pandemic, which supports the need for research to determine the effectiveness of implementing SEL virtually.

Social-Emotional Learning Socially

There are many life skills that young people should master throughout their life. Blad (2017) specifically identifies the following as key in the emerging adolescents: beliefs and attitudes, planning, coping, and managing different areas in life. The growth of these healthy social and emotional skills will likely enable the adolescents to take advantage of opportunities and reach their full potential in life despite the challenges they encounter. While some may believe these skills should be instilled in the home by the caregiver, Jones and Kahn (2017) stated, “Given the substantial amount of time children spend in schools, the school environment

is an important and powerful influence on children's development all areas. Schools are considered a key environment in which to intentionally and productively cultivate social and emotional development" (p. 16). Along with the social and emotional skills already mentioned is advocacy. Linsky et al. (2018) expressed the urgency in schools equipping students with emotional control, communication skills, persistence, and confidence, to be able to advocate for themselves and others effectively.

Preparing students with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills should allow for social action to take root during the 'new norm' of virtual learning; however, little to no evidence has been presented to its effectiveness as it has with implementing SEL skill sets regularly in a class setting. With early adolescence being a necessary development period, Jones and Kahn (2017) presented the idea of providing middle school students with the ability to have Social-Emotional Learning included in their education. Using SEL lessons that apply to them allows the students to "Integrate the lessons they learn, apply learned skills collaboratively with peers and faculty, and engage in active learning" (Linsky et al., 2018, p. 6). The question then becomes how successful the implementation of SEL will be during virtual learning, if any is implied, during the virtual classroom experience. Unfortunately, given that most schools in different states have transitioned to virtual learning because of the pandemic the world is facing, there is limited to no research conducted on the teachers' experience with applying SEL virtually or the impact, if any, it has on the teacher-student relationship in connection to virtual SEL.

Social-Emotional Learning Concept

Given that this research is theoretically based on Abraham H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs theory outlines human motivation: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Noltemeyer et al. (2012) suggested that

Maslow's theory indicated that children require satisfaction of their deficiency needs being met before being motivated by what would help them grow, including academic achievement.

Noemeyer et al. (2020) identified two types of needs on Maslow's hierarchy, which consisted of the lower three (psychological, safety, and love) being needs that are typically deficit and the top two (esteem and self-actualization) being the needs for growth. With many schools, particularly in urban areas, conducting classes virtually, one should consider how poverty amongst this population can impact how they learn. Jensen et al. (2017) revealed that social-emotional development is contingent upon the severity, length, and duration of the individual exposed to poverty and other contributing factors suggested in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If the child's basic needs are left unmet, this could impact their ability to focus and engage academically.

Gross (2020) explained how learning and teaching are being conducted is America's new norm and the new norm for millions worldwide. Theoretically, there appears to be a connection between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and social-emotional about the shaping of development, as Gross (2020) discussed, especially with school being operated virtually, essentially new for those in primary and secondary schools. Realizing the world of education has shifted amongst the students, it should be considered how adolescents, especially middle schoolers, could be affected by their current development stage.

Adolescents are within the developmental age range where there may be an additional need for Social-Emotional Learning. During the middle-school age, adolescents are learning how to handle and navigate new demands both academically and socially while dealing with what Yeager (2017) considers to be "new, intense emotions both positive and negative" (p. 73). With the intensity of these new emotions, Yeager suggested that adolescents have an ever-increasing feeling that handling these new emotions could be done independently, without adult support.

Although SEL programs are considered to help navigate challenges adolescents may face, Yeager (2017) raises several questions in his study, and one relating to this study is “Do SEL programs work for adolescents?” (p. 74). When researching the effectiveness of SEL, literature has predominately focused on those in elementary school (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Humphries et al., 2018) and struggle to provide important data on the effectiveness of SEL in upper grades.

Read to Lead (n.d.) identified middle school students as experiencing increased social-emotional and academic challenges. In this pivotal stage of life, Modan (2020) sheds light on the trauma, increased anxiety levels, and additional stress from the aftermath dealing with various things from “child abuse and neglect to unemployment and loss of life” that the middle-schooler is or will face while participating in remote learning. While the nation has begun accepting the new normality of life; Modan specified in April 2020 that the school systems would need to brace themselves in the Fall for a loss in academic learning and an expanded gap in equity, this is the opportunity to build the social-emotional skills needed especially with middle-schoolers as they are in a unique, transitional moment of development in their lives.

SEL and Academics

One vital aspect of improving a student’s academic performance and lifelong learning is implementing Social-Emotional Learning [SEL] skill sets in educational standards (Zin et al., 2007). While students learn cognitively, integrating the social and emotional components alongside academics is deemed the most successful when seeking to fulfill a school’s overall mission (Zin et al., 2007). Furthermore, Zin et al. (2007) argues a strong linkage between SEL, and the overall improvement of a school’s attitudes, behavior, and performances. The capability of students learning on their own is far in between; nonetheless, since school is a social place and learning is a social process, Zin et al. (2007) determined that the collaboration of teachers, peers,

and family is warranted. With emotions being an avenue that could either make or break the students learning and their overall success in school; thus, Zin et al. (2007) recommend that all schools attend to this aspect of the educational movement as it would benefit all students. Zin et al. (2007) explained the path of these benefits as a skill paving the way that ultimately points those being taught Social-Emotional Learning in a stable, concrete direction from the end to the beginning leading to better academic performance and success in school and life.

Zin et al. (2007) considered academic success in school and life an important aspect of implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the classroom. Elias (2009) identified the integration of academic and Social-Emotional Learning as one of the vital pieces missing in the school system. Elias (2009) previously advised that our failure to address this missing piece of SEL could potentially lead to continual academic underperformance in education overall. Elias (2009) further clarified this missing piece as “Likely sustaining selective underperformance, as our urban students, our minority students, and our at-risk learners suffer the most” (p. 832). In 2012, Ursache et al. proposed that those raised in a poverty-stricken area are prone to begin their academic lives with a lower Social-Emotional Learning level.

Studies have shown academic success linked to self-regulation, specifically with children in primary school settings (Ursache et al., 2012). Likewise, Liew (2012) suggested how the educational process is aligned with the holistic child's developmental needs, including but not limited to academic achievement and SEL. McCormick et al. (2015) consider the development and implementation of SEL to be based on the need for behavioral regulation, attentional skills, and the ability to problem-solve, which are all denoted to being the early social-emotional competencies needed for children in obtaining academic outcomes. Although there appeared to be a need for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), in 2017, Jones and Kahn allude to an attempt to

integrate Social-Emotional Learning in schools and districts but were blocked by education policies. Although there was a block in this area, the Every Student Succeeds Act made it possible for social-emotional development to become a priority at the state and local levels (Jones & Kahn, 2017). The question then becomes, why not allow for the integration of SEL if the research has proven it to be effective?

With social, emotional, and academic development mattering, both Jones and Kahn (2017) settled on the idea that “Schools and other organizations that work with children must promote development across multiple areas and address the skills and beliefs of educators and other adults in schools; organizational culture, climate, and norms; and routines and structures that guide basic interactions and instruction” (p. 18). Research has suggested that schools play a vital role in children's social, emotional, and academic success (Jones & Kahn, 2017). This vital role shows necessity because school influence is a significant piece of the puzzle that allows for social, emotional, and academic development from a wider community, as suggested by Jones and Kahn (2017). Focusing on social and emotional development has been declared worth it (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Interventions designed to build upon social and emotional success have shown evidence of their effectiveness for all children and youth if delivered appropriately (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Given the evidence from Jones and Kahn (2017) promoting the worthiness of SEL, it should be explained what supports this confidence. Jones and Kahn (2017) supported this claim with two thoughts:

1. Supporting social, emotional, and academic development is a wise use of public resources because there can be long-term social and economic benefits to society when

schools implement and embed evidence-based programs that promote social and emotional as well as cognitive development; and

2. All students, regardless of their background, benefit from positive social and emotional development. Simultaneously, building, nurturing, and integrating social, emotional, and academic development in pre-K–12 can be a part of achieving a more equitable society (p. 21).

With the focus on integrating SEL alongside academic success, Jones and Kahn (2017) concluded that to see success in our young people, educational system, and society, incorporating social-emotional development paired with academic instruction must be the foundation. With the components of Social-Emotional Learning being the groundwork for academic and life success, what insight do others such as teachers, parents, students, and the community have on SEL implementation?

Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning

Durlak et al. in 2011 learned that individuals' grades K-12 demonstrated an increase in academic achievements when participating in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) than their peers who were not provided the opportunity to engage in this type of learning experience. However, while there were academic successes identified, Durlak et al. (2011) also communicated the wariness teachers might have experienced incorporating SEL given the multiple demands they face in the classrooms, especially within the urban school population. Durlak et al. (2011) concluded that this degree of wariness is perhaps the result of either little to no training in the overall understanding of social-emotional competence or the lack of knowledge in effectively implementing social-emotional component skill sets virtually.

Illinois. The Illinois School Board of Education [ISBE] (n.d.) determined that zero-tolerance policies had been devastating for the student, the teacher-student relationship, and the student's educational success. Hence, it was agreed that advocates and educators understood the law and worked to eliminate all illegal practices that would contradict the Illinois School Code (p. 1) and hinder any student's education regardless of race, gender, disability, religion, or national origin. Skiba (2014) suggested the zero-tolerance policy was indeed a failure to both the students and the community. It did not provide the necessary safety net to keep schools or streets safer than the policy's original initiation. Not only did the zero-tolerance policy overwhelmingly fail, but according to data, expulsions, suspensions, and increase law enforcement had shown to be risk factors in a range of negative academics and life outcomes (Skiba, 2014; ISBE, n.d.). According to Skiba (2014), appropriate strategies such as school-wide planning and classroom management, Social-Emotional Learning, parent, community involvement, etc., can help students act up and teach them appropriate behaviors to assist in minor misbehavior into a more severe crisis.

The Illinois School Board of Education [ISBE] (n.d.) identified that loss of school time, precisely, could significantly intensify children's educational and emotional well-being. For that reason, ISBE put into effect five important factors each school administration must consider when suspending or expelling a student in Illinois; those vital factors include the following:

1. The egregious of student's conduct.
2. The history or record of the student's past conduct.
3. The likelihood that such conduct will affect the delivery of educational services to other children.
4. The severity of the proposed punishment.

5. The interest of the child (p. 1).

While these factors were student-centered and individually focused, there appeared to be a missing piece, which Illinois identified as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Zinsser and Dusenbury (2015) recognized that “The state of Illinois, historically a trailblazer in matters related to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in education settings, was the first in the United States to draft free-standing SEL standards for K–12 students” (Introduction section, para. 1). Given Zins and Elias's (2006) argument, it was suggested that the educator-student relationship be examined. This examination would further evidence why teachers' social-emotional competence is highly related to their student's academic achievement. In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift in how education was delivered; therefore, shifting the way SEL was being implemented. This shift of learning was moved from a classroom model of teaching to a virtual model. Cipriano and Brackett (2020) worked alongside the Collaborative for Social-Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL) and conducted a survey to unload how teachers' emotional lives were during the COVID-19 crisis. With how teachers incorporated SEL before the pandemic, one may assume the way teachers perceive things, including their feelings now during the pandemic, are entirely different, but is it?

Teachers. In 2018, Humphries et al. suggested that while Social-Emotional Learning programs are on the rise in schools, little is known about how teachers perceive such programs. Humphries et al. (2018) conducted the study of fifteen teachers (prekindergarten to 3rd grade); fifteen teachers, one was male, and fourteen were women from a large, urban city in the Midwest. In this study, teachers undoubtedly perceived it as the ultimate responsibility to promote social-emotional competencies in their students; however, while their perception of this responsibility was professional, the idea that parents should take a responsible role in integrating

social-emotional development in the home is just as important and needed. Humphries et al. (2018) identified five themes and twenty-two subcategories after his study. The five guiding themes amongst these teachers were “curricula/program design, contextual relevance, responsibility, support, and barriers” (Humphries et al., 2018, p. 166). In addition, in participating in the focus group, the teachers voiced how they perceived Social-Emotional Learning and social-emotional competencies relating to early childhood education (Humphries et al., 2018).

A 2017 survey sample of over 5,000 teachers nationwide was conducted on their thoughts on being an educator. In this study, Cipriano and Brackett (2020) identified the top five emotions: frustrated, overwhelmed, stressed, tired and happy. Before the pandemic, educators were burned out; however, after conducting a similar survey in March 2020, the teachers asked the teachers to describe the three most frequent emotions they experienced each day. Although the teachers identified the following: anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad, anxiety was by far the most frequently mention one, according to Cipriano and Brackett (2020). Understanding teachers' emotions are important as it provides an idea of how not a work-life balance having can eventually affect a teacher's ability to teach. Though there is limited research on the perception of teachers implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) virtually; teachers have linked their stress and burnout to an increase in job demands, especially when addressing the behaviors of challenging students and the limited-to-no training in SEL where educators', as well as students' emotional needs, are supported.

Oberle et al. (2014) stated that empirical evidence was identified in social-emotional development playing a significant role in foreseeing students' academic success; however, future research is needed to investigate what additional variables attribute to the role of social-

emotional influence from a teacher's perception. In 2019, Cipriano et al. conducted a study examining the "student and teacher perception of classroom support as a function of school-, classroom- and individual-level characteristics, as well as associations between student and teacher perceptions of support" (p. 221). Although middle school begins at the sixth-grade level, it was concluded that fifth graders perceived the environment within their classroom to be significantly more emotionally supportive than the sixth-grade classrooms (Cipriano et al., 2019). Approximately thirty years prior, literature hinted at a significant decline in the classroom experience as adolescents shifted from primary school to secondary school settings (Eccles and Midgley 1990; Eccles et al. 1993). During early adolescence, there had been a wave of importance when considering both the teachers' and students' perception of the classroom environment; however, parental involvement in school had not been included. Cipriano et al. (2019) advised that parental involvement would be useful as it contributes to how the student and teacher perceive support in the classroom setting.

Parents. There is a collaborative effort needed between home and school who share in the decision-making process for a child in the school systems. Calvins (2019) concludes that the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning was less important to parents than teachers. In 1980, Burlison et al. concluded the same thought about the need for effective education, identified as a new movement in education where teachers went back to the basics and emphasized cognitive skills. Parents in this study did not deem it necessary for effective education to take away basic skills instruction during classroom time (Burlison et al., 1980). Although this study was focused on elementary students, it was determined that affective education like Social-Emotional Learning was vital to the cognitive and emotional development of the student; additionally, gains were shown in two key areas among the students who

participated in the affective education program: self-perception and academic triumph (Burlison et al., 1980; Purkey, 1970; Stilwell & Barclay, 1977). Although researchers have examined the impact that Social-Emotional Learning has on the education system, there remained very little research on its impact in rural and urban areas (Zolkoski et al., 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic has created a greater concern in students grade K-12 regarding their mental health and its impact on their education. Although teachers believe that approximately twenty percent of their students could benefit from engaging in an SEL program, barriers continue to surface, which create limited resources, especially in rural areas; however, parents in these areas have expressed a desire for more Social-Emotional Learning exposure for their school-aged children (Bain et al., 2011; Myers & Holland, 2000; Haymovitz et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2021). In addition, parents perceived the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning in the classroom to be helpful in the development of prosocial behaviors with their children, especially those who have been impacted by other students who struggle with mental or behaviors health needs in the classroom setting (Eisenberg et al., 2007; van Vulpen et al., 2018). However, regarding implementing SEL virtually in an urban middle school, there is little to no research on parents' perception at the time of this study.

Students. The transitioning from one grade level to the next is challenging, and students who transition from middle school to high school experience a measure of socio-emotional difficulty that results in an identity crisis at times (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Tan et al., 2018). Furthermore, Tan et al. (2018) reported that a vague pattern had become apparent when examining the social-emotional needs among those entering first-year students' year related to academics, behaviors, and their individualized perception of the importance of social skills. Although scholars have hinted at problems surfacing academically

and behaviorally during the transition from middle school to high school, there has not been a good pool of success identified among youth aged 14 to 17 in comparison to the younger population (Yeager, 2017; Tan et al., 2018) with the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning, particularly in the urban population.

Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is a natural part of one's lifespan. However, it continues to be recognized by teachers, parents, community leaders, etc., as a state of uncertainty in adolescents' lives. With educators paying closer attention to students' mental health needs, Strahan and Poteat (2020) explained how scholars seek ways to address the Social-Emotional Learning need and its linkage to students' academic success and personal wellness. Understanding this need, Bendici (2021) explained the increase of isolation adolescents have during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the focus should shift towards mental well-being, and Social-Emotional Learning is more critical than ever before. According to Durlak et al. (2011), students learn best in the company and support others such as their teachers, peers, and encouragement from their family members. In addition, Durlak et al. (2011) stated, "Emotions can facilitate or impede children's academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate school success" (p. 405).

In 2019, Nickerson et al. conducted a study where students self-reported their perception in the following areas: the use of SEL instruction at their school, their SEL skills, bullying at school, and personal victimization encounters. Student reports were both direct and indirect. Students' perception of SEL being implemented in the classroom created less bullying, and students felt less victimized. Although this study was a success, Nickerson et al. (2019) suggested that future research be centered around certain demographic variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (p. 85). In addition, Strahan and Poteat (2020)

conducted an exploratory study focusing on how middle school students perceived their social-emotional connection experience in their school environment. Using procedures recommended by Yin (2018), Strahan and Poteat (2020) reported analyses of individual cases that examined “The types of social-emotional connections students make with their experiences shape the extent of their personal and academic development” (p. 4).

This insight was centered on the complexity of social-emotional development and its power to be a negotiable process with middle school students (The Pennsylvania State University, 2017; Main & O’Neil, 2018; Farrington et al., 2012; Immordino-Yang, 2016; McCrickerd and Philosophy Documentation Center, 2016). Although this study was conducted in a rural, small area, results steered towards social-emotional success. The students developed stronger CASEL competencies, which allowed them to perceive the effectiveness of using the skills taught (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). The result yielded insight into awareness of self and socially, according to Immordino-Yang (2016). Connection made with teachers and peers in middle school has been shown to increase students' emotional safety; however, there remains little information on how students in an urban middle school perceive their Social-Emotional Learning experience.

Social-Emotional Learning Linkage to Teacher-Student Relationships

CASEL (2020) emphasizes the importance of students learning and developing relationship skills, especially using those skills to cope with changes. Modan (2020) suggested the need for a deeper focus on the relationship, even if it is on a basic level. Relationships have shown to be important in individuals' lives despite their age; however, the relationship between a teacher and student can be interrupted by how discipline is taught in the classroom setting.

Poulou, 2017 conducted a study on educators' perceptions of Emotional Intelligence (EI), SEL skills, and the relationships between educators and students concerning the emotional and behavioral difficulties from students' perspectives in Patras, Greece. Within this study, EI's use was used to clarify the relationships between the educator's emotions and how they engage daily with students, especially those who show emotional and behavioral difficulties in a classroom setting (Poulou, 2017, p. 73). Unfortunately, this study suggested little to no prior study in understanding the competency of educators in respect to EI, SEL, and educator-student relationship among those students who presented with emotional or behavioral difficulties; recently, with virtual learning being the "new norm," there is also little to no data on how the teacher-student relationship is affected amongst this same population or others for that matter.

The promotion of students' feelings related to others, including teachers, outside the classroom, lacks research and how the integrations can occur in a virtual classroom. Nevertheless, being a teacher can be stressful. Not succumbing to the emotional stress that comes alongside the teacher is equally important and should be considered when identifying the teacher-student relationship, especially during a challenging time. While much study has not been conducted on teachers' perceptions of implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually, it is an exception to the rule given the nation's crisis with COVID-19. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that supporting the social-emotional well-being of adolescents has been significantly challenging for those who teach in middle schools; in addition to the challenges, it is also indicated that providing such support to this group of adolescents (Second Step, 2020) is imperative. With the challenges and difficulties that surround the virtual integration of Social-Emotional Learning with middle schools, there lies a gap in research of how teachers perceive their implementation of SEL, if at all, with middle schoolers in urban areas and have there been

an impact on the teacher-student relationship since the onset of executing virtual Social-Emotional Learning.

Although there were implications, Poulou (2017) identified his study as one of the first steps to understanding how teachers' emotional factor(s) could contribute to students' overall emotional and behavioral response. This can eventually have a lasting impact on student's academic success and how they view their relationship with their teacher. An important role in the development of adolescents is formed during their middle school years; therefore, understanding this stage would allow educators to put into context how the student learn both about themselves and relationships (Way et al., 2007). Conderman et al. (2013) suggested that middle schoolers who form positive relationships with their teachers create a positive school environment for learning. However, as research continued, not many considered conducting a study on teachers' perception regarding their students' relationship regarding implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to add to the limited research which seeks to describe the lived experience of urban middle school teachers in Illinois as it relates to implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic and describe any impact it has had on the teacher-student relationship. The chapter covers a narrative of content to be used throughout this section; therefore, I will disclose the design chosen for this research body, the research questions to be answered, the setting, participants, and procedures to be used for the sole purpose of data collection. My role as the researcher will be revealed and discussed in detail and the data analysis methods used in this study. The chapter with validation to the participants and readers about this study credibility and moral understanding.

Design

A transcendental phenomenological design will be used in this study. The approach as described by Creswell and Poth (2018) will facilitate the discovery of meaning with a group of teachers attributing to a particular problem. Sloan and Bowe (2014) describe giving experience a voice through phenomenology research methodology; therefore, the key to this approach is going beyond the description of the phenomenon to “exploring and conveying its meaning in context of everyday life” (Bynum & Varpio, 2018 as cited by Crist, 2003). As Creswell and Poth explained, this approach originated through philosophy, human science orientation, and psychology (2018). Given phenomenology’s origination, it is understood that its production of quality data will focus on the lived experience and move away from basic information which develops a string of common themes. Bynum and Varpio (2018) explained the purpose of this qualitative research

methodology is to attend to others experience and reflections to have a deeper awareness within the context of ‘the whole human experience’ (as cited by Van Manen, 1990).

In identifying the problem and getting the answers, the researcher is responsible for focusing on the meaning of the experience and engaging with the data interpretively (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). After all, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested this is one of the only approaches that require multiple participants to reduce individual experiences and an increase of understanding the entire meaning of the event shared with others. This adds to the upholding of the researcher’s ethical responsibility and demonstrates trustworthiness alongside the research participants. Like all research approaches, there are a few known challenges to consider, such as the approach being too structured at times, at various occasions it may be difficult to get people who share the same issues, the linkage of personal experience and the researcher's assumption can cause conflict in the implementation as well as the collected data interpretation (Kozleski, 2017).

Though there will be challenges; preliminary considerations should be taken since there has not been any structure agreed upon in how one should design a qualitative study. Measures should be taken to counteract these challenges such as confirming the research problem is best studied using a phenomenological approach, ensure the phenomenon chosen is of interest which would allow potential participants to be carefully chosen having all like involvement in the phenomenon is question, and finally bracketing as well as transcendental should be incorporated from the beginning as it would allow the researcher to set aside his or her personal experience and take a fresh look toward the problem being studied (Moustakes, 1994; Groenewald, 2003; Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research will allow teachers to share their experiences of implementing Social-Emotional Learning skill sets virtually during a pandemic and the impact it had on the teacher-student relationship.

Research Questions

The present-day study will be guided by six research questions, which are,

RQ1: How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills in a traditional classroom setting?

RQ2: How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills in a non-traditional way such as virtually amid COVID-19?

RQ3: How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19?

RQ4: How do Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after developing a teacher-student relationship virtually amid COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ5: What do teachers perceive in their experience as the greatest impact on the teacher-student relationship teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills virtually in an Illinois, urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) amid COVID-19?

RQ6: What has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually?

Setting

The state identified for this research in Illinois. Illinois has been selected because it is one of the only states that mandate teachers to implement Social-Emotional Learning skills into their daily teaching. As stated previously, Illinois is the first state to develop and implement standards to align with teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills in the classroom (ISBE, 2004; Prewitt, 2017). Although this is a wide range of territory, it provides a pool of teachers which can be utilized to share their experience from different urban cities. Narrowing the setting to one city could be problematic as it would not provide individuals willing and available to participate in the research. The sample population will consist of teachers serving a high percentage of minority students to align with the focus of the problem statement and research study.

Nevertheless, the Illinois State Board of Education has a database that can send information throughout the state on research participants. This wide range of opportunities will allow teachers of all races, gender, backgrounds, etc., who teach in urban areas to participate. Not only would the study give a different perspective from different areas of the state but using Illinois as the primary setting would allow for teachers to learn from one another and seek to make changes if warranted.

For the participants' names and location, including, but not limited to, the school district and school names, I have chosen to select pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Depending on those participating, I will select and assign pseudonyms by colors, as needed. Participants should include both male and female, various ethnic groups, different years of experience, and those who either implemented Social-Emotional Learning skills in the past or currently implementing them now virtually.

Participants

Creswell and Poth (2018) described data collection as identifying people and places to study and establishing a respectable relationship with the participants through rapport building, which is an important step in providing good data. Kalu (2019) hinted at the significance of researchers unequivocally stating the characteristics of the sampled population and not just saying “the population to be sampled” (p. 2527). For this study, I have chosen to use purposeful sampling, which follows the phenomenology design for qualitative research; furthermore, the specific sampling I will use is homogenous. Using homogenous sampling, I will emphasize the description of the lived experience (Kalu, 2019).

The decision that guided using purposeful sampling allows the researcher to intentionally choose a group of people who can best describe the studied problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study will consist of a participation pool of middle school teachers in urban school districts in Illinois because of the mandate to implement SEL using the standards outlined by the Illinois Board of Education. I seek to obtain eight to ten participants for the study. Therefore, participants will be chosen from a pool of individuals who have been identified as teaching Social-Emotional Learning skills to middle schoolers virtually during COVID-19 in an urban area. All participants should hold either a bachelor’s or higher in which this study is open to both male and female responders in education. One year of teaching experience will be required for a teacher’s participation in the study.

After gaining permission from the Illinois State Board of Education, I will invite middle school teachers to participate in this study by emailing all teachers. This email will request those who taught or currently teach Social-Emotional Learning skills virtually and meet the criteria outline to reply, showing their interest in participating in the study. Given that this study is

happening among those in an urban school district, snowball sampling could occur when established cases because people know of others who could benefit from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A pseudonym will protect the participants' identity; however, each pseudonym will remain gender specific. This may be an important component of the experience among teaching Social-Emotional Learning virtually and its impact on the teacher-student relationships.

Ethical Protection

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics will be implemented to ensure the six foundational principles for ethical behavior and decision-making is being adhered to as ethical research is being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; American Counseling Association, 2014). The participation of middle school teachers in an urban school district will be based on the approval from the director of parent and student support services who oversee the implementation of social, emotional learning and the completion and return of consent forms distributed. The study will be conducted using the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). A copy of the IRB approval will be included in the appendices section. Safeguards will be established before the consent forms to participate forms by following the individual school district and Liberty University IRB guidelines. The purpose of obtaining permission from the IRB is to allow the review boards to examine the study design and ensure it follows their distinct guidelines for completing the ethical research intended.

Procedures

Before proceeding with this study, the first step is to seek the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University's approval following a profitable proposal defense. After an IRB approval, I will seek permission from the director in charge of the Social-Emotional Learning program to conduct individual and post-group focus interviews with prospective urban middle

school teachers in Illinois using a purposive sampling method. This approval will seek access to potential participants who would engage in a semi-structured interview and focus group virtually, given that I as the researcher conduct the study on the personal time of the teacher.

Prior to seeking participants for the study, I will also seek permission to join a monthly meeting with principals and secure time to share the purpose of the research study and provide each participating principal with a form of request to participate in the study letter detailing relevant information. It is the hope of this researcher to conduct the informational session with principals from various school districts in the urban parts of Illinois a month before securing any participants.

I seek to recruit individuals with the assistance of the school principals as well as the Social-Emotional program director assigned to each school district. School principals will be asked to assist by sending the participate letters to their middle school teachers. If the school principal agrees to assist at this level, I will then ask he or she to copy me on the email that were sent to the teachers regarding this study. If teachers who received the email is interested, I will allow for the names to be forwarded by the principal (or designee) or those interested will have the choice to email this researcher directly.

When the pool of participants have been secured, I will begin the vetting process as the researcher of the study. This process of vetting will include the participants confirming their use of teaching Social-Emotional Learning virtually to the urban, middle school students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the participants are vetted, the primary researcher will send an introductory letter to each participate securing and finalizing the participants list for the study. Additionally, this researcher will correspond with each participate via email to schedule a day and time to discuss the study further. At the time of the discussion, each participate will be given

an opportunity to read and sign the informed consent as well as schedule the interview which will be conducted after IRB approval. As another layer of commitment, this researcher will add the mutually agreed time into a Microsoft Outlook Calendar and send an invite to each participant individually.

I anticipate using an encrypted online communication tool (i.e., Skype, Zoom, etc.) to conduct a semi-structured interview with those who were chosen during the vetting stage and use the recording option through the communication tool to transcribe the information provided later. A focus group will be scheduled and confirmed via a Microsoft Calendar invite with the date and time the participant agreed to. The anticipated length of time for the focus group will be a minimum of 60 minutes. This session will be recorded for accuracy in the data collection part of the research; permission will be sought to record each participant which will be included in the Informed Consent and held for all who can participate at a minimum of two weeks following the semi-structure interview.

The data collected throughout the entire study will be reviewed as many times as needed to obtain a clear view of the gathered data. Data collection from the interviews, both individual and the focused group, will be transcribed to determine the meaning and significance of each lived experience as establish themes and patterns of the data. Member checking will be included with the results and conclusions of the study being shared with all participants. The explanation after data collection will adhere to the American Counseling Association [ACA] Code of Ethics (2014) which states, “After data are collected, counselors provide participants with full clarification of the nature of the study to remove any misconceptions participants might have regarding the research” (p. 16); in doing so, this will assist the counselor in taking sufficient measures to avoid harm.

The Researcher's Role

Presently, I am a Vice President of Justice and Crisis Response for an organization in an urban area within the Saint Louis area. I am also a licensed mental health therapist. However, I do not practice my present-day job duties as a 44-year-old African American woman who has provided therapy to adolescent boys in Florida for ten years or more before moving to Illinois's Midwest region. My view of the world is shaped by my Christian beliefs and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Although I had gone astray a few times, my worldview in the faith has been established and maintained through the impact my spiritual upbringing has had on my life. I also have faith in the teachers and their ability to change students' lives who come from urban areas, where barriers to academic success are common. I am a product of one teacher's ability to see beyond my actions and see the need for social-emotional development before implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills became a movement of the present and future classroom settings.

Education and Christianity are two important components instilled in me during my years of developing in and through life's ups and downs. At the time, education was drilled in me, so I needed to help others, specifically adolescents, which became the foundation of what I believe my life's purpose was. Most of my career has been spent working with juvenile males adjudicated by the courts and committed to serving nine to twelve months of their lives being rehabilitated through mental health therapy. A great majority of my time in the field has been spent working with African American youth who felt different and lack confidence because of their ethnic background. While working with this population, it was evident that the social-emotional skills were lacking, which frequently was observed as impeding their general education. The life and death of my brother played a significant role in the choice of my career

path. In his death, I realized that educators failed him, and because of their inability to see beyond his negative behavior, he chose the path of dropping out of school. His decision can and should be based on educators' lack of social-emotional competency during that time and the deficiency in him having those skills developed at a crucial stage of development.

As a licensed professional counselor, I quickly found the need for advocacy on behalf of children who could not advocate for themselves, especially when referred to an emotional-behavioral disability classroom setting or alternative school. Growing up in a generation where it took a village to raise a child, there were several opportunities to build skills such as decision-making, conflict resolution, coping skills, job-coach training, etc. These opportunities were provided through programs such as community centers, boys and girls clubs, big brother, big sister, mentorship, D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) are a few to name. However, with community-based afterschool programs being scarce, the ability to provide an alternative solution to an immediate behavior problem, which were evident in my son and niece, gave others a different perspective on what it means to develop a child's social-emotional skill set as opposed to taking the easy way out by distributing referrals for alternative placement.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), my role as a human research instrument is to become unbiased and remove all personal experiences that impede this study's success. This can cause difficulty in the potential implementation and interpretation of data presented and collected if bias is present. To avoid and reduce any form of bias, I would use the following technique: Bracketing. This technique will set aside my personal experience and focus directly on the teachers' perspectives throughout this study. Bracketing should not be used as a one-time action but will be used various times to ensure this researcher's involvement with the phenomenon is minimized.

Data Collection

Setting out clear goals and objectives at the onset of a research study is one of the focal points of a qualitative researcher (Cypress, 2018). When collecting data for a qualitative study, the key question is which approach should one use, structured or unstructured (Creswell & Poth 2018, Cypress 2018, Moustakas 1994). Cypress (2018) described the difference in the two approaches as follows, the structured approach including “ensuring comparable data across individuals, times, setting, and researchers”; however, the unstructured approach focuses on the “particular phenomenon being studied which may differ from others and may require individual attention” (pp. 302-303).

Given the difference in the two approaches and the need to capture the teachers' lived experiences, data from this study will come from semi-structured interviews. Cypress (2018) considers this approach of interviewing to be a conversation with a distinct purpose; therefore, during this phase, it is important to allow each interview to describe his or her experience as it is present or it had been in the past, which in essence seek to “avoid causal explanations, generalizations or abstract interpretations” (Guillen, 2019). I will use the teachers' information who participated in the interviews. In addition, all participants will be invited to participate in a post-focus group based on similar information provided during their interviews. In collecting the data for this study, I will identify the participants and use purposeful sampling, which will involve selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or have experienced this phenomenon firsthand (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Participant Interview

A semi-structured, virtual face-to-face, individual interview will be conducted with teachers participating in this study. The semi-structured interview will consist of open-ended

questions which will produce informative answers derived from the teachers lived experiences as explained by Creswell (2013). The goal of this researcher is to reiterate the purpose of this study and explain the design of the interview which is to collect data that will answer research questions one through five from which this study is defined. The interview questions will allow participants to share their experiences, or lack thereof, during a wide and open dialogue. In developing the research questions, Moustakas (1994) challenges the researcher to go beyond the status quo of questions and design questions that are significant to the phenomenal of the participates and developed clearly as well as concise.

As a qualitative researcher, my passion, interest, and review of literature presented for this research has helped me in constructing the open-ended interview questions for this study. It is with anticipation that the open-ended questions are supported with the research questions presented and grounded in the theoretical literature provided. Prior to the initial interview with the vetted participates, I will seek to pilot these interview questions with others for the sole purpose of refinement (Creswell, 2018). In piloting these questions, it would allow for this researcher to assess and resolve any biasness within the structure of the questions presented.

Open-Ended Individualized Interview Questions

1. Thank you for joining me for this interview today. If you could state your name and the grade level, you teach that would be helpful.
2. These next questions ask for you to share in detail how you perceive your experience in implementing social-emotional learning virtually to middle school students in an urban area here in Illinois.
3. How would you describe your experience in implementing social-emotional learning in a regular classroom setting prior to COVID-19 pandemic? (RQ1)

4. What has been your experience in implementing SEL virtually with students in an urban school area? (RQ2)
5. What has been your experiencing in adhering to the mandate of implementing SEL competencies to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards, virtually? (RQ3)
6. How have you managed to develop a teacher-student relationship virtually? (RQ4)
7. What do you perceive as having the greatest impact on the teacher-student relationship while implementing SEL skills virtually? Why or why not? (RQ5)
8. What has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually? (RQ4, RQ5)
9. What additional information would you like to share with me concerning the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning virtually that has not already been discussed in previous questions? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5)

Questions one and two were designed to establish rapport with the participant as the interviewer and interviewee's dynamics can present as challenging in qualitative research, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2018). Question three is intended to provide the researcher with an understanding of the implementation of SEL prior to COVID-19 where it was conducted in a regular classroom setting. According to Guillen (2019), this in-depth interview seeks to acquire information about the participant and compile the experiences by creating foundational questions to guide future questions.

I strategically designed questions four and five to set the tone and help the participant feel relaxed with the interviewing process. It should provide insight into their present experience with virtually implementing Social-Emotional Learning and its integration with the competencies as

outlined in the Illinois School Board of Education standards. Cypress (2018) suggested researchers should reiterate the nature and aim of the interview by asking questions that are clear and easy to understand. In addition, Cypress (2018) explained what an interviewer should do with the interviewee at the beginning, which is “be clear, listen, provide a calm relaxing atmosphere, and allow the respondent for some time and the chance to ‘organize his or her head’” (p. 305). These nuggets explained by Cypress would be utilized in helping the interviewee relax as he or she tells their lived experience. Additionally, these questions were designed to investigate if the state mandate of Social-Emotional Learning is being implemented, regardless of it being virtual?

Questions six through eight were developed to explore the impact on the teacher-student relationship when Social-Emotional Learning skills were being implemented virtually. These questions also provide further examination into relationship development. Furthermore, these questions sought a richer understanding of the promising and difficult results of using SEL with urban middle school students and the overall experience of implementing SEL virtually compared to an in-class experience. The final question, number 9, invites the participant to offer additional information as the author of their experience. This allows the interviewer to offer an ample opportunity for the interviewee to offer valuable information to the study at large.

Participant Post Focused Group

The post-focused group discussion questions will follow a semi-structured, open-ended question/s formatted as conducted during the individual interview. The questions are designed to allow participants from the individual interviews to engage with one another while describing the phenomenon in further detail and providing additional evidence for a clearer picture of the presenting problem.

The following are the follow-up group discussion questions.

1. Thank you all for joining me for this post-focused group. If you would not mind, stating your name (pseudonym given), the grade you currently teach, and years of experience with implementing Social-Emotional Learning.
2. The next few questions will focus on your profession expertise in reference to implementing SEL during a pandemic. What advice would you give future teachers who may not have experienced teaching and implementing SEL skills during a pandemic? (RQ1, RQ2)
3. Do you believe implementing SEL virtually has been beneficial to students? (RQ3)
 - a. Why or why not?
4. If the need to implement SEL virtually again arise, what challenges do you foresee new teachers having with the implementation of SEL? (RQ4, RQ5)
5. What advice would you give new teachers of SEL about how to overcome these challenges?
6. In closing, is there anything else you would like me and others to know about your virtual experience with SEL? (RQ2 – RQ5)

Question one was developed to allow each participant to introduce themselves before gathering additional information for data. This demographic question is also used as an icebreaker to identify with others who engaged in the individual interviews from different schools.

Question two was designed to hear advice given from different perspective which could be utilized in future trainings and/or education with new teachers in the field of education.

I developed question three to provide the participants with a space to share their thoughts on if implementing SEL virtually was beneficial to their students while among peers in a safe place. Also, to identify the difference in the teacher's perspective from different grade levels. This is also a quest to motivate participants to take every opportunity to implement this successful skill in hopes for an educational gain and healthier teacher-student relationships.

I designed questions four and five to facilitate a discussion on the barriers faced, what was done to overcome the barriers, and advice that would help future teachers as well as research if ever faced with a nation-wide crisis again.

I developed questions five and six to understand further how SEL is being implemented virtually and the overall impact on students adjusting to this new learning method. The purpose here is to discover if virtual SEL was being taught in a manner that continued to foster adolescents' social, emotional developmental skills, build, and maintain relationships, successful classroom management by the teachers, or for some other vital reason.

Question six was designed to provide each participant with an opportunity to reflect on any additional information that would be relevant to this research study and enhance SEL in schools. Overall, I am seeking to discover if there is a connection between social-emotional learning and the way it is taught. Any specifics the participants can describe of their experience would assist in developing an accurate picture of many colors (themes) become one painting (solution) of how implementing SEL rather face-to-face or virtually assist with the functionality of the learning environment and development of healthy teacher-student relationships.

Data Analysis

According to Cypress (2018), “analyzing text from multiple forms of data is challenging to qualitative researchers, especially for novice and doctoral students” (p. 306). To simplify the

data analysis process, Creswell and Poth (2018) identified procedures that should be utilized to guide qualitative research. The procedures that will be utilized for this study are data organization, memoing, and coding, which will be used as the baseline of analyzing data. The key to this study is to establish through the participants' experience with implementing social-emotional learning virtually. These steps should include, but not be limited to bracketing throughout the duration of the study, which would allow for direct focus to be on the participants involved and not focusing on the researcher's personal experience.

Data Organization and Memoing

During the early stages of the analyzing data process, the researcher typically organizes their data in a file, which Cypress (2018) suggests giving a naming system to be easily identified later. Next, it would be imperative that I secure the data to protect the information received from the participants. Creswell (2013) proposed that one should organize their data by writing down the responses using a pen and paper or using technology. Concerning this suggestion, I will use paper and pen to take notes during the interview as it is being recorded via Zoom. I plan to transcribe the recorded interview verbatim to develop the themes and substantial statements captured during the individual and focus group interviews. To verify that each participant is represented correctly, I will use member checking as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), whereas the participant will review the transcripts for accuracy. These transcripts will serve as the foundation for phenomenological data analysis and the communication tool used to record individual and group focus interviews.

In addition to the organization of the data, I plan to use the process of memoing. Creswell and Poth (2018) described memoing as key phrases, ideas, or concepts that stand out to the reader. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that using a memo helps synthesize the data into

an advanced analytical meaning instead of a simple descriptive summary. Cypress (2018) suggested writing these memos in the margins of the transcripts, which can be explored later to track all “major organizing ideas and for further synthesis that would lead into higher-level analytic meanings” (p. 306).

Reduction and Coding

At the heart of qualitative data analysis is coding (Creswell and Poth, 2018); therefore, after organizing, reading, and memoing, “the next steps are to describe, classify, and interpret the data” (Cypress, 2018). Cohen et al. (2000) identified the main concepts in phenomenological research as: “the development of the understanding of meaning; the study of some human concern; ‘lived experience’; ‘lifeworld’; and ‘reduction’ as cited in Heinonen (2015, p. 35). There are two main aspects within the phenomenological methodology: epoche and reduction. Heinonen (2015) explains epoche as the ability to free oneself from assumptions and reduction as returning to the origination of individuals’ experience. This would involve me bracketing myself from the experience so my judgments will not interfere with how SEL is being implemented; therefore, allowing me to see the phenomenon for what it is (Moustakes, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Konecki, 2019).

Horizontalization will be used to create significant statements said by the participants; therefore, this process will be completed using the data collected by the researcher to identify major statements about how the participants experienced the problem. Ideally, this process will allow for the researcher to give value to each relevant topic. Next, a cluster of meaning would be implemented to arrange the major statements from the data collected; therefore, this process will allow the researcher to avoid repetitive, overlapping statements. Finally, both structural and textual description will be used to allow the researcher to do the following:

- focus on how the teacher experienced the event.
- have a clear understanding of the “how” of the teachers’ experience.
- focus on explaining the direct words of the teacher.
- transcribe verbatim.
- advise the reader what the teachers experienced using the situation and how they experienced it (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 200 as cited by Moustakas [1994]).

In creating themes and textual/structural descriptions with the use of horizontalization, I expect the core of these collective experience to emerge from the participants.

In generating the distinct themes, Creswell and Poth (2018) expound on the theory behind Moustakas use of horizontalization by suggesting the need to build on the data using both research questions, going through the data, and pulling out the significant statements, quotes, and specific content provided by the participant relevant to the phenomenon experienced. Although the themes will be ground in the collected data provided by urban middle school teachers who taught Social-Emotional Learning virtually, the themes' existence will be based on the analyst's perspective. Individuals’ perspectives could shift and change; therefore, the themes can shift and change. As the transcripts are evaluated, I will seek to discover and identify commonality among the participants' statements, expressions, and thoughts, which would allow for the development of a cluster of meanings as explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), which will eventually come from the noteworthiness of themes discovered while analyzing the data presented through the interviewing process.

Trustworthiness

In ensuring the quality of a research study, one must provide a degree of confidence in the facts, understanding, and procedures being used (Connelly, 2016). When establishing

trustworthiness, I plan to use the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1994), including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (as cited by Connelly, 2016). The American Psychological Association [APA] (2020) explains the need for researchers to show methodological integrity by proving that the information suggested from the data analysis is warranted in the study. Additionally, the American Counseling Association [ACA] supports the need to safeguard the integrity of the counselor-client (participate) relationship as well as practice in a “competent and ethical manner” (p. 3). To achieve a level of trustworthiness, it would be necessary to identify and articulate a qualitative study accuracy from the lens of the researcher, participant, and reader’s or reviewers as expressed by Creswell and Poth (2018); therefore, the use of triangulation should be incorporated. The utilization of triangulation would allow for an extra layer of trustworthiness as sources of information would come from various sources, findings, or investigations described by the APA (2020). This would allow for validation strategies to be incorporated, clarifying any bias or engagement in the researcher's reflexivity. Furthermore, it is the responsibility as counselors to “minimize bias and respect diversity in designing and implementing research” (ACA, 2018, p. 15). The participant would, therefore, allow me to play an important role as I would provide credibility through member checking, allowing for participant collaboration in the study.

Credibility

Credibility in this study should reflect the truth of the data, participate views, interpret, and represent the information gathered from the study by the researcher (Cope, 2014). The ability to access participants to show interest in a study can present challenges independently; therefore, building trust and credibility are of the utmost importance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In building trust, I plan to use member checks to provide the participants with an opportunity to

give their perspectives on the findings and interpretations (Connelly, 2016). In addition, I will seek to establish credibility by using grounding, which the APA (2020) described as findings grounded in evidence such as quotes, excerpts, or descriptors from the researcher's data collection. Finally, I seek to establish credibility by using continued engagement, member-checking, and bracketing; hence requiring me to return to the information received and examine it several times (Connelly, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This validation from the participants' perspective will provide them with a voice in the study and allow for further credibility because of direct quotes to convey a personal perspective on implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually.

Dependability and Confirmability

According to Polit and Beck (2014), "dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and over the conditions of the study (as cited by Connelly, 2016, p.435). In addition to providing stability of the data, confirmability will also be used to ensure the study findings are consistent and could be repeated if needed (Connelly). To safeguard and ensure accuracy in the dependability and confirmability of the findings, I will invite those who participated in the individual and group focus interviews to check the transcripts transcribed by this researcher, which would be member-checking (Cope, 2014; Lietz et al., 2006). Participants would receive their transcript through an encrypted email along with their pseudo name. Member checking in this study would consist of both the researcher/participant having the analysis to discuss "which aspects of the data analysis best fit their perspectives" (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 453).

In addition to member checking, I will seek to use a consultant whom the state of Illinois has assigned to perform an external audit. This would allow for a peer debriefing of a colleague outside the study to assess the methodological integrity of the study; however, this individual

would need to have experience with SEL, those in urban schools, or the methods being used in the study (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014; Lietz et al., 2006). Having the peer debriefing would also allow for recognition of how the analysis could be hindered or improved based on who we are (Lietze et al., 2006). I, as the researcher, will also use audit process logs. Connelly (2016) described these process logs as the researcher's notes of all activities that occurred during the study; however, it would be additional notetaking in the interviews and focus groups, which would allow me to maintain the audit trail of analysis I would have gathered.

Transferability

Transferability can be summarized as the researcher 's findings of the study can be useful to individuals in an alternative setting because of the applicable findings to their situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Connelly, 2016). To ensure the transferability of the study is adequate, grounded, and consistent, I will provide rich, in-depth, thick descriptors of meaningful details to the reader. The descriptors provided should allow for a collection of information to be described that is compatible with the study design when writing about the participant, theme, and setting being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the descriptors will highlight any pertinent information gained from the participants in this study. Finally, to remove any personal bias I may possess, I will continue bracketing out any "preconceived biases and judgments, setting aside voices, sounds, and silences that so readily tell us what something is" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 60), which would allow me to focus on the experience of the participants only.

Ethical Considerations

Preceding any research participation, I will seek permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. This pre-approval will ensure that this study is not misleading and that each participant will be informed of this study's overall purpose. To maintain

privacy and confidentiality, I will assign pseudonyms to those participating. All information containing research material will be kept in a double-locked, safe, and secure location. A password-protected file will be used in any digital or electronic data is needing to be safely stored. The research will seek to share results with participants and other stakeholders as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) for “advancing the ability of inquiry to lead to action on the part of participants and training those participants to take action” (p. 259). To keep with the concept of ethical consideration, I will inform each participant of their freedom to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. I will allow the participants to participate in some of the studies and opt-out to answer any questions during the interview process.

Summary

The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach used to investigate middle school teachers' perception of implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually during a pandemic. This study aims to understand how, if at all, do urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers implement Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) virtually and describe any impact of the teachers' virtual SEL and teacher-student relationships in a school district in Illinois. In further studying the phenomenon, I will identify and describe the participants. In addition to this study, I will also seek to explain the procedures used to collect and analyze studied data. The steps to establish trustworthiness were integrated into this study by ensuring the researcher allowed for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to be demonstrated through the lens of methodological integrity. In concluding chapter three, I provided a synopsis of ethical concerns and how I will seek to address them once approved by the IRB to move forward in my research endeavors.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented, alongside an introduction to the study's interviewees. The first section summarizes the description of the study's participants, with relevant demographic data to outline the interview. The following sections describe the participants' experience implementing social-emotional learning skills during COVID-19. The themes from the interview and excerpts from the narratives presented by the middle school teachers are also included.

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experiences of urban middle school teachers in Illinois who implemented social-emotional learning education amid COVID-19. Chapter Four describes the 10 participants, responses to individual and group-focused interview questions, and a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analyzed. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional learning skills in a traditional classroom setting?
2. How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching social-emotional learning skills in a non-traditional way, such as virtually, amid COVID-19?
3. How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional learning skill sets to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19?

4. How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after developing a teacher-student relationship virtually amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. What do teachers perceive in their experience as the most significant impact on the teacher-student relationship teaching social-emotional learning skills virtually in an Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) amid COVID-19?
6. What has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing social-emotional learning virtually?

Participants

This section describes the participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' actual names to protect the participants' anonymity and identity. The ten participants for this study were certified urban middle school teachers who had been teaching in an Illinois urban school district for a minimum of one year and who taught social-emotional learning skills virtually amid COVID-19. Regarding the time of teaching for participants, four teachers had taught between one year and two years; five teachers had been teaching between three and four years; and one teacher had been teaching for six years. The gender make-up of the participants included eight males (80%) and two females (20%). The racial makeup of the participants included eight individuals who identified as Black Americans (80%) who were born in the United States and two individuals who identified as being African American (20%), who are natives of Africa.

The grade level taught by the participants consisted of four sixth-grade teachers (40%), three seventh-grade teachers (30%), and three eighth-grade teachers (30%). At the time of the interview, all participants had a Bachelor of Arts degree, with six having a Bachelor of Arts in

Education (60%), two had a standard Bachelor of Arts with no concentration (20%), one had a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics (10%), and one had a Bachelor of Arts in Educational Psychology (10%). Amongst the participants, the range of teaching experience within an Illinois urban school district ranged from one and a half years to six years. The demographic data for the participants is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Interview Profiles

Name	Gender	Degree	District/School	Years Teaching	Grade Taught	Were SEL Skills Taught Virtually?
Brandon	Male	Bachelor	Not Collected	6	6 th	Yes
Leonard	Male	Bachelor	Not Collected	3	8 th	Yes
Stephanie	Female	Bachelor	Chicago School District	2.3	6 th	Yes
Johnathan	Male	Bachelor	Urbana School District 116	2	7 th	Yes
Brian	Male	Bachelor	Edison Regional Gifted Center	1.5	8 th	Yes
Willie	Male	Bachelor	Sunset School District 39	2.5	8 th	Yes
David	Male	Bachelor	Kennedy Jr. High School	4	7 th	Yes
James	Male	Bachelor	Influence Academy Charter School, Urbana School District	3	6 th	Yes
Andrew	Male	Bachelor	Wood Jr. High School	4	7 th	Yes
Kayla	Female	Bachelor	Wirth Middle School, Cahokia School District	3	6 th	Yes

After the interview, I performed transcription of the interviews, coding the items instead of using a transcription service to provide more accuracy and validity to the study. Once the transcriptions were completed, each participant received an email copy of their transcriptions for member checking, and all participants followed up on the confirmation email and scheduled a virtual follow-up meeting to discuss the results of their individual interview for clarity and to

identify discrepancies. There were ten completed interviews; the average length of an individual interview was 14:01 minutes, with the transcribed interviews having an average of 9.9 pages.

Brandon

Brandon was a Black African American male who taught grade six. Brandon had one year of experience teaching social-emotional learning skills, done virtually. Brandon expressed a passion for helping students grow and develop. He stated, “I’m always looking for ways to improve my teachings” for the betterment of the students.

Leonard

Leonard was a Black American male who taught grade eight. He had been teaching for three years; however, he had only been teaching for one year when COVID-19 occurred. Leonard was delighted to share his experience implementing SEL skills virtually with his students. Leonard considers himself a great teacher; however, trying to uphold Illinois SEL competency standards was complicated since this was his first year teaching it.

Stephanie

Stephanie was an African American teacher who taught sixth graders in a Chicago school district. She had been teaching for two years and three months; however, she had only been teaching SEL skills for three months before going to virtual learning. While Stephanie was a newer teacher, she started her implementation of SEL skills in the classroom, then quickly transitioned to a virtual platform amid COVID-19. Stephanie enjoyed teaching and implementing the SEL skill sets into her learning curriculum as outlined in Illinois educational standards; however, she expressed significant challenges in completing this task in a virtual setting.

Johnathan

Johnathan was a 34-year-old black male teacher who taught seventh graders in Urbana School District 116. He had been teaching for two years and implementing SEL skills for one year. Johnathan taught social-emotional learning skills virtually during the onset of the pandemic; however, he experienced “a whole lot of stress” because “you know, we're talking about virtual learning, I think, way back. We used to see virtual learning for advanced people, for people that are, you know, really advanced to try to apply to the, you know?” Johnathan expressed this as something new, ultimately changing people's mindset.

Brian

Brian was a 37-year-old Black male teacher who taught eight graders at Edison Regional Gifted Center. He had been teaching for over a year when the pandemic took place. Brian explained that SEL skills were not mandated in his school because the state did not operate it. However, he successfully proposed the adoption of this skill set to those in authority and began implementing the it on a trial basis—a few months prior to the start of the pandemic. Brian suggested the implementation of those new skills virtually was not “rosy.”

Willie

Willie was a 36-year-old black American who taught eighth graders in Sunset School District 39. He had been teaching for two and a half years, of which six months were used in implementing SEL skills into his academic curriculum. Willie was eager to share his experience, describing it as very difficult during the pandemic. He emphasized the importance of parental involvement, noting that a teacher's efforts can only go so far.

David

David, an African American male in his early thirties, taught seventh grade at Kennedy Jr. High School. With four years of teaching experience, David had been teaching SEL skills to his students for several years. He readily discussed the differences between in-person and virtual teaching skills. Although David struggled with implementing the mandated SEL skills virtually, he remained dedicated to building relationships with his students and providing the best version of himself as a teacher.

James

James, who had been teaching for three years, was a 35-year-old Black American who taught sixth graders at Influence Academy Charter School in the Urbana School District. James expressed excelling at in-person delivery of SEL skills for a year and a half; however, he virtual instruction significantly more difficult. He suggested making things work for the students and teachers with all the changes, “a teacher must not be harsh. It must not be somebody that is, so you know, rigid but must be flexible to be able to carry the student and the people together.” James demonstrated compassion and concern during his interview. He was transparent in how impactful the continuation of implementing SEL skills was during this time, but he was also forthcoming in how he and other teachers faced challenges.

Andrew

Andrew was a 38-year-old Black American who taught seventh graders at Wood Jr. High School in the Northbrook School District. He had been teaching for four years, spending all but one year teaching and implementing SEL skills in his lessons. Andrew was enthusiastic during his interview. He expressed compassion in delivering SEL skills in person but explained his frustration in providing the skills on a virtual platform.

Kayla

Kayla was a Black sixth-grade teacher at Wirth Middle School in Cahokia School District 187. She had been teaching for three years, but only taught SEL skills the year prior to the pandemic. Although Kyla had been teaching for a few years, she expressed being unprepared for this new teaching norm through a virtual platform. Kayla, in essence, became a researcher in her quest to find as much material as possible on SEL skills to remain in compliance with the mandate from the state while implementing SEL skills virtually.

Results

The findings from the data collected from this transcendental phenomenological study are presented in the following sections. Data collected were organized and established through the research questions designed to understand urban middle school teachers' experiences with implementing social and emotional learning skills virtually amid a pandemic and its influence on the teacher-student relationship. The information included within the section, Significant Statements and Themes, is derived from a method described by Moustakas (1994) as horizontalization, which is the findings of common themes among participants and their experiences within the phenomenon. The information incorporated within the section provided a collection of data that connected the research question responses from the participant interviews and focus group directly answered in the quest by the research questions. The data presented originated from the personal testimonies of participants to describe their lived encounters with the phenomenon.

Interviews

The interview questions for this study were generated out of a desire to fill a gap in recent literature pertaining to teachers' perception of implementing SEL skills virtually amid COVID-

19. The questions were based on the lack of information on virtually implementing SEL skills in urban schools amid COVID-19 and its connection to current literature. Individual and focus group interviews were performed with ten urban middle school teachers during a time that suited each participant's schedule using the virtual platform, Microsoft Teams. All interviewees were recorded using this same platform. The recordings and transcripts were immediately saved to Microsoft Teams and downloaded to my computer, which was password-protected.

Significant Statements and Themes

Upon completion of the interviews, each recording and transcript was reviewed for accuracy and then studied with the participant for member checking. As a result of the data collection, three themes were identified from the statements and key words, which revealed common themes in no distinct order; five sub-themes also emerged. The three main themes are (a) Personal Experience of Implementing SEL, (b) Professional Experience of Safeguarding Illinois Mandate SEL Implementation Virtually, and (c) Experience in Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually. The significant statements and themes were developed after a thorough review of focus group and individual interviews. In repeatedly reading the transcripts, I color-coded each statement according to its relevance to and description of the problem being studied. Each statement pertinent to the phenomenon was extracted and detailed in a separate Word document for further review and analysis.

The coding of each statement required me to bracket out my own involvement in the study, but not wholly. Still, it allowed me to identify and put aside any personal experience, focusing solely on the participant's experience within the study. This type of bracketing required careful application of phenomenological reduction, which included but was not limited to bracketing out inner prejudice, personal beliefs, and reactions. To expand my understanding of

the phenomenon experienced by the participants, I was intentionally reflective regarding my role as the researcher, aiming to minimize how the collected data shaped what I saw, heard, and wrote, as articulated by the participants in the study.

Moustakas's (1994) practical steps were used for the analysis of this study. These steps included (a) interviewing eight to ten participants who experienced this phenomenon, (b) identifying and documenting significant statements, (c) grouping relevant statements into categories of meaning, and (d) synthesizing the meaningful statements into themes. The emerging themes from the individual interviews are as follows: (a) personal experience of implementing SEL, (b) professional experience of safeguarding Illinois-mandated SEL implementation virtually, and (c) experience in developing a teacher-student relationship virtually. These themes provided a framework for understanding the personal and professional experiences of urban middle school teachers in Illinois as they implemented SEL virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and their experience developing teacher-student relationships during this period. The themes and associated sub-themes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Sub-themes of Virtual SEL Implementation Experience

Theme	Sub-theme
Personal Experience of Implementing SEL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classroom Implementation - Virtual Implementation - Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation
Professional Experience of Safeguarding Illinois Mandate SEL Implementation Virtually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning Process - Resources
Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually	

Table 4 verifies the repeated words and phrases learned during individual interviews and focus groups that helped structure the themes.

Table 4

Significant Words and Phrases

Theme	Cluster of Meaning	Repeated Words or Phrases
<i>Theme I:</i> Personal Initial Experience of Implementing SEL	Classroom Implementation	Easier because students were focused Easy with little challenges Different; could see their faces, read their emotions and responses Easy; I was able to observe the students' different emotions. I only taught it virtually during the pandemic. Easy classroom implementation
	Virtual Implementation	Kids are easily distracted. Students not on the same academic level Virtual learning is for advanced people. Unable to see students Audio only with no facial expressions First year teaching SEL
	Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation	Attendance Background distractions Poor school implementation Lack of parental support Lack of resources First introduced during the pandemic Poor student time management Switching from face-to-face to virtual learning; decline in concentration and attention. Inability to cope (poorer background population); students thinking they're not smart enough and giving up. Lack of implementation education for both the student and teacher
<i>Theme II:</i> Professional Experience of Safeguarding Illinois Mandate SEL Implementation Virtually	Learning Process	Independent SEL skill sets research. Lack of training for virtual implementation

	Time-consuming; struggle with balancing courses and skill implementation
Resources	Lack of initial resources Lack of devices for students Lack of platforms for online SEL implementation Virtual platform and network issues
<i>Theme III:</i> Experience in Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually	Not easy Flexibility Rapport building Communication Alternatives Encouraged parental involvement. Managing personal skills Activities Trust; safe space; building on similarities Tools Increase effective communication. Parental involvement Character building Bonding

Personal Initial Experience of Implementing SEL

The first significant theme that emerged from data collected pertains to how participants perceived their experiences when implementing social-emotional learning skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme of implementation was mentioned twelve different times throughout the interviews. Participants described their individual experiences (easy, difficult, challenging, distracting, stressful), which impacted their ability to successfully implement SEL skills. Four participants stated the implementation was easy initially, another four said it was difficult/challenging/stressful, and two shared that it was their first-year teaching SEL skills.

One person with prior in-person experience in implementing SEL skills and suggested it was relatively easy initially; however, transitioning to virtual made implementation more

complicated. David shared that his in-person experience implementing SEL skills during the pandemic was “easy with little to no challenges; communication was quite smooth.” Brian suggested the skills were “easier to explain and students were more focused.” Meanwhile, Willie characterized his experience as “easier because students were in person, and you can put your eyes on them to evaluate what state they're in.” James emphasized that his experience was easy because he “was able to observe the student's different emotions and provided help when needed.” While some perceived their pre-pandemic experience as easy, others, such as Stephanie, described her experience as being stressful.

Stephanie shared, “I will say it was a bit stressful. This is because capturing the students' attention and using the strategies has not been easy. Some students found it challenging to understand what you're teaching them, even in the classroom setting, making virtual implementation much more difficult.”

Andrew suggested it being “quite different.” When asked to explain, Andrew expounded by sharing,

The quick transition from in-person to virtual was difficult because initially, I can see the faces of these students. I can read their emotions and responses, which lets me know if they are getting what I am trying to convey, but suddenly I couldn't with the swift changes.

Johnathan and Brandon shared mixed feelings of weirdness, strangeness, discomfort, and difference when sharing their experience in the pre-virtual implementation of SEL skills.

Although each participant met the criteria and implemented SEL skills virtually, two teachers lacked the opportunity to implement these skills in a regular classroom initially, which limited their depth of understanding of the difference between face-to-face and virtual SEL

implementation. Leonard stated, "When implementing these skills in person, I only began implementing these skills during the pandemic," and described the virtual introduction of SEL skills as "brutal." Kayla was the other teacher who had begun teaching SEL skills right before the start of the pandemic. She conveyed feeling unprepared as she stated, "Uh. During the pandemic, of course. That was when I was first charged with implementing, umm, SEL as part of the curriculum for virtual learning." Kayla highlighted her unpreparedness, adding, "There were no materials, but finally, we were given access through our district. So, what I was able to do and implement, I think, came across successfully, although I felt I needed more training and support in that area." A breakdown of the participants' initial experience is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Personal Initial Experience of Implementing SEL Skills

Theme	Times Mentioned
Easy	4
Difficult	6
Challenging	6
Distracting	5
Stressful	4

Of the individual experiences, three sub-themes were identified to explore deeper the theme of Personal Experience of Implementing SEL. These sub-themes included classroom implementation, virtual implementation, and the challenges of virtual SEL implementation. Detailed below, the sub-themes provide a more thorough understanding of how participants personally experienced the phenomenon.

Classroom Implementation. All participants, except for Leonard who first experienced it virtually, had similar experiences implementing SEL face-to-face in a regular classroom. During the individual interviews, six participants described classroom implementation as “easy,

easier to explain, students more focused, and communication was quite smooth.” Stephanie found that her experience stressful due to inattentive students. Andrew was one participant who expressed that “face-to-face implementation was easy” but different because he could “see their facial expressions” when teaching a new SEL skill. He emphasized the importance of paying attention to the student’s body language by stating,

In your classroom, it's different from when I do it virtually. The difference here is if I'm teaching students in the school, I can see the faces of these students, and I can read their emotions and their responses. I know I can detect the general response, and I see the message I'm passing is getting to this student, and I know how they are receiving it. Still, the difference here is when I do it virtually, sometimes the virtual meeting is just audio, just audio recorded, and I don't get to see their facial expression. I can't be 100% certain that the student is receiving the message very well. So, there's that difference, you know.

On the contrary, Stephanie voiced her experience implementing SEL skills face-to-face as being “stressful, not easy, and students not being attentive.” According to Stephanie,

OK. I will say it's a bit stressful. It's because it's not easy to capture the student’s attention and implement the strategies for SEL because of poor concentration. So, it's the SEL, a process by which the children can learn, understand, and manage emotions and then set and achieve positive goals. As well as feeling and showing empathy for others to some extent. It's just not easy. Some students find it challenging to understand what you're teaching them. It was not easy either way (August 2022).

One participant, Kyla, had known of SEL skills and the mandate to teach them in schools within Illinois; however, she explained,

So, umm, with it. Uh. During the pandemic, of course. That is when I was first charged with implementing SEL as part of Illinois's educational standards (Coughing) for our virtual learning. And so, with it, if I had to rate myself on a scale of one to five, I would put myself in a category three, just a neutral, be it that, for the most part, a lot of what I had to do or teach virtually honestly had to come to the, I guess, my understanding.

Brian's experience was different:

OK, so before the pandemic, it was, let's say, a little bit better. I had to prove it was worth learning or teaching students about. So basically, I taught students, maybe in my leisure time. I just wanted to give them a little briefing on how it is to learn SEL skills. But basically, after doing so. I saw that the response from the students was great, so I had to ask the school if they could add something like this to the educational standards since the school is a private entity and does not follow Illinois general academic standards, which was good. I got a good response and was able to incorporate it into the virtual platform.

Virtual Implementation. Seven of the ten participants faced difficulties in navigating the students' academic levels in virtual settings. The difference in educational levels included participants stating that "virtual learning is for advanced people" and "students were not on the same level academically." The difference in students' academic levels made it challenging for teachers to implement and teach SEL skills. Some described their experience as "stressful, challenging, tough work, and a tough journey. Johnathan was vocal about his virtual experience, stating, "I was stressed out a lot of times because the students were easily distracted, especially those with individual education plans (IEPs)." In speaking about his virtual implementation experience as it relates to SEL skills, Johnathan stated,

Do you know something? This has never happened before. You know, COVID changed the entire system. No, I think it changed people's whole mindset. Because, you know, when talking about virtual learning, I think way back. We used to see virtual learning as for advanced people, for people that are, you know, really advanced, to try and do it because it is a lot of stress. For us to be able to cope initially, it was stressful because sometimes those children would come on virtually and just be distracted. Still, you would have to put them in line, redirect them to the call and not their surroundings, and get them to understand why they need to focus on what's being taught and why they are here. So, yes, it was stressful and challenging.

David stated virtually, "I was unprepared, and so were the students. This was new for everyone, so this advanced learning level made implementing SEL skills a struggle for a long time."

In comparing implementing SEL skills in a school versus virtually, Stephanie explained, "Remote learning was a bit challenging. It was the most challenging of my career as many of those students could not cope with the pandemic, which caused the implementation flow not to go well. I noticed several students were further behind than some classmates, increasing challenges." Although Leonard's first year teaching SEL skills was virtual, he echoed these same sentiments:

The starting point of the pandemic was somewhat tricky because not every student could control their social learning and cope with their emotions while completing their studies. You know how stressful the pandemic period was for everyone trying to cope with their families and trying to get vaccinated and having one issue or the other. And for me as a person and teacher, I responded that it was tough because I couldn't cope well with the pandemic and the new way of teaching these new skills to students.

Other participants also made similar statements when describing virtual implementation, discussing struggles with implementing the skills outlined, difficulty with using only audio with no facial expressions, not knowing if students are receiving the information presented, and network challenges. This was exemplified through David's statement:

You can tell when you're not getting the message across. When one of many students isn't getting it, you know when you know that you're not communicating or connecting with them effectively. I mean, it's a bit difficult because even if nobody's getting what you're saying, they all can, you know, nod in agreement with it. And you know you can't tell specifically, compared to when you are in a four-wall classroom with them.

Brian unapologetically said, "Virtual implementation of SEL skills was not at all rosy, but extremely difficult." He further explained,

OK, now basically, when students are in the classroom, you can get their attention, maybe by calling on the student or telling them to stand up or just incorporating activities to draw their attention towards you. But virtually, there were a lot of distractions, and most of the students were not, let's say, initially when we started, paying much attention to the lessons being taught on SEL. So, I had to sometimes divert a little from what I was teaching to make maybe the class a little bit more fun so I could get their attention. But it was more stressful than I expected.

Some participants highlighted the challenges of virtual implementation of SEL skills for reasons other than those previously mentioned. Willie explained,

During the pandemic, it was so difficult. It was so complex that the people you handled were in great need. So, they are having difficulty in being available for virtual learning.

Umm, platform and so many issues, network issues, and they cannot attain what was being taught. And it was demanding that you couldn't see or talk to them as before.

James stated his level of discomfort as he watched his students face emotional trauma and not being able to approach them in a more personal way. He shared,

Sometimes when I see students, you know, sitting down, maybe lonely, so lonely and so gloomy, you know, and I need to approach the students. You know, give them some counseling after finding out the issue is because of money, which causes a lot of my students to face some emotional trauma.

Many participants stated that implementing SEL skills virtually was difficult and stressful for them and their students for various other reasons such as academic level differences, emotional instability, economic difficulties, and, most importantly, the inability to connect with them due to technology.

Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation. The primary reasons teachers experienced difficulties implementing SEL skills virtually were students' ability to stay focused, lack of resources, and attendance. Several teachers were confident in teaching and implementing SEL skills face-to-face; however, due to things outside their control, five teachers expounded on distractions, four on lack of resources, and three teachers experienced problems with student attendance. Johnathan stated,

The most challenging thing was they were distracted. You know it, it was always tough for me because sometimes they were constantly distracted, and trying to incorporate the five core SEL competencies was not attainable according to what the state of Illinois required. This was especially true when everybody's video cameras were on, and they saw their friends; they only wanted to play and not take things seriously. So, sometimes,

they were easily distracted. However, this surprised them; most have not evaluated or used this virtual learning tool before.

David suggested that “the level of concentration and keeping the attention of the students was a great challenge in the virtual world,” so he had to devise a plan that worked for him and his students. David stated,

So, switching to virtual was a considerable challenge. The students felt like they had enough room to do whatever they wanted since the teacher was not right before them, creating some fear. They felt like they had all the freedom, but I had to understand this was new and try to understand how to manage the situation best because I knew that that was a big challenge. The student's level of concentration and attention declined the most. So, I just needed a solution, and that brought about my design. I planned to split the class into smaller groups where I could handle and give more attention to each of them. Therefore, the biggest challenge, in short, was capturing their attention and knowing they are 100% focused on the SEL skills you are trying to incorporate into the class.

While students’ ability to focus was a significant challenge, four teachers also found not having adequate resources to teach the mandated SEL skills challenging as well. Brandon stated,

For my part, I would say economically it was a challenge for students to communicate using laptops, internet, etc. because of poverty. Some schools had the resources immediately available to the students. Still, some didn’t, which impeded the student’s ability to access the class; therefore, implementing SEL skills is impossible for all students within our district.

Willie also reflected on limited resources being a significant challenge:

I had students who did not know how to operate a laptop and navigate different applications for the learning process. And you must ask yourself, “Why is this?” However, they perform more effectively when you meet them face-to-face in the classroom. So, my most significant challenge was the students' and parents' lack of competency with working on a laptop in the early stages of virtual learning.

Three teachers faced the challenge of students' attendance while teaching SEL skills virtually. Kyla explained, “Attendance and students being vulnerable enough to participate is challenging, especially at this stage of development.” She further stated,

I'll be honest: the most significant issue was attendance. Seeing that there wasn't a grade for social-emotional learning, and even the vulnerability of students had been sometimes the more substantial issue. I would think, after attendance, that they should push themselves outside their comfort zones. When you're virtual, it always feels like the spotlight is on you and when you speak. And so many students tend to shy away from their voices. Trying to find other mechanisms outside of, you know, just unmuting or having their camera on was imperative if you wanted to make them comfortable enough to participate.

Eighth-grade teachers Leonard and Brian, who both began teaching and implementing SEL skills for the first time during the pandemic, faced unique challenges. Leonard's struggled with the “virtual experience altogether and not knowing how the students were feeling.” Brian, on the other hand, struggled with “students being sarcastic and not taking the lessons seriously.” He further explained, “Teaching and implementing these skills took a long time because I was trying to teach them something new and valuable but also motivate them simultaneously, which was not an easy task using a virtual platform.” The participants' feelings and experiences reflected the

importance of understanding the impact of SEL skills implementation in a classroom versus in a virtual setting on both the teacher and the student.

Professional Experience in Implementing SEL In Illinois

Participants reported things related to lack of “preparation, such as being time-consuming, having a lot of self-training, having heavy tasks to complete, and having little to no flexibility” in the SEL skills curriculum.

Kayla highlighted, “It was a learning process, most definitely. Umm, because by the time the pandemic started, I had only been teaching middle school for a year, and so with it, that was a learning process for me to go through.”

Andrew stated,

Incorporating SEL skills into a lesson is a fixed process given by the state of Illinois, especially when completing the task face-to-face; however, this process was not easily adaptable using a virtual platform. While the coursework was arranged, the ability to control the class and implement these skills was less evident. You can review lesson plans and agree on how to incorporate the skills. Still, when the time comes, you must be flexible enough to adjust, even if that means not including SEL skills in the coursework, which was not a wise choice at times.

The mandate to implement SEL skills regardless of the platform primarily rested on the participant's comfort level, training, and resources provided, as noted by six of the ten teachers. Leonard considered himself a great teacher; however, trying to uphold Illinois SEL competency standards was sometimes tricky.

Kayla felt that she was “doing a lot of independent SEL skill sets research” to navigate how to meet her students' needs best. Johnathan used the word “balance” to describe his struggle

in following the mandate of Illinois to include SEL skills in everyday teaching. His overall challenge with following the mandate was balancing the actual coursework of the students and skill implementation. He noted, “As a teacher, I was confused about which was precedent since both were time-consuming.”

Learning Process. All 10 participants voiced their concern about the absence of adequate preparation for obeying Illinois' state mandate of virtual SEL implementation.

From David,

Yeah, it's Monday, and it's time to teach virtually for the first time. I am anxious because I've never taught almost, but I soon realized you still must teach these skills as part of the state requirements, so you do it. You know, it's part of what you must do to keep your job, right? So. I wasn't down with it and confident, but I knew I had a task before me and needed to find a way to do it. So, the comfort wasn't there because I received the virtual training and preparation myself quickly (David, interview, August 2022).

Willie expressed feeling unprepared to implement SEL skills among students from various types of academic and behavioral backgrounds within the same virtual classroom:

Students' success in learning the SEL skills being implemented face-to-face or virtually is based on the individual student. As you know, in the school system, we have the talented, gifted, emotional, and those with learning disabilities. So, the classification of individuals matters when it comes to following the mandate. When teaching a group of students, you expect them to be different. However, mixing those with learning disabilities with those without is a lot to handle when teaching SEL skills using a new implementation method. Some of these kids are so emotionally distracted and distant that it takes the focus from the other students trying to learn.

Brandon, a sixth-grade teacher, explained that although he had been teaching and implementing SEL skills for the last five years, which was easy, continuing to abide by the Illinois state mandate of implementing SEL skills virtually had been exceptionally hard:

Because of the students' different social and economic levels, I have found abiding by this mandate challenging. Many students did not have adequate internet, devices, or academic understanding to comprehend what was being taught. In learning these skills, one can get online quickly while another cannot, which ultimately creates a barrier to introducing any new skills on the part of the teacher. Some days, I would have a whole class; other days, I would have half of a class, but most days, I would have fewer than ten students to attend out of twenty-five on my roster. Although the pandemic happened fast, more preparation and training should have been given to teachers in this implementation area, especially since it is vital to the development of students during their middle school lives.

Even though interviewees taught and implemented SEL skills virtually during the pandemic, one teacher—Leonard—found this task very difficult as he reflected on his professional experience:

Yeah, it was hard, you know, introducing and implementing SEL skills while under the pandemic. You know how stressful the pandemic period was for everyone trying to cope, be away from their families, get vaccinated, and have one issue or another, as a person and as a teacher. I found it very difficult, especially with it being my first year teaching the skills. I couldn't cope during that period, so abiding by the Illinois state mandate was not as successful as it could have been.

Resources. All ten participants, in some form or another, acknowledged that teaching and implementing SEL skills to middle students was imperative during the COVID-19

pandemic; however, the lack of resources to carry out the task was challenging. An example of the importance of continuing to teach and implement SEL skills can be seen in Leonard's explanation of what it provides middle schoolers during their time of development amid the world's norm shifting at a rapid pace:

The importance of teaching and implementing these skills should be for teachers and students alike to have self-awareness. This means we should be able to model for the students how to recognize their strengths and needs as they develop a growth mindset. Teaching and implementing this competency allow the students to begin seeing things from their peers' perspectives, showing empathy, and appreciating diverse backgrounds. Teachers can intentionally support children's social and emotional health by using children's books, planning activities, coaching on the spot, and pressuring administrators to strive for adequate resources to reach all levels if higher standards are to be attained (Leonard, member checking, November 2022).

Kayla initially had no materials for teaching SEL, but her district eventually provided some resources. She said, "What I could do and implement, I think, came across successfully, although I felt I needed more training and support in that area if that makes sense."

Five participants believed the lack of resources hindered their ability to comply with the mandate professionally, leading to a disparity in the quality of education among students. Leonard, Johnathan, Brandon, and Willie reported a lack of resources such as the internet and laptops. Leonard remarked, "Accessibility to educational material and coping effectively with emotions affected middle schoolers negatively during the pandemic." Brandon added, "The economic status of resources for his students was limited and not readily affordable to most

households, which directly affected his students' ability to access skills as part of their development."

Stephanie explained,

When teaching and implementing SEL skills remotely, it has not been easy for some students to follow along. Many students lacked devices, causing them to be left behind, which ultimately meant they weren't getting taught the skills needed not only as part of the state mandate but also for their personal development. Devices were necessary to help the students navigate this new learning norm, especially those who needed additional assistance and support. Being able to send SEL activities to my students allowed them to express themselves independently without fear of being the center of attention. They had breakout rooms where they could challenge themselves and others using the SEL skills taught without needing my direct presence and engagement in the session; however, many students were not allotted this opportunity due to limited internet and laptop access.

The value of safeguarding the Illinois mandate impacts how teachers experience implementing SEL skills virtually. In preserving this mandate, Kayla shares what she perceived as the missing link and an opportunity for growth:

I would say one of the missing links for me as a teacher is that I could have used something that was a visual training opportunity to give me ideas. I think a lot of what I experienced was learning to fly, taking what was created as an in-classroom learning opportunity, and trying to translate it virtually. Educators often ride behind the eight ball when we should be in front of it, especially when it involves kids. A secondary education reference manual could assist in future resources for educators and those we teach within

urban communities. Table 6 outlines the themes associated with the challenges in implementing SEL skills virtually as mandated by the state of Illinois.

Table 6

Challenges in Implementing Illinois-Mandated SEL Skills Common Themes

Participants	Lack of Virtual Training	Lack of Preparation	Lack of Student Devices	Lack of Resources	Parental Involvement	Emotionally Challenging for Students	Teachers Emotional Discomfort
Brandon		X	X	X	X		X
Leonard	X	X	X		X		X
Stephanie		X			X	X	
Johnathan		X		X			X
Brian		X		X			
Willie		X	X			X	
David	X	X					
James		X			X		X
Andrew		X	X			X	
Kayla	X	X	X	X		X	

Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually

The development of virtual teacher-student relationships, as described by eight of the participants, hinged significantly on heavy communication. This was deemed crucial for establishing rapport with middle school students. Participants identified communication-related themes as integral to the relationship-building process, such as trust building, rapport building, and role modeling. As Willie stated during his member checking interview,

Everyone has different challenges, so it will take time to develop the teacher-student relationship. One reason it takes time is because of the lack of attendance and the fact that it is virtual. Students will come but not be there mentally because they have challenges in their families or wherever. When in the classroom, students were in school regularly, which allowed you to ask questions about their previous night, their families, etc.; however, virtually, it's limited time, but you must put in the same energy that you did

face-to-face if you want the best relational outcome. The bottom line is that relationships take time to be established, especially with this age group, and communication is the key ingredient.

Andrew explained that one needs to open dialogue with their students and exhibit personal, relational skills. Andrew described this sentiment:

Uh, I communicate with my students to make them feel comfortable. In doing this, I try again and again to make the virtual environment very suitable for them. I hope that maybe next time, it'll be easier to join the classroom experience with ease. I have learned that middle schoolers, especially minorities, don't know you care unless you show it. Therefore, asking about their welfare, families, hobbies, responsible decision-making, and stuff like that brings you closer to understanding where they are and helping guide them if allowed. The most significant impact I perceived during my virtual teacher-student relationship experience was learning how to communicate effectively with my students without being face-to-face. That gives me an edge to keep going and not turn back; I see growth in my students when they share appropriately.

Another participant echoed that communication is a vital component in developing the teacher-student relationship; however, he expressed it as a big challenge compared to being face-to-face with his students.

David explained,

Uh, kids can be a handful sometimes. So, you know, going virtually abruptly and then trying to develop strong communication with them when you are not physically with them; it's a big challenge, but I think I learned how to find my way to make it work. I usually try to minimize the sections and how many students are in each. I do this because

the larger the number, the more challenging it becomes. So, I usually have numerous sections with shorter times, like 30-40 minutes, so I can give more attention to those who need it. I could have five students in any section and maybe ten in another. Breaking the students into sections based on their individual needs gave me the privilege of handling the class appropriately and getting to know my students in a smaller setting (breakout rooms).

When recalling their experience developing a virtual teacher-student relationship, several participants spoke of parental involvement as a critical factor.

Johnathan emphasized,

Some of my students were not comfortable being alone using a virtual platform; it's something they had never done before. To ease the anxiety of my students and make attempts to build a relationship, I allow "parents to participate in sections with their middle schooler until the student felt comfortable."

Kayla described the development of her teacher-student relationships in the virtual environment, highlighting the use virtual group circles: "We were able to do different building activities to be more receptive to the process of social-emotional learning."

Kayla elaborated,

Building that trust opportunity allowed my students to know they were in a safe space, that we were all here, and just highlighting the similarities of issues that we may have been exposed to or experienced and just being able to build that platform or foundation for us to work. We often see young people as just kids, but they have the exact emotional needs of adults. They need to feel like they can trust. They need to feel like what they say is going to be valid. They need to feel like their experiences matter. And with that,

ensuring that we were building those foundations of safety; they understood the importance of our conversations and that whoever was brought in as a guest speaker would speak on those issues in a way that felt supportive, not demeaning, and that there was mutual respect.

Brian also explained how he developed and maintained his teacher-student relationships:

OK, first, I made learning new SEL skills a fun way. I spent 90% of the time teaching, but the other 10% was spent incorporating fun SEL activities into the lessons. We could talk a little during this time and catch up on what's happening with them. Creating a fun learning environment allowed my students to feel a sense of freedom where they could be vulnerable and share with me as their teacher and peers. In making the learning environment more fun, students felt empowered to use self-control and channel their energy to think before responding regardless of the problem.

While some participants relied on communication, relationship skill sets, activities, and parental involvement to establish and maintain teacher-student relationships virtually, Leonard leaned into his students' voices:

The responsibility, uh, decisions about the temperature of the teacher-student relationship was set by my students. I ask questions and get feedback from them, allowing me to understand them more personally. Giving my students a voice by encouraging them to provide feedback has significantly impacted the development of a relationship using a virtual platform. Additionally, Leonard suggested that the teacher-student relationship is substantial; however, it is critical to middle schoolers' stage of development that knowledge be imparted and that they observe how SEL skills are modeled in adults.

Table 7 outlines the themes associated with teacher-student virtual relationship building.

Table 7*Teacher-Student Virtual Relationship Building Common Themes*

Participants	Trust	Time	Increase in Communication	Parental Involvement	Incorporating Age-Appropriate Activities	Role-Modeling SEL Skillsets
Brandon	X	X		X	X	
Leonard						
Stephanie				X	X	
Johnathan				X		X
Brian					X	
Willie	X	X	X	X		
David			X			
James						X
Andrew		X	X			
Kayla	X					

Note: Common themes generated through participants interviews

Focus Group Responses

Four focus group research questions were formulated to guide this study. The themes and sub-themes developed during the data analysis of the individual interviews provided the foundation for the responses to the focus group research questions. The responses to the focus group research questions communicated the fundamental nature of the participant's advice to future middle school teachers on implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform through the textural and structural interpretation of the phenomenon. Focus groups were conducted as another method, allowing the researcher to collect different information based on participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs. This session was utilized to obtain participants' opinions, not to reach a consensus, but to acquire the expression of differences, which is informative.

Focus Group Question One

Focus Group Question One asked, "What advice would you give future teachers who may not have experienced teaching and implementing SEL skills during a pandemic?" This question allowed the participants to advise from different perspectives, which could be utilized in

future training and education with new teachers. All participants discussed what advice they would give future teachers transitioning from teaching SEL in person to teaching SEL on a virtual platform during a pandemic. Participants offered advice based on their experience with teaching SEL virtually through a historical lens of changes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants effectively connected their advice to their first-of-its-kind teaching of SEL skills virtual experiences and that of their colleagues. Participants Kayla, Johnathan, Stephanie, and Andrew highlighted the importance of having emotional intelligence coupled with practical communication skills as crucial components that teachers would benefit from if a pandemic would lead them to teach SEL skills virtually in the future.

Participants Leonard, Brian, and Willie emphasized the need for adaptability when facing the *new norm* of teaching and implementing SEL skills for teachers who may have to do so virtually. They attributed this advice to learning, accepting, and practicing patience for both the teacher and the student as it assisted in taking virtual implementation strategies instead of fighting against the unknown.

Participants David and James credited their advice to connecting, collaborating, and creating space for forming teacher-student relationships. They pointed out getting to know their students as impacting their understanding and implementing two of five SEL core competencies: social awareness and relationship skills. All participants identified their advice in their virtual implementation of SEL skills as impacting their modeling of self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making.

None of the participants voiced an arrival to mastering teaching and implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform; many viewed it as a stressful but rewarding journey that could be dominated both now and, in the future, as Brandon spoke during the focus group. Brandon

suggested this level of mastery could take place if the following advice is understood and utilized,

It is essential to be clear about social and emotional learning, which the new teachers can do. They must create a safe and supportive environment. You need students to feel comfortable with you, the teacher, and their classmates so they can share their thoughts and feelings when the time arises in or out of the classroom setting. This can be done by establishing ground rules and maintaining a respectful and open-minded attitude between the teacher and the learner, and if done correctly, it will be great.

Though participants' perceived experience with teaching and implementing SEL skills virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic is not equated with having been mastered compared to face-to-face classroom implementation, the advice of those teaching experiences in helping to place respect and importance for the virtual implementation of SEL skills was apparent. Table 8 details the advice given per participant that future teachers could use when implementing SEL skills virtually.

Table 8

Advice for Future Teachers Implementing SEL Skills Virtually

Participants	Advice for Future Teachers Implementing SEL Skills Virtually
Kayla	Incorporate self-management, goal-setting, and emotional intelligence.
Johnathan	Manage stress, practice emotional intelligence, and insert practical communication skills.
Stephanie	Train and retrain your mind; create a relationship, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness.
Brandon	Create a safe, supportive environment for students to feel comfortable sharing. Establish ground rules that encourage open-mindedness and respect between the teacher and learner.

<i>Leonard</i>	Get adapted to the new norm and learn as much as you can on online teaching in your spare time
<i>Brian</i>	Learn, accept, and practice patience for both you and the students.
<i>Willie</i>	Be patient and adapt instead of fighting against virtual implementation.
<i>David</i>	Connect, collaborate, and create a space for relationships to be formed.
<i>James</i>	Please get to know your students and use encouragement to build them up.
<i>Andrew</i>	Self-awareness: build relationships, incorporate activities

Note: The synopsis of advice for teachers by participants.

Focus Group Question Two

Focus Group Question Two explored, “Do you believe implementing SEL virtually has benefited students? Why or why not?” The purpose of this focus group question was to give participants a space to share their thoughts with their peers in a safe place, identify the difference in the participant's perspective according to grade level, and challenge participants to take these perspectives and implement the successful skills for a future educational gain and healthier teacher-student relationships. This question pulls out whether the teachers believe implementing SEL has been virtually beneficial to students or not. Eight out of 10 participants thought there were benefits in teaching and implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform.

Willie shared, “I think it's beneficial because it could be used to prepare students for virtual learning. So that in case this happens again, the students will be prepared.”

Johnathan stated,

OK. I think it's essential for the students to learn virtually because it gives them a new sense of purpose. You know, it's a new sense of view that enlightens them on how to use gadgets and how to, you know, combine academic work with technology. And it will give them a kind of self-confidence because sometimes when you're taking virtual, you

know, classes. There's this nervousness you must feel because sometimes it sounds or it. Sometimes it feels weird to people around, like seeing other people on, you know, on your platform. You you're not seeing them in person, so I think it's a benefit for students to learn virtually so that it will help them, you know, while advancing to the next stage of their career, they won't feel any strange or any surprise when the attending virtual meetings or when they are taking virtual lectures. So, it will give them a sense of purpose and confidence to cope in today's technological world.

Stephanie continued,

It's nice because it leaves us students with a sense of focus. It improves their focus and helps them think critically. They have a vast way of solving problems independently, giving them a sense of a situation where they can communicate fluently without needing much help. It also provides a suitable coping mechanism. Within the students themselves, they know the things that help to do. They do it independently and at ease, even if it could be complex or challenging at some point. But they'll be able to sort out a solution to a particular problem.

During the focus group session, others explained the advantages of virtual SEL skill implementation; however, Brian, David, and Brandon disagreed.

Brian suggested,

OK, I know virtual sessions are sometimes good, but sometimes they can distract students. What happened recently is that most students are attached to the Internet (i.e., Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok). They are maybe watching videos online. So, I can't see if they are dedicating their time to learning new skills. Online teaching and

learning were big distractions; in-person teaching and implementing SEL skills is far better than a virtual platform with middle schoolers.

While most of the participants disclosed some benefits, David agreed with Brian.

David added,

Yeah, just a little to what Brian just said. In a physical setting, you can see the students and assist, therefore allowing for more control in the classroom learning experience. I think the concentration level is reduced drastically when you teach students virtually, especially middle schoolers, so I guess Brian was right there. To strengthen this disadvantage, I find that the student can be on the virtual call, but meanwhile, their attention is on something else, or they're engaging in something else. You know, they are sitting right in front of the camera, looking like they're paying attention when they're not focusing on the lesson or skills being taught.

Brandon continued,

I also had this incident where one could not meet the demands of these virtual meetings. That is economic instability between homes. It also had an emotional impact on not only the student but the parents as well. There was also a lot of disturbance behind the child. And so, it became difficult, and not everyone could go to a separate place to learn or even be flexible about coping with this new way of learning. And so, it's not to everybody's advantage to have working technology or a quiet place to learn, which ultimately becomes frustrating and challenging for the student already experiencing developmental changes.

The data analysis revealed that while there are some benefits to implementing SEL skills virtually, there are also some concerns about whether the student is receiving the information

delivered. Participants shared how virtual learning could give middle schoolers a new sense of purpose, increased focus, critical thinking, problem-solving, and coping mechanisms. Others suggested a combination of academics and technology, early access to virtual learning, collaboration, teamwork, and conflict solving as other benefits to the continuation of implementing SEL skills, even if it's on a virtual platform. On the contrary, some participants felt that teaching SEL skills virtually would impede the student's ability to concentrate and learn the skills effectively.

Focus Group Question Three

Focus Group Question Three asked, "If the need to implement SEL virtually again arises, what challenges do you foresee new teachers having with implementing SEL?" I designed Focus Group Question Three to facilitate a discussion on the barriers faced and what was done to overcome said barriers. The three significant challenges that participants emphasized were time management, technical issues, and relationship building when teachers and students abruptly transitioned from in-class sessions to virtual classrooms. Participants used words such as "frustration," "stress," "hardship," and "difficulty" to explain how they experienced trying to meet the mandate of incorporating SEL core competencies into their everyday educational teaching using a virtual platform with little to no training. During the discussion within the focus group on foreseeable challenges new teachers could have when implementing SEL skills virtually.

Andrew explained,

OK, so I will say I think some of the issues we needed to address. There could have been a better way to transition teachers and students to teaching/implementing SEL skills virtually because time was not on our side when trying to fit these core competencies into

our abbreviated schedules. To cover what we had to share with the students, you know, when some of the students join late, you have a lot to cover. I realized there was insufficient time, but rushing through the skill sets to say it was done was unacceptable or unfair to the students when teaching new SEL skills. So, the time and the adjustments to the schedule were significant challenges you can expect if teaching in Illinois schools.

The challenge of technical issues and financial hardship went hand in hand for most students.

Stephanie explained,

A challenge that every teacher should expect to face is having students in their class who may not be as technically inclined as others, which could be generational as opposed to intellectually competent. This challenge conflicts with the 'No Child Left Behind' Act because many students struggle significantly and lack support at home to catch up academically or socially. Additionally, most of the students lack finances, which caused a delay in obtaining appropriate internet to join online classes.

Brandon echoed this same challenge, stating,

I've had several incidents where students could not meet the demands of virtual classes due to economic instability between homes. It has an emotional disturbance that leaves the student behind, which becomes difficult because not everyone can be flexible in coping with this new way of learning. And so, not everybody has the same situation, but it is difficult for those affected, including many of my students.

Brian highlighted that technology and its number of distractions could be potential challenges for teachers who implement these skills virtually in the future.

Brian noted,

Okay, umm, one of the problems I see the new teachers experiencing is that I don't want to be sarcastic, but at least 60% of the new teachers will become frustrated. Teaching virtually is technically frustrating, and if you don't have patience and high tolerance, you will not be able to prepare because sometimes students are annoying and tend to get distracted by technology. Then you may think a student is paying attention to you, but you do not know the student is splitting the screen into two parts, watching a different video on the other side, or maybe reading a different thing entirely. These days, I've noticed that let's say, most students live 80% of their lives online, which can be an issue. So basically, their coming to class virtually or trying to learn on this new platform will become an issue. And if, as a teacher, you're not able to control your emotions, it will become very frustrating.

Andrew shared,

Okay, I think one of the issues we need to address is time management. There must be a better way to split academia time and the implementation of the mandated SEL skills in a virtual setting. There is a lot of material to cover what we must teach the students when some are joining late. So, the time and the adjustment in scheduling were a huge problem I can see carrying into future challenges. We had a couple of technical issues; at the time, we did not have time to address them, and they were also on the side of the students.

Stephanie conveyed,

Several challenges have already been mentioned; however, one challenge I foresee being an ongoing concern is students who think they are not smart enough and have the misconception that some individuals are just born to be intelligent. I encountered a few students who felt they weren't smart enough to catch up with everyone else because of the struggle with technology and

having a generational gap, especially for those being raised by their grandparents, which occurs a lot in the school district where I teach.

Willie explained,

If another pandemic requires a virtual interface, the teacher-student relationship will continue to be challenging because the teacher has not learned about the student, and the students have not gotten to know the teacher. So, I think teachers should constantly be introduced at the onset because this would establish rapport building and trust, which creates an avenue for a better educational experience.

Focus Group Question Four

Focus Group Question Four asks, “What advice would you give new teachers of SEL about overcoming these challenges?” As a follow-up to focus group question three, focus group question four aimed to draw outgrowth opportunities that would help future teachers and researchers if they ever face a nationwide pandemic again. Several themes emerged from this discussion: training, time management, and building healthy and strong relationships with the students. Participants Kayla and James expressed the importance of having patience and making the virtual learning experience fun. Kayla stated, “Be focused, make fun of yourself, and be patient with your kiddos.” James suggested, “The person should be tolerant, you know, of the student’s behaviors because not everyone has what it takes to show grace when it’s not earned.”

Participants Stephanie and Leonard highlighted the need for training. Stephanie posed the following questions one should ask themselves before taking the challenge of teaching, “Have you been able to get the necessary training? Are you ready to deliver? And before you step into being a teacher, are you ready to put up with the orders, approaches, techniques, and strategies required regardless of the platform you are teaching on?” In highlighting training, Leonard

suggested, “Teachers need to try and understand students' emotions. This can be done by learning to overcome the necessary challenges regarding time management and the barriers many face at home.”

Additionally, David suggested focusing on relationship building, while Brandon suggested focusing on economic disparities as a barrier to student success. David said that,

When you jump on a virtual meeting with many students like that, you want first to get their attention, like capture their attention so, if it must be all, you know, one-on-one asking them about their stuff, engaging them. You know, joking around with them for like, you know, let's say 5 minutes of probably the one hour you set out, you know, give them love, get them to loosen up a bit so you can get their attention, then ensure that whatever you want to deliver, it is done in a short time. Don't take the lesson for too long, you know. Make sure that it's captivating and conversational, like between you and the student. Engage them. Let them also feel proud of the whole learning section.

Brandon disclosed,

Being open to thinking outside the classroom regarding economic disparities among students is essential. And so, it's been difficult for me to find resources amid the pandemic, but I've tried to reach out at least and started within my local area. And so, for the low-income masses, I think there will need to be flexibility in being able to reach the local areas and to be able to at least set up for your students one thing or two, especially for those who are poor.

Summary

Chapter Four discussed the findings of middle school teachers' lived experience with implementing SEL skills virtually amid COVID-19. This chapter began by reiterating the

purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study and including a profile for each participant. Each participant's profile described their professional and personal background and highlighted their passion for teaching virtually during COVID-19.

The researcher used open-ended questions to prompt the responses of the participants. The data analysis revealed three evolving themes and five sub-themes, which were examined and amalgamated into the research and focus group question responses. The three themes and five sub-themes include the following:

1. Personal Experience of Implementing SEL
 - a. Classroom Implementation
 - b. Virtual Implementation
 - c. Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation
2. Professional Experience in Safeguarding Illinois Mandate SEL Implementation Virtually
 - a. Learning Process
 - b. Resources
3. Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually

This chapter also explained how the individual research questions were answered. Research question one asked, "How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills in a traditional classroom setting?" This question was answered by the first theme, which addressed the individual expertise in implementing SEL skills pre-pandemic. Research question two asked how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching social-emotional learning skills in a non-traditional way, such as virtually, amid COVID-19. This question was answered by the three sub-themes of classroom implementation, virtual implementation, and challenges of implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform.

As part of research question one, information was drawn that shed light on how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional Learning skill sets to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19. For example, the second theme spoke to the teachers' professional experience in safeguarding Illinois' mandate in implementing SEL skills. This question was answered by the two sub-themes of the learning process and resources.

Additionally, research questions four through six provided information about how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after developing a teacher-student relationship virtually amid the COVID-19 pandemic, their perception of the most significant impact on the teacher-student relationship, and the most challenging experience they had with the students when implementing SEL skills virtually. These questions were answered by the third and final theme, which delved into developing a virtual teacher-student relationship.

Again, focus groups have advantages that add to the value of individual interviews. This chapter provided additional insight into how the focus group research questions were answered, allowing participants to share their unique perceptions. According to Heppner et al. (2016), the interactions between participants can provide for richer discussion “as various members of the group provide more details, degrees on points, and reconcile differences of opinions” (p. 375). Focus group question one asked, “What advice you would give future teachers who may not have experience teaching and implementing SEL skills during a pandemic.” This question was answered by teachers sharing advice such as using emotional intelligence, building relationships with the students, learning, accepting, practicing patience, and establishing effective communication. Focus group question two asked participants their view on implementing SEL

skills virtually and its benefits to the students. This question was answered by 80% of the teachers, who agreed overall with its benefits, suggesting it gives a new sense of purpose, early access to virtual learning, provides opportunities for teamwork and conflict resolution, and 20% disagreed because of the influx of distractions and students' different learning styles.

Focus group question three asked participants, “If needed to implement SEL virtually again arises, what challenges do you foresee new teachers having with implementing SEL?” This question was answered by teachers sharing future difficulties such as management of virtual behaviors (mentioned three times), technology (mentioned five times), and economic hardship (mentioned three times). As a follow-up to focus group question three, focus group four asked participants what advice would be helpful to give new SEL teachers about overcoming these challenges. In answering this question, teachers suggested creating one-to-one opportunities for virtual learning, making learning SEL skills virtually fun, building strong and healthy relationships with the students, being patient and developing a high sense of tolerance, and getting as much training in areas you don’t know or understand well when teaching/implementing SEL skills on a virtual platform.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explain how urban middle school teachers perceived their experience teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing them virtually during a pandemic. Chapter Five seeks to summarize the study's findings and deliberates those findings with relevant theory and appropriate research as described in Chapter Two. Implications of the research and the study's delimitations and limitations are examined. Finally, a chapter summary will reflect a recommendation for the upcoming research.

Summary of Findings

This study examined participants' perception on implementing social-emotional learning skills virtually during a pandemic in urban areas within Illinois. As discussed in Chapter Four, three themes were generated from the data analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. These themes suggested that the participants shared common virtual experiences of teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois during a pandemic. (See Table 3). The six research questions that guided this study were (a) How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional learning skills in a traditional classroom setting; (b) How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching social-emotional learning skills in a non-traditional way, such as virtually, amid COVID-19; (c) How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional learning skill sets to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19; (d) How do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after developing a teacher-student relationship virtually amid the

COVID-19 pandemic; (e) What do teachers perceive in their experience as the most significant impact on the teacher-student relationship teaching social-emotional learning skills virtually in an Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) amid COVID-19; and (f) What has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing social-emotional learning virtually?

The themes from the analysis helped reveal the following: (a) personal experience of implementing SEL, (b) professional experience of safeguarding Illinois mandate SEL implementation virtually, and (c) experience in developing a teacher-student relationship virtually. Each theme represented a captivating argument of the participants' lived experience with the problem. This defined experience became a vital factor in understanding the core of such a phenomenon.

The first theme from this data collection was the participants' personal experience of implementing SEL. Three sub-themes related to this surface of data collection included (a) classroom implementation, (b) virtual implementation, and (c) challenges of virtual SEL implementation. Overall, participants reported classroom implementation of SEL skills to be easier with fewer challenges than implementing such skills virtually. Participants suggested virtual implementation was challenging because kids were easily distracted, students were not on the same academic level, and several found virtual learning to be more for advanced individuals than students in middle school. Some participants recognized attendance, home distractions, and lack of parental support or resources as challenges of virtual SEL implementation, all of which impeded its success. Participants expressed frustration in implementing such skills on an unfamiliar learning platform due to a lack of implementation education for both the student and teacher. Virtual implementation of SEL skills was first introduced during the pandemic, in which

participants expressed students' inability to cope and a noticeable decline in concentration and attention to detail.

Professional experience in virtually safeguarding Illinois mandate SEL implementation was the next theme to emerge from the data analysis. This theme has two sub-themes, which include (a) the learning process and (b) resources. This theme referenced how participants perceived their ability to teach virtually and implement SEL as mandated. There was mutual agreement amongst the participants that there was no training for the virtual implementation of SEL, ultimately leading to a struggle with balancing courses and skill implementation. Subsequently, all the participants conducted independent SEL curriculum research due to a lack of initial resources, devices for students, platforms for online learning, and network issues; therefore, with no formal training, participants described this experience as challenging, frustrating, stressful, and confusing. Of the areas mentioned above, lack of training and resources were the two most discussed among participants. Participants explained that because of these challenges and those of their students, the implementation of SEL was often placed on the back burner to get through academic requirements. While all participants agreed that SEL was beneficial and essential, the urgency among some participants to include SEL virtually as a mandate of Illinois did not exist.

Developing a teacher-student relationship virtually spoke to the perceived impact SEL implementation had in the classroom amid a pandemic. Several participants explained that creating a teacher-student relationship was not easy. Still, rapport building was essential to implementing SEL and holistically identifying the student's needs. However, most participants believed that creating a safe space of trust and encouraging parental involvement was vital to developing relationships. Participants stated that explicit effective communication was

imperative in bonding and character-building to enhance the Illinois Social Emotional Standards: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and decision-making skills. The learning standard of using communication and social skills to interact effectively with others was emphasized under the context of skills needed to establish and maintain positive relationships. Although relationship building between teacher and students was slow to develop, it was verbalized that one-on-ones were a crucial alternative to the virtual experience. With Illinois establishing specific standards for how SEL goals should be executed, teaching virtually in itself is inconsistent in bringing about the desired change in the increase of academic success or decrease in problematic behaviors as it pertains to the grit of the teacher-student relationship; therefore, being a substance of growth.

Research Questions

Data analyses were solidified through the views of the participants' responses to the research questions. The first research question asked *how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceived their experience after implementing Social-Emotional Learning skills in a traditional classroom setting*. Participants shared their unique stories and experiences, leading to the incorporation of the subtheme of classroom implementation. Participants displayed strong emotions regarding their existing perception of implementing SEL face-to-face and virtually and its challenges to this implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Every participant acknowledged during their interviews that the five core competencies of SEL were somehow implemented; however, according to the participants, not all students benefited from learning the skills due to various challenges along the virtual journey. Participants believed that before the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL implementation was easy

because students were focused. They could observe their body language during discussions to determine if the student received the information being taught well.

While some participants elaborated on the implementation, others geared their responses toward their performance of teaching SEL skills to the students. Participants stated that their overall classroom, face-to-face experience of implementing SEL skills was easy, ultimately making their virtual implementation experience more complex than they thought it would be. There was a desire to mimic those same implementation strategies virtually; however, challenges rose due to students being on different academic levels and teachers being unable to observe their student's body language, making it difficult and stressful. This was especially true for those who only engaged in implementing SEL skill sets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants (80%) perceived their in-classroom experience of implementing SEL skills as easy and manageable.

The second research question pondered *how do Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after teaching social-emotional learning skills in a non-traditional way, such as virtually, amid COVID-19?* Data revealed that many teachers who experienced significant difficulty implementing SEL skills effectively faced student attention challenges. Participants stated that one possible reason is that the students were not taking the classes seriously, which was evidenced by students showing a lack of focus. One participant shared that their students struggled significantly with coping with the pandemic overall, impeding their ability to focus. While teachers observed body language as positive during traditional face-to-face teaching, other teachers expressed being uncomfortable teaching these skills virtually and being unable to see the students. Participants reached a consensus throughout the interviews that not being able to see their students' faces hindered them from

knowing if the students received the information provided. Participants acknowledged their experiences implementing SEL skills on a virtual platform as complex and not helpful to middle schools. Table 9 describes the themes related to research questions one and two.

Table 9

Themes Related to Research Question Three

Theme I: Personal Initial Experience of Implementing SEL Skills	Classroom Implementation	Virtual Implementation
	40% stated that implementation was easy face-to-face.	70% suggested challenges in working with different academic levels.
	40% suggested that students were more focused.	60% stated that virtual implementation was complex.
	30% stressed the importance of observing students' body language.	20% said it was year one of teaching SEL during the pandemic
	20% did not have classroom experience teaching SEL.	

Note: Percentage summary of participants statements according to generated themes from questions one and two.

The third research question asked *how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after implementing social-emotional learning skill sets to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards amid COVID-19*. From the interviews, one could conclude that fewer teachers across Illinois implemented SEL skills in their total capacity as mandated by the state as part of its core competencies. After participants gave voice to their personal experience with implementing SEL skills virtually, they moved into their experience with implementing SEL skills and its core competencies as a mandate through

the state of Illinois. This appeared to be a genuine transition from personal experience to professional expertise.

Participants drew upon their unique understanding of the need to incorporate SEL skills virtually into their lessons amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, participants accentuated that there was not much preparation or training on the virtual implementation of SEL skills before the COVID-19 pandemic to assist them with transitioning from face-to-face to a virtual platform. None of the participants in this study were skilled in implementing SEL skills virtually. Therefore, having a mixed class of students with varying academic and behavioral difficulties made it challenging and created more difficulty in upholding the Illinois mandate.

The mere perception of implementing SEL skills in a face-to-face classroom setting should not be equally compared to its virtual implementation amid a pandemic. Three participants expressed that this mandate was challenging to abide by and stressful; however, the Illinois Board of Education required the implementation and provided little to no knowledge of how to complete the task using a virtual platform.

Table 10

Themes Related to Research Question Three

Theme II: Professional Experience if Safeguarding Illinois Mandate SEL Implementation Virtually	Learning Process	Preparation/Resources
	50% mentioned having to teach themselves virtual implementation.	100% described the mandate as difficult to fulfill because of a lack of preparation in transitioning from face-to-face to virtual implementation of SEL skills.
	50% lack students having devices.	40% lack resources.
	40% stressed the importance of parental involvement.	

40% discussed emotional challenges for students.

40% described the experience as being emotionally discomfoting for teachers.

30% describe virtual training for implementing SEL skills as lacking.

Note: Percentage summary of participants statements according to generated themes from question three.

Virtual learning is no longer only for higher education, but it is an integral part of the educational process on all levels; therefore, participants believe that if we are going to include social-emotional learning, we need to address those roadblocks and those obstacles that could potentially keep our kids from being able to engage and connect fully.

In response to teachers and students not having adequate resources to fulfill their professional responsibility of implementing SEL skills and the students receiving the necessary skills, the burden of resources fell on the teachers. This is where most participants' perception of their experience with virtual implementation of SEL skills was gleaned. It was suggested that if remote implementation of SEL skills is mandated, then there is a need for proper funding and resources to be successful. When investigating participants' perception of abiding by Illinois' state mandate of including the five core competencies of SEL skills while teaching virtually, it showed a consensus among participants on their inability to implement the mandated SEL skills successfully during the pandemic.

The fourth research question asked *how Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers perceive their experience after virtually developing a teacher-student*

relationship amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants viewed the teacher-student relationship as imperative to positively implementing new skills, such as social-emotional learning, into the classroom setting. To establish this connection with the students, all but four participants explained the value of rapport building, which requires trust and time. Half of the participants stated that along with trust and time, effective communication between teacher and student is essential when developing this type of relationship on a virtual platform. Some suggested creating one-on-one or small group sessions with students who struggle to interact appropriately with others, including the teacher. Also, participants attributed parental involvement as fundamental to developing, keeping, and maintaining healthy teacher-student relations. One participant illustrated the importance of parental involvement by incorporating after-class fun group activities amid the pandemic. Participants unanimously, in some capacity or another, agreed that virtual relationship building between a teacher and student takes consistency and commitment, but it can be done well and impactfully.

The fifth research question examined *participants' perception on the effectiveness of the teacher-student relationship while teaching social-emotional learning skills virtually in an Illinois urban middle school (sixth through eighth grade) amid COVID-19.* The ultimate topic from the data was creating a virtual teacher-student relationship, particularly during middle school. Developing and managing relationships remotely is a skill not acquired by all. In allowing parents to be present during their child's class, one participant witnessed the increase in self-confidence with the students, which he voiced had the most significant impact on his relationship with the students.

Several participants identified teacher-student relationship building as an active work in progress. Activities such as virtual group circles and trust-building exercises increased student

engagement with the teachers. This led to students being more open to learning the skills of SEL and modeling what they have learned through positive teacher-student relationships.

Fundamentally, implementing SEL skills virtually was deemed to have a promising influence on the teacher-student relationship. This influence is evident by the data collected in which participants shared standard terms such as bonding, trust, effective communication, and character building when describing how the teacher-student relationship was developed, managed, and impacted using a virtual platform to implement SEL skills amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The final research question is *what has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing social-emotional learning virtually?* The consensus among all participants was that there are advantages and disadvantages to teaching, implementing, and learning SEL skills practically. Face-to-face is far better when teaching new skills to students in a vital development stage; therefore, virtual teaching and implementation of SEL skills for middle schoolers should be utilized in extreme crises.

Table 11

Themes Related to Research Questions Four through Six

Theme III: Experience in Developing a Teacher-Student Relationship Virtually	Virtual Teacher- Student Relationship Development	Significant Impact on Teacher-Student Relationship while Teaching SEL Skills Virtually	Challenges of Virtual SEL Implementation
	60% suggested rapport building (trust/time) was essential and relied more on the teacher than the student.	50% defined trust and bonding as impactful while teaching SEL skills virtually. 30% suggested an increase in effective communication	50% indicated distractions as a significant challenge.

50% said communication was critical.	through activities as impactful.	30% identified poor attendance as a challenge.
40% mentioned that parental involvement is vital to building virtual relationships with students.	20% noted modeling good character and seeing it reciprocated as impactful.	20% stated a lack of parental support.
	20% said seeing parents engage in their student's education was impactful.	

Note: Percentage summary of participants' statements according to generated themes from questions four through six.

Distractions in the home while implementing SEL skills virtually were considered a significant challenge. Participants cited distractions such as playing video games, scrolling the internet, being absent during lesson time, and constant noise in the background. The next biggest challenge was poor attendance, attributed to the lack of parental support in ensuring their middle schooler attended class daily. Ultimately, participants articulated various challenges in implementing SEL skills virtually; some include but are not limited to vulnerability, no accountability, time restraints, poor organization, lack of internet, laptops for students, and poor coping skills with the new learning norm.

Discussion

To value the significant perspective of this research's findings, it is imperative to comprehend the results through a theoretical and empirical literature lens previously discussed in Chapter Two. This study's findings will help build upon the body of literature related to social-emotional learning and teachers' relationships with students that may be helpful in future crises. This study validates Maslow's hierarchy of needs because of participants' experiences implementing social-emotional learning skills amid a pandemic. As such, participants

experienced challenging emotions and questioned whether their delivery of the social-emotional skills was meaningful and helpful to their students.

At the close of the study, it was discovered that the participants were optimistic about implementing social-emotional learning skills virtually if preparation and resources were readily available. All participants used a virtual platform to implement SEL skills during eLearning when schools closed due to the weather. The results from the data analysis both verified and broadened the theoretical and factual literature discussed related to the experience of teachers implementing social-emotional learning skills virtually and its influence on the teacher-student relationship in an urban setting.

Theoretical Literature

Mastery or lack of implementation of social-emotional learning skill sets as mandated by the state of Illinois as viewed through the microscope of the participants and their expertise inadvertently connects with human motivation theory. This theory also explains participants' efficacy in virtually establishing a solid teacher-student relationship amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory that guided this study was Maslow's human motivation theory, which had the necessary theoretical foundation, according to Taormina and Gao (2013). According to Maslow (1943), every human has a degree of needs that must be fulfilled in some capacity to reach the highest level of self-actualization.

In comparing Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the core competencies of social-emotional learning skills, it became clear that the lack of fulfillment teachers had in implementing SEL skills virtually impeded their ability to master filling an achievement gap in education, which has been the most talked-about issue in U.S. education, especially in the minority communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This study focused on the participants following the state of Illinois

mandate of implementing SEL skill sets using a virtual platform amid the COVID-19 pandemic. During individual and group interviews, the participants frequently spoke about the importance of SEL skills and the ongoing frustrations of upholding the mandate using a virtual platform, especially in school districts where the mass majority were minorities.

In understanding the overarching achievement gap in education, Ansorger (2021) suggested it was through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs that there was an impact on "culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and low-socioeconomic (SES) students in core subjects up to the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 2). While SEL highlights the need for students to become aware of how they engage academically, the impact this would have within a community of minorities when a life-changing pandemic has interfered with how students learn is not understood. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census (2011) and the U.S. Department of Health Services (2001), as cited by Farahmand et al. (2011),

Youths of color are especially likely to be poor. Poverty rates for African American youth are almost two and a half times those for European American youth, and poverty rates for Latino youth are nearly two times those for European American youth, with approximately 34.4% of African American and 30.3% of Latino youth living in poverty. Youth of color are also more likely to live in segregated urban communities where there are few resources and high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and crime.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Bureau of Census (2023) reported poverty rates in 2022 were at historic lows for Black children under 18, at 22.3%, and higher for Latino youth, at 28.4%, which is slightly lower in Black children but higher in Latino youth. Middle school is a vital time in the developmental period for adolescents, which provides both challenges and opportunities for growth; however, stressors that range from major events to chronic interpersonal stressors to

daily hassles are associated with poverty, which those in urban communities are exposed to including violence (Green et al., 2021; Farahmand et al., 2011).

Green et al. (2021) also noted the importance of social and emotional competencies for the “development and maintenance of health relationships, the ability to cope with difficulties, and the maintenance of overall health and well-being” (2021, pg. 1058). Participants highlighted the need for students to meet their emotional and mental health needs amid COVID-19; however, it should be noted that their esteem was also impacted, as all but two participants suggested the difficulty in students' ability to navigate a virtual platform. Students appeared preoccupied with losing loved ones and their inability to understand the new way of learning. This caused students to give in, preventing ample opportunities to reach their full potential, as Goldstein (1940) described as self-actualization.

Chapter Two suggested that students must feel a sense of safety both emotionally and physically before they can have their cognitive needs met. As previously stated, the basic needs known to man are physical, emotional, and social, derived from Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid. Maslow (1943) suggested that individuals have a level of needs that must be satisfied; therefore, it is recommended that if these needs are unmet, the individual cannot recognize or fulfill the highest tier of their needs, self-actualization. Ultimately, the lower-level needs, such as food, water, and safety, would need to be filled before the higher needs can be attended to. Participants understood that an unmet need, such as technology or feelings of incompetency, particularly in the urban community, brought about a risk in properly teaching SEL skills due to a lack of resources (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). The understanding of this came from the personal experience of students with unmet needs or observing absentees of students from their virtual teaching experience in working with students in the urban community.

Additionally, participants spoke frequently about the inconsistency of available resources to the students, which made teaching and implementing SEL skills impossible. In understanding the unmet need for technology, participants experienced increased emotions such as frustration, helplessness, stress, confusion, and anxiety (Boeree, 2006). Participants considered themselves a natural support for the students; therefore, they were impacted when students' basic needs, such as food, water, technology, etc., were unmet. With physiological needs being the lower needs on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students would require this tier of needs to be met before having a chance of social-emotional and academic success in the classroom.

In connecting SEL skills with Maslow's theory of motivation, students long for belonging and having their esteem boosted; however, this appeared to be unavailable because of the lack of focus on learning new skills associated with Social Emotional Learning. As cited by Ansorger (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic caused stress and underlying trauma for students, parents, counselors, and educators, heightening the need for social and emotional learning to be incorporated. With the new learning norm, participants needed to consider how implementing SEL skills virtually would be different and how the virtual platform would affect the overall relationship-building with their students—understanding the idea of Maslow before Bloom was essential in understanding the impact COVID-19 would have on middle schoolers. Mutch (2021) hinted that students would lose all sense of purpose and self-identity because of the loss of school, community activities, and support systems, which can ultimately impact their mental health and behavior (Capurso et al., 2020; Thabrew, 2020). While some participants understood the importance of community and the pandemic's overarching effects, others found that parental support and involvement were vital in ensuring students showed up and engaged in all aspects of the learning experience, which allows them to move from safety/security to a sense of

belonging/esteem according to McLeon (2020). Through participants' experience with implementing SEL skills virtually and maintaining a teacher-student relationship, it is evident that human motivation theory, at least in part, could lend credibility to how SEL can encounter and endure the level of needs if met.

Empirical Literature

Implementing social-emotional learning skills in a classroom setting is not new to research; however, implementing social-emotional learning using a virtual platform is new. Before COVID-19, SEL skills were taught and incorporated in regular classroom settings, emphasizing students' and teachers' ability to recognize and manage their emotions, develop cohesive relationships, handle challenges effectively, and make responsible decision-making (Gordon et al., 2011). This study addresses the lack or non-existence of literature in response to participants' experience with the Illinois mandate of implementing SEL and its effects on the teacher-student relationship during COVID-19 using a virtual platform. The findings from this study seek to add to the present literature on the importance of SEL implementation and the teacher-student relationship.

Perception of SEL and Illinois Mandate. At the time of this study, no literature connects the efficiency of implementing SEL skills virtually and the Illinois standardized mandate of SEL implementation. Nevertheless, there continues to be growing literature that speaks to the connection between Illinois schools implementing a zero-tolerance policy and its long-lasting damaging effects on the student, the teacher-student relationship, emotional stability, and academic success of the student (Puckett et al., 2019; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Skiba, 2014), leading to the quest of identifying the missing piece, which was Social Emotional Learning (Zinsser & Dusenbury, 2015). Even though participants could not quantify their

perception of how SEL impacted their students' behavior and academic achievement, all believed it was hard to abide by Illinois's mandate of implementing SEL skills into their virtual classroom setting. The reasons participants gave for this hardship were time consumption, lack of training, lack of student devices, students being on different academic levels, no flexibility, emotional challenges for the students, etc.

In understanding the importance of students' ability to focus and its impact on the teachers' ability to implement SEL skills, one must be aware of the events and situations that students encounter that impact their overall social and emotional well-being (Graham et al., 2011). In a study, Graham et al. (2011) suggested that teachers identified students' family and home life as the predominant concern impacting a student's ability to focus. Participants supported this study by recognizing that from their professional occurrences, many students focused more while in the classroom compared to virtual classrooms. Participants noted supplying students and their families with food as parents lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Additionally, participants expressed students having difficulty focusing on tasks due to divorce, unstable home life, poverty, back-to-back death of family members, and an increase in interpersonal relationship violence. Humphries et al. (2018) idea that parents should also integrate SEL development in the home and not allow it to be the teacher's sole responsibility is shown in the lack of skills related to self-awareness and self-management while trying to teach and implement SEL virtually to the students. Participants explained that in trying to uphold the Illinois state mandate in implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform, they saw it increasingly challenging for the students academically, socially, and emotionally. Seventy percent of the participants overtly explained that these challenges made it difficult to prepare the students for success, as observed before implementing these skills virtually amid the pandemic.

Three out of 10 participants believed that if students could focus, the virtual experience would give them a new sense of purpose and increase critical thinking, problem-solving, and coping mechanisms. Two out of 10 participants believed that if students' home lives were not in shambles, this experience would allow for early access to virtual learning, collaboration, and teamwork, which would have strengthened the core competencies of social-emotional learning, therefore increasing the chances of the student reaching the highest tier on Maslow's hierarchy of needs: self-actualization.

Previous research has shown the effectiveness of SEL learning in children in terms of “academic, mental health, and long-term life outcomes” (Schnittka, 2021, p. 1); however, there remains little to no research on the effectiveness of middle schoolers and its impact in urban areas. Schnittka (2021) hinted at SEL programs inadequately meeting the needs of students in low-income urban districts, as Farahmand et al. (2011) suggested programs such as school-based social-emotional learning being ineffective in poverty-stricken urban school districts; therefore, questioning the effectiveness of successfully addressing the needs of the students appropriately. Participants highlighted a decrease in students successfully engaging in learning SEL skills due to economic hardship, which ultimately led to an inability to have the technology, amongst other resources, for the virtual learning experience.

Teacher-Student Relationships and SEL. A substantial component of students' development and comprehension of social-emotional learning concepts is uniquely tied to the degree of comfort and understanding of the teachers with SEL (Gerics, 2019; Jones et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Participants' understanding of the impact teaching and implementing SEL skills virtually had on the teacher-student relationship came from their in-person, or lack thereof, experience of implementing SEL skills versus virtual implementation.

Whether participants experienced implementing SEL skills in person or not, their lived virtual experience weighed how they measured their success or lack thereof relating to their students. Participants who experienced extreme emotional and social turmoil could have compassion for their students' emotional and social inability to perform on a deeper level, therefore emphasizing more outstanding merit on the teacher-student relationship, reserving social-emotional learning skills.

Gerics (2019) cited some challenges teachers faced with implementing SEL skills in person: time constraints, lack of basic SEL knowledge, and lack of resources. The research was validated through participants, although no literature has been readily available to determine the challenges faced by implementing SEL skills virtually. Participants expressed that successful virtual implementation of SEL skills was inhibited by time constraints, lack of training, no flexibility, lack of resources, and no prior experience with SEL prior to switching to a virtual platform of teaching, which hindered the relationship between the teacher and the student being successful.

Implications

The findings of this study have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications that justify further consideration for several groups of people. This study could be beneficial to teachers, school counselors, researchers, parents, and other mental health professionals. As it pertains to theory, participants believed with proper training, implementing SEL skill sets in person or virtually to students would be beneficial in helping middle school students reach the Maslow's self-actualization level on the hierarchy of needs pyramid. Empirically, there had been little literature based on implementing SEL skills virtually amid a pandemic. Furthermore, there is limited research regarding how teachers in general implement SEL skills in middle schools and

its effectiveness in urban schools. Practically, participants shed light on the lack of research surrounding the implementation of SEL skills as mandated by the Department of Education in Illinois and the challenges faced amid a pandemic.

Theoretical Implication

This study has theoretical implications that should be considered for researchers exploring implementing social emotional skills using a virtual platform amid a time of crisis. The Maslow hierarchy of needs theory was appropriate for this study because it examined the hierarchy of needs of students who had received teaching on SEL skills using a virtual platform amid a state of emergency pandemic. Focusing on these needs is consistent with Noltermeyer et al. (2020) argument for children's needs of satisfaction of the lower three needs (psychological, safety, and love) before they can develop growth (esteem, self-actualization) on the higher level. Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be described as the basic needs of humanity being met for growth (Maslow 1943).

The findings of this study revealed that not only did the students struggle with understanding their own emotions as they attempted to navigate the new way of teaching and learning during COVID-19, but the participants did as well. For instance, participants used words such as "stressed," "challenging," "complex," and "big shift" when explaining their experience with implementing SEL skills virtually during COVID-19. Due to this deficiency, participants could not successfully follow Illinois' mandate in implementing SEL skills using a virtual platform. It was also shown how the effects of lack of training caused participants to shy away from using a virtual platform when implementing SEL skillsets. Due to a lack of research on this subject matter, most participants articulated challenges in knowing that the virtual implementation of the SEL skills was working to assist the students in moving through the

hierarchy of needs pyramid. Some participants contributed to a lack of training, communication, and experience, and their emotional turmoil from COVID-19, which allegedly prohibited them from making and seeing progress in a virtual setting compared to the classroom.

Considering self-actualization as the highest need being met on Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid, one can examine the participants' focus on taking action to address the lower needs, which included the students' esteem. Participants indicated that students' different academic levels impeded them from being their authentic selves because of a lack of understanding. Not only was the students' esteem impacted by lack of understanding, but several participants hinted that the lack of necessities also diminished the esteem of some of the students. The overall purpose of teaching and implementing SEL skills may promote classroom structure, academic improvement, increase attendance, and decrease negative behaviors; therefore, using Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a foundation can provide teachers with an understanding of the importance of SEL skill being taught, virtually or face-to-face, with middle schoolers.

Empirical Implication

There are also empirical implications for this research. For those studying virtual implementation of SEL skills, this study examined the lived experiences of teachers who executed this at the onset and duration of COVID-19. Present-day literature focused on face-to-face implementation of SEL skills in elementary and high school, but lacked teachers' perspective, specifically urban middle school teachers. It was discovered that Illinois, middle school teachers who experienced teaching and implementing SEL skills for the first time, virtually to middle-school students exhibited difficulty and significant challenges with fulfilling this mandate as outlined throughout the Illinois Board of Education procedures.

Based on middle school teachers' expectations, they alluded to a need for more training in implementing these skills successfully using a virtual platform. Due to urgency and lack of training on virtual implementation, they felt unprepared, stressed, overwhelmed, fearful, and unsuccessful, which influenced their perspective of implementing SEL skill sets virtually, given it had never been done prior to the pandemic. They also felt a sense of guilt in trying to navigate which is more important, academics or following the mandate of implementing SEL skills, causing some to have anxiety and questioning the efficacy of their teaching strategies. Upon building rapport with the students and obtaining information about their overarching needs, it became increasingly challenging knowing what would happen next in their stages of development and not some control over future outcomes.

Although teaching and implementing social-emotional learning skills was mandated, regardless of the platform used, many found the interventions of SEL skill sets to be helpful, but in a classroom, as opposed to using a virtual platform. The participants vocalized SEL skills being vital to the development of students in middle school and being able to teach it virtually would increase the student's ability to learn additional skills needed for the future, for instance online learning used in high school. The findings from this study promote understanding and awareness of how teachers' implementing SEL skills and developing relationships with students virtually during COVID-19 can be negatively affected. Even though teachers encountered many challenges, there were little to no studies on their experiences on using a virtual platform to implement SEL skill sets to middle school students during a time of crisis and its influence on the teacher-student relationship. This study adds to the gap in the literature on SEL learning concerning urban middle school teachers.

Practical Implication

From a practical standpoint, although participants had not implemented SEL skills virtually before COVID-19, participants authenticated previous studies' challenges with implementation that included time restraints (Todd et al., 2022; Lee, 2023; Huynh, 2021), lack of training, no prior experience with SEL, and limited resources. Illinois middle school teachers spoke on the importance of SEL skills, especially in urban school districts, and its success with the teacher-student relationship; however, they struggled to implement it virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As previously divulged, virtual implementation challenges lie with time restraints as opposed to academics against SEL, lack of training and knowledge of SEL, and available resources being immediately available for learning SEL skills (Todd et al., 2022; Lee, 2023; Huynh, 2021). Participants described that many of the challenges with virtual SEL implementation were contingent upon the training and experience with SEL. Participants disclosed that given that the state of Illinois mandates SEL skills be included in academics if proper training on implementing it using a virtual platform was given at the bare minimum, an implementation may have been less complicated. According to the participants who had implemented SEL skills in person before using a virtual platform, school administrators who valued SEL skills and found it helpful to the classroom experience provided adequate training, resources, coaching, and accountability to those teaching and implementing SEL skills regularly within the classroom setting.

Additionally, in response to participants' experience with a lack of training in SEL implementation, whether in person or virtually, "institutions of higher learning need to start establishing courses in which teacher candidates are exposed to the fundamentals of SEL"

(Gerics, 2019, p. 140) as well as how to implement SEL skills using a virtual platform.

Participants emphasized that the more they researched and self-taught themselves ways to implement SEL skills using a virtual platform, the less frustrating and difficult it was to implement the skills and build and maintain relationships with the students. Nonetheless, if academic teaching programs fail to incorporate SEL into their curriculum, the responsibility of experience, training, and resources will either fall on the individual, district, or state in which it is mandated.

Delimitations and Limitations

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explain how urban middle school teachers perceive their experience teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing them during a pandemic. This section presents the delimitations and limitations of the study.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study included the participants' work experience in urban Illinois school districts with social-emotional learning and its implementation during COVID-19 using a virtual platform. This study was purposefully made to fit human participants over 18 to prevent delays in executing the study. Each participant must have taught SEL skills to middle schoolers virtually during the pandemic. Each participant had to hold either a bachelor's degree or higher in education studies, and each participant had to have one year of teaching experience. The participants were sixth- through eighth-grade teachers. No delimitations were placed based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or age. While the participants had to teach virtually in Illinois amid COVID-19, there were no restrictions on the type of schools they represented if they were

in an urban area. The chosen delimitations were done to ensure the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Limitations

Illinois schools with similar demographics are expected to present some limitations in diversity. One such restriction was that I was a human instrument for research; given the practice established by Moustakas (1994), there were still prejudices I brought into the study connected to the experience. Bracketing was initiated during this study due to my stance on adequately implementing SEL skills in urban school districts.

Another limitation included transferability and diversity. All participants were African American, with no other ethnic group involved. All but one participant worked in the same region. The results of this study cannot be transferred to other urban middle school teachers apart from urban Illinois school districts with certainty, as it would be impossible to know their independent experiences with the phenomenon besides those in urban areas. Being from a metropolitan area alone with limited resources, there is a possibility that the participants would not be afforded the same opportunities as teachers from other demographically diverse regions.

Gender was another limitation, as only two females participated in this study. More on a woman's perspective on implementing SEL skills and the teacher-student relationship amid COVID-19 were not investigated but should be considered for future research. One final limitation was the sample size. While the sample size allowed for in-depth individual and group interviews, significant feedback and details about teachers' lived experiences could be hindered, given that not all had experience with SEL implementation prior to COVID-19. Because of COVID-19 and the time of year of this study, a pilot could not be performed, which constituted an initial limitation of the study. Further research must justify the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The existing study focused on the experience of 10 middle school teachers in an urban area who implemented social-emotional skills virtually in Illinois and the mandate to adhere to the educational standards administered by the Illinois State Board of Education. Suggestions for future research are proposed from the findings, practical implications, delimitations, and limitations associated with this research. While this study contributed valuable information to the existing body of literature on SEL, future research on the virtual implementation of SEL skills should be explored.

While this study addressed a research gap, it is restricted in its transferability to a more expansive population of urban middle school teachers outside of the Chicago, Illinois region. To strengthen the multiplicity of this study, quantitative research and a case study should be considered and carried out. Research involving participants from different geographical regions would provide a unique perspective encompassing issues since this study was restricted to urban middle school teachers in Illinois. Studies with participants from other states may contain differentiating cultural, socio-economic, and sociological perspectives than those in Illinois since limited states have the mandate of SEL built into their educational standards. Future research should include diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging, as this study included African American participants who taught in Illinois.

As a result, some of the uniqueness of an individual's experiences based on their geographical and cultural lens may be absent. Future research could also focus on the student's caregiver and assess their experience with the virtual implementation of SEL skills alongside their adolescent child. Finally, while we evaluated the phenomenon of urban middle school teachers, a future study should address how school counselors connect SEL with students who

were provided an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which addresses a student's behavioral and behavioral needs. Vital considerations should be given to the topics offered for future research on how virtual implementation of SEL skills impacts the functioning of other types of personnel within the school.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explain how urban middle school teachers perceived their experiences teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing them virtually during a pandemic. Throughout participant interviews, questions were asked and answered about the impact, if any, on the teacher-student relationship. Participants' lived experiences provided clarity and an overview of the problem created to allow others to glean insight into the problem studied. Concerning the implications identified from the research, if taken seriously, a systematic change could minimize the challenges faced if virtual implementation of SEL skills is provided amid a pandemic or other reasons.

First, suppose teachers are mandated in Illinois to teach and implement SEL skills in their educational curriculum. In that case, the question remains: why were teachers not provided adequate training and student resources in every school district, including the less fortunate? Awareness of the mandate and the importance of implementing SEL skills were present to all participants, and the hindrance was threatening to both the teachers and students. Nevertheless, awareness and understanding of implementing SEL skills virtually is the difference between implementing and not implementing this evidence-based teaching model.

Secondly, the results of this data collection have shed light on the challenges urban middle school teachers face with teaching and implementing SEL skills virtually. Although the teachers who taught and implemented SEL skills in person valued and found these skills valid, it

was demonstrated that the lack of proper training, resources, and prior experience depended on the success of this new learning norm. Teachers can desire to follow Illinois standards of teaching and implementing SEL skills but not fully execute the requirements due to the ideal of academic subjects being more critical than SEL skills alone. This study further unveiled the quest for instructional time, and many teachers, regardless of location, would choose academics over SEL—acting upon the premise of an inability to do both using a virtual platform because of time restraints. Intentional efforts should be made to provide teachers with opportunities for growth using solid and specific ways to integrate SEL and academics successfully, regardless of the teaching platform.

Additionally, endeavors should be initiated at a higher education level to incorporate SEL strategies and tools into teachers' coursework in preparation for successful completion. The lack of foundational knowledge of SEL content and teaching it virtually could lead teachers (especially new ones) to feelings of frustration, stress, confusion, and a lack of comfortability, forcing one to dismiss the implementation of SEL for the lack of basic knowledge and understanding. Given Illinois' development and adoption of SEL standards into its academic curriculum, it becomes imperative that educators are both prepared and SEL-competent in all areas.

The research study highlights the need for additional teacher training when teaching and implementing SEL skills, regardless of the teaching platform. Knowing the importance of SEL skills and their positive effects on middle schoolers, educators must aim to include—and not neglect—the critical components of social-emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, thereby allowing success for the student through content mastery. Participants frequently stated that with the proper

training, resources, and support, implementing SEL skills and the teacher-student relationship would be successful if they needed to use a virtual teaching platform for a long time.

REFERENCES

- 5 Chicago News. (2020, March 13). *All Illinois schools to close due to coronavirus, governor announces*. Chicago: NBCUniversal Media, LLC. Retrieved on June 27, 2021 from <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/all-illinois-schools-to-close-over-coronavirus-governor-announces/2236775/>.
- Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B., Köller, M. M., & Klusmann, U. (2020). Measuring teachers' social-emotional competence: Development and validation of a situational judgment test. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11* doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00892
- American Counseling Association. (2014). *2014 ACA code of ethics*. <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2014-code-of-ethics-finaladdress.pdf>. Retrieved on June 6, 2021.
- American Psychological Association [APA] (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association. (7th ed.)*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ansorger, J. (2021). An Analysis of Education Reforms and Assessment in the Core Subjects Using an Adapted Maslow's Hierarchy: Pre and Post COVID-19. *Education Sciences, 11*(8), 376. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080376>
- Asim, S., Ponnors, P. J., Bartlett, C., Parker, M. A., & Star, R. (2020). Differentiating instruction: For middle school students in virtual learning environments. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 86*(3), 19-31.
- Aviles, A. M., Anderson, T. R., & Davila, E. R. (2006). Child and adolescent social-emotional development within the context of school. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 11*(1), 32-39.

- Bahr, N., & Pendergast, D. (2012) What's happening down under: Young adolescent education in Australia. In Vagle, M D (Ed.) *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education [Volume 60: Adolescent Cultures, School, and Society]*. Peter Lang Publishing, Germany, pp. 227-244.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioural change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191
- Bain, S. F., Rueda, B., Mata-Villarreal, J., & Mundy, M. (2011). Assessing mental health needs of rural schools in South Texas: Counselors' perspectives. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 14, 1–11. <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/11998.pdf>
- Bendici, R. (2020). How to remotely support Social-Emotional Learning: Social-Emotional Learning during remote learning will be a challenge for school districts. *Tech & Learning*, 20. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A636288758/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=BIC&xid=9be71202
- Blad, E. (2017, September 20). Social-emotional learning; "The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development" *Education Week*, 37(05), 5. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A507672536/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=BIC&xid=91e91c97
- Bland, A. M., & DeRobertis, E. M. (2020). Maslow's unacknowledged contributions to developmental psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 60(6), 934–958. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167817739732>.
- Boeree, C. G. (2006). Abraham Maslow. Retrieved February 2024.

- Bradberry, T. & Greaves, J. (2005). *The emotional intelligence quick book: Everything you need to know to put your eq to work*. Fireside.
- Brasseur, S., Grégoire, J., Bourdu, R., & Mikolajczak, M. (2013). The profile of emotional competence (PEC): Development and validation of a self-reported measure that fits dimensions of emotional competence theory. *PloS One*, 8(5), e62635.
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0062635
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Burleson, B., Nelson, R. E., & Tollefson, N. (1980). Elementary teachers' and mothers' attitudes toward affective education. *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling*, 15(2), 147-151.
- Bynum, W., & Varpio, L. (2018). When I say ... hermeneutic phenomenology. *Medical Education*, 52(3), 252-253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.13414>
- Calderon, V. (2020, June 16). *U.S. parents say COVID-19 harming child's mental health*. Washington, D.C.: Gallup News. Retrieved on June 27, 2021 from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312605/parents-say-covid-harming-child-mental-health.aspx>.
- Calkins, H. M. (2019). *Parent and teacher perception of the importance of Social-Emotional Learning in the schools*. (Order No. 1166). [Master of Science theses and dissertation, Illinois State University]. <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1166>
- Capurso, M., Dennis, J. L., Salmi, L. P., Parrino, C., & Mazzeschi, C. (2020). Empowering children through school re-entry activities after the COVID19 pandemic. *Continuity in Education*, 1(1), 64-82. <https://doi.org/10.5334/cie.17>

- Carroll, A., Houghton, S., Forrest, K., McCarthy, M., & Sanders-O'Connor, E. (2020). Who benefits most? predicting the effectiveness of a social and emotional learning intervention according to children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. *School Psychology International, 41*(3), 197-217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034319898741>
- Cauchon, D. (1999, April 13). Zero-tolerance policies lack flexibility. *USA Today: Education News*. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/educate/ednews3.htm>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. (2021, May 25). What is COVID-19. *National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505369.pdf>
- Chung, S., & McBride, A. M. (2015). Social and emotional learning in middle school curricula: A service-learning model based on positive youth development. *Children and Youth Services Review, 53*, 192-200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.04.008>
- Cipriano, C., Barnes, T. N., Pieloch, K. A., Rivers, S. E., & Brackett, M. (2019). A multilevel approach to understanding student and teacher perceptions of classroom support during early adolescence. *Learning Environments Research, 22*(2), 209-228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-018-9274-0>
- Cipriano, C. & Brackett, M. (2020, April 7). Teachers are anxious and overwhelmed. They need SEL now more than ever. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-07-teachers-are-anxious-and-overwhelmed-they-need-sel-now-more-than-ever>.
- Coleman, J. C., & Hendry, L. B. (1999). *The nature of adolescence*. Psychology Press.
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2020). *What is SEL?* <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2015). *Social and emotional learning (SEL) and student beliefs: Implication for the safe schools/healthy students core elements*. Chicago: Author. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505369.pdf>
- Colling, K. P. (2018). *The relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and student performance* (Order No. 10831034) [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Conderman, G., Walker, D. A., Neto, J. R., & Kackar-Cam, H. (2013). Student and teacher perceptions of middle school climate. *The Clearing House*, 86(5), 184-189.
doi:10.1080/00098655.2013.802214
- Conley, D. (2014). Common Core: Development and Substance and commentaries. *Social Policy Report.*, 28(2), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2014.tb00079.x>
- Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Medsurg Nursing*, 25(6), 435-436
- Cope, D. G. (2014). Methods and meanings: Credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41(1), 89-91. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.89-91>
- Cowan, R. J., Swearer, S. M., & Sheridan, S. M. (2004). Home—school collaboration. In C. D. Spielberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of applied psychology, Volume 1* (. Elsevier Science & Technology. Credo Reference:
http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/estappliedpsyc/home_school_collaboration/0?institutionId=5072
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Cypress, B. (2018). Qualitative research methods: A phenomenological focus. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 37(6), 302-309. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DCC.0000000000000322>
- Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J. *et al.* A Wake-Up Call: Equity, Inequality and Covid-19 Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning. *Postdigit Sci Educ* 2, 946–967 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00187-4>
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>
- Dolev, N., & Leshem, S. (2017). Developing emotional intelligence competence among teachers. *Teacher Development*, 21(1), 21-39. doi:10.1080/13664530.2016.1207093
- Domitrovich, C. E., Bradshaw, C. P., Berg, J. K., Pas, E. T., Becker, K. D., Musci, R., . . . Ialongo, N. (2016). How do school-based prevention programs impact teachers? Findings from a randomized trial of an integrated classroom management and social-emotional program. *Prevention Science*, 17(3), 325-337. doi:10.1007/s11121-015-0618-z
- Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*. McKinsey & Company. <https://fresnostate.edu/kremen/about/centers-projects/weltycenter/documents/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' Social-Emotional Learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

- Eccles, J. S., & Midgley, C. (1990). Changes in academic motivation and self-perception during early adolescence. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & T. P. Gullota (Eds.), *From childhood to adolescence: A transitional period?* (pp. 134–155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., et al. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, *48*(2), 90.
- Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A., & Spinrad, T. L. (2007). Prosocial development. In N. Eisenberg, W. Damon, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of childhood psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development*, *6*(3), pp. 646–718. John Wiley & Sons.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0311>
- Elias, M. J. (2019). What if the doors of every schoolhouse opened to social-emotional learning tomorrow: Reflections on how to feasibly scale up high-quality SEL. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(3), 233-245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1636655>
- Elias, M. J. (2009). Social-emotional and character development and academics as a dual focus of educational policy. *Educational Policy (Los Altos, Calif.)*, *23*(6), 831-846.
[doi:10.1177/0895904808330167](https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904808330167)
- Farahmand, F. K., Grant, K. E., Polo, A. J., Duffy, S. N., & DuBois, D. L. (2011). School-based mental health and behavioral programs for low-income, urban youth: A systematic and meta-analytic review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *18*(4), 372–390.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2011.01265.x>.
- Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of*

noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved on March 11, 2021 from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED542543>

Gerics, Joseph George, "A Qualitative Study on Urban Middle School Teachers' Perspective of Social and Emotional Learning as Formed through Personal and Occupational Experience" (2019). *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*. 2252.
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2252>

Goldstein, K. (1940). *Human Nature*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press.

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60-71. doi:10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831

Gordon, R., Ji, P. Mulhall, P., Shaw, B., & Weissberg, R.P. (2011). Social-Emotional Learning for Illinois students: Policy, practice, and progress. In: *The Illinois Report: 2011*. Urbana, IL: Institute for Government and Public Affairs.

Graham, A., Phelps, R., Maddison, C., & Fitzgerald, R. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher views. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, 17(4), 479-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.580525>

Green, A. L., Ferrante, S., Boaz, T. L., Kutash, K., & Wheeldon-Reece, B. (2021). Social and emotional learning during early adolescence: Effectiveness of a classroom-based SEL program for middle school students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58(6), 1056-1069.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22487>.

Greenberg, M.T., Weissberg, R.P., O'Brien, M.U., Zins, J.E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., Elias, M.J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through

- coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, 58, 466–474.
- Gregorian, N. (2020, December). *Fluent family wellbeing study: Research report for the Jed Foundation*. New York, New York. Retrieved on June 27, 2021 from https://www.jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Family-Wellbeing_JED-report_12-28-20.pdf.
- Gregory, A., & Cornell, D. (2009). "Tolerating" adolescent needs: Moving beyond zero-tolerance policies in high school. *Theory into Practice: A Person-Centered Approach to Classroom*, 48(2), 106-113. doi:10.1080/00405840902776327
- Gregory, J. F. (1995). The crime of punishment: Racial and gender disparities in the use of corporal punishment in U.S. public schools. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 64(4), 454-462. doi:10.2307/2967267
- Gross, H. (2020, April 22). During COVID-19, teachers can support students using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. *Perspective*. <https://www.ednc.org/perspective-during-covid-19-teachers-can-support-students-using-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/>
- Guillen, D. E. F. (2019). Qualitative research: Hermeneutical phenomenological method. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, 7(1), 201-229. <https://doi.org/10.20511/pyr2019.v7n1.267>
- Hargreaves, A. (2001). Emotional geographies of teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 1056–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0161-4681.00142>
- Harrell, A. W., Mercer, S. H., & DeRosier, M. E. (2009). Improving the social-behavioral adjustment of adolescents: The effectiveness of a social skills group intervention. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18(4), 378-387.

- 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. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1093/cs/cdx029>
- Heinonen, K. (2015). van manen's method and reduction in a phenomenological hermeneutic study. *Nurse Researcher, 22*(4), 35-41. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.22.4.35.e1326>
- Hen, M., & Goroshit, M. (2016). Social-emotional competencies among teachers: An examination of interrelationships. *Cogent Education, 3*(1), 1151996. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1151996>
- Heppner, P. P., Wampold, B.E., Owen, J., Thompson, M. N., & Wang, K. T. (2016). *Research Design in Counseling*. Cengage Learning.
- Hoffman, D. M. (2017;2009). Reflecting on social-emotional learning: A critical perspective on trends in the United States. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(2), 533-556. doi:10.3102/0034654308325184
- Humphries, M. L., Williams, B. V., & May, T. (2018). Early childhood teachers' perspectives on social-emotional competence and learning in urban classrooms. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 34*(2), 157-179. doi:10.1080/15377903.2018.1425790
- Huynh, V., Giang, T., Nguyen, T., & Dinh, D. (2021). Exploring the challenges of social-emotional learning integration in secondary schools: A phenomenological research in vietnam. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 14*, 621-635. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S300748>
- Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE]. (n.d.). *School wellness: Social-Emotional Learning*. <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Social-Emotional-Learning.aspx>

Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE]. (n.d.). *Discipline*.

https://www.isbe.net/Documents/discipline_discrim.pdf.

Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE]. (2016). *Discipline*. <https://www.isbe.net/discipline>.

Immordino-Yang, M. H. (2016). *Emotions, learning, and the Brain: Exploring the educational implications of affective neuroscience*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

January, A. M., Casey, R. J., & Paulson, D. (2011). A meta-analysis of classroom-wide interventions to build social skills: Do they work?. *School Psychology Review*, *40*(2), 242-256.

Jeloudar, S. Y., Yunus, A. S. M., Roslan, S., & Nor, S.M. (2011). Teachers' emotional intelligence and its relation with classroom discipline strategies based on teachers' and students' perceptions. *Journal of Psychology*, *2*(2), 95-102.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09764224.2011.11885468>

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. doi:10.3102/0034654308325693

Jensen, S. K., Berens, A. E., & Nelson, C. A. (2017). Effects of poverty on interacting biological systems underlying child development. *The Lancet. Child and Adolescent Health*, *1* (3), 225–239. [https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1016/S2352-4642\(17\)30024-X](https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1016/S2352-4642(17)30024-X).

Jones, S.M., Bouffard, S.M., Weissbourd, R. (2013, May). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *94* (8), 62–65.

Jones, S. M., & Kahn, J. (2017). The evidence base for how learning happens: A consensus on social, emotional, and academic development. *American Educator*, *41*(4), 16.

- Kalu, M. E. (2019). Using emphasis-purposeful sampling-phenomenon of Interest–Context (EPPiC) framework to reflect on two qualitative research designs and questions: A reflective process. *Qualitative Report*, 24(10), 2524-2535.
- Kennedy-Lewis, B. L. (2015). Second chance or no chance? A case study of one urban alternative middle school. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(2), 145-169. doi:10.1007/s10833-014-9242-0.
- Kodelja, Z. (2019). Violence in schools: Zero tolerance policies. *Ethics and Education: Education and Hope*, 14(2), 247-257. doi:10.1080/17449642.2019.1587682
- Konecki, K. T. (2019). Creative thinking in qualitative research and analysis. *Qualitative Sociology Review: QSR*, 15(3), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.3.01>
- Krezmien, M. P., Leone, P. E., & Achilles, G. M. (2016;2006;). Suspension, race, and disability: Analysis of statewide practices and reporting. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 14(4), 217-226. doi:10.1177/10634266060140040501
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>
- Lázaro-Visa, S., Palomera, R., Briones, E., Fernández-Fuertes, A. A., & Fernández-Rouco, N. (2019). Bullied adolescent's life satisfaction: Personal competencies and school climate as protective factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1691. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01691
- Lee, J. (2023). “Teach what’s good for learners”’: Adaptive teacher pedagogy for social and emotional learning in malawi. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 102, 102870. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102870>

- Lerner, R. M., & Steinberg, L. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of adolescent psychology, volume 1: Individual bases of adolescent development* (Vol. 1). John Wiley & Sons.
- Levers, L. L., Anderson, R. I., Boone, A. M., Cebula, J. C., Edger, K., Kuhn, L., et al. (2008, March). *Qualitative research in counseling: Applying robust methods and illuminating human context*. Based on a program presented at the ACA Annual Conference & Exhibition, Honolulu, HI. Retrieved June 27, 2008, from <http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas08/Levers.htm>
- Lietz, C. A., Langer, C. L., & Furman, R. (2006). Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research in social work: Implications from a study regarding spirituality. *Qualitative Social Work: QSW: Research and Practice*, 5(4), 441-458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325006070288>
- Linsky, A. C. V., Hatchimonji, D. R., Kruzik, C. L., Kifer, S., Franza, N., McClain, K., . . . Elias, M. J. (2018). Students taking action together: Social action in urban middle schools. *Middle School Journal*, 49(4), 4-14. doi:10.1080/00940771.2018.1488469
- Lopes, J., Silva, E., Oliveira, C., Sass, D., & Martin, N. (2017). Teacher's classroom management behavior and students' classroom misbehavior: A study with 5th through 9th-grade students. *Revista Electrónica De Investigación Psicoeducativa y Psicopedagógica*, 15(3), 467-490. doi:10.14204/ejrep.43.17075
- Lopes, P. N., Mestre, J. M., Guil, R., Kremenitzer, J. P., & Salovey, P. (2012). The role of knowledge and skills for managing emotions in adaptation to school: Social behavior and misconduct in the classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(4), 710-742. doi:10.3102/0002831212443077

- Main, K., & O'Neil, M. A. (2018). Social-Emotional Learning in the middle grades. In S. B. Mertens & M. M. Caskey (Eds.), *Literature reviews in support of the middle-level education research agenda* (pp. 155–174). Information Age Publishing.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370-396.
doi:10.1037/h0054346
- Maslow, A. H. (1948). Higher and lower needs. *Journal of Psychology*, *26*, 433.
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F1290609779%3Faccountid%3D12085>
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Maslow, A. H. (1958). A dynamic theory of human motivation. In C. L. Stacey & M. DeMartino (Eds.), *Understanding human motivation* (p. 26–47). *Howard Allen Publishers*.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/11305-004>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company.
- Maslow, A. H. (1987). *Motivation and personality (3rd ed.)*. Delhi, India: Pearson Education.
- McCrickerd, J., & Philosophy Documentation Center. (2016). Emotions, learning, and the Brian: Exploring the educational implications of affective neuroscience, by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang. *Teaching Philosophy*, *39*(4), 547-552.
<https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201639481>
- McLeod, S. A. (2020, March 20). *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. Simply Psychology.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Merritt, E. G., 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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2012.12087517>
- Miller, K. E. (2021). A Light in Students' Lives: K-12 Teachers' Experiences (Re) Building Caring Relationships during Remote Learning. *Online Learning*, 25(1), 115-134.
- Miller, K. E., Riley, J., & Slay, L. (2021). School belonging matters now more than ever: Preparing teachers to foster a technology-mediated culture of care. *What Teacher Educators Should Have Learned from 2020*, 21.
- Modan, N. (2020 April 27). Pandemic-induced trauma, stress leading to 'uptick' in SEL need. *EducationDive*. <https://www.educationdive.com/news/pandemic-induced-trauma-stress-leading-to-uptick-in-sel-need/576710/>
- Moody, H. R. (2006). Later life and the farther reaches of human nature: Robert H. Binstock, Ph.D., editor. *The Gerontologist*, 46(5), 695-698. doi:10.1093/geront/46.5.695
- Moreno, G., & Scaletta, M. (2018). Moving away from zero tolerance policies: Examination of illinois educator preparedness in addressing student behavior. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 10(2), 93-110.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412995658
- Mutch, C. (2021). 'Maslow before Bloom': Implementing a caring pedagogy during Covid-19. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work.*, 18(2), 69–90. <https://doi.org/10.24135/teacherswork.v18i2.334>
- Myers, C. L., & Holland, K. L. (2000). Classroom behavioral interventions: Do teachers consider the function of the behavior? *Psychology in the Schools*, 37(3), 271–280. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1002>.

- Nickerson, A. B., Fredrick, S. S., Allen, K. P., & Jenkins, L. N. (2019). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) practices in schools: Effects on perceptions of bullying victimization. *Journal of School Psychology, 73*, 74-88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.03.002>
- Noltemeyer, A., Bush, K., Patton, J., & Bergen, D. (2012). The relationship among deficiency needs and growth needs an empirical investigation of Maslow's theory. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(9), 1862-1867. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2012.05.021
- Noltemeyer, A., James, A. G., Bush, K., Bergen, D., Barrios, V., & Patton, J. (2020). The relationship between deficiency needs and growth needs the continuing investigation of Maslow's theory. *Child & Youth Services, 1-19*. doi:10.1080/0145935X.2020.1818558
- Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Hertzman, C., & Zumbo, B. D. (2014). Social-emotional competencies make the grade: Predicting academic success in early adolescence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 35*(3), 138-147. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2014.02.004
- Panayiotou, M., Humphrey, N., & Wigelsworth, M. (2019). An empirical basis for linking social and emotional learning to academic performance. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 56*, 193-204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.01.009>
- Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Cox, C., Garfield, R., & Chidambaram, P. (2021, May 26). *Mental health and substance use considerations among children during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/mental-health-and-substance-use-considerations-among-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

- Parnell, C.L. (2007). *Emotional intelligence, school success, and the black-white achievement gap* (Order No. 3300865) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42*(5), 533-544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Philippe, D. L. (2017). *Implementing social-emotional learning (SEL): An evaluation of Illinois teachers' capacity to provide SEL instruction and use the Illinois SEL standards* (Order No. 10286121). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1983952238). <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fimplementing-social-emotional-learning-sel%2Fdocview%2F1983952238%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>
- Pierson, R. (2013, May 3). *Every kid needs a champion* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFnMTHhKdkw>
- Poulou, M. S. (2017). Social-Emotional Learning and teacher-student relationships: Preschool teachers' and students' perceptions. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 45*(3), 427-435. doi:10.1007/s10643-016-0800-3
- Poulou, M. S., Bassett, H. H., & Denham, S. A. (2018). Teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence and Social-Emotional Learning: Students' emotional and behavioral difficulties in U.S. and greek preschool classrooms. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 32*(3), 363-377. doi:10.1080/02568543.2018.1464980

Prera, A. (2020, Sept 04). *Self-actualization*. Simply Psychology.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-actualization.html>.

Prewitt, E. (2017, January 30). Illinois governor signs law to include social-emotional screening in school health exams. Paces Connection.

<https://www.pacesconnection.com/blog/illinois-governor-signs-law-to-include-social-emotional-screening-in-school-health-examinations>

Puckett, T., Graves, C., & Sutton, L. C. (2019). Redefining School Discipline: Illinois and Other States' Responses to Negative Impact. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice.*, 16(1).

Purkey, W. W. (1970). *Self-concept and school achievement*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall

Read to Lead. (n.d.). Middle school: A critical moment. Ensuring students' social-emotional needs are met. *Association for Middle-Level Education*.

<http://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/1186/Middle-School-A-Critical-Moment.aspx>

Reza, F. (2020). COVID-19 and disparities in education: Collective responsibility can address inequities. *Knowledge Cultures*, 8(3), 68-75. <https://doi.org/10.22381/KC83202010>

Schnittka Hoskins, J. E. (2021). SEL in context: Exploring the relationship between school changes and social-emotional learning trajectories in a low-income, urban school district.

Interactions (Los Angeles, Calif.), 17(1)<https://doi.org/10.5070/D417154036>

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

<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarl>

y-journals%2Fsocial-emotional-learning-teachers%2Fdocview%2F2434476657%2Fse-
2%3Faccountid%3D12085

Schwadel, P. (2013). Changes in Americans' views of prayer and reading the bible in public schools: Time periods, birth cohorts, and religious traditions. *Sociological Forum (Randolph, N.J.)*, 28(2), 261-282. doi:10.1111/socf.12018

Second Step (2020). *Second step middle school remote learning advisory guide: A guide to using the second step middle school program advisory activities during school closure*. Committee for Children, 1-32. <https://cfccdn.blob.core.windows.net/static/pdf/middle-school/second-step-middle-school-covid-19-supports-advisory-guide.pdf>

Sengupta, S. S. (2011). *Growth in Human Motivation: Beyond Maslow*. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 47(1), 102–116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23070558>

Skiba, R. J. (2014). The failure of zero tolerance. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 22(4), 27.

Sloan, A., & Bowe, B. (2014). Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: The philosophy, the methodologies, and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design. *Quality & Quantity*, 48(3), 1291-1303. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-013-9835-3>

Smith, P. (2018, February 19). The battle over the paddle: Is corporal punishment an effective disciplinary tool in school or a form of abuse? *New York Times Upfront*, 150(9), 8+. https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/apps/doc/A528710560/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=BIC&xid=8988dd25

- Spievack, N & Gallagher, M. (2020, June 23). For Students of Color, Remote Learning Environments Pose Multiple Challenges. *Urban Institute*. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/students-color-remote-learning-environments-pose-multiple-challenges>
- Stilwell, W. E., & Barclay, J. R. (1977). *Effects of an affective-social education program over two years*. Lexington, Ky. (Mimeograph, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 143 425)
- Strahan, D. B., & Poteat, B. (2020). Middle-level students' perceptions of their Social-Emotional Learning: An exploratory study. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle-Level Education*, 43(5), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2020.1747139>
- Tan, K., Sinha, G., Shin, O. J., & Wang, Y. (2018). Patterns of Social-Emotional Learning needs among high school freshmen students. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 86, 217-225. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.033>
- Taormina, R. J., & Gao, J. H. (2013). Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 126(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155>
- Teske, S. C., Huff, B., & Graves, C. (2013). Collaborative role of courts in promoting outcomes for students: The relationship between arrests, graduation rates, and school safety. *Family Court Review*, 51(3), 418-426. doi:10.1111/fcre.12038
- The Pennsylvania State University. (2017). *Issue brief: Promoting Social-Emotional Learning in the middle and high school years*. State College, PA: Author. <https://www.rwjf.org/sociallearning>

- Todd, C., Smothers, M., & Colson, T. (2022). Implementing SEL in the classroom: A practitioner perspective. *The Clearing House*, 95(1), 18-25.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2021.2016566>
- United States Census Bureau. (2023). *Poverty Rate for the Black Population Fell Below Pre-Pandemic Levels*. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/black-poverty-rate.html#:~:text=Poverty%20rates%20in%202022%20were,not%20statistically%20different%20from%202019>
- Valente, S., Monteiro, A. P., & Lourenço, A. A. (2018;2019;). The relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom discipline management. *Psychology in the Schools*, 56(5), 741-750. doi:10.1002/pits.22218
- van Vulpen, K. S., Habegar, A., & Simmons, T. (2018). Rural school-based mental health services: Parent perceptions of needs and barriers. *Children & Schools*, 40(2), 104–111.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1093/cs/cdy002>
- Way, N., Reddy, R., & Rhodes, J. (2007). Students' perceptions of school climate during the middle school years: Associations with trajectories of psychological and behavioral adjustment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 40, 194-213.
 doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9143-y
- Weissberg, R. P., & Cascarino, J. (2013). Academic learning + social-emotional learning= national priority. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(2), 8-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309500203>
- White House. (2020, March 13). *Proclamation on declaring a national emergency concerning the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak*.

- <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>.
- Williams, A. L., Giano, Z., Merten, M. J., Herring, A., Delk, C. A., Gallus, K. L., Cox, R. B., & Shreffler, K. M. (2020). Middle School Teachers' Academic and Behavioral Perceptions of Their Students and Expectations for High School Graduation. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 40(8), 1061–1086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431619891244>
- World Health Organization [WHO]. (2021). *Coronavirus*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1.
- Yeager, D. S. (2017). Social-Emotional Learning programs for adolescents. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 73-94. doi:10.1353/foc.2017.0004
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (Sixth ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zhao, Y., & Jim, W. (2021). The changes we need: Education post COVID-19. *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(1), 3-12. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1007/s10833-021-09417-3>.
- Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M.C., Walberg, H.J. (Eds.). (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Zins, J. E., & Elias, M. J. (2006). *Social-Emotional Learning*. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (p. 1–13). National Association of School Psychologists.
- Zins, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2007). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. *Journal of Educational and*

Psychological Consultation, 17(2-3), 191-

210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410701413145>

Zinsser, K. M., & Dusenbury, L. (2015). Recommendations for implementing the new Illinois early learning and development standards to affect classroom practices for Social-Emotional Learning. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 17(1). Retrieved from <https://ecrp.illinois.edu/v17n1/zinsser.html> on September 13, 2020.

Zolkoski, S. M., Holm, J. M., West, E., Ismail, H., Kennedy, B. R., Votaw, A., Miller, G. J., Stocks, E., & Sass, S. M. (2021). Social-Emotional Learning in rural schools: Parents' perspectives. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 57(1), 43-46.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2021.1851587>

APPENDIX A

Open-Ended Individualized Interview Questions

1. Thank you for joining me for this interview today. If you could state your name and the grade level you teach, that would be helpful.
2. These next questions ask for you to share in detail how you perceive your experience in implementing social-emotional learning virtually to middle school students in an urban area here in Illinois.
3. How would you describe your experience in implementing social-emotional learning in a regular classroom setting prior to the COVID-19 pandemic? (RQ1)
4. What has been your experience in implementing SEL virtually with students in an urban school area? (RQ2)
5. What has been your experiencing in adhering to the mandate of implementing SEL competencies to meet Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) standards virtually? (RQ3)
6. How have you managed to develop a teacher-student relationship virtually? (RQ4)
7. What do you perceive as having the greatest impact on the teacher-student relationship while implementing SEL skills virtually? Why? (RQ5)
8. What has been the most challenging experience you have had with students when implementing Social-Emotional Learning virtually? (RQ4, RQ5)
9. What additional information would you like to share with me concerning the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning virtually that has not already been discussed in previous questions? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5)

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Interview Questions

The following are the focus group discussion questions.

1. Thank you all for joining me for this post-interview focus group. If you would not mind, please state your name (pseudonym given), the grade you currently teach, and your number of years' experience with implementing Social-Emotional Learning.
2. The next few questions will focus on your professional expertise in reference to implementing SEL during a pandemic.
3. What advice would you give future teachers who may not have experienced teaching and implementing SEL skills during a pandemic? (RQ1, RQ2)
4. Do you believe implementing SEL virtually has been beneficial to students? (RQ3)
 - a. Why or why not?
5. If the need to implement SEL virtually again arises, what challenges do you foresee new teachers having with the implementation of SEL? (RQ4, RQ5)
6. What advice would you give new teachers of SEL about how to overcome these challenges?
7. In closing, is there anything else you would like me and others to know about your virtual experience with SEL? (RQ2 – RQ5)

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship

Principal Investigator: Felicia Spratt, MS, LMHC, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Teach a population of students between 6th – 8th grade
2. Have a minimum of one years of teaching experience
3. Hold a bachelor's or higher in education.
4. Currently implement or have implemented social-emotional learning (SEL) virtually with middle-schoolers during COVID-19 in 2020-2021

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explain how urban middle school teachers perceive their experience teaching social-emotional learning (SEL) skills in Illinois after implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Teachers will participate in an initial individual virtual Zoom interview using a semi-structured format. The interviewing process will be audio recorded and will take 60-90 minutes to complete.
2. A focus group interview will be had with all participants. This segment should occur once for approximately 60-90 minutes.
3. A follow-up transcript review will be had with all participants, which should last 30 minutes. This will ensure the accuracy of transcribed quotes and statements aligned with themes generated from individual and focus group interviews. This conversation will be conducted using the online platform of Zoom.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The society in which we live can benefit from this study as it will assist the community in knowing and understanding the importance of SEL. This would serve as an entrance way to developing more wrap-around services to include more programs centered around SEL, especially during a pandemic.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms.
- Individual and focus group interviews will be conducted using an encrypted online communication platform such as Zoom. The researcher will conduct these online interviews in her home to ensure privacy where conversations will not be heard by others.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Once participants have completed the final procedure (transcript review), the participant should expect to receive a \$150 VISA gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your respective middle school. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, the

overall focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Felicia Spratt. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Courtney Evans-Thompson, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher/Investigator

Date

APPENDIX D

Participate Invitation Letter

Hello Teachers,

As a graduate student in the Community Care and Counseling department at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explain how urban middle school teachers perceive their experience while teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic. If you meet the participant criteria described below and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

You were selected to participate in the current research study because you are a middle school teacher in an Illinois, urban school district with a minimum of one year of teaching experience who has taught grades 6th through 8th virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and holds a bachelor's or higher in education. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one semi-structured interview, a focus group, and a short follow-up interview. The interviews and focus group should last 60-90 minutes each. The questions will focus on your perceptions and experience implementing social-emotional learning skills virtually and any impact it may have had on the student-teacher relationship in an urban middle school. Participants will be asked to review the transcripts for the interview and focus group recordings during the follow-up transcript review to check for trustworthiness/accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in this study, please contact me via email to schedule a date and time for your interview. A consent document is attached to this email via email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to your interview via email (as an attachment).

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Once participants have completed the final procedure (transcript review); the participant should expect to receive a \$150 VISA gift card.

You can also contact me at any time with questions regarding this research at: [REDACTED]. Thank you for your time. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Felicia S. Spratt, MS, LPC

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship

- Are you a middle school teacher in an Illinois urban school district?
 - Have you been teaching for a minimum of one year?
 - Do you have a bachelor's degree (or higher) in education?
- Did you teach social-emotional learning skills virtually during COVID-19:
- Do you want to share your perception on its implementation and the impact on the teacher-student relationship, if any at all?

If you answered **yes** to all these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explain how urban middle school teachers perceive their experience while teaching social-emotional learning skills in Illinois after implementing social-emotional skills virtually during a pandemic. Participants will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, post-interview focus group, and a follow-up interview, which will be conducted virtually at the teacher's convenience. The interviews and focus groups should each take 60-90 minutes, and the transcript review should not exceed 30 minutes. Illinois school districts in urban areas could benefit from this study by providing an avenue to what some have described as the missing piece (SEL) to academic success and benefit external partners who provide wrap-around services. These wrap-around services, specifically in a time of a pandemic, would include skills needed for developing healthy social-emotional children/adolescents in the homes, schools, community, and workplace. Once participants have completed the final procedure (transcript review); the participant should expect to receive a \$150 VISA gift card via email.

The study will be conducted virtually via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. If you would like to participate, please contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below. Felicia Spratt a doctoral candidate in the EdD Community Care and Counseling department at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Felicia Spratt at [REDACTED] for more information and to receive consent documentation.

APPENDIX F

IRB Approvals

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 7, 2022

Felicia Spratt
Courtney Evans-Thompson

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-205 A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship

Dear Felicia Spratt, Courtney Evans-Thompson,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-205 A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to "include more school districts within the state of Illinois" and change your participant criteria to a minimum of one year has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 11, 2021

Felicia Spratt
Courtney Evans-Thompson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-205 A Phenomenological Study of Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Skills Virtually and Its Influence on the Teacher-Student Relationship

Dear Felicia Spratt, Courtney Evans-Thompson,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office