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TEACHER PERCEPTION OF K-5 STUDENTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONAL HEALTH

BY

SCOTT SELF

DISSERTATION APPROVED:



Chair, Advisory Committee



Member, Advisory Committee



Member, Advisory Committee



Dean, Graduate School

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X Scott Self

Date: 4/1/2023

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BY

SCOTT SELF

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Eastern Kentucky University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION

2023

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father who adopted me from that orphanage in Bogota, Colombia. The example that they set for me, proving what is possible, has served me well.

“Cyrus Jones, 1810-1913, made his great grandchildren believe you could live to a 103; 103 is forever when you’re just a little kid, and so Cyrus Jones lived forever.”

-Dave J. Matthews, *Gravedigger*.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my loving wife, Katherine, for all her support and counsel. I also dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful Honey Badger, who has been singing in my heart and soul for nearly nine years!

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Abstract

Education has grown in complexity. Educational stakeholders are perpetually caught within the debate of what constitutes best practices. However, “the delicate fabric of the civilization into which successive generations are woven has unraveled, . . .” (Bloom, 1988, p. 57). Bereft of much of the traditional social and emotional family support, contemporary students have been yielding diminishing school engagement and waning school success. With students’ social-emotional health teetering toward the unhealthy, educators must accept, and therefore learn to thrive in the recursive nature of best practices, all while attempting to salvage their pupils’ social and emotional health (SEH). Thus, the lived experiences of educators offer a wealth of knowledge as educational stakeholders seek new perspectives and strategies to mitigate mounting educational impediments. Since social emotional health breeds community, and since community precedes effective education, consequently, educators’ voices deserve amplification and a powerful platform. What continues to be far removed from this discourse is a more thorough and more candid account of teachers’ perceptions of their students’ social emotional health. Social emotional learning curriculums, whether supplementary or embedded in the curriculum, are typically lacking a definite imperative as well as a tried and proven course of action. When the data allow us to excel past the theoretical and become pragmatic with fidelity, education will naturally become more effective and transformative. The results of this dissertation may align educational stakeholders’ efforts with positive, reliable strategies and outcomes.

Keywords: *Social-Emotional Competencies, Community, Social-Emotional Learning, School Engagement, and Social-Emotional Health.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For a couple decades, social emotional health (SEH) within education has taken center stage, revealing instability within academic settings (Elias et al., 1997; Estell & Perdue, 2013; Greenberg et al., 2003). Elias et al. (1997) described social-emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (p. 2). Educators have had to reexamine educational approaches to adequately accommodate gaps in the educational literature concerning students’ contemporary social emotional health. New relevant questions about the true nature of students’ SEH can be partially explained by parental responsibility alarmingly shifting to the shoulders of schools over the years (Bloom, 1988; NIMH, 2020; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). The essential purpose of schools is to educate students; however, schools must reevaluate the relevance of curricular content and their overall approach to student learning. Therefore, schools must revisit their own perception of social emotional health in the classroom as new social and emotional challenges arise, consequently presenting new opportunities for effective leadership (Coelho & Sousa, 2018; Yogev, 2013).

Whereas many of the gatekeepers of education may balk at a complete overhaul of educational practices to inculcate social-emotional learning, many administrators, teachers, parents, and students have sensed something amiss in the delivery of an educational experience. Consequently, evaluating the effectiveness of students’ education is most appropriate. Social and emotional deficiencies can manifest long after graduation for individuals, affecting the durability of the American social fabric (Bloom, 1988; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kemp-

Graham, 2018; Ringwalt et al., 2005). Various steps have been taken by schools to address many of the identified SE deficiencies and this is partially evidenced by augmented social-emotional curriculums, intervention programs, and monetary allocations (Elias et al., 2003; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Richardson & Shupe, 2003).

As society and modern social institutions have changed over time, the current social condition of school climate has produced a sense of urgency in response to a diminished sense of belonging and acceptance among students. Blum and Libbey (2004) shared their analysis of the progressive loss of community in the school setting, emphasizing a dearth of social-emotional competencies pervading and influencing student outcomes. This, therefore, profoundly affects both students and teachers, resulting in a waning sense of community as students progress from elementary to middle and then to high school. These researchers contend that this lack of connection or loss of community negatively affects students' academic outcomes, as well as their social and emotional health. Families and schools were once strong examples of communities that edified and upheld the collective good. However, now, innumerable shifting cultural and societal realities associated with upending traditional values, that once promised societal cohesiveness and stability, are prominent and actively erosive. Elias et al. (1997) argued that students do not learn as well in actual or in perceived isolation, and they argued that an optimal academic setting is inclusive of teacher-peer collaboration, along with the support and engagement from their parents or guardians, further elevating the notion of shared community preceding effective education. Elias et al. (1997) consistently emphasized the idea that the state of students' emotional stability affects their educational engagement, their will to work hard, and ultimately their general academic enjoyment. The reported importance and significance of educational foundations, consisting of partnerships among the family and the school, emerge

throughout social-emotional literature, indicating that America is still interested in a viable strategy to address the social and emotional deficits within the education system. The National Institute of Mental Health (2020) reported that between 2001 and 2017 the overall suicide rate in America grew 31%. In an age of modern luxuries and technological progress, one can only wonder how to account for the ever-growing suicide rate and its root causes. Burton (2019) alluded to Abraham Maslow, speaking about his theoretical hierarchy of needs, labeling the foundational four needs as *deficiency needs*. The deficiencies of social-emotional health are destructive, chipping away at the foundation of education, and can be observed and experienced in classrooms across the nation. Rory (2016) raised an important question concerning education and social change. His question is regarding American education during the colonial era, but the question is just as relevant when superimposed upon the contemporary educational landscape. Rory asked, “Could the common man, poorly informed and subject to manipulation by demagogues, uphold principles of fairness and honesty that [are] vital to the country’s future?” (p. 43).

Whether teachers are regarded as the frontline fighters or the last line of defense, researchers have at least acknowledged the critical role of educators’ attempts to deliver effective education. Teachers reported that they readily accept social and emotional instruction as part of their job (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013; Jacobs & Struyf, 2015; Moreira et al., 2013; Rae et al., 2017). Research emphasizes that teachers agree that there is a pressing need for social and emotional training beyond the scope of teacher certification; therefore, there is a clarion call for assessing social and emotional competencies among educators. Because successful implementation of social and emotional curriculum is heavily dependent upon the attitudes and dispositions of the teachers, it is imperative to understand the state of, the hindrances to, and the tenets of success,

regarding socio-emotional programming relative to teacher perception. Perhaps the dynamic of school hierarchy and infrastructure facilitates a rather blind implementation and evaluation of social-emotional learning. This may be partially due to the established employer/employee social contract that may place greater value on professional acquiescence significantly over teachers being encouraged to voice their opinions, desires, and perceptions, for better or for worse, free from official and unofficial sanction. Perhaps an inadvertent marginalization of honest feedback from teachers has produced a less than thorough cost-benefit analysis of SEL and its efficacy (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013; Jacobs & Struyf, 2015; Moreira et al., 2013; Rae et al., 2017).

It is worth pointing out that teacher perception of the need for and the benefit of SEL is necessary for efficacious implementation to have a fighting chance. Ascertaining an accurate vantage of teacher perception regarding students' social-emotional health is an integral component and a critical step towards synthesizing an effective response, helping to protect and even heal our students. So, what is an appropriate response?

Consequently, many of the individual and collective efforts to curb the unfortunate effects of the poor social-emotional conditions remain inadequately unaddressed. Therefore, many of the challenging educational issues are treated more like causes for poor social-emotional conditions, and less like the symptoms that they most certainly may be. There is an ever increasing need to understand these social phenomena in an honest and thoroughly contextualized manner. Any approach that addresses educational deficiencies outside the context of the social-emotional health of students is positioned disadvantageously and cannot hope to accurately diagnose the issue(s), most likely because the target is fixed incorrectly on the symptom(s) and not on the root cause(s). To further the point, Bloom, (1988) observed the gravity and toll of social-emotional deficiencies in both an indictment and a prognostication

when he appropriately claimed that “the delicate fabric of the civilization into which successive generations are woven has unraveled, and the children are raised, not educated” (p. 57).

Statement of the Problem

In the light of shifting educational imperatives and priorities, and despite well-intentioned efforts to create a patchwork for a deficient social-emotional fabric within schools, there persists a critical need to graduate from reactivity regarding SEL deficiencies to effectively addressing these issues through the implementation, and perhaps saturation, of well-researched best practices. What continues to be unknown is a truer understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the current social emotional health of students, which is central to establishing best practices to combat the numerous and nefarious pitfalls of students’ social and emotional health. This cannot be overstated.

It is unknown what impetus must precede effective school policies regarding students’ social-emotional health. By amplifying the voices representing educator perception, it can be learned if teachers perceive their hard-wrought efforts feckless or worthwhile, and, thus, foundational gaps can be addressed with high-impact practices and policies, thus positively affecting student stability throughout life’s course.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological, descriptive study was to characterize and to articulate the current state of K-5 teachers’ perceptions of their students’ social and emotional health, and of their capacity to adequately respond to students’ needs. Utilizing teacher candor, many previously studied factors associated with SEL have been assessed, and a more complete portrait of teachers’ attitudes has been ascertained. Data used in this study was collected by

interviews administered to K-5 teachers working in central Kentucky. The interview questions were adapted from gaps in the literature, and the participants for the inquiries were chosen through convenience sampling.

Research Question

This research was predicated on the method of description to gather the candid perceptions of educators who are tasked with preparing students academically and socially for the future. The following question was employed to guide this dissertation:

Will ascertaining an accurate vantage of teacher perception regarding students' social-emotional health [and their own] be an integral component and a critical step towards synthesizing an effective response, helping to protect and even heal our students?

Significance of the Study

This research contributed to the literature of social-emotional learning (SEL) by interviewing K-5 teachers about their mission and work, using qualitative methods. Despite a timely and burgeoning body of research that has explored a multitude of social-emotional factors pertaining to the education of K-5 students, there has been no other current research observed grappling directly with teachers' observations and perceptions of students' social-emotional health (SEH), based on teachers' lived experiences, and reported perceptions. This study furnished insights and understandings of teachers' perceptions of students' social-emotional health as it pertained to current student success in the classroom. The research also provided a panoramic purview of teachers' personal convictions regarding the manner of social-emotional learning implementation, furthering the body of knowledge.

Focused Significance of the Study

Students across our nation already struggle through so many impediments to a quality education, so when a pandemic arises, it further exacerbates existing obstacles to academic progress. Kulkarni et al. (2020) reported that COVID-19 “has caused an unprecedented impact on medical, political, administrative, financial, education, industries, and business sectors.” They go on to mention that COVID-19 has resulted in “a rise of mental health issues, emotional disturbances ...[and] academic stagnation” (p. 597). According to these researchers, lockdowns are responsible for pervasive maladies such as “depression, anxiety, stress, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, insomnia, irritability, anger, and frustration” (p. 598). To conclude their research, Kulkarni et al. (2020) asserted that major barriers exist for distance learning in our school populations such as the lack of “availability of android phones/supportive devices, accessibility to the Internet, and residence in remote settlements. . .” (p. 599). Scalabrini et al. (2020) supported these opinions as they claimed that COVID-19 “deeply affect[s] our sense of self and its spatio-temporal neuronal dynamics providing the prerequisites for the manifestation of fear and existential anxiety, thus disrupting the brain-world relation with significant repercussions on our psyche and on our daily lives” (p. 46). Consequently, COVID-19 has disturbed the already disrupted educational process to a profound degree, and so the social and emotional condition of students is even more central and critical to contemporary educational discourse.

This investigation may also continue to reveal unknown facets of the perpetually changing face of K-5 education in the light of new social-emotional realities, challenges, and opportunities. If a more viable and more accurate understanding of teachers’ attitudes concerning the effectiveness of social-emotional learning efforts in schools is ascertained, then perhaps

researchers can determine if teachers' actual perceptions could contribute to meaningful solutions aimed at addressing deficiencies in the social-emotional spectrum or if teacher perceptions have become either marginalized, misunderstood, skewed, or even disregarded altogether. Furtherance toward bridging this evident gap in knowledge catalyzed the empowerment of teachers and will continue to work to breed high-impact, educational practices, positively affecting students throughout their lives.

Definition of Terms

Elias et al. (1997) defined *social-emotional learning* (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (p. 2). The progenitors of this definition are members of the Research and Guidelines Committee of the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and have defined the *purpose of social-emotional learning* to be “to encourage and support the creation of safe, caring learning environments that build social, cognitive, and emotional skills” (p. viii). Social emotional learning (SEL) has also been defined as having to do with “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others” (Zins & Elias, 2007 p. 234). *Social-emotional health* (SEH) is defined as “the child’s developing capacity to form secure relationships, experience and regulate emotions, and explore and learn” (Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, 2020).

Positionality

For twenty-four years, I have served students in the secondary classroom. I have taught rural, urban, suburban, and international students. I have taught designated special needs individuals as well as designated gifted and talented. One thing I have learned through years of observation is that regardless of socio-economic background, secondary students struggle and thrive in common. Maslow's educational theorems and postulates have proven to be a guiding light throughout my professional tenure. There are so many moving pieces throughout the educational machinery and such a great need exists to recalibrate educational mechanisms. I believe that teachers need to be empowered at all stages of their pedagogical journeys. Part of this empowerment rests with comprehensive empathy extended to teachers on the part of administrators, policy makers, and educational philosophers. This study is an honest attempt to remove some of the professionally induced barriers, replacing them with free-flowing communication and a more honest discourse, untethered from typical fear and reluctance.

Teachers commiserate. Teachers' complaints are often the poignant evidence of discontent. In other words, Maslow's imperatives are true for teacher and pupil alike. It is most logical to deduce that teachers' social-emotional health is central to students' social-emotional health (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013; Jacobs & Struyf, 2015; Moreira et al., 2013; Rae et al., 2017). The literature is very clear on this. Administrators are struggling to address the overall school climate. The symbiotic relationships which contribute to student success across the social-emotional spectrum within education cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, throughout the literature students are depicted as less than proficient in conflict resolution skills, critical thinking skills, and tend to lack the wherewithal to problem solve within social-emotional contexts. Conversely, the state of these deficiencies may reside just as heavily in teacher populations, for

similar reasons. The idea that educators enter the profession “baggage free” and “well-equipped” is a dangerous and perhaps faulty presupposition. However, we continue to grapple with the idea that if this social-emotional “baggage” remains mostly unaddressed, it could greatly skew any reasonable reference point necessary for effective education to take place in most academic environs.

I have noticed that some teachers struggle in their roles as classroom managers. Chaos and lawlessness, so to speak, can make it difficult for the teachers and students alike. Students in these environments tend to be emotionally guarded-to their detriment-and are thereby distressed. Because school culture and classroom climate are symptomatically populated by varied degrees of social-emotional health, I think that further delving into an ongoing conversation about obstacles to SEH is a positive concept and endeavor. Many of the tasks that teachers are expected to perform in the classroom involve and require complex skill sets within critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal acuity, and communication.

At the international boarding school where I taught for sixteen years, I observed the phenomena of Maslow’s theories coming to life. For instance, when concerned parents and guardians brought their children to the boarding school, the administration typically emphasized that parents should not expect to see educational turn-around during the first six months. The reason for this is that it generally took six months for a child to start to trust his or her social and educational environment. Once the student began to trust the environment and to experience the stability that often ensued, the student usually brought their grades up, began to seek positive reinforcement, got involved in the co-curricular, and, basically, came back to life. Essentially, the students found true community, and their thriving trajectories were coextensive of a sense of social and emotional acceptance and belonging.

Statistics surrounding suicide, crime, divorce, and mental health conditions, as well as the breakdown of the family and the loss of language acquisition constitute and contribute to social-emotional deficiencies felt at every level of K-5 education. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has shaped a large portion of my educational philosophy. Regrettably, my job as an educator becomes more and more meaningful and crucial as students are presented with more and more obstacles between them and successful academic outcomes.

I believe the best way to disseminate cogent, social-emotional competencies is for educators to model the appropriate behavior for students and colleagues. For this behavior to be modeled with fidelity, educational practitioners must gain an accurate view of their own strengths and weaknesses in this regard. In my quarter-century in the secondary classroom, social-emotional learning has taken a back seat to many other school-related initiatives. Even when it has been introduced to a faculty, it is usually treated as another intervention that will die the death of a thousand qualifications, rife with great intentions, albeit, but fading before it has an opportunity to turn one life around. Teachers' perceptions of their own educational impact must be central, not peripheral, to schools addressing social-emotional health.

Beaty (2018) reported that the first introduction of an SEL framework for the purpose of scholastic implementation occurred in Illinois in 2004 with an improved revision in 2013. The main impetus behind my interest in SEL is a heartfelt concern to pinpoint a reliable cause *for* and a fitting solution *to* social-emotional deficiencies. This research provides a current and reliable vantage of K-5 teachers' perceptions of students' social emotional health. The participants include K-5 teachers who described their perceptions and experiences regarding students' current social-emotional health. The findings in this study could corroborate useful understandings and could certainly inspire future research.

Delimitations of the Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate and to understand teachers' perceptions and beliefs about students' social-emotional health. The researcher did not produce this research to develop a grounded theory nor did this research attempt to solve current maladies stemming from social-emotional learning deficiencies.

Assumptions

This study employed interviewing participants about their experiences in the classroom to learn what teachers thought and believed concerning the overall effectiveness of their schools' efforts to address relative social-emotional deficiencies. Collectively, six elementary teachers were interviewed for this phenomenological investigation. Personal identifying information on original surveys in its entirety will remain on my professional laptop computer and under two locks at my school office until the allotted time to destroy the materials has expired, at which time all personally identifiable information will be destroyed. It is assumed that all participants provided honest and accurate information regarding their thinking and beliefs during the duration of this study.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the educational system is called into question in terms of conventional responses and practices when considering professional opinions pertaining to students' social-emotional health. Knowing how teachers think and feel about the effectiveness of their schools' SEL instruction was essential to constructing a better understanding of effective SEL programming that supports students' emotional health and academic success.

The problem statement and the research questions allow for the purpose of this study to be realized through proper guidance on the principles of timeliness and need. The revelation of answers to the research questions created avenues useful to both practitioners and researchers, allowing them to address problems more effectively with viable, reliable solutions. These research questions were the foundation and driving force of all interview questions during data collection.

Defined terms, study limitations, assumptions, and positionality provided direction for how social and emotional components were pieced together in the formation of this research. These qualifiers also served to establish boundaries and to undergird the stated purpose of this study, as well as provide assurances that all information and relative interaction resulting from this investigation were ethically congruent with standards and best practices for research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to candidly explore the current K-5 teacher perception of students' social-emotional health and to discover what these teachers perceived as being best practices for delivering proactive social-emotional education. In this chapter, the theoretical framework, and the reasons for using this framework were established to guide and ground this study to ascertain relevant qualitative data. This chapter highlights the following pertinent theoretical positions: social-emotional learning needs, benefits of social-emotional learning, obstacles to social-emotional learning, teacher perception of social-emotional learning. Also included is how to best generate a renewed and practical sense of community, begetting a sense of belonging and acceptance within students, teachers, and administrators- all prerequisites to establishing sound student' social-emotional health. The indisputable case emerged for the strong correspondence between socially and emotionally healthy students and a renewed sense of community, supporting educational efficacy, as well as contributing to quality of life for students and teachers alike. Characteristics of teacher perception regarding social-emotional learning was assessed to help establish best practices for educators, deserving credence and attention. The conclusion of this chapter includes an abridged body of findings covering teachers' cultural learning, teaching, and perspectives. This chapter establishes what needs to be known about K-5 teacher perception pertaining to students' social-emotional health.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1956) established, within a humanistic framework, a hierarchy of needs that is widely accepted, debated, theorized, and applied to and within institutions ranging from education, to marriage, and to the family. This hierarchy consists of self-fulfillment needs, psychological needs, and basic needs (McLeod, 2020). As the social-emotional learning literature burgeons, and its applications become integral as well as accepted educational theory and practice, understanding the indispensable contributions to education that Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* holds, as well as the educational direction it provides, is critical. The grandest application of Maslow's theoretical framework lies in the stability it promotes. This indirectly promises that if educators will meet the basic needs of students or ensure that these needs are in the process of being met, then students will be able to enjoy a more authentic community and therefore will be able to learn more efficiently and effectively (McLeod, 2020).

Maslow's theory was developed in the 1930s and 1940s, in a time of geopolitical unrest. Maslow thought that by categorizing human needs, the notion of world peace was within reach, as we could accommodate for deficiencies and perpetuate proficiencies (Hoffman, 1992). In a 1968 interview, Maslow said, "the ultimate happiness for man is the realization of pure beauty and truth, which are the ultimate values" (Hoffman, p. 72). The point here is for educators to promote social-emotional health within education and thus catalyze empowerment of students in this pursuit, as guaranteed by state constitutions and educational statutes. A heavy incorporation of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* within classroom instruction produces stability for students, teachers, and families (Slaten et al., 2015). To add to the concept of Maslow's "truth," Maslow

wanted to test his theory to find out if emotionally healthy people perceive better, which is to say perceive in a healthier manner (Hoffman, 1992).

If, in fact, effective education *is* preceded by a true sense of community, then assimilating Maslow (1956) in a pragmatic way is the foundational component in delivering brighter futures for students. Janosz et al. (2008) underscored the idea that a true or truer sense of community, from the perception of the student, will not only prevent an unstable pattern of school engagement but may also mitigate the negative, social chain reaction resulting from school disengagement, specifically anti-social manifestations. Therefore, an extremely high premium is placed upon providing basic needs for students such as love and acceptance. Accordingly, without students' basic human needs met, educators cannot begin to hope for better futures for their students. Brighter futures will only likely stem from the subsequent character development of students, offered inherently in Maslow's hierarchy and its applications. Maslow stated, "the great educational experiences of my life . . . taught me what kind of person I was" (Hoffman, p.73). Oved (2017) argued that love is a prerequisite for the feeling of safety and that loving relationships preceded organized and civilized society. Oved concludes that love needs are basic needs for students, and this alone may merit further consideration of an overall approach towards improvement of the social emotional landscape in schools.

The Motivation of Maslow

Abraham Maslow (1956) addressed the question of what motivates humans, whether it be to learn, to thrive, or to love. Valiunas (2011) highlighted his contention with Maslow's self-fulfillment needs such as self-actualization, citing that some theorists believed that self-actualization was the gateway to humans becoming a selfish monstrosity of sorts. However, Fradera (2018) explained that Maslow's self-actualization was built around the concept of others.

For example, when someone serves another with virtue, that very act will build a sense of community and will be a positive for all involved. Skelsey-Guest (2014) cited Maslow introducing the idea of intrinsic needs and thus intrinsic values, such as truth, beauty, elegance, perfection, even after supposed self-actualization has occurred. Fradera (2018) believed that when more of a population achieves self-actualization-partially due to their basic needs being met, then creativity abounds and people feel less anxious and report higher levels of self-determination, with a myriad of other advantageous qualities that otherwise would have been absent in a life. Perhaps the motivation of Maslow is best described in terms of community, whether it is belonging to a community or being accepted by a community. Skelsey-Guest (2014) alluded to Maslow's belief that people want to know and want to be known, thereby constituting a key component in spurring intrinsic motivation. Wells (2018) pinpointed a barely perceptible hunger or longing or need, beyond Maslow's hierarchy, lurking on the soul's level. Wells (2018) further believed that when this hunger is satisfied, it uncovers a gift that we possess and can assume as part of our identity, thus, allowing people to realize that the strength of the community is proportional to the degree to which its members see these communities as more than the sum of their parts, worthwhile. Therefore, anything educators can incorporate to foster or increase student perception of community, belonging, and acceptance will yield greatly and will become useful in terms of social and emotional dividends, presently.

Maslow's Community

An educator that views classroom management and student discipline as an opportunity to grow and to nurture the student community is an agent of stability and an ambassador of Maslow. Conflict resolution is an essential social skill, whether in intrapersonal or interpersonal terms. DeVoogd, Lane, & Kralowec (2016) studied peer mediation as a device to curb student

conflict. Their study showed that student mediators not only showed marked improvement in their own conflict resolution skill sets, but, moreover, the study showed increased attendance on the part of the student mediators. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that increased participation in community leads to a higher sense of belonging, acceptance, and therefore naturally attracts students, evidenced by increased school attendance, relative to this study.

Social-Emotional Needs and Benefits

The need for and the benefit of social-emotional learning (SEL) are best addressed in tandem because solving deficiencies leads to augmenting proficiencies. Slaten et al. (2015) claimed the manifest function of SEL is to prepare a person for life. This does not assume nor negate the presence of social-emotional deficiency (SED) among student populations; it simply implies a need as well as a benefit in better preparing students. Ritter et al. (2018) acknowledged how contemporary business models allow for and value the acquisition of soft skills within their workforce. Soft skills (teamwork, communication, leadership, and problem solving), whether wrought interpersonally or intra-personally, are an agency and the focus of SEL. Hoffman (2000) was confident that students can benefit from shared experiences saturated with social and emotional learning. Myers et al. (2015) submitted that the inclusion of “multiple perspectives” from all the stakeholders is very important to a nationwide SEL curriculum and implementation. Zeidner et al. (2002) regarded the school setting as the most important context for learning SE competencies.

To address the school community adequately, it takes the community. Jacobs and Struyf (2015) explored the mutually beneficial nature of school guidance and school community, placing a renewed emphasis on the SE progress for every student. They found that positive communication between school and home has a positive effect on school guidance programs.

Another factor they uncovered is that “principal support and collaboration between teachers has a positive influence on teachers’ professionalism with regard to social-emotional guidance” (p. 108).

Elias et al. (2003) contended that as risk factors mount around the student, there is a greater need for focused guardianship to create more definitive solutions. By the time a student reaches kindergarten, they may be behind, on par, or advanced within their socialization process. Kabasakal and Totan (2013) stood resolute in that early student intervention diminishes the chances for negative mental symptoms to emerge within student populations. Duncan et al. (2007) pinpointed social-emotional deficiencies found in kindergarten populations, underscoring the importance of understanding the practical dynamics of school readiness. School readiness in relation to this study implies that a student can experience belonging within their school community, which sharpens their propensity toward attentiveness and developing social-emotional skill sets, thus increasing the likelihood of achieving greater academically and socially. Stated a bit differently yet still powerful, Kabasakal and Totan (2013) suggested that SEL programs should build community, building a sense of belonging within each student, while decreasing hostility toward the educational environment, positively affecting their attitude toward self and others, creating social and emotional stability. Payne et al. (2003) supported this notion by theorizing that when students bond, they build and strengthen their community, therefore resulting in less school disruption, leading to a more effective, and a better-quality education.

Coelho and Sousa (2018) essentially argued that SEL must be effective because so much is at stake. For example, they claim that correctly and effectively implementing SEL positively affects the mental health of the student, leading to higher levels of academic achievement and

attainment, as well as supporting prosocial behaviors. The consequential, multifaceted reality of effective implementation of SEL is in its mitigating effects on detrimental social maladies.

Greenberg et al. (2003) argued that SEL should be saturated and embedded throughout K-12 educational settings because of their notion that school success will occur with a “school-family-community” approach (p. 470). Furthermore, Durlak et al. (2011) found that school communities that engage in SEL saturation saw an increase of 11 percentile points in academic achievement.

In Coelho and Sousa’s (2018) study, they researched the implementation of SEL curriculum in varied settings: embedded in the school setting and implemented in after-school programming. They found that SEL programs are most effective when implemented within the school setting. They cite better attendance coinciding with *in school* as opposed to *after school* as well as citing student perspectives which support that after-school settings are less consequential than in-school settings and noted these as possible culprits for the differentiated effectiveness within their study. An analysis of their study alludes to the idea that when students are in settings heavily saturated with the perception of community, where they sense belonging and acceptance, students learn and absorb more. These researchers used and studied levels of “social-emotional competencies, self-control, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and self-esteem” as variables comprising social-emotional health (p.1982). In this similar vein of social-emotional health, Yang and Bear (2018) discovered strong *teacher-student* and *student-student* relationships resulting from the teaching of social-emotional competencies, highlighting that, by default, when school-wide measures are taken toward any student-centered initiative, community is typically built and enjoyed by its members. Rae et al. (2017) stated that “interactions that enhance social-emotional learning” can help both teachers and students (p. 214). Furlong et al. (2003) suggested that positive teacher/student relationships are important to

mitigate anti-social behaviors and believe that students with increased bonds to school personnel and the school setting generate greater academic achievement.

Kemp-Graham (2018) contended that SE deficiencies are best remedied in-school, rather than through punitive and isolated conditions, citing that student isolation of any sort breaks down perceived community and is therefore counter-productive. Since community is integral for creating and maintaining thriving student populations, the benefits deserve mention and recognition. Moorish et al. (2018) posited that SEL promotes the regulation of emotions within student populations and this regulation in turn promotes socially beneficial traits such as sound mental health and the general, social well-being of students, all leading to greater school engagement. Janosz et al. (2008) strongly supported school engagement as an imperative. Their research also supports that students' families and peers highly influence school engagement, and they go on to say that early school engagement levels are reliable predictors of future school engagement. Therefore, early interventions decreasing social isolation and perceived rejection serve to lessen future social detriment. Estell and Perdue's (2013) study of social support during fifth grade and school engagement in sixth grade, yielded similar findings. Levels of student support from family, school, and peers either will positively or negatively affect school engagement, heavily influencing future success or failure.

Critical Thinking and Conflict Resolution as a Benefit

The argument that social-emotional deficiencies are partially the result of underdeveloped cognitive abilities is reasonable. Schools that place a high premium on developing critical thinking skills will be manufacturing a self-soothing apparatus in students that will stabilize and serve them well beyond the confines of the school premise. Wilson et al. (2001) argued that intervention programs that focus on changing students' thinking, change student behavior. Thus,

cognition precedes behavior, positively or negatively. Critical thinking, indeed, assists conflict resolution, whether that conflict originates internally or externally. When White and Walker (2018) argued that SEL seeks to produce healthy citizens, the essence of SEL is undeniably rooted in critical thought processes, as the student learns to process and react to the world surrounding them. They go on to exalt intervention programs because the data show that they mitigate alcohol and drug use, and lessen dropout and truancy, which corroborates with Frey et al. (2005). These latter findings indicate a need to promote prosocial behavior, indirectly asserting that if students can resolve conflict on their own, then teachers will be freed up to direct *their* emotional energies toward actual instruction. The idea here is that critical thought translates into better decision making. Sundararajan et al. (2018) also perceived the indispensable value of critical thinking exercises by insinuating the importance of school-based critical discussions in early childhood education because they create shared experiences and allow the students to bond as well as practice contending with surrounding ideas and opinions. Zeidner et al. (2002) delineated social-emotional competencies and highlight the benefits of critical thinking, simultaneously. They know the importance of students being able to articulate their emotions linguistically to express themselves as well as to be better understood by others. They also mention that through utilizing SE competencies, students will act less violently and will enjoy higher levels of self-esteem, thus learning to value others while enjoying a more positive perspective toward others and toward life itself. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) placed an emphasis on the need for interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict resolution. Problematic student behavior towards others has its roots in inner conflict, and the usage of critical thinking skills directly reduces the power of the conflict over the individual student. They also argue that school communities need to be consistent, providing more stability for the student. Their research places

great importance on community, citizenship, and emotional regulation/self-control. They therefore argue that all 50 states in America need SEL standards, all of which can be directly or indirectly associated with critical thinking and conflict resolution. Developing critical thinking skills and aiding conflict resolution represents a more thorough commitment to the student. Furlong et al. (2003) argued for the development of cognitively aware students and further contended that developing critical thinking is to be deliberate, not left to chance. They define the “affective quality of school” and say it “includes a level of emotional response or involvement toward schooling” (p. 103), thus concluding a positive connection between academic achievement and school involvement.

In summary, Bandura (2006) aptly characterized the benefit of teaching students critical thinking skills when he states, “through cognitive self-regulation, humans can create visualized futures that act on the present; construct, evaluate, and modify alternative courses of action to secure valued outcomes; and override environmental influences” (p. 164).

Obstacles to Social Emotional Learning

A fair assessment and social differential of the forces working against social emotional learning is paramount to establish an appropriate trajectory for its effective implementation, utilization, and sustainment. Sowell (1995) asserted that there is a great likelihood that valuable capital and human resources will be squandered if the implementers of any program or policy do not take the time to carefully assess whether the problem being addressed is truly a representation of the reality of the situation. Evans et al. (2015) forewarned of an iatrogenic reaction (treatment of problems causing more harm than previously existed) coinciding with attempts to mitigate social emotional deficiencies. Residual negative impact on students, stemming from failed, mitigating efforts, can be very discouraging for teachers and pupils and

could significantly contribute to a diminished enthusiasm toward implementation of programs that otherwise possess massive amounts of potential helpfulness. These researchers expound on this concept by suggesting that students who perceive their participation in any initiative as negative -citing and experiencing that it further isolates students from the school community-will, in a self-fulfilling cycle, perceive compounded isolation. Simons-Morton (2003) claimed that peers are put at greater risk when surrounded by other peers at risk, leading to further school disengagement. So, if schools allow poor student engagement to persist, it will only serve to exacerbate the problem, underscoring that student attitudes can be quite contagious.

Jones et al. (2013) are advocates for communication with all educational stakeholders that furthers an appreciation for the benefits of social emotional learning, one of the key ingredients necessary for shifting school culture and climate. They proceed to posit that a healthy school climate nearly always coexists with improved teacher-student relationships. Elias et al. (2003) contended that without a comprehensive, schoolwide approach to SEL, teachers most likely will fail to lead students to success in school and in life. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) perhaps offered the most cogent and practical advice when they asserted that teachers are consistently finding themselves in emotionally charged scenarios with students and that if the teacher possesses relatively low social emotional competencies, it will only serve to worsen the situation, which is unacceptable for the healthy school setting. This phenomenon clearly is the opposite of what Maslow advocates for building trust at school, underscoring emotional benefits resulting from perceived trust in relationships.

In response to potential impediments in delivering high impact educational practices, Rae et al. (2017) proposed that teachers need training on emotional well-being and must be supported consistently. Fiorilli et al. (2017) were very concerned with teachers' emotional exhaustion and

how it is often accompanied with a teacher's sense of depersonalization in the workplace. They go on to promote psychological resources to help combat the daily stress that teachers report as problematic. One major finding is that low social-emotional competence levels in teachers contributed significantly to teacher exhaustion and burnout. Ringwalt et al. (2009) reported lack of administrative support as problematic when implementing school wide programs and initiatives. Slaten et al. (2015) cited that SEL programming tends to be too short sighted. They argue that SEL must prepare students for life, and that these programs are best viewed apart from the oversimplified objective of getting a student assimilated back into a general school population. They are strong advocates for stronger relationship building, based on love, support, and acceptance.

Teacher Perception of Social Emotional Learning

How do teachers tend to perceive the multiple facets of social emotional learning and why does this matter? Ransford et al. (2009) agreed that teachers that become weary in the workplace are less likely to go the extra mile for their students and colleagues. So, there are definite internal and external motivation pieces integral to teacher perception of social emotional learning. Jacobs and Struyf (2013) reported that teachers view SEL as their responsibility and duty. This is significant because this is half the battle. Another large part of the battle is taking care of teachers, so they, in turn, will take care of students. These teachers believe that social skills are just as important as intellectual skills. Most teachers that have served in a classroom realize the very human side of education and know that cultivating student-teacher relationships are among the greatest of any endeavor within the classroom and school setting. Rae et al. (2017) conducted a study of behavior disorders in school populations to see how teachers could be better supported emotionally and cite that teacher emotional health affects the quality of job they

can do for students. Teachers report that a lack of administrative support is a big “stress inducing factor” in the workplace (p. 211). According to this research, teachers also desire a “nurturing context” and “team support” to deal with work-related emotional stress (p. 214). Ringwalt et al. (2009) explored the possibility that because teachers observe a lack of support connected to previous school wide initiatives, that these experiences drive down their perception and estimation that new social emotional initiatives would be met with any consequential or desirable support.

An interesting twist to teacher perception of social emotional learning comes from a Malloy et al. (2015) study that looked at teacher perception of social emotional and character development programming, and discovered that because the program focused on positivity and innovation, teachers felt supported as they tried and failed within different approaches to SEL. The creativity and innovation that SEL and its implementation require cannot be overstated, and the Malloy et al. study confirmed it. Moreira et al. (2013) understood that teacher perception of SE needs and their difficulties with it vary, depending on gender, age, school level, and school demographics, such as rural, urban, suburban, public, or private. Their study highlights the need to develop instruments to accurately measure teacher deficiencies within SEL to better target areas for teacher support and improvement. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) echoed the idea that building strong teacher-student relationships should be prioritized, but also acknowledged that if a teacher is deficient in their interpersonal acumen, then, consequently, the modeling of such deficient behavior could be a huge detriment to the student. These researchers go on to suggest that if an educator promotes social emotional health, that simultaneously there is a great chance that teacher burnout will decrease, and student engagement will increase. Sadri and Bowen (2011) posited that motivation ignites a person’s passion towards a goal and propels them

through difficult parts of their journey. They also set forth “rest” as being an integral part of the psychological needs, as prescribed by Maslow. The literature alludes to concepts such as teacher burnout, and this “rest” component is perhaps more important than originally thought. Sadri and Bowen (2011) went on to speak about the loss of trust between employee and employer as a phenomenon likely to figure significantly in a teacher’s decision to move to a different school or to quit altogether, further demonstrating that Maslow is not just something to consider on behalf of the student but also as a concept pertinent to teachers and their social emotional health.

Ransford et al. (2009) took the position that teacher buy-in associated with SEL can slip away quickly if teachers are under emotional duress and/or feel emotionally drained. The architects of social emotional programming would obviously view the educator as a major stakeholder in these educational processes, and one might assume that the research would guide these engineers to secure a healthy and prepared teacher population before hoping to positively affect students. Ransford et al. (2009) discovered that when teachers sense genuine support, they are more likely to implement curriculum with greater quality and fidelity. Richardson and Shupe (2003) encouraged teachers to be aware of their initial emotional triggers, as this could give them more of an opportunity to respond positively to negative external stimuli. And this is part of the reason why teachers can start to view conflict with students as opportunities to build stronger relationships.

Building on the human element of Richardson and Shupe (2003), Slaten et al. (2015) promoted being open with students about life, encouraging them and knowing them personally, thus relying on the efficacy of relationship building as being a prerequisite to effective learning. Frey et al. (2005) underscored this principle in that they promote positive social goals as early as kindergarten. Some educators, as cited by Buchanan et al. (2009), believed that if we address

social ills in isolation, we will end up treating symptoms rather than causes-this being akin to attempting to justify actions and allocating resources with the intent to mitigate a false narrative, directly leading to the squandering of time, opportunity, and resources. This may lead some educators to think that the time for basic “implementation” is over, and, rather, decide that what education needs at this point is a complete overhaul of the entire educational paradigm.

According to Buchanan et al. (2009), nearly all educators believe that SEL skills enhance academic outcomes. A hallmark of their study is that teachers believe that politics drive an “academics over everything” approach, and that this, in fact, is a solid example of misplaced priorities. One interesting idea that Ransford et al. (2009) presented is that *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) may have added toilsome and damaging psychological strain upon the educator, which preceded their main finding that teachers implement programming better when they are more familiar with it, and that they can only become more familiar with targeted programming if they are emotionally and psychologically prepared and supported to do so. Most literature on SEL supports this finding on some level. Another large part of teachers’ perceptions of social emotional learning put forth by Ransford et al. (2009) is that teachers can feel very guilty from knowing the critical nature and condition of SEL yet believing that they are underqualified or ill-equipped to effectively deal with it all, not to mention having the perception that they are crumbling underneath the weight of increased job demands. In their analysis of teacher burnout, it was discovered that the teacher first becomes exhausted, then they begin to perceive a depersonalized experience, and, finally, the educator can realize an actual and perceived reduction of personal accomplishment. And this obviously drives social emotional stability of teachers further away from its desired and effective state.

Estimations of Students' Social-Emotional Health

Estell et al. (2013) and Janosz et al. (2008) strongly asserted that family, school, and peers comprise the trifecta of relevant variables spelling out futuristic student failure or success. And this is extremely promising given the stance of Slaten et al. (2015), emphatically stating that students can heal social-emotional deficiencies through mitigating factors associated with support within family, school, and peers. Student engagement is evidence of well-adapted pupils. Furlong et al. (2003) claimed that positive school engagement will provide chances for students to gain academic and social confidence, which will equip them for the future. They also believe positive verbal and behavioral teacher modeling is a key component associated with student engagement. In addition, according to these researchers there is a pragmatic angle to these estimations, which suggests that positively rewarding students for academically engaging will promote positive social bonds amongst family, school, and peers.

In a landmark study conducted by Duncan et al. (2007), six longitudinal data sets were studied to establish whether there is a link between observable skills associated with academic attentiveness (school engagement) during the preschool year and future academic achievement. They hypothesized that attention skills would be better predictors of future academic success than social-emotional behaviors. Conversely, their study found that early knowledge of math and language skills, especially math, a derivative of academic engagement, were the strongest predictors of later student achievement. Given that math skills have direct ties to logical cognitive processes, it is reasonable to associate these skill factors as precursors strengthening critical thinking skills, a valuable life skill set.

Greenberg et al. (2003) raised poignant questions such as: “What is the purpose/mission of preschool [through] high school in the 21st Century?” (p. 466); “Under what school ecology

and climate conditions will students benefit maximally, and teachers instruct most efficiently?” (p. 466); “What aspirations does one have for high school graduates who become future workers, citizens, and leaders?” (p. 466). They go on to triumphantly express, “high quality education should teach young people to interact in socially skilled and respectful ways; to practice positive, safe, and healthy behaviors” (p.466). It stands to reason that Greenberg and his colleagues are proponents for the embedding and saturation of social-emotional skills across the K-12 curriculum. These researchers find that as communities become either stronger or weaker, so follows the nurturing degree of children’s “social, emotional, and moral development” (p. 467). Greenberg et al. (2003) also cited that any abbreviated attempt at implementation of SEL is a disruptor of education, and they view lack of administrative support for SEL as a major contributor to unsuccessful implementation, cogently advocating for the need to saturate the schools’ curriculum with SEL.

Kabasakal and Toten (2013) submitted that social-emotional learning in schools greatly assists mental health throughout life. To circumvent a realization of the work of Janosz et al. (2008), having cited students showing disengagement in early adolescence are more likely to drop out, Durlak et. al. (2011) asserted that social emotional programming works, as it places specialized emphasis on oneself, others, and school, prescribing a concerted effort to promote prosocial behaviors.

Potential Predictors of Students’ Social Emotional Health

What does research say about teachers and predictors of social-emotional health of students? Davis et al. (2014) study from a sample size of 5,000 teachers from an urban school district found that the lowest 25% of academic performers reported lower social-emotional skills compared to the top 25% of academic performers. Whether there is a direct correlation between

low reported social-emotional competencies and low academic outcomes is yet to be acknowledged or seen. More to the point, can teachers begin to predict social-emotional outcomes throughout the life course from academic standing during school years?

Jones et al. (2015) wanted to know if kindergarten teachers' ratings of students' prosocial competence could reasonably predict adolescent and adult noncognitive outcomes. They found statistically convincing associations between early, prosocial ratings and vital young adult outcomes, ranging from education, jobs, criminality, substance use, as well as mental health, among other non-cognitive domains. Despite helping to identify non-cognitive deficits for the purpose of early interventions, this study may suggest teachers' ability to utilize several data points to get a sense of future social-emotional wellness of students, up to twenty years later. Jones et. al. (2015) reported that, "Our results demonstrate the predictive power of teacher-measured prosocial skills independent of child, family, and contextual factors that typically predict adult outcomes . . ." (p. 2284).

Oberle et. al. (2014), alluding to Zins (2004), stated that schools promoting the implementation of SEL have found the benefits to far exceed the costs. Benefits include "improved educational outcomes, lower substance use, reduced crime, and decreased mental health problems" (146). These accounts of success surrounding SEL competencies begin to form corroborating evidence toward teachers' abilities to get a sense of student social outcomes based on observable levels of social emotional competencies and prosocial behaviors. McKown (2017) concluded that years of research ". . .has consistently found that the better developed [children's] SEL skills, the better children do in school and life" (158).

Experienced Community Begetting Social Emotional Health

The point of this research is not to accentuate the negative aspects regarding the condition of social emotional health among student populations. Rather, this research works to elevate realistic considerations to augment the common variable found to be the catalyst for effective education: shared and realized community that begets social emotional health for all school stakeholders.

The literature is saturated with cautionary tales regarding what diminishes school engagement, what creates a truer school community, and what best spurs and perpetuates student success, both short and long term. Bandura (2006) found that the “self must be socially constructed through transactional experiences with the environment” (p. 169). Slaten et al. (2015) cite healthy relationship building and relationship maintenance as central to SEL. They also underscore the potential for students to experience healing, resulting from a shared sense of community.

In a study conducted by Frey et al. (2005), the effects of *Second Step* programming are examined to study the relationship between social cognition and prosocial vs. antisocial behavior. Interventions that foster prosocial relationships will redirect social and emotional trajectories positively for students. As a result, stronger friendship networks emerge, and motivation to resolve ensuing conflicts with peers and with authority figures increase, respectively. This program emphasizes “empathy training, impulse control, and problem solving,” all seeking to mitigate negative perceptions of relationships and to promote social compromise to maintain healthy student perspectives (p. 174).

Estell and Perdue (2013) studied social support during the fifth grade as a predictor of school engagement in the sixth grade. Their study yielded cogent data supporting that “peer support [due to affective school engagement] was a significant prediction of affective school engagement” (p. 335). Sensing community begets enjoyed community. Duncan et al. (2007) position school readiness in an interesting light that coincides with forecasting healthy community. They posit that by equipping younger students with socioemotional skills, it will translate into a strong sense of community, which, consequently, will usher in greater academic achievement. Payne et al. (2003) present a unique angle with school engagement: more school community will mean less school disruption, citing strong student bonds as responsible for student edification, along with students experiencing a truer sense of school community.

Part of the experience of belonging to a community is believing that the community desires success for its members. Sometimes students can perceive their plight to be one of powerlessness. A sense of community can empower students through their ability to act and to not act. Bandura (2006) posits that “unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act, or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 170). It stands to reason that when students experience belonging, acceptance, and love, from engaging in their shared community, they are empowered to view their level of control as advantageous to their well-being. Bandura (2006) submits that “the construction of selfhood is not entirely a matter of private reflection on one’s experiences. There is a social aspect to this process” (p. 170). Richardson and Shupe (2003) cite that teacher education does not always address teachers’ self-awareness and their ability to “build and maintain” effective relationships (p. 9). This is good news. Teachers and students, together, can learn and thrive side by side, creating a perfect picture of an edifying community and its rippling effect.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This phenomenological study was executed to develop an understanding of teachers' perceptions of their students' social emotional health (SEH). This research was inclusive of an investigation into the thinking and reasoning process which undergirds teacher perception in the realm of their students' social emotional health. There was a significant, noticeable lack of information and literature concerning how teachers view SEH within their student populations, which can be partially explicated through this qualitative method of research. It was both timely and relevant to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers process their perception of students' social emotional condition and its ramifications. This study was needed to ascertain a truer reflection of teachers' actual thinking, untethered from professional constraints, such as obligatory toeing-the-line because of what constitutes their perception of socially and professionally acceptable responses. Since teachers are the managers of social emotional learning, their experience, and thereby perceptions of SEL's manifest and latent outcomes needed to be central to this scholarly discourse. Social emotional learning has been implemented in questionable and varying ways, leading researchers to challenge an already status quo approach to SEL and its programming. The researcher found a lack of information in the literature regarding teachers' ability to predict students' social emotional health. This phenomenological research was intended to provide deep insights from educational practitioners familiar with the reality of students' social and emotional welfare. All interviews were conducted utilizing an in-depth, semi-structured format. Interviews incorporated purposefully selected participants. These research contributors also were asked to provide empirical reasoning, anecdotally or otherwise, as evidence to support their positions.

Sampling

This research included elementary teachers from central Kentucky. This study supported a full disclosure of attitudes and opinions of teachers based upon personal convictions, personal experiences, and philosophical findings through their years of observation and applied expertise. All six interviewees were selected utilizing convenience sampling and were contacted through email and phone calls. The researcher contacted elementary school principals and administrators from urban and rural locales and directed them to contact random teachers and thus begin an interviewee recruitment process. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted via recorded *Zoom*. The setting of their choosing provided participants with greater comfort, allowing them to freely express themselves, as well as giving them more control over the pacing of the interview. Once I was granted approval from the university's institutional review board and from my dissertation committee, all potential participants were contacted by email. Before eligible teachers agreed to partake in the study, they were sent an email, providing an official description of the study and a consent waiver. Once the researcher obtained permission from the IRB to do so, the potential participant was asked to return an email stating they have both read the consent waiver form and do/do not, in fact, intend to participate in this study, independent from an actual physical signature. The description of the study included an overview of the types of questions they were requested to address during their interviews once they decided to participate in this research. Participants were sent the data collection instrument prior to their individual interviews. Potential participants were informed as to their right to cease to be a part of this study at any point in the interviewee recruitment process at their request, and at no risk whatsoever of negative consequence.

There was great interest from contacted teachers to participate in this study. Candidates were selected with the purpose of gleaning valuable insights and to consider information from a diverse group of educators, rural and urban, as well as randomly differentiated grade level teachers and levels of teacher experience. Participants were expected to render rational and logical responses to the interview questions. All participants were apprised that the objective of this research study was to uncover personal convictions, personal experiences, and philosophical findings through their years of observation and applied expertise. The personal convictions, personal experiences, and philosophical discoveries resulting from their observation and applied expertise were unknown and unassumed prior to the commencement of the interviews. This research was conducted in a contemporary context to investigate the thinking and the reasoning process which undergirds teacher perception within the realm of their students' social emotional health.

Value to the University and to the Participants

This study provided critical information on SEH that could be extremely instrumental in creating advantageous insights for students, parents, educators, administrators, policy advocates, and policy makers. This research could also augment educators' self-concept as influencers of students. Lichtman (2013) asserts that the future of qualitative research is exciting and bright, and that it significantly hinges on the idea that new insights not yet imagined will empower us to ask better questions of ourselves and about the phenomenon we will study. Teachers may have reimagined their roles as an educator and gained empowerment through reflecting on the collective process and findings of this research. There is a possibility that educators involved in this study became proactive as they searched for innovative ways to positively shape social and emotional frameworks for their pupils. Because this research inadvertently intersected

contemporary, social emotional health with social emotional health in consideration of COVID-19, these findings could be utilized to further an understanding within multiple, relative considerations, linking previous and current SEL dynamics and practices. This confluence could initiate and create a new frontier within SEL. This research primarily served to amplify and to characterize the current state of K-5 teachers' perceptions of their students' social and emotional health, revealing the true essence and the true power of incorporating teachers' opinions. Investigating this phenomenon serves as a foundation for future research to be built upon.

Promises and Reciprocity

This researcher protected all information about all the participants. The researcher realized, in accordance with Lichtman (2013), that “those studied in qualitative research are real people with real needs, ambitions, fears, and desires” (p. 295). All information was inclusive of communications, notes, memos, work, and recordings, and therefore was closely protected and all handling protocols were strictly followed. The handling of related materials for this research was thoroughly explained to every participant, and all aspects of their identity has been protected from the beginning of their involvement in this study. All physical materials will be securely stored on my professional computer in my school office under two key security and will be destroyed completely after the proper time limit. All personal convictions, perceptions, and content of what the participants shared during the interview process were respected. All relevant research artifacts will be housed with my dissertation chair, Dr. Raymond Lauk, for three years and then destroyed responsibly.

Risk Assessment

There have been no identified risks connected with this phenomenological research. The agreeable participants of this study were given all pertinent information prior to committing to participate; they were given ample time to formulate their reasoning for participating or for declining participation in this study. Participants were informed that they were not obligated to answer every interview question, nor would there be any sanctioned or unsanctioned consequences to participants withdrawing from the study at any time, for any reason. All participants were asked to verify the collected data from their interviews to ensure that the integrity of what they intended to share was accurate and valid. Records of this verification have been properly recorded and will be stored for three years and then will be responsibly destroyed.

Confidentiality

Throughout the duration of this investigation, all data that was collected will be sufficiently safeguarded. All data collected in the form of recordings and transcribed interviews has been saved on my professional school password-protected computer. Another layer of protection was added as passwords will be regularly changed every three months. Any data that was physically collected will be stored and secured at my school behind a locked filing cabinet in my school office. Information shared with the dissertation committee was done using pseudonyms for all participants in this research. The original pseudonyms assigned to participants remained constant throughout this study, whether written or communicated otherwise.

Data Collection

The researcher recommended and requested full transparency from participants throughout the course of this research and data collection. Ensuring a reasonable level of comfort for the participants during the interviews required the researcher to constantly assure participants that it was perfectly acceptable to share anything and everything in whatever manner they wished. All six participants were fully briefed before the interviews to remind them that they were under no obligation to answer any question that they were not fully comfortable answering. Participants were also informed that there would be no negative repercussions if they decided to not answer the questions or if they decided to withdraw themselves from the interview or research study entirely. The researcher communicated to participants that they were encouraged to view the results of this research study and to consult with the researcher as well as with committee members to further discuss the research. Participants should have access to the completed dissertation upon completion and publication.

Researcher

All participants selected for this research study were chosen through convenience sampling, completely free from the present entanglements of the researcher's working colleagues and social contacts. Eligible participants were sought after based on a wide range of characteristics that added integrity to the research, differentiating within rural and urban, teaching experience, and grade level. It was important to include veteran teachers, new teachers, and teachers from varied content areas through random sampling at the behest of principals and administrators. It was important to incorporate teachers from humanities, sciences, and mathematics. The intentionality of this approach to the research and to the data collection safeguarded against and erased all unconscious bias or potential misunderstanding on both the

part of the researcher and the participant. At every stage in the research, the participant/researcher relationship was professionally conducted and incorporated ethical behaviors conducive to equality, respect, and patience. The researcher's professional conduct promised an enjoyable experience for all parties participating in this research study.

This phenomenological study characterized and articulated the current state of six K-5 teachers and their perceptions of their students' social and emotional health. This study gained Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval under its category 6 exemption policy. Upon defending this research prospectus, the researcher was available to answer any questions and to provide clarifications for the research committee, if necessary. Considering that this research was in partial fulfillment of a Doctorate in Education, the dissertation chair, and the committee's members, by proxy, have supervised directly and indirectly all phases of this dissertation hitherto. As prescribed by EKU and the College of Education and Applied Human Sciences, all coursework and program requirements have been completed by me as prerequisites to conduct my research. These program requirements developed my cognition within qualitative and quantitative analysis and reporting, ethical considerations within research, research design and methods, educational leadership-theory and design, educational policy, and a plethora of practical avenues to explore within my current and future research.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were collected from six rural and urban elementary school teachers in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Every interview was performed in an in-depth, semi-structured manner at a locale of the participants' choosing. All interviews adhered to a free exchange of ideas within the parameters of each question, with a designated opportunity for the

participant to communicate anything that they believe the researcher might not have asked or anything they believe the researcher should have asked. Typically, interviews were expected to last approximately 60 minutes. Each of the interviews was digitally recorded, saved, and stored on the same device. The digital recordings were transcribed in their entirety. The research data was meticulously coded, organized, structured, restructured, aggregated, and disaggregated to procure and accentuate findings and results. This process was universally applied to each qualitative data set to promote uniformity and integrity within this research.

All obligations and privileges pertaining to the researcher within this phenomenological study were derived and granted through Eastern Kentucky University's *Institutional Review Board's* authority and supervision. All permissions from the dissertation committee as well as from the IRB were obtained prior to contacting any potential participant for this study. At the appropriate time the information presented to the potential participants of this study included full disclosure of the study and its purposes as well as information that participants could use to get access to or to stay in touch with the researcher.

When the potential participants committed to joining the study, the time, the date, the format, and the venue was determined and clearly communicated to the potential participant through email. Permissions were sought and obtained to allow participants to state and sign their consent through non-physical means. The participants had prior knowledge of these forms upon receipt. Matters having to do with the purpose of the interview, the purpose of the recording, and their right to refrain from answering questions or to withdraw from the study completely, as well as their right to review personal data was reiterated in writing. To further supplement confidence within participants and reliability to the study, the researcher verbally communicated these rights and parameters as an additional safeguard to ensure full transparency and to augment the overall

comfort levels of the participants prior to each interview. Additional questions on the part of participants were answered with full, professional integrity.

Data Collection Tools

Interviews were conducted with participants in a one-on-one social dynamic, and the location was of the participants' choosing. A casual, conversational approach best suited the interviews. A priority for the researcher was to conduct the interviews in a manner which allowed the participant to feel as relaxed as possible during the interview, for the purpose of inspiring as much candor and transparency as possible. The participant was generally encouraged to expound on the open-ended questions and at times was prompted to do so. The researcher took thorough notes during and after the interview to capture some of the experienced nuances of the interview. This further validated the interview and its processes. Nuances such as apprehension in answering a question, abrupt breaks in thought, non-verbal communication, inflections and tonalities, evasions, or excitedness were documented to assist the researcher in ascertaining a more thorough understanding of the data collected. When the interviewee had an opportunity to review the transcription of the interview to check for accuracy, the researcher obtained reliable confidence resulting from this clarification process. This system of checks and balances concluded before any data was coded or categorized.

The purpose of this research was to characterize and to articulate the current state of six K-5 teachers and their perceptions of their students' social and emotional health. The shared experiences and the narratives that emerged during the interviews have been most valuable in the assessment of educators' dispositions regarding this study. The idea that *perception is reality* was extremely powerful within the framework of this research. This study facilitated an embracing, of sorts, rather than a partial or full dismissal when it came to teacher perceptions of their

students' social emotional health. It was anticipated that participants' responses would be rife with strong emotion and conviction, further elevating the idea that teaching is a labor of love. One of the possible, residual effects of this study featured teachers' reflections on their own social emotional health. This is owing to the direct and indirect emotional symbiosis between students and teachers. These insights served as the foundation for future related studies. I kept an organized record of my interview notes with the intent to perpetually reflect on any emergent subtlety that may have helped me in formulating a more accurate view of the participants' responses, and therefore the overall investigation. Creating these additional data points of emphasis, the researcher further created advantage by characterizing the moods, mindsets, perceptions, and conclusions of the interviewees within a more holistic framework. The early research questions and anticipated follow-up questions were thus: Grand Tour Question: What are your overall impressions of students' social emotional health and how have you seen this change over your career?

Research Question 1: What are K-5 teachers' current perceptions of students' social and emotional health, and what focused lines of reasoning are employed in drawing conclusions?

- A. What kinds of factors in and out of the classroom have you come to associate with your students' present social emotional health?
- B. What kinds of things do you do in and out of the classroom to strengthen your students' social emotional health as it may relate to your own social emotional health? Is there a formal, prescribed SEL curriculum that you are required to represent?

- C. Please tell me some of the things you have personally observed in the classroom that you think are contributing to or mitigating future social emotional health for your students.
- D. What types of things do you communicate to your students that either create social emotional health or promote it?

Research Question 2: Do K-5 teachers believe that social-emotional learning programs get implemented with integrity, with fidelity to the root causes of the social-emotional deficiencies, and, if so, how? If not, what are the hindrances?

- A. Please tell me what social emotional learning looks like in your school's environment.
- B. When it comes to social emotional learning at your school, where do you think energies are most effective and where does energy and resources seem to be squandered, if anywhere?
- C. Please describe your experiences, positive or negative, as a manager and facilitator of social emotional learning.
- D. Does your school address social emotional learning and, if so, do you think that social emotional interventions within your school environment target mostly symptoms or root causes, and can you provide evidence to support your perspective, please?

Research Question 3: Is the concept and act of "intervention" capable of thoroughly responding to the gravity of student needs within the social-emotional spectrum? And what, if anything, needs to be additionally addressed in this regard?

- A. Are there any stories you could communicate that would speak to the adequacy or inadequacy of social emotional intervention accommodations/scenarios in your school setting?
- B. If you could construct your perfect recipe, so to speak, to augment and improve the social emotional health of your students, what would it include?
- C. If, in fact, you do have concerns as to whether you're actually meeting students' social emotional needs with the current approach within your school setting, what would you suggest would more thoroughly address and perhaps rectify these deficiencies?

Research Question 4: If you were tasked with developing a plan to address social emotional learning at your school, what might be the broader tenets of your strategy, and why would this be your chosen direction?

Research Question 5: Have there been noticeable changes within the social emotional health of your students when comparing pre and post COVID, and, if so, how has this impacted your perception of your teaching responsibilities?

Data Analysis

According to Lichtman (2013), data analysis includes “coding, categorizing, and concepts” (p. 265). Lichtman (2013) also recommends the following six-step process: “(1) initial coding, (2) revisiting initial coding, (3) developing an initial list of categories or central ideas, (4) modifying your initial list based on additional reading, (5) revisiting categories and subcategories, and (6) moving from categories to concepts” (p. 265). A thorough reading and re-reading of collected data was conducted to ensure full measures of fidelity were applied to the

coding process. Within this qualitative investigation, it was expected that theories would emerge through hermeneutics, providing clues as to impetus that revealed the respondents' motives throughout the inquiry. Lichtman (2013) posits an important admonition, warning researchers to not arrive at their conclusions prematurely, as this will almost guarantee surface level analyses. The integrity of the data's analyses helped guarantee that the findings and therefore the emerging theories have been prudently constructed by adhering to the professional standards of analysis within qualitative research. Consequently, theories that most accurately and adequately explained the dispositions of K-5 educators regarding the social emotional health of their students were constructed with greater confidence.

With these analytical safeguards in place, thematic categories were taken from data analysis, and were carefully structured to create reliable data sets true to variables collected. All data was shared that contributed to and therefore assisted in the construction of the narratives of the participants' lived experiences. The researcher interpreted the data to determine the current state of K-5 teachers' perceptions of their students' social and emotional health.

Managing the Data

All collected data, inclusive of digital recordings of the six interviews, is housed on a password-protected computational device in my school office, with passwords changing every three months, minimally. Handwritten and digitized notes as well as any other materials gathered from the respondents are kept on file in an academic office that is behind at least two electronically locked barriers as well as behind a locked door and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Upon transcription of the digital interviews, copies of the transcripts were internally filed on a password-protected computer at my school as well as stored on a flash-drive with singular designation to this research. The flash-drive is archived at my school behind two electronic

barriers and behind a locked door and locked filing cabinet in my school office. All research materials were physically warehoused for the prescribed time of 3 years; upon honoring this archiving protocol, all relative research materials will be properly destroyed and/or deleted.

Limitations of the Study

The intention of this study was to assess the current state of K-5 teachers' perceptions regarding their students' social and emotional health. The qualitative method and phenomenological approach to this investigation was favored for the purpose of acquiring a significant understanding of the lived experiences of these educators. The study was not designed to emphatically build educational theory nor to develop social theories of any stripe. Furthermore, the findings of this research do not constitute an entire scope or sequence surrounding the subject matter, nor surrounding the research questions. The investigation targeted K-5 teachers; no inquiry regarding any other relevant populations were consulted nor ascertained.

Therefore, the findings of this research have not been applied to or assumed to be applied to any other population aside from the educators selected to participate in this study. This study thereby angled to create a deeper understanding of teachers' thinking and feeling only within the population of selected respondents and therefore was not representative of the teacher population as a whole or any significant part of the whole.

Researcher Bias

Lichtman (2013) posits that researcher bias as well as the theoretical inevitability of it-when it comes to qualitative research-should be taken under heavy consideration. However, this researcher made every effort to place to the side his preconceived notions, a technique

commonly known as *bracketing*. The researcher readily admits he has a passion for social emotional learning and its potential to heal students and educators alike. Throughout the course of the research, the researcher remained focused on each of the participants' unique perspectives and experiences, being careful to remain unassuming and to rid himself of any bias that could possibly skew the collection of the data, initially. Since this study pivoted upon teacher perception, it was important for the researcher to approach collected data with personal and professional respect for the sacredness of revealed attitudes, dispositions, feelings, and thinking. This helped to bolster fidelity within reliability, consistency, and validity.

Researcher bias was further minimized by safeguards: the researcher personally reflected on the interviews and took notes on anything that may have tainted the authenticity of the interview and its integral process; part of the reflection process for the researcher included adequate time to reflect on the negative cognitive space (things not said or subtleties not observed) for the purpose of delving deeper into the true communications of the participants; the structure of the six interviews allowed for the researcher to redirect the interview, if necessary, to maintain fidelity to the original intent of the interview questions, accounting for unexpected impediments to the interview or its processes; the participants understood the need for the interviewer to request further clarification of a rendered answer or to request for greater specificity for better quality data collection. Each of the study's participants were asked to and provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts, checking for any inaccuracy or misrepresentation that may have inadvertently occurred.

Summary

This chapter included the framework for this phenomenological investigation of six K-5 teachers and their perceptions regarding their students' social and emotional health. This

research was conducted to ascertain a more vivid description and a more in depth understanding of multiple individuals who have both unique and shared experiences as educators. The researcher presented both the timeliness and relevance of this study. A cogent understanding concerning the value of this research was offered to both the university and to the respondents. The interview processes were described with detail and purpose. The reasonable expectation regarding the protection of the collected data, risk assessment of this study, and confidentiality within this research was communicated. The researcher's data management process was clearly communicated, initially granting the guarantee of integrity and fidelity for this research. The limitations to this investigation were thoroughly discussed, and safeguards to minimize and prevent researcher bias have been adequately presented. This research is not intended to be replicated within other educational contexts. This research was conducted with the primary and sole objective of gleaning K-5 teachers' perceptions regarding their students' social and emotional health.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter four of this qualitative investigation includes the findings from the inquiry data derived from the data collection instrument specific to my research study. Data from interviewees, taken from all six participants, helped to uncover significant themes and concepts for this dissertation. Findings in this research come from the responses that participants provided in the semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Undergirding and elevating this research further is this dissertation's theoretical framework: *Authentic community precedes effective education*. The purpose of this research was to mine in depth qualitative data pertaining to K-5 teacher perception of their students' social emotional health. Every participant was an elementary educator teaching in rural and urban communities in central Kentucky. Their shared professional experiences and dispositions were extremely useful in providing the researcher with diverse data sets, and the juxtaposition of educator dispositions alone allowed this research to be rich and meaningful.

Coinciding with this research study, confidentiality, privacy, and security have been maintained with integrity and great care. The researcher has employed pseudonyms to create anonymity, replacing actual identifiers regarding schools, districts, and personnel. Each participant came to the interviews with unique experiences, stories, perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and histories, thus providing a rich and meaningful sample of teacher perceptions. The convenience sampling employed in this research allowed the researcher to collect data efficiently as well as allowed data to be pooled from a readily available and willing sampling of K-5 teachers. Social emotional literature and its applications throughout school systems has burgeoned in the last twenty years, creating massive interest and intrigue. The ubiquity of social

emotional learning and its implementations helped to drive an interest in participants, further elevating engagement with my research study.

Analysis of the Interviews

My research used a phenomenological qualitative method to acquire honest perceptions of K-5 educators with adequate and extensive experience in the workplace. The following section will address my research inquiry: Will ascertaining an accurate vantage of teacher perception regarding students' social-emotional health [and their own] be an integral component and a critical step towards synthesizing an effective response, helping to further protect and even heal our students?

Teacher Perception and Reality of Students' SEH

Throughout my investigation of K-5 teacher perceptions regarding their students' social emotional health, I sensed that educators had a myriad of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes concerning social emotional learning. This chapter focuses and accentuates the voices of elementary educators to ascertain and to explore the most honest reflection available of teacher perception of students' social emotional health. Based on what teachers chose to emphasize in their interviews, the themes that best encapsulated and detailed teacher perception of their students' social emotional health were:

- General Perceptions of Student SEH
- Teachers' Perceptions of COVID Effects
- Social Dynamics
- Teacher Concerns
- Community Building

- Innovative Ideas and Practices

General Perceptions of Students SEH

I perceived teachers' obvious willingness to be a part of the solution *for* and a reasonable response *to* most social emotional deficiencies mentioned and observed. Teachers seem to understand and even embrace the foreseen sacrifices necessary to right the social emotional ship for students.

Participant Rita, a 4th grade teacher, communicated both a positive mindset as well as her perception of the gravity of students' current social emotional health condition, and put forth:

Probably the most challenging has been the last four years at my current school, but it's also rewarding, too, so it kinda makes you step outside of your comfort zone. Just take off your teacher hat for just a minute, and you are kind of being more of a parent, a little bit a friend, and somebody that they can lean on, and that they can trust. And so, I've learned a lot of that in the last four years, so it's definitely been different. It is a need that we focus on social and emotional health.

Teachers intuitively recognize the importance of their own social emotional health (SEH) as it relates to the social emotional health of their students. Participant Rita went on to describe something that her principal did for the entire faculty to try to boost the staff's SEH:[Our Principal] had actually held a kind of like a learning hour as part of our staff meeting, and one of them was to meet with our counselor, and it was basically like a counseling session for an hour, and it was probably the best thing I did for me to sit, and it was like off the record, just having conversation about our frustration, how we feel and just how hard it's been. And I think when we do stuff like that, it helps us as teachers when we go back into the classroom, because we need that mental part as well, just as much as they [students] do.

As risk factors continue to encircle the student, there is a greater need to create more definitive solutions for their social emotional health. Participant Cassie, a 2nd grade educator, agreed and identified a unique take on the modern social emotional landscape:

. . .but I think students are struggling in general with communicating their needs, with working cooperatively with others, with their own personal issues and their family life. I feel like it's multifaceted; the issues that we're seeing now in the classroom, whereas years ago when I started, it was like you show up. You do the learning, and teachers were mainly just teachers. Now I feel like we are counselors and parents and all the things. So, I feel like students have a different need nowadays, based on their social emotional and mental health.

Another unique take on students' social emotional health, and perhaps alluding to the types of catalysts responsible for present conditions of SEH, 2nd grade teacher, participant Jayne, said:

We have noticed the biggest difference of the family breakdown, the dynamics of our schools, changing, like we have more Title I schools than ever before; and we feel like a lot of that [attributes] to grandparents raising children, aunts and uncles raising children, and that comes with all these emotional needs. We feel like that the people who are their [students'] role models, or who should be doing it, are not necessarily doing the best job because they're either exhausted or because they've already raised one set of kids, and now they're raising their grandkids, or they're working two or three jobs to make ends meet, and the dynamics of home has really changed in the last 10 years.

Participant Sarah so aptly characterized the tension in a teacher's life between two very important considerations, academic and social emotional:

I think there's just a lot on the homeroom teacher's plate and I think, like all teachers, it's, you know, what their product is. Scores, those kinds of things. Are the kids moving forward? What's their MAP score? What's this score? So, I think those pressures sometimes take the forefront for the teacher, not because they want it to, because they feel like that's the job. Maybe that they've been caste with it.

Participant Rita's candor was brave when she expressed some frustration with unaccounted for elements of the social emotional landscape in our schools. Some of her frustration perhaps stems from becoming weary under the strain of what it actually takes to care for her students as well as herself:

It's just from a teacher standpoint of our brains are full. And, like I had said earlier, we forget about teachers. They also need that mental break as well, and we try so hard to help those children that have trauma and issues that we forget to do that. We need help as well. So that's really the only negative I can say for myself is that sometimes I come

home, and I am mentally exhausted from trying to focus on those things all day long, and sometimes it just doesn't work, and my day is just a complete cluster.

Participant Cassie reflected on some impediments to proper fidelity with implementing social emotional programming:

I kind of already said, like teachers wear so many hats. Now, I don't feel like I have really been trained. And all the things that kids need nowadays, like I have been through trauma training. I've been through the mindfulness training, but it's not like as much as like a counselor would have, and there are days where I feel like a counselor who needs to be in my classroom for certain issues that come up. I mean, I feel like we do the best we can with the training that we've had, and things like that, and, you know, personal life experience and what not, but I don't know that it's with integrity.

Participant Gretchen, a Library Media Specialist, when sharing her perception of overall student social emotional health, coupled the impact of the Covid period with certain observable student deficiencies:

I think due to Covid we feel, or many of the educators that I work with feel, like their [students'] growth has been stunted in being independent. They need a lot of additional help, especially with things like fine motor for the little guys, because they are not doing that as much. They've been at home, many of them on screens, and not sure how to gain that independence when they're put in a setting where things are expected of them. We call it, and I'm sure you've heard this term, the "Covid Gap," where we're seeing a lot of students also struggle interacting with peers and understanding how to deal with their emotions, because they are used to not having to deal with that as much.

Sometimes teachers have to stand their ground, especially when administrators may make too many assumptions about what is truly feasible to ask and expect teachers to do. Entertaining as it is, it is also sad. Sometimes everyone involved loses:

Oh, my Gosh! My counselor! She is a great teacher, like when she comes in, and she does her lessons. She is great. She does a very good job. Here's the problem . . .two times a year. So, I'm assuming, and I told my assistant principal, and I told my principal, that if she can do it two times a year, then I should be able to do it two times a year, so I'll give you your two SEL lessons two times a year. Oh, no, you're with them every day. You should know more. I'm like, I'm not *the* trained professional. I am trying to teach reading and math. Let's be honest. That's all you really want me to teach. You ain't worried about social studies or science. You want me to teach reading and math, and you want to be on grade level. Guess what? If you'd let me do my job, maybe they could read an SEL magazine and understand it. They did not really like my sarcasm, but that's how we feel; I

mean, and I'm not the only one, like, why are there so many experts in the building that do so very little, or they're one on one, and they are not even trying to be in the classroom to have classroom management.

Obviously, teacher perception will vary concerning social emotional learning, and some teachers teach in organizations that have really thought things through, where teachers can feel supported, and students can benefit greatly. Participant Gretchen explains, “The teachers really enjoy doing it. They have fun. It's 15 minutes where they're not working towards standards, and the kids care about their emotional health. They really like that relationship time.”

A couple of the interview questions asked teachers to think about what direction they may go if they were responsible for coming up with their own social emotional programming. The question inspired them and put them in the position of administrator. The data were interesting and telling. Participant Rita thought she would institute more soft starts for students, where the student can come in and play with their peers, rather than jumping right in to schoolwork. Participant Bella advocated for emphasized focus on self-respect and respect for others. Participant Cassie wanted to institute more practical lessons on compromise and perseverance. Participant Sarah had convictions to work with students on processing stress and anxiety in healthy ways. Participant Jayne thought self-regulation and problem-solving would be good focal points for students. Participant Gretchen would push for Guardian Activity Nights and a mentor program for students.

Teacher Perceptions of COVID Effects

It is very interesting how teachers responded with their observations concerning pre-Covid and post-Covid. There were so many amazing insights, and it was very apparent that these educators have employed a growth mindset and that they are ready to be better teachers as a result. The impact has obviously been felt by educators, but educators are resilient and do not

seem content to just stand by and allow events like Covid to devastate the future for students.

Participant Rita shared a very personal story about Covid, speaking about how her own son lacked resolve and resiliency:

My son's dependent; he is in seventh grade. So in the last couple of years he has been very dependent upon me. Some emotional outburst with things, you know, just can't problem solve. So, like immediately coming to me. And just like, you know, I can't figure this out. I can't work this problem, or you know this is what's going on at school, or whatever, and just not trying to figure it out on his own. So, he and I do a lot of role play, of, you know, what I think he should do, and it's hard, because I'm basically trying to make him toughen up a little bit, to be able to problem solve and figure this out on his own, so he's not constantly coming to me, and I think back, you know, again, that stems back to Covid, you know. It was just me sitting there with him, trying to get this work finished and get it done.

Another very personal story was shared by participant Bella, recalling how her daughter presented different characteristics through the Covid pandemic:

My daughter, for instance. She was in second grade when Covid began, and she was the most bubbly outgoing bouncy kid, never met a stranger. After Covid, she has a lot of anxiety. She doesn't like big, big crowds, but she is very communicative. She, like, knows how to set her boundaries. I am not comfortable with this mom. Can we go? And I think that's in large part because of the conversations we're having at school.

Participant Sarah put a positive spin on going through the pandemic, what we learned from it, and how we might be able to use that knowledge to move students in a positive direction:

I think, one, because we got to go through the pandemic, we got to see what these kids lived every day like. You know what their home life was like a lot of times through those *Zoom* meetings. I think we have a better understanding, like we might know that the kid goes home, and they're by themselves in the afternoon, but we don't know that they're going home, and also taking care of their two-year-old little brother, and at the same time expected to prepare dinner for two-year-old brother, or whatever the circumstance may be. So, I feel like we have a heightened awareness of that with our students because of the pandemic.

Social Dynamics

As strengthening the cord of school, family, and peers tends to form a support structure with healing properties, there is a flip side to that coin. What happens when one of those three is not as strong? Disruption of a growth process can be costly given its duration and destructive potential.

Teacher candor is what I was hoping for throughout the interview process. Conversations surrounding the social dynamics for students can be very challenging, but healing must start on an honest foundation to have the best chance to affect change. Participant Jayne shared her perspective on noticeable societal change:

But society has changed a great deal through technology, through this [computer], like the family dynamics. I have this kid this year that has a mom and a dad and they're divorced. Mom married another mom. Dad married a woman that is, like, should be his mom, age-wise, and we have a seven-year-old kid and a three-year-old kid in this house. So, they, yeah, my seven-year-old, they have a lot of questions about what's going on, but we do not have any support for that child, and I will be honest with you, [interviewer]. I'll be damned if I'm touching that. You know. I do not get paid to touch that!

Self-regulation abilities contribute greatly to social emotional health, assisting mental health. Students' ability to control themselves in difficult social situations would be extremely meaningful for their lives. Participant Jayne goes on to describe what may lead to a student meltdown:

Inside the classroom we find that the kids are coming with the idea that the world revolves around me. You know, when you take college classes, grad work, work, and things like that, you go, oh, yeah, you've studied child psychology. Yeah. Five-year-olds. The world does revolve around me. I'm supposed to be the greatest thing on this side. But by the time they get to seven and eight, they should be figuring out that it's not just me. Maybe it's even that person next to me. But these kids are coming with the attitude that I deserve a trophy, I need rewarded. I need instant gratification, and when you can't provide that with 28 kids in a classroom. . . Then what happens is there's no regulating skills, there's no coping skills. There are no problem-solving skills. So, we have meltdowns.

Participant Gretchen shares her concern and desire to bridge students home experiences with practical coping strategies for students:

I think schools can mostly only deal with symptoms because we're not going home with the children. The root causes of many of the SEH issues that we're seeing, not all of them, but many of them, are coming from home. I think it would be really special if we could get parents into different programs to support their children. But we have a lot of guardians that are not always the best role models, or support structures for their children. And we help as much as we can at school. And we are dealing with symptoms that most of the time, I think, are rooted in home, and we're helping kids try to deal with that where we can say, yes, we know that that is the situation. And now our goal is to make you understand, yeah, that's terrible, and then how are we going to be okay at school?

Participant Bella, a Kindergarten teacher, named some of the shifting family dynamics that touch student life:

I have lots of families that are single parent because of divorce or other reasons. Lots of kiddos that are being raised by grandparents, and I think that definitely contributes. And then lots of kiddos that, you know, have parents, who have been in jail or have addiction problems or things along those lines.

Since school success tends to increase through school, family, and community ties, these ties will continue to strengthen when all parties involved come to an appreciation for what students endure. Participant Cassie has elucidated some of these dynamics when she shared:

. . . I had the highest percentage in the entire school of students who did not live with both biological parents, so I feel like the family make-up is a huge issue, maybe just for our community, my little school, or maybe on a broader scale. I'm not sure . . . but I feel like that just adds to what the students are struggling with. You know the example that they see at home, the support that they get from home. Two homes. Maybe they're going back and forth between two homes during the week, and structure is different in one home from another home. And it just changes things. . . I feel like the percentage has gotten higher of those who are in foster care or raised by grandparents or what not. So, I feel like that's a big issue.

Participant Jayne was candid about social media's destructive power as well as her interesting and provocative take on students' over-involvement in extra-curricular activities:

We talked about social media. You can see everything, anytime, everywhere. You used to think that the Joneses were rich. Well, now you know how rich the Joneses are and what you don't have. So, we were worried about social media. We were worried about sports and extracurriculars. You are now playing year-round basketball, baseball. You are involved in all kinds of different activities, but it seems like you're involved with somebody else's life. But you're not involved with your family's life. The parents are allowing other people to raise their children, and like sitting down at the kitchen table and finding out what's going on, because we have to hurry up and get to basketball. Hurry up, get to band, hurry up to get the ball in, or whatever it is.

Teacher Concerns

Social emotional programming can work to stabilize the community, as it places specialized emphasis on oneself, others, and school, prescribing a concerted effort to promote prosocial behaviors. These prosocial behaviors allow students, now, and the adults they will become to experience a better quality life.

Participant Bella spoke on how students can be inadvertently traumatized while at school due to witnessing the manifestations of their peers' social emotional deficiencies:

Some of our other kids have never experienced that kind of thing [emotional, screaming outbursts] And you can see them, and they're just sitting there, and their eyes get really big, and you can see that it really upsets them. I had a little girl last year that was almost in tears because she's like, why is he so mean to you, [Miss Bella]? You're supposed to be nice to grownups, and it really really upset her.

Participant Bella went on to express her concern for students to receive interventions in a timely and efficient manner. Sometimes the process of student referrals and getting students help is slowed needlessly and to the detriment of the student:

We have systems for crisis, for helping kids that are extremely escalated. But I think that's one area that we continue to need to just refine our processes to make sure that it's happening quickly and efficiently, so that we're not promoting another kid who was in the process of helping this child deal with their trauma.

Participant Jayne provided a story about taking a difficult stance, risking herself with official sanctioned disciplinary action:

I had a principal one time that called me, and wanted to know if this was a true statement that I had said, so they call me to the office. And, basically, says, Ms. Jayne, is it true that one of the parents called, and you denied her child to be able to retake the test. And I was like, I guess. Yeah, I mean, yeah. And they were like, well, we let them retake the test, and then we give them half the points, here. And I'm like, I'm not doing it. And, well, that's not how we do things. And I'm like, Hmm. I don't get a do over. I failed many interviews before I got my first job. I have failed my driver's test the first time before. Do you think that I would want that driver to say, oh, you look lovely! You come back in 15 minutes, and I'll give you half the points. I'm like, that's not how society works, but I hate to say that. Today. That's probably what is expected of me, but I'm still not doing it. But that is the expectation. Twelve years ago, that's where we were headed. And now I think we're there- that children cannot fail. And let's talk about the grading system. Oh, we can't fail them, like there are school districts out there that says, oh, no, no child can get a failing grade. You have to continue to get them up. Well, you know what? I will be honest with you, and sure, all right. Guess what? I'm not going to work that hard. And I'm not going to teach that hard, because in this Socialist society that we're in right now, I can work my ass off and I'm still going to get paid what the teacher down the hall, that's doing whatever.

Participant Rita shares her heart and mind when it comes to imagining what some students may face in life because of underdeveloped character, skill sets, and abilities to regulate both cognitively and behaviorally:

I do worry, like in the future, like socially, you know, and so like the kids used to just talk to you and say, you know, hey, I don't understand this problem. I don't get it. But instead, you know, we're putting our heads down, banging our heads on the table and saying, I'm dumb. I'm stupid, and you know, it's just, it's alarming to think that as they grow up and become adults, you know, continuing to act like that. So those are some things that I am concerned with, that they just cannot regulate their emotions and be able to respond appropriately. When there is a problem, no matter how small or how big it is. So that's just something that I worry about for their future.

Participant Jayne expressed grave concern for over-saturating students with technology and screen time:

But with all that technology of twenty-first century learning, that also means that these kids are sitting at the screen, and I'm telling you they are wired by the end of the day. Their fine motor skills. Oh, my gosh! We don't have any, because we don't have anybody at home teaching them how to use scissors. We don't have anybody at home teaching them how to type. I have kids that can't tie shoes. I had a kid in fifth grade, they couldn't tie their shoe. He wore Velcro shoes, and he was okay with that. And I think that's the next thing that I get to is [sic] self-motivation. We don't have it. And I don't know if there's any SEL program that can teach that and that's what I worry about more than anything.

Participant Cassie voiced her concerns based on with what she is seeing in schools now and how it may translate for students in the future:

I feel like some of them are going to struggle. The ones who, you know, have issues now with controlling their emotions, or even recognizing their emotions, are going to be the ones who struggle as stress increases in a teenager's life. Of course, there are some who, you know, might mature and work through their own issues, but I also feel like there's going to be some who, who definitely struggle. You know, in in the younger grades we don't see a lot of issues like middle schools do, with like self-harm and things like that. But you know there are times where you get a glimmer of something, and you think to yourself, like oh, that's gonna be a sore spot when this kid gets older.

Participant Rita discussed some evidence when it comes to implementing social emotional programming with fidelity versus infidelity:

I think that in my four years at my school, watching social emotional issues become an issue, I can tell when it's being implemented with fidelity and when it's not, and in the classrooms that are doing it, you don't have a lot of behavior issues. You have a lot of students that are respecting the teacher, and they do what they're told. But then, in the classrooms, where they're not putting anything in place with social emotional, and if it's no morning meetings, not trying to establish that relationship between the students, complete chaos. So, you can kind of tell where it's being implemented and where it's not with fidelity.

Rita went on to honestly pinpoint one area of social emotional learning that can inadvertently fail our students:

I wish that we, even though we do focus on social emotional learning, that we do also kind of old school, do have consequences in place. So, I think that sometimes we are afraid to . . . I'm not gonna say punish, but it's like if a child does make a bad choice, and it's like we do sit and we do social stories, and we talk, and we do all that. But you can only do that for so long. And then, after a while, it's kind of like, well, we're going to have to do something else. Sometimes I feel like is not good use of energy. . . Do I want

us to suspend a student every day? No, no, not at all. But it's just you've got to find that happy medium. We do an awesome job with the social emotional, but then, then it's kind of where we fall apart. After that it's like we need to come up with something else, too.

Participant Bella is forthright in stating that teachers and schools need more personnel, emphasizing that sometimes social emotional health can be augmented through a well-equipped system:

I definitely think that having that extra personnel, just to be a calm down place. We especially need it because we are all human. We get elevated, too. You've got a kid that's screaming curse words at you and throwing chairs. It's, you know. It's very easy to become elevated and having that support to give them a cool down and give me a cool down to respond to them in a better way helps a lot!

Community Building

Authentic community is a powerful accelerant for social emotional health. Connecting all this back to the conventional Maslow principle, that when basic needs are met, individuals and community strengthens, there is great hope for schools to build stronger community. This, in turn, allows individuals to sense belonging and acceptance, which is both what creates community and sustains it. It seems that the more that students enjoy community, the more social emotional competencies they are likely to develop and use. One data point of emphasis and saturation that my research yielded is that teachers perceive community building as integral to and essential for students' social emotional health. The participants of my research seem to value immensely and be very excited about opportunities to further build authentic community for students to thrive in, kind of like a botanist tending to nutrient rich soil for their plants to grow. Participant Gretchen provides insight into just how far a demonstration of respect might go toward allowing students to sense community:

So, I think, for me, quality time with them [students] is the way that I form relationships with my kids, like I get to know them and what they like, and then we talk about it, and I find something in common with them to build on that and ask about their basketball games or go to their basketball games. I like to go to their events, and just like actually

take an interest in their lives because they're important humans...those kids aren't going to respect you, because they've seen many adults that they can't respect. But you always have to make sure that you're treating them with logic. So, I respect them, even if they're, you know, they're five. That doesn't matter. They're humans that should have a say in their lives. And I think when you do that for kids, they really appreciate that, because not all adults do give them that respect in that space.

I have no problem admitting that what participant Bella shared with me regarding one of her school's practices, pierced my heart and mind with so many possibilities for building community or rebuilding communities, depending on how one perceives it. It speaks for itself:

But when we notice the kids either struggling academically or struggling with the big emotional feelings, or anything like that, they'll call parents in, and it's not a, well, you need to fix Johnny's behavior. *It's what can we do to support you? What's going on with your family? How can we help you with your needs? So that things go better, so that you're able to get kids to school.*

No good educator would overlook the social emotional boost for students and teachers when considering the powerful advantage of positive verbal and behavioral teacher modeling. As academic and social confidence ensue right along with student engagement, there are plenty of reasons for educators to be hopeful about building community. Participant Jayne shared a powerful reminder of the simple act of sharing life with students:

I share my own experiences. I was a student that could not read very well. I was a student that was called names. I have a lot of failures. I have a country accent. I had a stuttering problem. I had it all going on, and I always share my experiences with them.

Participant Gretchen, a library media specialist, echoes some of the advantages of opening-up with students about her personal journey, all in the name of boosting social emotional health:

I am the digital citizenship coordinator. . . I definitely bring in a lot of personal, appropriate anecdotes from my life. So that's helpful to me, too. I always think that when we're teaching, if we're being good teachers, that we're bringing in SEL to the classroom; we're communicating with our students how to interact in an appropriate, loving manner, how to be calm when a student isn't being calm and showing them how to regulate their emotions, and how to have healthy relationships.

One of the most inspiring practices emerging from my inquiry data sets was the idea and practice for building strong community with students. Participant Sarah, a visual arts teacher, shared such a simple and wise practice, promoting students' social emotional health:

I think the art classroom lends itself to that social emotional learning component, as a lot of the arts' areas do. And I feel like one thing that I've always done in my teaching is I always save a spot for me at the table with the kids as they're working, which I think is really powerful. So, I take time after I explain the lesson and get everyone started to just sit with them and just be there. And a lot of times it doesn't have to be related to what we're doing in the project, but I'm there for them, having conversations, you know, getting to know them on a more personal level, so that they're comfortable with me in any setting, so they're comfortable coming to me with questions later, you know. When a kid is having a bad day they'll come and get a hug, or whatever it is. And I think the little time that I take to do that has made a big difference in the relationships that I build with kids. I want to be the story at the dinner table when a kid goes home.

Participant Rita shared her confidence in being transparent as possible with students for the purpose of building their confidence and understanding of how to deal with adversity, life itself:

Yeah. And I try to relate a lot of my personal experience as a child, even in elementary school and things that you know that I have messed up on, made a poor mistake, or I have failed at doing to show them that I'm still here. It's okay. I managed to be successful and become a teacher and go to school.

Participant Bella shared a restorative practice supported by school policy for building community with young students:

So when a kiddo is escalating to the point where it's no longer safe for them to be in our classroom, they have someone that they can go cool and it's not, you know, it's not a you're in trouble. You're going to go to detention. It's what can we do to help you feel better and to figure out a better way to cope with this next time. So very, very responsive. We try to be proactive, and they [administration] anticipate things that we're going to see in our classrooms.

Participant Bella enthusiastically celebrated some of the ways her school family works to make students feel valued and welcome:

. . .He [the principal] has very few things that are non-negotiable, but one of his big ones is that we greet every child as they come through the door in the morning by name and, you know, we make that intentional effort to connect with them every single day, so that all kids leave our building feeling somebody saw me today. So that's been very positive . . . the emotional connection with the kiddos is phenomenal.

Innovative Ideas and Practices

An exciting phenomenon that I observed in these interviews is teachers' ability to be so forward and innovative in their thinking about solutions to our social emotional deficits.

Necessity as the mother of invention can create so much and profit so many. To reiterate, any educator that approaches classroom management and student discipline as an opportunity to build student community is a catalyst for stability and an agent of Maslow. Innovative practices within SEL will almost undoubtedly strengthen the perception of the community as well as the actual community. There are plenty of reasons to be hopeful that educators, as they search for and discover innovative responses to social emotional deficits, will naturally strengthen school communities.

Participant Jayne recalled a practice at her former school to which I will refer to as the hard part of community building, but because the practice has waned and is not an ubiquitously applied, it remains both novel and innovative:

Every beginning of the school year, we had to do a home visit. Go, knock on that door. I needed to see. We're not sure where you lived. I needed to see where [my students] lived, and I needed to see mom and mama needed to see me. And I have the best relationships with those moms now. I had to get a true relationship. Now I did have one person to look at me and tell me, my little white ass didn't know how to teach her black child. But by the end of the year, I thought it was a compliment when the little boy looked at me and said, you sound just like my mama. I'm like, well, your mom is getting it done like that! So, we did turn that around. But I believe if you are not a part of this community, if you are not in that community, let that community see that you are wanting to be a part of them.

Participant Rita expounds on a practice that could be labeled as disruptive to students' learning, but the reality of it is innovative and cutting edge:

Our day really begins with about a good 20 to 30 min of social emotional things, whether it's morning meeting, maybe acting out things of like, how would you react in this scenario? And sometimes in the middle of the day I will literally stop my teaching, and just so we can make a circle in the middle of the floor, and let's just talk about what's going on right now.

Participant Rita goes on to explain how she creates a relief valve of sorts for students, because she knows all too well that for her learners to learn well, their community has to be as healthy as possible:

I try to be responsive to their needs, as I see that it happens, because I want to be able to go on about my day, and to be able to teach and to be successful. But at the same time, if I can't get the social emotional part under control with them at that moment, I'm not going to be able to teach and do anything. So, we work on just being calm, *how to communicate, how to talk to each other*, and talk about our emotions, instead of just bottling up and getting angry and just pouting and not doing what we're supposed to do.

Participant Bella underscores how she teaches SEL in the moment, in a responsive stance for the students' benefit; she also has preemptive measures to help meet the needs of her kindergarteners:

If I'm seeing a lot of tattling, I might teach a lesson on tattling, and why that, you know, hurts people. Again, teaching kids to recognize their emotions is really important. We do have a calm corner. We have lots of tools there that we teach the kids how to use, including some reflection pieces that they can use. You know, things like a big stuffed animal that's weighted that they can hug and just use to help themselves regulate. But no, we do not have a prescribed program in our classrooms. We just have lots of resources that our counselor has created for us.

Rita, teaching 4th grade, has shared a very practical idea that provides one more safety net for her students to rely on:

We do like check in things, where they can write a little note, and they just slip it on my desk whenever they want to, or something that's going on, if it's at home, or if it's with a friend, and that way I know to pull that child and just have a couple of minutes with them and talk to them. So, I try to communicate with them that I am here, I'm available, and I am going to listen. And so that way they have somebody to talk to, because sometimes they don't at all, at home, and it's just me. And that's it. So, I try to do things like that, so I can get them to communicate and talk to me when there is a problem . . . So, I, I just constantly, all day, every day, I'm just trying really hard in the middle of trying to teach

the standards and everything else, to try to throw in things that will make them just be successful adults and be able to communicate.

One of the greatest innovative practices was mentioned by participant Cassie, a 2nd grade teacher. She loves to observe kids throughout the school day when less structure is applied to their activity, such as at recess, so that she can get a better idea for how they are socially and emotionally interacting with each other:

In the classroom I feel like I see it [indicators of students' SE needs] most at like recess time or cooperative learning times. Just issues with other students. You know, how to effectively communicate and work through differences, compromise, things like that. I say recess just because that's less structure than like, you know, small group or whole group instruction. That's when they are more free to interact without an adult right next to them or leading the instruction and things.

Participant Sarah referenced the benefits of building community, which, in turn, has allowed students to value school personnel as they have returned to school after the pandemic:

I feel like this is the first school that I've been at, where I feel like the students come to me for more things, and I feel like part of that is because I'm a constant for them. They've known me for four years. I was there during the pandemic. You know, our school did a lot of things to try to make things normal during the pandemic, and my team, in particular, I mean, we would go like visit kids and take them presents on their porch, go to neighborhoods, and just to say, hey, on random days kind of thing. I think that's made a big difference. So, I think the kids are a lot more comfortable with us as adults, and I think they see our spaces as a safe place to share or just be themselves, which I think is great. A lot of these kids do not have a constant in their life.

Participant Jayne celebrated a victory in teaching kids self-regulation as she modeled self-regulation right before their eyes:

I had two or three little girls that had anxiety. So, we worked through those, and I would prep them for those things that came around, and they wanted to be perfect. But by the end of the year, it was a big deal. They no longer had to use their eraser. They just literally marked through their work, which was a great big deal, because they, seeing me, did it enough times, even on the board. I didn't erase. I got to the point. Oh, gosh! I'm erasing. That's why they erase. I think it has to look perfect on the board. Well, guess what? They probably think it has to, too. So, then I started writing on the board or on my little platform, my little screen, whatever, and I wouldn't erase. I just marked through it. So by the end of the time, they understood perfection didn't have to look that way all the time.

Participant Jayne, staying true to her academic and professional convictions, communicated a story that speaks to the intestinal fortitude that conscientious teaching requires. It is not always easy to do the right thing, and it becomes especially difficult when educators are ridiculed for being tough on kids, when in a lot of situations, being tough on a student is the most loving expression possible:

I basically look at them and say, if you cry one more tear over something that can be taken care of . . . and they'll look at me. And I'm like, so you better think about if this is worth you crying over, and I know I sound harsh . . . But a lot of times they just need to go. Hmm, wait a minute. She's not going to let me by with this. I just better make sure if I want to cross in tears, it's worth it, but I don't have as many criers.

This next innovative practice is not only describing a positive rewards' system, but possibly even a golden SEL tool, encouraging students to delay gratification, to think before they act and speak, and to experience in a meaningful way the fruits of their self-regulation.

Participant Gretchen likes the students' ownership of their decisions she has witnessed with the following innovations:

Our counselor does a character trait of the month, and teachers nominate, and then the kids are invited down to a pizza party, and they love that. That's been really good. Our school does PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) . . . they can earn money, but no one takes the money away, which I really like. They can only earn it. So, I really like that. We do that, and then they can actually go to a store in school and use their money, like their good behavior actually buys them objects. And that tangibility, I think, has helped a lot of kids be positive and feel good about their choices at school.

Teachers really seemed to understand that part of the community building process, what needs to be heavily considered, is what can we do to advance families incrementally, things that are really going to make that big difference for students as well as their families. Participant

Bella shared her ideas of how to educate parents:

I would love to see us do more community partnerships like big brother and big sister mentoring, and that would take a lot of training. In the past we've done things like Parent Universities for reading and math skills. I'd love to see us do some parent universities for social emotional learning.

Another innovative practice is in the details. Sure, schools can only do what they can do, but participant Rita highlights for us what going the extra mile sometimes entails:

I do believe our school does an amazing job of addressing that [root causes of social emotional deficiencies] and trying to get to the bottom of what's going on, and not just, Oh, well, whatever, you know, their parents are just not taking care of them. Let's just go on. We gotta move on . . . We take a lot of data. We make a lot of phone calls. We get a lot of people involved. We try to make sure that the counseling they receive, if it's not in school, if it's outside counseling, that it's good outside counseling, so we do a lot of good stuff.

Referencing a useful analogy, participant Gretchen had some interesting ideas on what she might do to create a better social emotional experience for her students and for her students' families:

I would make all the guardians for school have to come in for like a monthly, like, maybe like a two hour thing at night, and I think they should all, like, maybe some sort of stipend is provided to help them, and they can see who we are, and we can talk about our goals for their student. And we can also, when you meet a parent, you [can] get a feel for what's going on at home. And I would also like to see how the kids interact with their parents, and see how their behavior is the same or different from when they interact with us. It's like the iceberg picture where you see it in a book where there's like so much beneath the surface, and I think that would help us as educators, and it would hopefully also help guardians. See how we are interacting with their children, if we're doing a good job to model that. We could learn from many guardians that are amazing, and we could, you know, help assist some guardians that aren't, and even though there's so many resources that our social worker provides for families, those don't always reach the families that need them the most, and if they're coming in every month.

Conclusion

Sometimes perception is reality. These people, these educators, chose their profession, but like so many other things in life, sometimes you get more than what you anticipated. The evident attitudes of my interviewees were a blessing to witness. It is good to know that educators have not just thrown their hands up in surrender, good to know that they are still out there fighting for students, fighting for students' social emotional and academic welfare. Many

useful ideas emerged from this data collection. We believe in the edification of students, and the literature emphasizes the importance of edifying teachers for the expressed purpose of edifying students. Based on what teachers chose to accentuate in their interviews, the themes that best encapsulated and detailed teacher perception of their students' social emotional health were:

- General Perceptions of Student SEH
- Teachers' Perceptions of COVID Effects
- Social Dynamics
- Teacher Concerns
- Community Building
- Innovative Ideas and Practices

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Whether social emotional learning will continue to be implemented with varying degrees of fidelity or whether national, state, and local policy makers will truly listen and appropriately respond to teachers and their perceptions based on their experiences is yet to be seen. The modern educational landscape is uncharted territory as far as striking a balance between emphasizing the academic and emphasizing the social emotional. Is it possible to address both, adhering to the highest of social and academic standards, creating a new wave of educational outcomes, exceeding our expectations, and properly serving our student clientele, our parents, and our communities?

The bravery and candor of this study's participants will hopefully ignite a deeper, more compassionate, and certainly more honest approach to education. The best controllers and safeguards that policy makers can put on education are going to be honest and difficult. Because if our education system is relying on treatments and ameliorations that exacerbate and add to the overall confusion, education cannot advance to meet the students where they are and where they need. If, in fact, Maslow was right, and, if, in fact, authentic community precedes effective education, then our educational path from here is predetermined, exciting, and hopeful. How can education continue to manufacture more stability for students?

I believe we are at a critical crossroads in public education. Many families are beginning to have second thoughts about the relevancy and utility of public education, but a stalwart response by public education, an honest response by public education, could prompt practical

and ideological adaptations and adoptions that would likely restore confidence in public education. But contemporary social emotional realities deserve much more than a standard response, erecting a facade and an impression of careful guardianship. The modern-day student deserves an educational system that exalts the person over the academic outcome, an educational system that is honest with itself to the extent that they can readily admit when they need redirection, bringing its stakeholders together to make important decisions that will affect the very society itself.

Perhaps the American education machine has slightly lost sight of its identity. As we present self-actualization and its usefulness in individual terms, can we extrapolate the same benefit for collectives? If the very educational apparatus becomes self-actualized, accounting for as many relevant variables affecting our students and teachers as possible, and, by default, our communities, then, according to Maslow's principles, it is plausible that there should be an onslaught of creative and innovative practices and thereby greater academic and social outcomes.

The data collected through this research have revealed the humanity of educators, further exploring the practical and emotional thresholds that teachers are screaming from under the waters of what sometimes can seem to be the normal movements of educational practice. The data have also uncovered some of the unfortunate family conditions that our students face on a daily basis and teacher dispositions on how to best soften this for students. Educators are the dream makers and the dreamers of the dreams; the data have certainly supported that teachers are primed to scrape and find and to fight on behalf of their students' welfare. Teachers are even ready to change their thoughts and actions to try to help students, applying their sacrificial love.

The potential for educators to help build stronger communities from the classroom is immense. Kabasakal and Totan (2013) suggested that SEL programs should build community,

building a sense of belonging within each student, while decreasing hostility toward the educational environment, positively affecting their attitude toward self and others, creating social and emotional stability. Payne et al. (2003) supported this notion by theorizing that when students bond, they build and strengthen their community, therefore resulting in less school disruption, leading to a more effective, and a better-quality education.

Through the data collection it was extremely evident that teachers are burdened for students. They are willing to be honest, and in instances are even willing to be cruel only to be kind. Teacher perception equated to teacher reality. The data continuously supported the notion that teachers are willing to go a couple extra miles for the students and that teachers are very concerned about what the students are facing in this 21st century. Despite some bleak reminders of the uphill battle yet to be fought on behalf of students, the data reveal that teachers remain hopeful and encouraged, even to the point of thinking innovatively toward solutions. Perhaps the greatest encouragement from the research data is teachers' willingness to actively create community. Teachers want to create belonging and acceptance for their students and their students' families. Teachers see, sense, and experience the potential of a strong community. Teachers will exhaust themselves to reach a single student through the most treacherous of circumstances.

The interview data continuously brought forth support for ideas represented in the review of literature. Practically incongruent to the assertion by Ransford et al. (2009), that weary teachers tend to not serve students well, the dissection of my interview data aligned more with Jacobs and Struyf (2013), as they observed that most teachers do, in fact, see social emotional learning as their responsibility, part and parcel of their chosen profession. Corroborating the conviction of Rae et al. (2017), that teacher's mental and emotional well-being is linked to

greater student achievement, Ransford et al. (2009) posited that as teachers experience genuine support, they are more likely to implement curriculum with greater fidelity, and this is something that lies so central to SEL and its success. Moorish et al. (2018) contended that SEL promotes the regulation of emotions within student populations and this regulation, in turn, promotes socially beneficial traits such as sound mental health and the general, social well-being of students, all leading to greater school engagement. Good things happen for students when educators are intentional about helping student SEH.

Educational communities stand to gain greatly as efforts to grow and to strengthen the community abound. Fradera (2018) alluded to and contended that when more of a community reaches self-actualization, unlocking more of their potential through realizing more of their talent's utility, that more and more creativity will emerge, benefitting said community in many new and novel ways. Blum and Libbey (2004) provided a reminder as to the consequences of loss of community, whether actual or perceived. Janosz et al. (2008) idea that when students sense strength of community, it not only helps drive school engagement higher but it also mitigates the frequency, or occurrence altogether, of anti-social manifestations is even more powerful when combined with the Slaten et al. (2015) idea, promoting openness with students about life, encouraging them and knowing them personally, thus relationship building, leading to better academic outcomes. In support Duncan et al. (2007) asserted that by equipping younger students with socioemotional skills, it will translate into a strong sense of community, which, consequently, will augment academic achievement.

Elias et al. (1997) defined *social-emotional learning* as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (p. 2). Teacher participants provided proof positive that they recognize

their growth responsibility when it comes to the social emotional health of their students. This was evident in how most of the teacher participants shared their lived experiences, especially the experiences that were colored by failure and defeat. Teacher participants also demonstrated a camaraderie with students in their willingness to model coping strategies to boost their own social emotional health. Sometimes the bravest thing is for teachers to allow their students to see them struggle, because it is human, because it is compassionate and honest. Interestingly, the research data well supports the idea that social emotional deficiencies are healed through attending to the internal root causes and symptoms. Not once in this research did the teacher participants ever suggest that the answer to students' social emotional difficulties was going to be realized through changing what they are or changing their appearance or rearranging some external impression for others if they could only present themselves to the world in a certain manner. And no one ever said it was going to be easy.

Throughout the interview process and during the ensuing data collection, I have tried to see the data through as many independent, pure, and creative lenses as possible. Objectively speaking, the point of the data collection and ongoing research was to ascertain an honest perspective regarding teachers' thinking and feeling about social emotional learning, in general, and specifically, teachers' perspective on their students' current social and emotional health. Even an objective approach to information requires a synthesis and an interpretation. Themes started to emerge as data was aggregated, disaggregated, and organized. So, again, objectively positioning the data and paying close attention to the negative cognitive space (things not observed and things not emphatically stated, a reading between the lines, of sorts), helping me to listen to the emerging narrative in newly minted realities and considerations, in isolation and in concert, greatly assisted me in the data analyses.

The main themes or ideas that emerged throughout the coding process were centered around what is best for students and their families and what is best for teachers and their social emotional health. The theme that teachers are stressed, overwhelmed, and stretched too thin in the face of modern education and social emotional learning demands became a masterpiece of understatement, culminating at a point of saturation. The theme that social emotional learning for students and teachers is worthwhile and deserves massive amounts of further consideration and revising ran abundantly throughout the data. The theme that teachers are becoming increasingly innovative and creative in how they are responding to the social emotional deficits of students was abundantly clear. The theme that educators are prepared to embrace anything that can ethically build community for their students and that these things should be heavily invested in was clearly uncovered. Last, but not least, a strong theme that emerged throughout the data was even the most minute attempt to mitigate unpleasant school experiences for students typically pays huge dividends for the student, especially for their very personal and acute sense of acceptance, belonging, and community. All of these themes offer varying degrees of hope for educators and students, moving forward. There's a willingness to learn more and teach differently on the part of the educators, and there's a willingness on the part of the students to learn better ways to feel and stay connected to their school communities.

Recommendations

The focal point of this research investigation was to glean K-5 teacher perception of their students' social emotional health. Gaining in-depth insights about teacher perception was integral to this study because the potential response by administrators and by policymakers to teacher candor regarding students' SEH could catalyze positive differences for students' school experiences. This study also sought to discover what teachers thought could help strengthen

students' SEH. The collected data confirmed that teachers acknowledged that their own SEH was critically important to students. Many of the stories extracted from the data of successful SEH interventions carried a healthy dose of hope and positivity; the data also revealed that teachers see social emotional learning as tough, yet worthwhile, proving that sometimes poor implementation does not always mean the death of an initiative. Sometimes teachers feel so strongly about the potential benefit for students that educators are willing to trudge through and make things happen.

Educational administrators and policymakers can certainly view this qualitative data as an opportunity to further develop educational integrity for all stakeholders. The trick for educational executives is to combine a clear-cut pathway to academic and social emotional success for students and teachers, to design an educational system that ameliorates impediments and maximizes human resource, targeting high impact educational practices that promote and sustain community. The data were very clear and encouraging when it came to the importance of and the need for more community building. This research underscored the hypothesis that *authentic community must precede effective education*, and this could be the future cornerstone of any future educational initiative. Participants never positioned themselves, meaning their own social emotional health, as central to educational success, but they all acknowledged in significant ways that their own social emotional health ought to be more central; this is supported throughout the educational literature. All recommendations in this research study are derived from the empirical nature of this dissertation.

Recommendation A: To increase the quality of SEL and SEH for our students, we must provide better quality trainings for administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents/guardians, as well as restructure teacher salaries to reflect their newly assumed

mental and social health expertise. Greenberg et al. (2003) concurred that any abbreviated half-measured, mediocre implementation of SEL is a disruptor of education, and they view lack of administrative support for SEL as a major contributor to unsuccessful implementation, cogently advocating for the need to saturate the schools' curriculum with SEL. Therefore, if we in our school communities can truly accept some corrective criticism, then perhaps we would provide educators with a renewed sense of direction, a newfound confidence that their voices are being heard and taken seriously, and furnish some additional incentive that communicates how much they are valued for their diligence with SEL. The educational literature is fairly saturated with data that supports more meaningful implementation and advantageous student outcomes in situations where the teacher senses administrative support. The data from this study carried strong opinions on what supportive administrations do and to what extent supportive administrations are needed.

Recommendation B: To further cultivate authentic community with families, we must be proactive in strengthening bonds with all families. Pillars of school communities must be continuously reminded of educational research (Greenberg et al. 2003, Estell et al. 2013, Janosz et al. 2008) position that school success will occur more when schools bond with families, creating community and trust, a foundation worth building strongly. It stands to reason and to logic that when people sense belonging to and support from their community, they are more likely to believe and contribute. Parental community involvement often carries multiple benefits for students; primarily, when parents model community through their own investments of time and effort, students witness and experience how valuable and beneficial this can be for their community and are probably more likely to follow the example in the future.

Recommendation C: To honor teachers' efforts, keeping in mind their appreciation for transparency and clear communication, and to acknowledge their expectations regarding data-driven decision making, we must develop a reliable progress monitoring apparatus for students' social emotional health, providing teachers with data that hopefully reflects their hard wrought efforts, providing inspiration, fueling new levels of commitment. Many schools already enjoy progress monitoring with academics and behavior, but mere implementation of SEL has been the rule and not the exception. McKown (2017) concluded that the more refined students' SEL skills are, the better they do academically, socially, and emotionally. I believe teacher buy-in to SEL and its programming could be easily procured if teachers knew that there was a system to ensure fidelity and accountability. In terms of profit margins, most business and industry personnel could attest to the value of data-based analysis and data-based decision making. Data-based decision making is the most reliable way for schools to keep their thumb on the pulse of students' social emotional condition. It is imperative to place and keep students in their *zone of proximal development* when conducting social emotional learning. Due to all the shifting variables factoring into social emotional learning, it is important for schools to commit their decisions relative to what the data indicates.

Final Reflections

Will ascertaining an accurate understanding of teacher perception regarding students' social-emotional health [and their own] be an integral component and a critical step towards synthesizing an effective response, helping to protect and even heal our students?

The transformative potential of education is too precious to squander. Fidelity to progress monitoring has been utilized successfully in various public and private sectors to accomplish goals systematically, and so it can be used to change a students' metacognition and change our

future. Wilson et al. (2001) contended that intervention programs that focus on changing students' thinking change student behavior, a kind of cognitive behavioral therapy lens to SEL. The data from this research provided a shocking reminder of what a lot of students live through and live with at home. Educators can become overwhelmed at the mere severity of what comprises some students' experiences. However, teachers are willing to put in the time and the effort required to mitigate social emotional deficiencies for students. This is good news.

My goal, to remove some of the professionally induced barriers, replacing them with free-flowing communication and a more honest discourse, untethered from typical fear and reluctance, was adequately achieved throughout this investigation's data collection. I was quite pleased with the transparency and the passion that participants approached their interview responses. The more I heard the inflections of participants' responses, the more hopeful I became for the future social emotional health of students. Sometimes along the journey I have become disheartened due to what I sensed to be uncaring teacher dispositions, but the interview data from this research investigation has encouraged me and ought to encourage educational stakeholders as well.

I am hoping that this research can serve as a springboard for future researchers to build upon. Future research could study teacher perception of 6th-12th grade students' SEH. This data could help further the academy's conceptualization of the state of students' social emotional health for the purpose of tailoring SEL curriculums to meet the needs of students, considering their SE growth from K-12. If we know more about how students' social emotional needs ebb and flow, we can better prepare educators so they can better prepare students. Future research could simplify SEL's implementation, making it more reliable and fitting. The more we lessen teacher stress associated with SEL delivery, the better we can contribute to teachers' SEH.

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