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A Mixed Methods Study on Urban Educators' Feelings of Preparedness to Implement Practices that Impact Social and Emotional Learning in a Mid-Pandemic Environment

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by

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

The purpose of the mixed methods study was to evaluate urban educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning strategies in their classrooms/workspaces as well as to understand what the educators' experiences were as their students returned to a five day a week school schedule after a year and a half of disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those involved in the study included educators from four K-8 public charter schools located in an urban Midwestern environment. Quantitative data was obtained through the administration of two identical surveys that were completed by volunteer participants at two different points during the 2021-2022 school year. Qualitative research methods included classroom/workspace observations and educator interviews. Through the mixed-methods research design, the researcher hoped to contribute to current findings on the impact of a global pandemic on the social and emotional needs of students and the experiences of school staff.

As a study conducted during the phenomenon of being an educator in a mid-pandemic urban environment, the data was anticipated to reveal significant themes, and it certainly did. The first qualitative themes that were identified had to do with educators' personal states of emotional and physical exhaustion. There were also themes of specific new challenges that had been introduced to the work of educators because of the pandemic. Interviews also exposed themes related to the importance and impact of facilities, operations, and district-level decisions. A final theme was educators' desire for a research-based and intentionally chosen SEL curriculum that would be used district wide. Quantitative data showed that, despite an educators' previous years of experience or amount of prior training/knowledge, these themes largely remained the same.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

In March of 2020, schools across the United States were abruptly closed due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Because of these closures, students were no longer able to receive the same levels of support from their teachers, and missed out on valuable social interactions, experienced isolation, and some even endured increased levels of trauma. Experts in the areas of adolescent mental health, social and emotional learning (SEL), and child development recognized that this was a critical opportunity to research the pandemic's impact on student well-being and ability to learn. While some families enjoyed more financial security and family time during the school closures, that was not the case for everyone, most notably those from minority backgrounds. "The human losses and financial tolls were more commonly experienced by Black, Hispanic/ Latinx, and indigenous students from lower-income communities" (Center on Reinventing Public Education [CRPE], 2021, p. 4). Research from the pandemic's effects on mental health was still in the early stages, but evidence already showed "a surge in anxiety and depression among children and adolescents since the pandemic began, especially among young people of color" (Bartlett & Stratford, 2021, para.1). Students of color disproportionately relied on schools for mental health services and the pandemic cut many off from the only sources of support that they had. Only several months into the pandemic, school administrators began to notice disparities. School leaders of campuses with mainly or exclusively students of color, such as those where the research took place, were more likely than principals of majority-White schools to realize a significant need

for high-quality resources that supported the social and emotional learning needs of students (Hamilton & Doss, 2020).

The necessity for students, particularly in communities such as the one where the research took place, to receive social and emotional supports from their schools had never been more pressing. Students returned to school in August of 2021 with significant learning losses accompanied by the need to relearn how to engage with their teachers and their classmates in healthy ways, while also processing any recent losses or trauma that they may have endured since March of 2020.

Educators anticipated the struggle. A study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE, 2021), revealed that when teachers reflected on what they wished the start of the 2021-2022 school year would entail, supporting the social and emotional needs of students was at the top of the list. All states, including Missouri where the research took place, required SEL training for educators. However, "fewer than 10 percent (of states) include training on key aspects of SEL, such as self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills" (Ferren, 2021, p. 2). Unfortunately, educator training frequently focused on things like handling student misbehavior instead of positive proactive strategies, such as creating supportive staff-student relationships.

Researchers interested in addressing the current crisis urged schools to shift away from focusing on reactive measures, such as rules and consequences, and instead advised districts and leaders to be proactive and provide tools and personnel to understand and support the diverse needs of students (National Urban League, 2020). Teachers needed to have training in restorative practices, know how to implement social and emotional learning supports, and recognize when students were not doing well in the area of mental

health. The preparedness of educators to create the components of a supportive classroom climate, provide explicit instruction in SEL, and integrate SEL into curriculum and academic conversations was likely the most important thing that districts focused on as students continued to navigate an ongoing pandemic and reacclimate to a full-time on-campus schedule. The study included educators who served K-8 students in four urban Mid-western schools made up primarily of non-White, lower income families. Knowing that the schools' populations consisted of those who were most likely to be adversely affected by the pandemic and school closures, identifying and tending to the diverse needs of students was of critical importance.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the mixed methods study was to evaluate educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning strategies in their classrooms, as well as to understand what educators faced as their students returned to a five day a week school schedule, after a year and a half of disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those involved in the study included educators from four K-8 public charter schools located in an urban Mid-western environment. By using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the researcher hoped to contribute to current research on the impact of a global pandemic on the social and emotional needs of students and the experiences of school staff. Quantitative data were obtained by the administration of two identical surveys which addressed educators' perceptions of their abilities to implement a variety of SEL strategies in their classrooms. Qualitative data were gained through interviews and observations and addressed the experiences of educators as they worked

with students in a mid-pandemic environment after a significant period of learning disruption, increased loss and trauma, and social isolation.

Rationale of the Study

There was myriad of research available regarding the intentional teaching practices that impacted social and emotional learning and their influence on children—the influence of SEL on learning outcomes, feelings of well-being, behavior in school, mental health, and long-term outcomes, to name a few. However, the researcher found that some unique themes emerged from a mixed-methods phenomenological study in a particular environment during the 2021-2022 school year. The educators in the four schools where the study took place welcomed back approximately 900 students after the COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted the school environment from March of 2020 through May of 2021. From mid-March through mid-October of 2020, only virtual learning was provided to students. There was no instruction that took place on campus.

Children were able to attend school on campus two days a week from mid-October through mid-April 2021 and up to four days a week during May of 2021. However, not everyone returned to campus on the hybrid schedule—some students' families elected to have them remain fully virtual through the duration of the 2020-2021 school year, and those children were isolated from the school community from March of 2020 until August of 2021. The researcher anticipated that, after a year of unpredictability, increased trauma, decreased socialization opportunities, lack of consistent support of the school environment, decreases in academic outcomes, and increases in mental health issues, educators would see an increase in their students' need for social and emotional learning. Though survey questions did not directly address the

impact of COVID-19, the researcher looked for themes that arose through open-ended responses and in interviews.

The four urban Mid-western K-8 schools where the research took place primarily served children from marginalized communities. An average of 85% of students' families qualified for free and reduced lunch, at least 85% of students were non-White, and many of the students had already experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, such as violence, neglect, having a family member die by violence or suicide, growing up in a household with substance abuse or mental health issues, or having an incarcerated parent (CDC, 2019). The additional layer of trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was then inserted into students' lives as well. School closures that were a result of the global pandemic compounded its impact on the social and emotional learning of children and increased the number of "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs) that many children experienced. According to educational researcher Mason (2021),

> Many students will be found in a psychological predicament perplexed by grief, anxiety, and confusion while searching for a sense of normalcy. This is coupled with preexisting disparities and inequities while trying to establish ways to succeed in a different and, to some, strange way of learning (para. 3).

The researcher believed that their study would contribute to the field by focusing on the phenomenon of returning to full-time, on-campus learning following the height of the pandemic. The commonalities that emerged between educators with different years of experience in education and varying amounts of training/knowledge in SEL and their ratings of perceived classroom and school culture could be revealing in terms of what resources, supports, and professional development made an impact on classroom and

school culture during unprecedented events, such as pandemics, natural disasters, or other catastrophic situations. Research could be used to assist school leaders in knowing a) what educators' experiences were as they started the 2021-2022 school year and if there were additional SEL supports needed when emerging from a pandemic or another type of disruptive situation and b) what the difference was, if any, in perceived classroom and school culture when compared to an educator's number of years of experience or level of prior training/knowledge in teaching practices that addressed the social and emotional needs of students.

As a phenomenological study, the data might also have revealed information on educator well-being, though surveys did not directly ask questions related to that topic. During the 2020 school year, Bintliff and Bintliff et al. (2020; 2022) conducted a study that surveyed 73 teachers working in under-resourced schools in Southern California during the pandemic. Their findings described how work-life balance affected educators' well-being and contributed to symptoms of secondary trauma, meaning that the educators heard about and gave even more of their time and emotional energy due to their students' increased trauma. The researcher was interested in the context and believed that "activities can best be understood in the actual setting in which they occur" (Fraenkel et al., 2019, p. 472). Conclusions and interpretations were made throughout the study, as the researcher interviewed multiple educators who went through the same experience of educating students who began the 2021-2022 school year after a long period of disruption. A number of themes emerged which could be used to help districts and administrators better support staff, students, and even students' families.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1: What are educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment?

Research Question 2: What correlations, if any, are there between educators' perceptions of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 3: How do the identified themes that emerged from interviews impact educators' positive/negative perceptions of their preparedness to address the SEL needs of their students?

Research Question 4: What is observed (classroom instructional practices, classroom environment, behavior management and disciplinary strategies) in classrooms and schools where teachers give culture a high rating?

Research Question 5: What supports and coaching are needed for educators to implement social and emotional learning into their teaching practices?

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between prior professional development related to SEL and educators' self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture.

Study Limitations

The research included two identical surveys that were distributed nine weeks apart, classroom/workplace observations, and educator interviews. While every effort was made to keep the observations and interviews reliable by using an observation rubric and the same interview questions were asked of all participants, these methods of data collection could still be influenced by the presence of the researcher. Another possible limitation was that, while the training and development provided to the educators at the four campuses were the same during the summer and fall, individual schools may have purchased additional curriculum and materials for their teachers to use. Educators might have been working with different materials as they addressed the social-emotional learning needs of students. One final limitation was the social and emotional wellness of the staff members themselves. It was possible that things, such as educator burn out and stress (or, on the positive side, educator joy and fulfillment) could play into their perceptions of how things were going in their classrooms/workspaces.

Definition of Terms

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE): ACE was an acronym for Adverse Childhood Experiences. Adverse experiences included things like emotional and physical abuse, caregiver mental illness, neglect, parental separation, and household violence. A child became more likely to suffer from poor health, lower academic achievement, and substance abuse later in life with each ACE that they experienced (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2020).

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): "CASEL is committed to advancing equity and excellence in education through social and emotional learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defined SEL more than two decades ago" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d., p. 4). CASEL was an organization dedicated to ensuring that SEL was a priority in every school nationwide. It was known by educators as a premier resource for social and emotional learning materials and information (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.).

CASEL Core Competence Areas (CASEL 5): Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making were the interrelated areas of competence that are highlighted as part of the CASEL 5. The CASEL organization believed that these five crucial competencies could be universally taught and applied. The CASEL 5 applied to various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts. School districts, states, and countries used the CASEL 5 when articulating what students should know and be able to do for "academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers" (CASEL, 2021, para. 4).

COVID-19 Pandemic: **"**COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. WHO first learned of this new virus on 31 December 2019, following a report of a cluster of cases of 'viral pneumonia' in Wuhan, People's Republic of China" (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d., para. 2). Pandemic-related trauma and economic instability were projected to "disproportionately impact children in

poverty, who most heavily rely on school-based services for nutritional, physical, and mental health needs" (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020, para.1).

Professional Development: Professional development was defined as the continuous learning and training opportunities that schools and districts provided to their teachers and other education personnel (Rebora, 2011).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL): The processes through which children and adults acquired and applied the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and express empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions were what defined Social and Emotional Learning. SEL skills could be taught and measured. Research showed that students with these intrapersonal and interpersonal skills performed better not just in school, but in life (Durlak et al., 2011; Goleman, 2005; Greenberg et al., 2003; National Research Council, 2012).

Trauma-Informed Guidance for School Reopening: The recommendations that supported the belief that a fundamentally different approach to the school year was required when circumstances were as different as they were due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included thinking about how the principles of trauma-informed care informed planning, choosing specific trauma-informed activities to engage in on day one, and navigating challenging situations posed by student behavior (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2020).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate educators' perceptions of their ability to implement social and emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment

where students had just recently returned to five days a week of on-campus instruction. It was assumed that other traumatic or disruptive events would occur in schools in the future. When those disruptions to the school environment occur, using learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the social-emotional needs of students and level of preparedness of staff would be a major benefit. At some point down the road, educators will again need to be prepared to create a responsive environment that is conducive to teaching and learning, while developing children who have the skills needed to become successful adults. In the next chapter, these topics were addressed within a review of current literature and research.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

The purpose of the literature review is to establish a basic understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL) by first defining SEL and its origins. The review also focuses on adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and trauma—two things that many educators found to become more prevalent in students because of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter gives a brief synopsis of the SEL standards emphasized in the United States and in the state of Missouri, where the research took place, as well as the specific SEL programs that were frequently adopted by schools nationwide. Finally, the review examines SEL practices and how they were connected to recent research centered on the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence in schools. This included research on the experiences of the educators tasked with teaching and developing students whose social and emotional development was most often negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The belief was that understanding the research behind this disruptive event could help educators prepare to handle future catastrophes or traumatic situations in schools.

What was SEL?

The term social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which individuals learned and applied a set of social-emotional and related skills attitudes, behaviors, and values (Jones et al., 2021). The successful use of SEL skills helps individuals direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that allow them to succeed, not just in school, but in work and in life. SEL was defined in a variety of ways over the years. It has served as an umbrella term for skills rooted in human development and

psychology, such as emotional regulation, aggressive behavior issues, and prosocial skills (Humphrey et al., 2015). The term SEL was also used to refer to a variety of types of educational interventions, such as character education, social skills training, and bullying prevention (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) widely accepted definition, which described SEL as

> the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (CASEL, 2021, para. 1)

History of SEL

Educators throughout history showed interest in applying the ideas of social and emotional intelligence in educational environments. Dewey (1933) was one of the first to suggest that effective interpersonal management and empathy were important skills to be taught and practiced in schools (Dewey, 1933; Deluna, 2017). However, it took until the early 1990s, for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to be founded, with the goals of applying the concepts of the theories, research, and practice of emotional intelligence to schools and education. Since its establishment, CASEL served as the leader of the global movement to support healthy social and emotional learning that aided in the development of children around the world.

It all began in 1968, when Yale University's Child Study Center started a program centered on putting ideas on educating the "whole child" into practice. Yale's Dr. James

Comer and his colleagues worked with two schools in New Haven, Connecticut, to focus on the social and emotional development of their students. By the early 1980s, the two schools involved with the Child Study Center saw a notable decline in behavior challenges. On top of the positive changes to school culture, the schools also grew to eventually exceed the national averages in academic performance (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2019; Stanard, 2018). Because of the positive changes noted in the two pilot schools, the superintendent of New Haven Public Schools called for the entire school district to focus on social development. A group of educators and researchers, led by Shriver and Weissberg, then began the New Haven Social Development program. Together, they pioneered SEL strategies across K-12 classrooms from 1987 to 1992 and consistently found that an SEL-focused approach to managing challenging relationships and behaviors ultimately transformed school culture into one that ensured a steady and dramatic rise in student pro-social behavior and academic achievement (Effrem & Robbins, 2019; Kasprow et al., 1991).

The term social and emotional learning first appeared in print in 1994 after a meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute, a group of people dedicated to building the foundation for a more loving world (Fetzer Institute, n.d.). During the meeting, school-based prevention researchers, child advocates, and teachers/school staff members came together to share their concerns about the unsuccessful nature of many prevention and healthy development promotion efforts (Elbertson et al., 2009; Fetzer Institute, n.d.; Greenberg et al., 2003). As a result of the collaborative meeting, the Fetzer group introduced the term *social and emotional learning* (SEL). SEL then became a framework meant to address the unique needs of children and how schools responded to those needs.

Originally, the framework, called the "SEL 16," aimed to prevent violence, lower rates of drug use and abuse in school, encouraged responsible behaviors, promoted healthy decision-making, and facilitated school-community connections (Cenovic, 2022; Elias et al., 1997). In the decades preceding the first iteration of an SEL framework, schools throughout the nation overwhelmingly found that assisting all students—not just those at risk—in the acquisition of the skills, values, and work habits needed to be included as an integral piece of a successful approach to any student's education. To that point, CASEL and other leading SEL advocates consistently made the case that children from all backgrounds tended to benefit from SEL (American Enterprise Institute, 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017). All children brought their unique experiences, strengths, culture, and identities to school with them.

The CASEL organization was comprised of members that included educators, researchers in the field of education, philanthropists, reformers, and policymakers who were invested in a more caring and just world. According to CASEL (2013), the goal of SEL practices was to foster the development of five interrelated competencies. The competencies included self-awareness (the ability to identify and recognize one's emotions, strengths, areas for growth, and a sense of confidence and efficacy), self-management (being able to control impulses, manage stress, set and achieve goals, persevere, and stay motivated), social awareness (an awareness of one's self in relation to another, the ability to feel empathy and respect for others, and the ability to take another's perspective), relationship skills (the ability to cooperate, seek and provide help, and communicate effectively), and responsible decision making (the ability to evaluate and reflect on decisions to be made, and to be aware of one's personal and ethical

responsibilities). It was believed that these five competencies formed the building blocks of healthy development (CASEL, 2020).

CASEL's research found that when students developed the five competencies, they built a personal foundation for social, personal, and economic well-being that lasted into adulthood. When rated by their teachers, children with higher social competence in kindergarten were more likely to graduate, attend college, and have a job 20 years later. They were also less likely to receive public assistance, be involved in the criminal justice system, or report mental health challenges as young adults (Jones et al., 2015). Better outcomes for all groups and demographics were observed when SEL was a priority.

The CASEL SEL framework was rooted in developmental research and prevention science and heavily grounded on the work of Zins et al. (2004) and Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2015). The modern-day purpose of SEL school-based programming was to promote the development of the competencies across contexts. The hope was that doing so allowed students to facilitate positive relationships, experience academic success, and demonstrate prosocial behavior that led not only to achievement in school, but in career and in life (Dermody et al., 2022; Elias, 2006). SEL was a cornerstone necessary for accomplishment in both academics and throughout one's lifetime.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma

An Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) includes things like emotional and physical abuse, caregiver mental illness, neglect, parental separation, and household violence. When a child is exposed to situations and events that overwhelms their ability to cope with what they experience, they meet the definition of having endured childhood trauma. Traumatic experiences were highly dependent on the experience of the child—it

could have been a one-time event, multiple events, or a continuing condition (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). The original ACEs study was conducted through Kaiser Permanente (2019). From 1995 to 1997, the researchers utilized two instances of data collection involving over 17,000 people. Participants received physical exams and completed confidential surveys, which centered on their childhood experiences within the first 18 years of life. They also shared information on their current behaviors and health status as adults (Felitti et al., 1998). Kaiser Permanente's extensive initial research and myriad of other studies since that time have been in agreement with each other. Without a doubt, a child became more likely to suffer from poor health, chronic attendance issues, and substance abuse later in life with each ACE that they experienced (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2020; Kaiser Permanente, 2019). Students who had high ACEs scores were also more likely to experience significantly lower academic success (Stempel et al., 2017).

Another important part of understanding ACEs and childhood trauma was recognizing that someone's race and socioeconomic status often impacted their level of childhood trauma or stress. Those who reported low socioeconomic status/higher levels of poverty were more likely to have endured more adverse childhood experiences. Black and Hispanic people reported higher levels of stress and discrimination before the age of 18 when compared to White people (Sternthal et al., 2011). Pre-pandemic, a 2018 study showed 49% of Hispanic children and 39% of Black non-Hispanic children had not experienced any ACEs in their lifetimes. In contrast, 60% of White non-Hispanic children had not experienced any ACEs, a significantly higher number. Also notable, at the time of the survey, one in three Black non-Hispanic children had experienced two to

eight ACEs, compared to only one in five White non-Hispanic children (Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

The feeling of safety, whether financially or physically, was lower in non-White populations, because of greater exposure to violence, poor living conditions, and a lack of opportunity for advancing in one's occupation (Browning & Soller, 2014). Starting in childhood and continuing throughout one's life, the disparities in race and economic class meant limited access to material, personal, and educational resources (Taylor et al., 2011). Minor issues were perceived as being more stressful by those groups of people who had a lack of sufficient resources, compounding the impact of adverse experiences (Sacks & Murphey, 2018; Webster, 2021). In educational environments, particularly in those where there were higher numbers of non-White children and children who came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, educators needed to understand ACEs and trauma, which were often the root causes of behavior (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2017). That understanding helped educators to look at the activities and demands of the learning environment and analyze what could be changed in order to effectively support children's unique needs.

Coping strategies and behaviors come from a child's experiences (Webster, 2021). When a child's social and emotional development have been impacted by trauma, they often reacted to experiences and events in ways that did not fit in with the expectations of a school environment. Intentional SEL practices helped to support students by giving them a sense of safety, empowerment, and stability, which led to healing and changes in behaviors (Bethell et al., 2014). Understanding a child's adversity and meeting their unique needs required an understanding of the social and material

resources, including SEL, that built resilience and lessened the adversity's effects (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

The concept of ACEs was important to the research because the pandemic itself served as an adverse childhood experience for many children throughout the world and left them with fewer chances to learn and practice the social and emotional competencies that affected life beyond their school years (Anderson et al., 2022; Bhushan et al., 2020). Social and educational disruptions caused by the pandemic only exacerbated concerns about adolescent mental health and suicidal behavior and amplified some ACEs. An article from the *Journal of Pediatrics,* published in July of 2020, predicted that ACEs would be intensified due to pandemic-related factors, such as social isolation, job loss, school closures, and other stressors (McDevitt et al.,2020). Pediatricians expected the pandemic would increase the hardships experienced by families, including housing or food insecurity. On top of new hardships, preexisting problems, such as bullying, suicidal ideation, and lack of social-emotional skills were likely to re-emerge and potentially worsen (Keelan, 2020).

Another speculation was that the increased adversity of families might impair the neurological development of children, especially during the early years. Several factors that were a result of the pandemic, such as the loss of a parent/caregiver or food/housing insecurity, were recognized as ACEs and negatively interfered in the construction of a child's brain (Araujo et al., 2021). Pediatric researchers also predicted the pandemic's indirect social and economic impact on family stress would continue for months or even years, causing ongoing troubles for both parents/guardians and their children. When an ACE caused intense toxic stress, it could result in changes to a child's immune system,

cardiovascular system, metabolism, and hinder development of the brain and nervous system (Campbell et al., 2016; Center on the Developing Child, 2020). Additionally, it was noted that the pandemic and the country's response to it disproportionately affected low-income and minority populations, which were already at increased risk for ACE-impacted chronic conditions (National Council of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2021). These predictions from 2020 aligned with other research findings during the same timeframe and beyond. The direct and indirect effects of the pandemic response exacerbated each of the common ACEs in children's lives.

As time passed, associations between the ACEs which occurred during the pandemic and mental health or suicidal behaviors among students in the United States were examined (Anderson et al., 2022). Experiencing one to two ACEs was associated with poorer mental health and increased suicidal behaviors. Repeatedly, harmful outcomes increased with additional ACE exposure and were reported most often in minority or lower-income communities. Adolescents who reported four or more ACEs during the pandemic had an occurrence of poor current mental health four times as high and a frequency of previous year suicide attempts, 25 times as high as those without ACEs during the pandemic (Anderson et al., 2022). Experience of specific ACE types, such as emotional abuse was associated with higher frequency of poor mental health and suicidal behaviors (Merrick et al., 2019).

The picture was bleak when it came to the pandemic's impact on adverse childhood experiences, but it was critical to remember that ACEs were a risk factor and not a definite fate. Having one or more ACEs in childhood did not necessarily lead to tragic outcomes and did not always determine a child's future destiny (California

Surgeon General's Report, 2020). If those who worked with children understood the potential impact of an ACE, they could then take action. Many researchers and medical professionals concluded that considering COVID-19 as an ACE would raise awareness of potentially short and long-term harmful effects on a child. The pediatric community advocated for an understanding of the unique individual and responding with a supportive and trauma-informed approach to the needs of children (California Surgeon General's Report, 2020). Supportive prevention and intervention strategies included early identification and trauma-informed mental health service and support for ACEs. It was imperative to be proactive in tackling the adverse effects of the pandemic, knowing that not doing so could have devastating long-term consequences (Jones et al., 2020).

National SEL Standards

In 2015, the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) led to greater enthusiasm for social and emotional learning in educational environments. This was because the ESSA federal education law allowed states to use one nonacademic measure for accountability (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). This was in addition to the academic measures that were already in place. States finally had the opportunity to account for the social and emotional learning happening in schools and then use that data to make decisions about how best to support students and teachers. Since then, social, emotional, and behavioral factors have been increasingly incorporated into school/district accountability metrics. The day-to-day work of schools and communities was not simply focused on academics and included initiatives that impacted climate and culture, incorporated positive behavior supports, such as PBIS, and aimed to make disciplinary practices more proactive and restorative (Grant et al., 2017).

ESSA allowed states to outline student success more broadly than simply academic achievement and permitted states to use some funds for efforts related to SEL. States could use Title I funds for evidence-based programming in SEL, professional development, whole child efforts; and afterschool programming (ASCD, n.d.; Grant et al., 2017). ESSA's passage led CASEL and other SEL-focused organizations to seize the moment. Initiatives were launched in order to push schools, districts, and states to acknowledge the importance of SEL and adopt SEL curriculum/practices. In 2019, CASEL reported that participation grew "from eight states to more than 30 states and one U.S. territory, collectively representing more than 11,850 school districts, 67,000 schools, two million teachers and 35 million students, preschool to high school" in the three years since ESSA had passed (CASEL, 2019, para. 4). Though there was not a universal set of SEL standards for all states in the United States, all 50 U.S. states did have SEL competencies for preschool-aged children and many had SEL standards for K-12. There was even strong political will, both nationally and locally, to bring SEL to schools, as proven by the more than 200 pieces of legislation referencing SEL that were introduced in 2019 alone (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

Missouri SEL Standards

In the United States, it was up to each individual state to create their own definition of SEL and to determine what SEL looked like in schools. For that reason, CASEL supported states through their Collaborating States Initiative (CSI), which was launched in 2016. CSI allowed for collaboration between state education agencies seeking to create the optimum conditions for high-quality SEL (Yoder et al., 2021). CSI's goal was to help state education agencies create statewide conditions that

encouraged and equipped educators to promote social and emotional learning throughout their systems. States involved in CSI submitted a two-year plan that included the creation of goals and implementation strategies. Stakeholder collaboration was required in order to ensure the SEL practices represented the diverse communities being served. State teams customized their own plans for advancing SEL by working with CASEL, other state's teams, and national experts in the field. Intended to be a true collaboration, states shared resources and findings from their own research; spread information on best practices and collaborated on common barriers to implementing SEL (Dermody et al., 2022).

Missouri, where the research for this dissertation took place, was like every other state and had detailed SEL standards for pre-school, called the Missouri Early Learning Standards for Social and Emotional Development and Approaches to Learning. The standards were a set of goals for adults to use when supporting the social and emotional development and approaches to learning of preschool aged children. Developed by a group of professionals whose backgrounds represented the many facets of Missouri's early childhood community, the standards were intended to be used by anyone who interacted with young children in any type of setting, not just in schools (MODESE, 2021). In addition to the Early Learning Standards, Missouri also offered Show-Me Standards. The Show-Me Standards emphasized the key parts of SEL (NCSL, 2020) for students in grades K-12 in a very general way and did not provide nearly as much detail for implementation when compared to the early learning standards for Missouri preschools.

In 2022, The Education Trust (2022) and CASEL (2022) released an evaluation of states' approaches to discipline, wrap around services, school community stakeholder engagement, curriculum, and professional development called, *Is Your State Prioritizing SEAD?* (Education Trust, 2022). The report and accompanying online tool reviewed the policies of all 50 states and examined how each state supported students' social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD). Using publicly available information, such as state education websites, published materials, and legislation, each state was rated in five areas that included discipline, professional development, rigorous and culturally sustainable curriculum, student, family and community engagement, and teacher diversity and wrap around services. To accompany their research, The Education Trust (2022) created an online tool comprised of interactive maps of the United States that was included on their website. The maps allowed the user to see how an individual state's social, emotional, and academic development policies aligned with evidence-based best practices in each of the five categories previously mentioned. On the five separate maps, states that earned a "meets criteria" were colored in green. States with policies that partially met the criteria were yellow, and those with policies did not meet the criteria were depicted in red.

On every one of the Education Trust's (2022) maps, Missouri was depicted in red, which meant that the state did not meet the criteria in any of the five categories. It could be deduced that Missouri's leaders had room for improvement when it came to supporting efforts to address students' SEL needs and academic learning. This could be done by prioritizing SEL policies in state goals, providing sufficient funding, and using publicly available data to prioritize need. The researchers argued that, if states like

Missouri were to take these state-level actions and combine them with strong implementation at the local levels, students' experiences would be positively and meaningfully impacted (Education Trust, 2022).

Most of Missouri's additional SEL-related standards were found in the school counseling manual, linked within the department of education's website (MODESE, 2019). The K-12 Grade Level Expectations generally aligned to CASEL's SEL framework and were divided into three domains. The first domain identified on the site was Understanding Self as an Individual and as a Member of Diverse Local and Global Communities. Interacting With Others in Ways That Respect Individual and Group Differences was the focus of the second domain. The third and final domain was Applying Personal Safety Skills and Coping Strategies (MODESE, 2019). Each of these domains had clusters, including self-concept, balancing life roles, being a contributing member of a diverse global community, quality relationships, respect for self and others, personal responsibility in relationships, safe and healthy choices, personal safety of self and others, and coping skills (MODESE, 2019).

The MODESE (n.d.) also included a section on their website called Show Me SEL, which addressed five different categories related to SEL in Missouri. The first section of Show Me SEL was specifically geared for students identified as being gifted. The next, "SEL for All," was meant to be a resource for on-site professional development to help educators develop in facilitating SEL skills. The third section, School Counseling Curriculum, had the most resources and included lesson plans to teach basic SEL skills in grades K-12, focused on combining academic content with enduring life skills. The fourth category under Show Me SEL, Early Childhood, contained extensive resources

and specific metrics for pre-kindergarten SEL development. The final part of the state department of education's Show Me SEL plan was Missouri Healthy Schools, which stated the purpose of building social and emotional climates that improve student learning outcomes (MODESE, n.d.).

Leading SEL Programs and their Impact

A 2021 publication funded by The Wallace Foundation entitled, "Focusing on SEL from the Inside Out" (Jones et al., 2021), highlighted 33 leading SEL programs and their impact on schools. This section focused on three of those 33 programs - Second Step, MindUP, and Responsive Classroom. These three SEL programs were commonly used in districts with demographics similar to those of the schools where the research took place. Additionally, during the 2021-2022 school year, the SEL Committee of the urban Mid-Western schools explored and chose these three programs as their top options for their future SEL curriculum, which made the programs even more applicable to this literature review. A large focus of the literature review was placed on an overview of these three programs, as understanding their focus allowed the reader to have a greater understanding of social and emotional learning and how it was approached in a school setting.

The first program, Second Step Elementary, was designed to help students obtain the skills and mindset needed to get through challenging situations, understand and connect with others, handle emotions, and resolve conflict. Research showed that Second Step helped to create a growth mindset and developed students' executive-function skills (Committee for Children, 2017). The combination of these skills and mindsets was

proven to contribute to positive classroom and school climates and served as the foundation for social success and academic gains.

Second Step's curriculum promoted social-emotional competencies and taught children the skills of self-regulation through a curriculum made up of four units entitled Growth Mindset and Goal Setting, Emotion Management, Empathy and Kindness, and Problem Solving. These skills were introduced and practiced in separate units in kindergarten through third grade. For students in fourth and fifth grades, the skills were integrated into lessons across all of the units (Committee for Children, 2017).

Rooted in the research of Dweck et al. (2014), the first Second Step unit of Growth Mindset centered on the belief that people's abilities were flexible rather than fixed and supported learning across content areas. When an elementary student possessed a growth mindset, their beliefs about changing their abilities influenced their resilience and perseverance. This led to success in school and higher levels of social-emotional development. Children who were taught and believed that their social skills and intelligence were adaptable had stronger rates of course completion, had more success navigating school and home transitions, and were less aggressive (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Interventions, such as Second Step, were in alignment with the idea that promoting a growth mindset would lead to improved grades and a decrease in the percentage of at-risk students who failed their classes (Dweck et al., 2014).

In the older elementary and middle school grades, the Second Step Elementary curriculum taught effective goal setting by building on the foundation of growth mindset, which was closely related to how individuals approached and set goals (Dweck, 2009). Individuals with a growth mindset tended to set mastery goals, which were focused on

improvement, instead of performance-focused goals where the person compared themselves to others (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010). A growth mindset within children led to increases in self-efficacy, positive personal relationships, greater empathy, and behaviors intended to help others (Yang et al., 2018).

The second unit of Second Step was Emotion Management. This unit was based on the belief that a child's emotions played a large role in their success both inside and outside of the classroom. How children effectively used executive-function skills like attention was related to their ability to manage emotion and ultimately influenced how children approached and solved problems, supporting motivation and engagement (Blair, 2002; Kwon et al., 2017). Having skills to manage emotions helped students cope in more effective ways (Zalewski et al., 2011).

Second Step's Emotion Management unit taught students to use contextual clues to identify and label emotions in themselves and others. It also trained students to process their emotions by teaching them to figure out the triggers, signs, and outcomes of their emotions. Students were provided with a variety of evidence-based strategies to handle strong feelings. These strategies included behavioral techniques, such as breathing slowing, distracting oneself, taking a break, talking to someone, changing thoughts, or positive self-talk in a tough situation (Low et al., 2015).

The third unit of Second Step, Empathy and Kindness, was rooted in the well-researched philosophy that being able to understand how someone is feeling and then respond in a compassionate way created the foundation for socially responsible behavior, friendships, and conflict resolution (Batanova & Loukas, 2014). A key part of empathy was the ability to see things from another person's perspective. The skill of perspective

taking was associated with children's ability to manage emotions (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011), as well as with a broad set of prosocial behaviors that led to success in school (Imuta et al., 2016). Children who developed these skills were also far less likely to be verbally and physically aggressive to their classmates. This highlighted the importance of empathy for cooperation and conflict resolution (Salmivalli, 2010). Second Step's Understanding Emotions unit helped younger students learn to identify acts of kindness, discover the impact of kindness, and perform kind acts for others. Role-play, personal reflection, and discussions facilitated students' development and application of empathy (Depow et al., 2021).

The fourth and final unit in Second Step, Problem Solving, centered on an awareness of the use of problem-solving strategies that defined social competence. Children who lacked or did not utilize the skills needed to understand the intentions of others and select appropriate responses were more likely to display aggressive behaviors (Zeraatkar et al., 2019). Being able to engage effectively in social problem-solving helped children choose prosocial solutions to their problems. Teaching students social problem-solving skills reduced impulsive behavior, improved social adjustment, and prevented violence and other problems that impeded a child's success (Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Low et al., 2015).

The problem-solving skills taught through Second Step were adapted from cognitive behavioral research (Van Loan et al., 2019). Designed as a framework for developing students' abilities to handle conflicts, Second Step's fourth unit taught students a step-by-step process, built on the emotional management and perspective-taking skills taught in the Empathy unit. Once they felt calm, a student learned to follow

the following process: "**S**ay the problem, **T**hink of solutions, **E**xplore the outcomes, and **P**ick the best solution" (Low et al., 2015, p. 3).

The second SEL-related curriculum explored was MindUP, another widely used mindfulness program popular in the United States and throughout the world. The MindUP curriculum was based on four pillars, with one of those pillars being SEL. The first pillar of MindUP was neuroscience, placing an emphasis on understanding how the brain and nervous system worked. Students whose schools used MindUP were taught about how the brain regulated their emotions. There was a strong focus on neuroplasticity, the idea that the brain can change and adapt throughout life. Research supported the effectiveness of students learning about their brain's plasticity. One example of this is the teacher who had her students write down their thoughts in a blog focused on their learning about brain plasticity and the strategies being used in their classroom. Thousands of educators from around the world ended up commenting on the blog, which proved to be very motivating for the students. Their brain-focused learning over a period of three months ultimately contributed to the students making an average of five months' worth of gains in their reading levels (Germuth, 2012; Wilson & Conyers, 2020).

The second pillar of MindUP was mindful awareness, a purposeful and non-judgmental awareness of the present moment that was linked with gauges of well-being. Students who used programs like the MindUP program developed focused attention and emotional balance by practicing mindful awareness. Mindfulness practices integrated into classrooms from preschool to high school demonstrated the potential to improve the brain functioning of students and led to developments in the

brain's structure that facilitated success in academics (Bakosh et al., 2016). A wealth of studies supported the argument that incorporating mindfulness practice improved self-regulation in ways that are critical to academic achievement (Lyons & DeLange, 2016).

MindUP's third pillar, positive psychology, helped students increase their feelings of well-being by developing strengths that contributed to the success of both the individual and their community. This pillar most notably centered on the idea of facilitating hope, which aligned with findings that higher levels of hopeful thinking within children were associated with how they felt about their competence and self-worth. This was done specifically through attention to positive psychology practices that emphasized the setting and achieving of individual goals (Marques et al., 2017).

The fourth and final pillar of MindUP was SEL and offered children explicit SEL instruction designed to help them focus on the skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Studies of a variety of SEL programs measured their impact on those essential SEL skills. Results, such as 24% increases in academic motivation, lower alcohol and drug use, 20% increases in cognitive skills tests, a 33% greater feeling that the school was a caring community, and 12% more positive feelings about school proved why SEL was an integral pillar within MindUP (Crooks et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Statistics, such as teachers' reports of 32% reduction in aggressive behaviors, 36% increase in students' displays of self-control, lowered levels of depression and self-destructive behaviors, a 68% increase in students' emotional vocabulary, and more general success in life due to higher graduation rates were also proof as to why SEL was

incorporated as a crucial piece of MindUP (Maloney et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The final program examined for the purposes of the literature review was Responsive Classroom. A U.S. Department of Education-funded study conducted by researchers from the University of Virginia from 2008 until 2011 studied the efficacy of the Responsive Classroom approach (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Research took place in 24 elementary schools in a large mid-Atlantic school district, following 350 teachers and over 2,900 students from the spring of the students' second grade year to the spring of their fifth-grade year. At the end of the lengthy study, researchers concluded that the three most positive outcomes of Responsive Classroom included increased student achievement in reading and math, improved teacher-student interactions, and higher quality instruction in mathematics (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015).

One of the elements that differentiated Responsive Classroom from other approaches was its emphasis on Academic Choice. With Academic Choice, teachers decided on the goal of an activity or lesson and then gave students a list of options for what to learn and how to approach and demonstrate their learning. The goal was the same for all students, but students had the ability to choose how to reach that goal. When Academic Choice was used well by educators, they noted that students were more engaged, excited, and productive. Students' thinking was reported as being more creative and on a deeper level. Teachers also noted fewer behavior problems when they had choice in directing their own learning (Marzano, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman, 2015).

There were a variety of reasons why approaches like Second Step, Mind Up, and Responsive Classroom seemed promising for urban schools like the campuses in which

the research took place. The first was that the positive impact between these programs and achievement were equally strong for children whose families were eligible for free or reduced priced school lunches (based on household income) and those whose families were not eligible. Also, Responsive Classroom strategies and achievement in mathematics appeared to be even stronger for students who were originally more low achieving than for others (Responsive Classroom, 2015). All three SEL programs were found to lead to greater equity in education, meaning that they increased students' access to the same resources and academic rigor despite their gender, ethnicity, race, disability, language, and family background or income (Jagers et al., 2018). Things that educators did not have control over, such as the inequities that existed within a community, the allocation of school resources, and bias were barriers to educational equity. However, strong SEL practices gave educators control over how they understood themselves, their students, the school community, and the world. This deeper perspective contributed to transformative SEL and ultimately created more equitable educational experiences for all students (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021).

Research-based programs like Second Step, Mind Up, and Responsive Classroom also were attractive to urban schools like the ones in which the dissertation research took place, not just because of their immediate impact, but because of their potential long-term impact on the futures of their students, most of whom were children of color from lower income homes. For example, though studies found that between 2010 and 2019 there was a considerable improvement in the United States' high school student retention and a decrease in the high school dropout rate by year, the rates remained high for people of color (NCES, 2021). In particular, American Indian/Alaska Native high school students

had the highest high school dropout rate at 9.6%, followed by Hispanic students with a rate of 7.7% and African American students at 5.6% (NCES, 2021). These statistics were much higher compared to the overall average dropout rate of 4.1% for White students and 1.8% for Asian students (NCES, 2021). Previous research showed fewer than one third of dropouts left because of difficulty with schoolwork (Hymel & Ford, 2003), but half dropped out of school because they didn't get along with teachers and other students (Lee & Burkam, 2003). When 40% to 60% of students were chronically disengaged (Waters & Cross, 2010), the ability of students to connect with teachers and other school staff was critically important. The most important finding of one large study of dropouts was that students from poor and disadvantaged families and neighborhoods were likely to stay in school when they had positive interactions with teachers and school staff (Lee & Burkam, 2003). A quality SEL program that addressed the importance of creating positive and supportive relationships could have a long-lasting influence on a student's life.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact

It was important to examine the progression of the pandemic in order to understand the experiences of children and educators. In January of 2020, most Americans did not yet see themselves as being at serious risk, due to the coronavirus. Even though federal health officials speculated that the virus could end up being a major public health threat, there were only five confirmed cases and no deaths yet reported in the United States (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Around the world at that time, there were about 6,000 confirmed cases and 100 reported deaths. Some schools had started to take precautions, such as notifying families on proper handwashing and healthy behaviors, but few people imagined the course that the virus would quickly take.

Just one month later in February of 2020, President Trump and his administration were asked by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to give professionals who interacted closely with the public more guidance on how to react to the increasing spread of the virus (Prothero, 2020). In mid-February through the first week of March, a few schools in DC, New York, and Washington state were temporarily closed for deep cleaning, but most of the nation's schools continued to conduct business as usual. In just a matter of weeks, on March 25 of 2020, schools were ordered or recommended to shut down to slow the spread of the virus, resulting in over 50 million American children missing out on the last part of the spring semester (Jeremias, 2021; New York Times Editorial Board, 2020).

By the late spring of 2020, the literature already reflected a strong desire on the part of researchers and educators to begin measuring and predicting the impact of the pandemic on K-12 students in the United States, the vast majority of whom were missing in-person instruction due to mass school closures. The overall influence of school closures on learning was uncertain at the time as the pandemic was an unprecedented event in modern history and there was little to compare it to. For example, there was some previous evidence of online learning approaches not being able to develop the same levels of learning as in-person teaching (Gottschalk, 2019), but there were not yet massive studies on the effectiveness on fully virtual instruction for elementary-aged students of various backgrounds. Educational systems also faced challenges related to attendance and higher rates of absenteeism and educators felt extreme alarm early into the pandemic. In a national survey of teachers conducted by Educators for Excellence in May of 2020, 33% of teachers had already reported being concerned about students'

social-emotional health. This worry was second only to academic decline. Of those teachers, 46% said they were spending "somewhat" or "much more" time providing their students with social-emotional support. More than 60% of respondents had heard students share social-emotional concerns connected to the pandemic (Educators for Excellence, 2020).

In attempts to use the past to predict the future, some correlations were made between the pandemic and the idea of summer learning loss, a largely studied occurrence that suggested that without their regular school schedule, children lost skills and competencies during the months of summer break (Gromada & Shewbridge, 2016). In fact, a 2020 study found that the average elementary-aged student lost 17% to 34% of the previous year's learning gains during the months of summer break (Atteberry & McEachin, 2019). The predictions of learning loss became worse for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds. Those students were less likely to have parents/guardians at home who could support their online learning, their caregivers' cognitive skills tended to be less, there were fewer resources to offer children learning at home, and being away from the safe and consistent school environment contributed to increased adverse childhood experiences that could hinder learning (Washington-Brown et al., 2021). Prolonged episodes of school closures could increase inequalities if governments did not effectively implement measures to ensure every child had sufficient resources to learn in good conditions, particularly in countries where non-school factors played a determinant role in learning outcomes. This was why designing education strategies for student learning in the next stages of COVID-19 and other future disruptive events was vital.

In June of 2020, literature began to reveal a slight shift, with researchers speculating that the pandemic was slowing down and governments needed to quickly develop the next phrases of their strategies to cope with the crisis. The safe reopening of schools was at the forefront. Germany and France had already started to receive their students for on campus learning. Other countries, such as Spain and Italy, kept schools closed until September of 2020 (UNICEF, 2020). In the United States, the debate continued over what was the bigger risk and could do more damage, exposing children and their close contacts to COVID-19 or keeping them away from in-person learning. The decisions of districts were based on numerous factors, including local infection rates and population density, the guidance of state officials, student need, access to technology, parent feedback, and political feedback both at the state and national level (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2020). By late August of 2020, slightly less than half of districts in the United States planned to use hybrid or fully remote models of instruction (Gross et al., 2020). Of the 900 public school districts tracked by *Education Week*, almost half opened with completely remote instruction. About one fourth of those schools chose to provide fully in-person instruction (Education Week, 2020).

As the uncertainty caused by the pandemic continued, so did the research on its effects on school-aged children and educators. School leaders and health organizations had to make difficult choices that required them to think of the educational and social needs of their students, while also protecting students and their families from the health risks posed by the COVID-19 virus. In the beginning, there was tremendous focus on the predictably negative effect that pandemic-related school closures would have on academic achievement. There were also great concerns that the achievement gap would

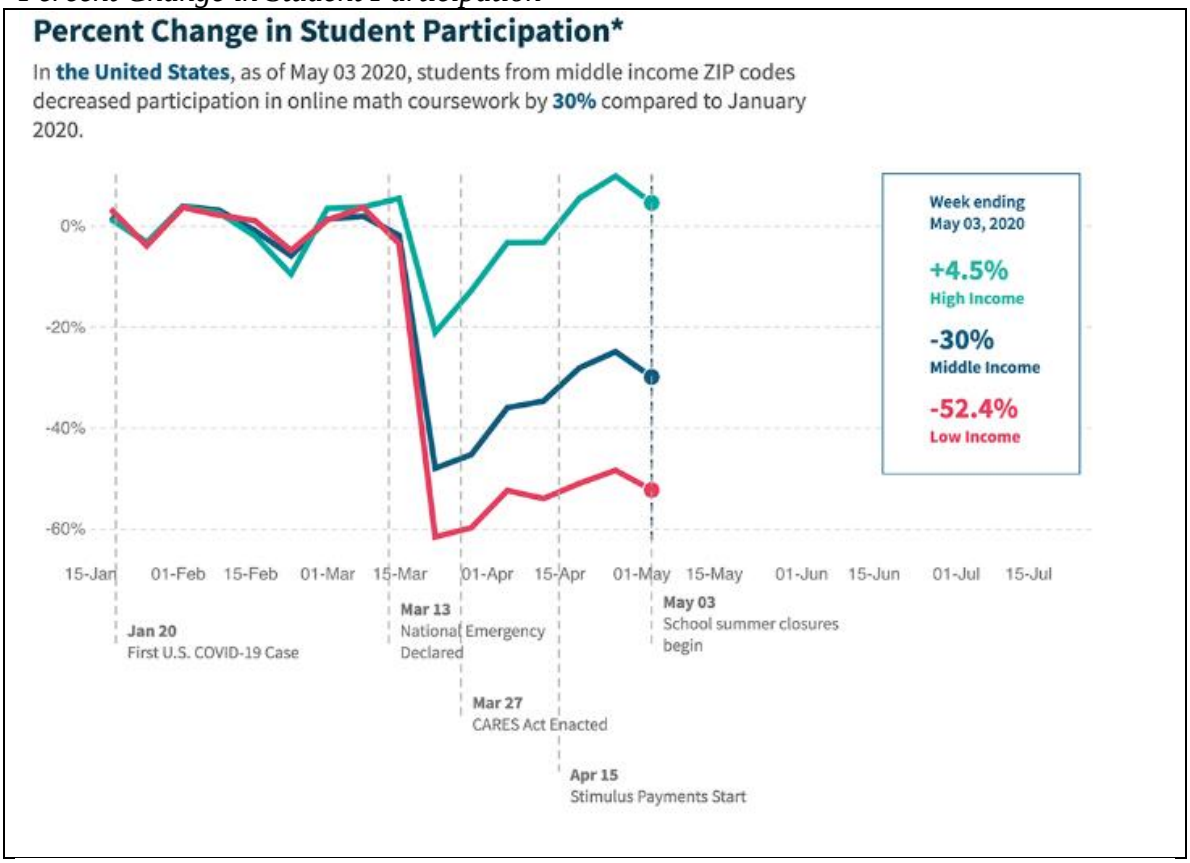
widen even further, due to the shortened school year experienced in 2019-2020. When anticipating what would be seen within schools in the coming months, people drew on lessons learned from research related to weather-related school closures, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and even the impact of summer vacation, otherwise known as The Summer Slide when most students did not receive instruction for at least two months. Hurricane Katrina's school closures caused the majority of New Orleans' students to be unable to return to school until the following school year. When they did return, educators found that children were an average of more than two years below grade level (some much more); the biggest losses were in math, and it took multiple years of individualized instruction to solve the most pressing academic decreases (Hill, 2020; Sacerdote, 2012). Over a decade later, Louisiana state data suggested that students still had not completely healed the academic devastation that came from being without school for so long (Hill, 2020).

As an illustration of this, Oster, an economist with Brown University, used data to show how crucial the following months and years of teachers' careers would be. Oster used data from Zearn, an online math platform used by 2.5 million students nationwide, including the four urban schools in which the research took place (Lemov, 2020; Oster, 2022). The Zearn Math data were charted longitudinally and then disaggregated by family income level according to the Census Bureau data for the zip codes in which schools were located (Opportunity Insights, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, participation and progress among Zearn users were about the same for students across income levels and countered the typical correlations between wealth and achievement. However, once

the school closures began, the Zearn usage data suggested the closures did not continue the existing learning gaps but were widening them within lower-income communities.

Figure 1

Percent Change in Student Participation



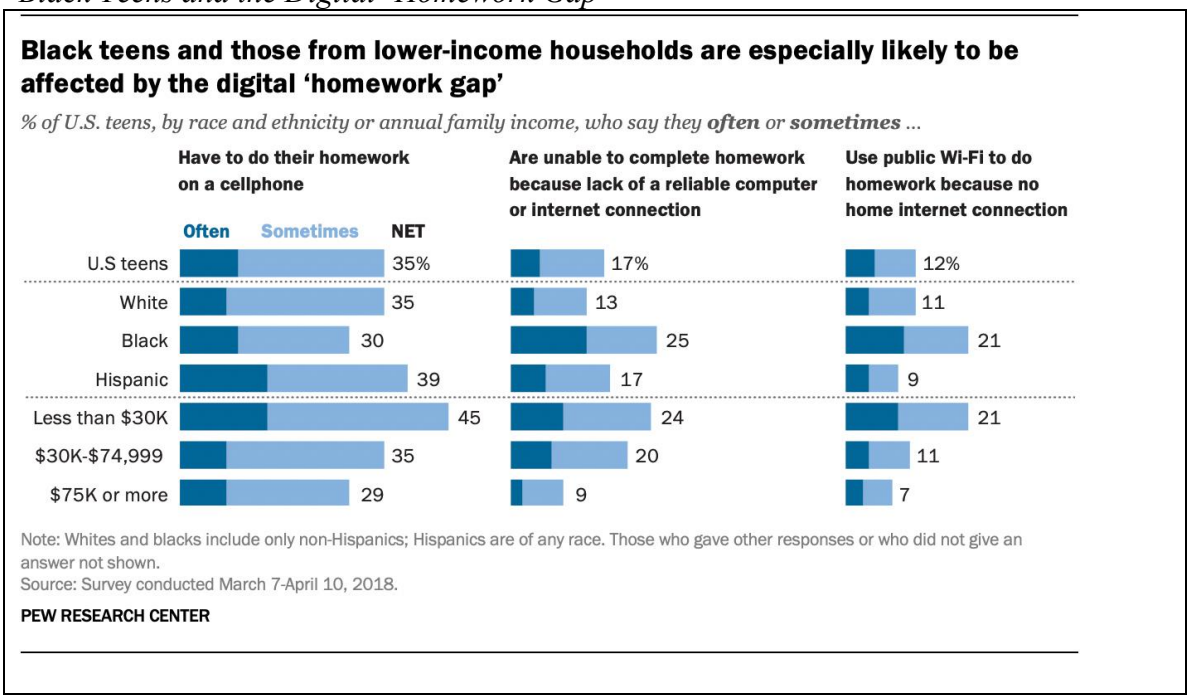
The data did not show why students slowed or ceased their progress, though the digital divide and the expectations of a student's teacher or school likely played a role.

Prior to the start of the pandemic, in 2018, 17% of students already reported that completing assignments was difficult, because they lacked a reliable internet connection or technology at home. That number was even higher among low-income families (Pew Research Center, 2020). When reliance on technology and online learning increased during the spring of 2020, the numbers of students struggling to complete schoolwork

only got larger, again, most notably with students from lower-income families. The first wave of findings from the Zearn tracker and other similar research led to conclusions that the pandemic would eventually reduce social mobility and amplify inequalities by having strong negative effects on the human capital development of lower-income and under-resourced students.

Figure 2

Black Teens and the Digital 'Homework Gap'



As the nation adjusted to social distancing, wearing masks, and a new way of life, most schools in the United States prepared to reopen for the 2020-2021 school year. In the state of Missouri, the location of the research, the Missouri State Board of Education allowed for decisions on instructional models to be made at the local level (MODESE, 2022). What students experienced that school year depended largely on the city in which they lived. The state board also required that hybrid instruction end after July 30, 2021. Schools were to return to providing what was in place prior to the pandemic. This

included full-time onsite instruction and virtual education enrollment, as allowed by state statute (EducationWeek, 2021; Joachim et al., 2020).

Schools in the city of Saint Louis, where the research took place, were held to stricter reopening guidelines than schools in Saint Louis County and beyond, ultimately decreasing students' access to in-person learning. Until January of 2022, students and staff were required to wear face masks, underwent daily health screenings, and had their temperatures checked when they entered a school building (City of Saint Louis, 2020; Saint Louis Public Schools, 2021). While these orders were similar to what was required in districts nationwide (Kaufman et al., 2020), the singular order that most impacted the schools in the city where the research took place the was the expectation that there be a radius of three feet around each student's desk (Saint Louis Public Schools, 2021). The required radius made it impossible for most schools to have all of their students in the school building at the same time due to the available square footage of classrooms. As a result, many schools in that city resorted to creating a "hybrid" model for educating their students, meaning that students were on a modified schedule and participated in both virtual and on campus learning throughout the week.

The experiences of students in schools in Saint Louis matched up with the findings in other higher poverty areas, both urban and rural. Research showed that the children in schools made up of families with lower incomes spent about 5.5 weeks more participating in virtual instruction during the 2020-2021 school year when compared to schools in mid to low poverty areas (Camp & Zamarro, 2021). There was also a higher occurrence of remote schooling for Black and Hispanic students. Students missed the equivalent of 22 weeks of in-person learning in schools that stayed remote for the

majority of the 2020-2021 school year, more than half of a traditional school year. Students in lower poverty schools missed only about 13 weeks of in-person learning (Camp & Zamarro, 2021; Grossmann et al., 2021; Oster et al., 2021; Parolin & Lee, 2021).

Educators expected that welcoming students back on campus would reveal a wide range of academic needs, and they were correct in that assumption. In a study conducted by NWEA (2022), a computer-based math and reading assessment used in the schools in which the research took place, math and reading achievement test scores from 5.4 million U.S. students in grades 3 to 8 were tracked across the first two years of the pandemic. The average 2021 fall math test scores were .20 - .27 standard deviations lower when compared to same-grade peers in the fall of 2019. Reading test scores decreased by .09 to .18 standard deviations. Achievement gaps between students in low-poverty and high-poverty elementary schools grew by .10 - .20 standard deviations, mainly during the 2020-2021 school year (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). The decreases in learning and increases in gaps were even more substantial than during other recent school disruptions, including major natural events.

Another study, published by Diliberti and Kaufman (2021), showed that in the highest-poverty schools 33% of surveyed educators said that their students were significantly less prepared than the prior school year. This contrasted with the reports of teachers in schools with less than 25% of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Only 16% of those educators reported that their students were significantly less prepared than the previous school year. Policy makers, researchers, and analysts all agreed that the learning losses would not just result in loss of competences in math and

literacy and widened achievement gaps. On a larger scale, the pandemic was predicted to lead to an increase in social inequalities and, ultimately, damage to the global economy (The Economist, 2020; World Bank, 2021). When students began returning to classrooms, teachers realized just how much work there was to do.

SEL and Remote (Virtual) Learning During School Closures

The extent of the pandemic's impact on students and schools went far beyond academics. The social and emotional needs of children were hard hit as well. There were already significant mental health, behavioral, emotional, and social needs in schools prior to the pandemic. Over the past several decades, research revealed that one in five children had mental health challenges, attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder had increased by 43%, teen depression increased by 37%, and 64% of students have experienced trauma such as witnessing violence or being abused (CDC, 2020; Mojtabai et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Studies done prior to the pandemic showed that educators were already struggling to address the difficulties that students brought to their classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and felt that they spent a disproportionate amount of time serving a small number of students who had the greatest behavioral needs (Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2014). Schools tended to fall back on ineffective practices such as detention, suspension, and expulsion when addressing students' behaviors. Those types of punitive practices, which impacted Black and Hispanic youth more than their White peers, often caused students to become disengaged and drop out (Restorative Justice Partnership, 2022).

SEL had been part of education for decades before the dawn of COVID-19, but educators saw an even more urgent need for it because of the pandemic. In 2020, data

from a survey paid for by the National 4-H Council and administered by the Harris Poll (National 4-H Council, 2020) showed that students were struggling. Seven out of 10 teens said that they were battling some sort of mental health issue, more than half of students reported experiencing anxiety, 43% of children felt excessive stress, 61% said that they were lonely, and 43% identified with having characteristics of depression (Herold & Kurtz, 2020; National 4-H Council 2020). Students also said that their levels of engagement prior to the COVID-19 school closures had significantly decreased. In fact, one out of four students met the definition of truancy during school closures because they were not logging into their virtual schooling and had not made contact with their teachers or school (Herold & Kurtz, 2020; National 4-H Council, 2020).

A national survey of 3,300 adolescents conducted only two weeks into the 2020 school closures highlighted the fact that nearly 33% of students had feelings of depression and anxiety. More than 25% of those students said that they felt a lack of connection to their classmates, teachers, and school communities (Margolius et al., 2020). Another study conducted by the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry was a meta-review of 63 individual studies done in 2020. That review revealed that young people experienced higher rates of depression and anxiety during and after the isolation required by the pandemic (Loades et al., 2020). Similarly, a study conducted by the CDC showed that between April and October of 2020, the percentage of emergency room visits related to mental health went up by 24% for children aged 5 - 11. For those aged 12 -17, there was an increase of 31% when compared with the same time period in 2019 (Leeb et al., 2020).

It was clear that students' needs were as high as they had ever been. Even students who needed little support prior to the pandemic found themselves struggling (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2020). Learning remotely required students to draw from different sets of skills than what they used when they were on campus. Students needed skills like self-regulation for navigating online learning and being able to independently balance their schoolwork and life at home. Those types of challenges, combined with limited social engagement and increased isolation, caused high levels of stress for children (Kamei & Harriott, 2020). A sense of normalcy was lost, and children craved social and emotional support as they were bombarded with change and new responsibilities. Educators could not wait until after students returned to campus full-time to address their social and emotional needs, so many attempted to do so through virtual learning. Providing not just academic instruction, but intentional SEL, reduced emotional distress, social withdrawal, and depression (Durlak et al., 2014; Kamei & Harriott, 2021).

Knowing that research proved the impact of SEL on learning, educators began searching for ways to integrate SEL into virtual learning, resulting in publications with titles like "SEL from a Distance" and "Teaching in the Online Classroom," as well as myriad of other books, articles, and blog posts. As children sat behind screens, teachers who cared about SEL-centered teaching addressed academic learning by continuing to integrate the skills of cognitive regulation, emotional competences, and social skills (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2021; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Lemov, 2020) into lessons throughout the pandemic. Their practices were in line with a thorough body of evidence showed that students learned more and had higher academic achievement when they had the cognitive regulation and emotional competencies to regulate their emotions,

motivation, attention, grit, and the ability to problem solve (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Osher et al., 2017; Sorensen et al., 2016). During virtual learning, CASEL (2020) recommended SEL approaches that used one or more of the following approaches: explicit instruction via free-standing lessons, general teaching practices, integration of SEL within academic curriculum, and organizational strategies to create a climate and culture that promote SEL (CASEL, 2020). Skills such as goal setting, using planners and calendars, cultivating a growth mindset, utilizing stress reduction strategies, and checking in with friends and teachers allowed for children to better navigate an uncertain time. Whether it was during a pandemic, or any other instance that caused children to often feel alone or unsure, SEL practices enhanced motivation through active participation in a learning community that made them feel valued and cared for (Berman et al., 2018).

After data from a survey of educators from 12 elementary schools and three middle schools across North Carolina revealed both staff and students were facing incredible challenges due to the pandemic, North Carolina developed a strong state-wide SEL plan that could be implemented virtually or in person (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). SEL and staff wellness moved to the top of the state's priority list. North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction joined the CASEL Collaborating States Initiative and gave educators access to free online courses on SEL practices. Educators also were provided with assessments and materials from CASEL resource centers (Rosanbalm, 2021; Yoder et al., 2021).

In North Carolina and other states, common SEL related practices during virtual learning focused on SEL instruction, relationship-building, and student outreach. The

most foundational student need was a caring and consistent relationship with their teacher, as proven by a Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies (2017). The review showed that strong teacher-students relationships led to immediate and long-term improvements on practically every standard that schools are measured by including attendance, engagement, grades, and disciplinary events (Quin, 2017). To address the need for relationship building during virtual learning, staff created individual connections with students online, by phone, or through email. Another frequently used strategy was to conduct virtual morning meetings. These meetings allowed children to connect with each other, check in with the teacher, reflect on how they were doing, and build a sense of community. Morning meetings gave students a chance to practice important social skills such as taking turns, respectful listening, being open to other perspectives, and following expectations for group behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2020; Lemov, 2020; Rosanbalm, 2021).

Brain Breaks were also effective strategies to employ during virtual learning. Commonly used in the classroom prior to the pandemic, a Brain Break was a short break in academic instruction when students participated in a movement activity or game. This provided an ideal way to teach and practice coping and wellness skills while increasing productivity and social skills (Godwin et al., 2021; Immordino-Yang et al., 2012). Virtual Brain Breaks gave student strategies for re-engaging when their attention started to wane and got them up and moving while they were learning at a computer all day. Similarly, calm down spaces were a practice that also transferred from in person to virtual learning. Teachers created online spaces that included virtual resources to help children calm down when they were feeling overwhelmed, like a physical calm-down space typically found in

a classroom. By temporarily visiting the online spaces when they needed a moment to settle, students were able to take a few minutes and then return to their learning (Kamei & Harriott, 2021).

For the students with the highest needs, staff adapted their previous practices to the virtual setting as well, as illustrated in articles such as "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative" (2020). During online staff meetings, schools like New York's Community Schools intentionally built in time to share information about children and families who might need extra support, resources, or outreach. These kinds of conversations ensured that all teachers and school personnel had necessary information needed so that students did not fall through the cracks. Schools also sent out wellness surveys to children and their families and created online referral/self-referral systems to identify those who needed more support. Counselors and social workers provided virtual services for students who had considerable pre-existing or new social and emotional or mental health needs (Johnston et al., 2019).

The Most Recent State of SEL

Ultimately, though virtual platforms gave students the chance for some form of connection during COVID-19, previous research showed that it could not completely take the place of face-to-face interaction as a way of building social and emotional skills (Giedd, 2012; Uhls et al., 2014). Children still needed social and emotional instruction and opportunity for practice. Pre-pandemic studies showed that the amount of time spent using technology was linked to lower self-control, increased distractibility, greater emotional instability, and more hardship when making friends (Gottschalk, 2019;

Twenge & Campbell, 2019). The pandemic only served to increase the amount of time children spent online and exacerbated the negative impacts of technology use, sometimes resulting in sleeplessness, higher rates of anxiety and depression, and decreased social skills (Qustodio, 2021). Research backed the idea that social and emotional development was in great trouble even prior to the pandemic. Returning to a more normal school experience after the pandemic required intense and intentional systematic efforts to get social and emotional learning back on track (Rosanbalm, 2021).

In July of 2022, a news release by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that 84% of surveyed educators agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the behavioral development of their students (NCES, 2022). Data on effects of the pandemic were plentiful, but at the start of the 2022–2023 school year, little was yet known about how quickly students were recovering from school closures, disruptions to learning, and the other adverse effects of the pandemic. A report entitled "The State of the American Student: 2022" issued by the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) in the fall of 2022 was one of many publications that examined what it would take to recover from the pandemic and reinvent education to better meet students' needs (Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2022). The goal of the report was to distill all the research done by CRPE and compile it with other findings to create a portrait of the current state of American students.

The CRPE report (2022) positively highlighted the fact that children were resilient and that going back to school in person clearly had a positive effect on things like academic recovery, social-skills development, and mental health. This was especially true of children in schools that doubled down on interventions and supports (Center for

Reinventing Public Education, 2022). However, the most recent research at that time also showed that recovery patterns were deeply uneven. One research study involving older elementary-age students in fourth and fifth grades showed that literacy skills were near pre-pandemic levels in 2021–2022 but the same was not true for younger students, especially those who were Black or Hispanic, whose literacy skills were lower (Lewis et al., 2022).

The findings on the continued impact on mental health were also dire. In 2016, half of the nearly 7.7 million children in the United States who had a treatable mental health disorder did not receive adequate treatment according to a University of Michigan study (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). The pandemic revealed how inadequately students' mental health and social-emotional development were served in *normal* times. As the years went on, in almost every state, there was an increasing and serious lack of accredited professionals, such as child psychiatrists, social workers, counselors and therapists. The pandemic uncovered a critical need for more effective social-emotional learning opportunities and the use of pioneering approaches to multiply student supports (NCES, 2022; Yoder et al., 2021).

Students returned to school, virtually or in person, having experienced stressful and traumatic experiences since they were last on campus in March of 2020. After major disruption, particularly for members of marginalized groups, SEL was even more critical to enable the healing, connection, and learning of students (Hamilton & Doss, 2020). At that point, two out of three teachers (68%) reported their school had not developed or shared an official plan for addressing mental health concerns of students. Teachers fully expected to have students who wrestled with mental health issues, but almost one in three

teachers admitted that they were not sure what actions to take after discovering a mental health concern (Rosanbalm, 2020). Teachers often mentioned their desire for school administrators to establish clear communication, expectations, and action steps when it came to how to respond properly to student stress and mental health.

The government acknowledged the difficult road to recovery through the creation of the American Rescue Plan (ARP, 2021). One of the things that the ARP did was to give schools and districts the opportunity to secure additional resources with federal relief funds. Besides just addressing academic gaps, districts and states were mandated to utilize ARP funds for evidence-based interventions that were chosen in response to the social and emotional and mental health needs of students. Districts had to specifically address the influence of the pandemic on student groups that were disproportionately impacted when compared to other groups (The White House, 2022).

It was important to target those resources and schools' efforts in ways that delivered the most impact. A statement issued by The White House in 2022 celebrated that the ARP had led to record growth in education jobs that were seen as vital to meeting the academic and mental health needs of students. At the time of the release, ARP ESSER funding had already created a 65% increase in school social workers and a 17% increase in counselors when compared to times before the pandemic (The White House, 2022).

Knowing that quick fixes did not exist, visionary superintendents like Catherine Truitt of North Carolina made sure to be very intentional when including social and emotional well-being in their long-term pandemic recovery plans. Truitt's Operation Polaris (2020) called for a social emotional well-being profile of 100% of the state's

schools. The profile began in the 2021-2022 school year and its use was meant to continue through 2025. Operation Polaris also included an annual 5% increase in access to social-emotional professional staff for both students and staff for the next five years. By 2025, North Carolina also aimed to fund breakfast and lunch for 100% of students and show a 6% annual increase in the number of homes with access to high-speed internet and technology (Granados, 2020; Operation Polaris, 2020) The focus on all aspects of a students' well-being, not just their academic needs, was seen as critical.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educators

A series of studies conducted by McLean and Connor (2015) and McLean et al. (2018) prior to the pandemic explored the part that educators' symptoms of anxiety and played in classrooms. It was found that teachers' mental health struggles impacted instructional practice and students' academic outcomes (McLean & Connor, 2015; McLean et al., 2018). When McLean and Connor (2015) measured the depressive symptoms of 27 teachers, they discovered that increases in depressive symptoms occurred within the first two years of teaching and were connected with decreases in instructional quality during classroom observations and lower levels of mathematics performance. McLean et al. (2018) also further examined the impact of depressive symptoms on classroom instruction and found that symptoms of depression were connected with teachers being less likely to engage in lesson planning, engage in full-class instruction, and give their students quality feedback. Knowing the impact of teacher mental health on student outcomes and that there was a notable increase of teachers who self-identified clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic (CDC, 2021; McLean et al., 2020) made addressing teacher wellness an even more critical need.

By April of 2020, research on the skyrocketing stress of educators had already started to emerge. The adjustment to virtual teaching and unfamiliar technology, reinventing lessons, and juggling communication with administrators, families, and children became overwhelming for many. The concept of "burn out" was described as a temporary state where one has drained their personal and organizational resources in an attempt to satisfy their professional duties (Santoro & Price, 2021). Slightly more than half of teachers said that they were moderately or majorly concerned about their feelings of burnout (Hamilton & Doss, 2020). Just two weeks into the pandemic, another survey conducted by CASEL and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence received responses from 5,000 educators in just three days. When teachers described their emotions in their own words, the five most-mentioned feelings among all teachers were anxious, worried, fearful, overwhelmed, and sad. Anxiety was the most frequently mentioned emotion by far (Bracket & Cipriano, 2020; Edsurge, 2021).

A late-summer 2020 educator survey raised greater concerns about teachers' morale as they began 2020–2021 school year when even higher percentages of teachers reported feelings of burnout and desires to leave the teaching profession (Herold & Kurtz, 2020). Part of the exhaustion was related to the fact that 57% of teachers said that they worked more hours per week during the 2020-2021 school year than they did before the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, about 25% of teachers indicated that it was probable that they would leave the teaching profession but had not felt that way prior to the pandemic (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Another survey, conducted by the CDC in 2021, showed that 53% of teachers were thinking of leaving the profession more than they did prior to the pandemic (CDC Foundation, 2021).

Teachers were also grieving the loss of their ability to connect with students during the pandemic. In a Southern California study conducted in 2020, educators mentioned experiencing various levels of loss and having no idea what happened to some of their students. The study, conducted by a psychological trauma specialist, also concluded that many of the teachers in their sample were experiencing secondary trauma that came from witnessing suffering among their students but feeling powerless to do much about it (Bintliff, 2020). This was not just the experience of educators in the United States. The Canadian Teachers' Federation (2020) showed that teachers felt that being unable to maintain their own professional values greatly affected their own emotional health. In the vast majority of educational settings, a significantly higher positive effect was reported while teachers directly taught students. This was consistent with the positive emotions often associated with the heart of the work of teaching and corresponded to what researchers like Lortie (1975) have found for decades. There were what had been long-term "psychic rewards" to teaching, meaning that the intrinsic satisfaction of working with students drove teachers more than any other part of their jobs (Lortie,1975).

Teaching had always been a stressful profession, and the stress was multiplied. Through Rand's American Teacher Panel (2021), researchers explored the issue of job-related stress among teachers through surveys completed in February and January of 2021. The results suggested that educators experienced a greater number of job-related pressures during the 2020–2021 academic year. Examples of stressors included working outside of one's preferred mode of instruction, lack of technological or administrator support, frustrating technical issues experienced during remote teaching, worry about their own personal health, and lack of implementation of COVID-19 safety measures for

those who taught in-person. One in four teachers admitted that they considered leaving their job by the end of the 2020-2021 school year. According to the work of researchers Steiner and Woo (2021) this was a higher number than in pre-pandemic years and a higher rate than the national norm for other fields of work. African American or Black teachers were the most likely to report that they were likely to leave. Teachers were also more apt to report suffering frequent job-related stress and indicators of depression than the general population (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

On top of the significant mental health impact of COVID-19, there was also the additional issue of social unrest sparked by the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery incidents (Eischstaedt et al., 2021). The social unrest hit the mental health of Black communities, like those where the research for this dissertation took place, especially hard. Immediately after George Floyd's death, data showed that feelings among surveyed Black Americans were particularly troubling with almost 50% reporting feelings of anger and 47% saying they felt more loss, despair and grief (Eischstaedt et al., 2021; Gallup, 2022;). Schools with higher populations of Black educators and students had to accommodate a new layer of mental health needs and distress within their communities that was not solely due to the pandemic.

Research just one year prior to the pandemic drew a connection between teacher well-being and student learning and well-being (Harding et al., 2019). With that in mind, many districts made teacher wellness a top priority. A 2022 study by the National Center of Education Statistics showed that over 67% of public schools said that they took measures to address their staff members' mental health needs during the pandemic. Proactive outreach to teachers was reported by 35% of schools, professional development

focused on mental health was provided by 35% of schools, and increased prep time was allotted by 32% of schools (NCES, 2022). Typically, teachers were not often allowed the needed time, tools, and space to prioritize self-reflection and self-care. However, intentional efforts, such as those made by states like North Carolina, paid off. Surveys administered at the end of the 2020-2021 school year by North Carolina's Resilience and Learning project confirmed that many of the state's public schools made noticeable progress in supporting educators. In the spring of 2021, the majority of surveyed teachers felt emotionally supported in their roles. Specifically, 27% felt moderately well supported, 44% felt very well supported, and 19% felt extremely well supported (Rosanbalm et al., 2020).

The CDC Foundation was another organization that sought to understand the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic had taken on school communities. Through a partnership with Deloitte and technical assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) the Monitoring School COVID-19 Prevention Strategies project (2021) was launched. The goal of the project was to collect data on the effects of COVID-19 on the academic, social, emotional, and mental health of school communities that served grades K-12. The project utilized multiple methods of data collection in 2021, including cross-sectional online surveys of parents and teachers and social media listening which involved scouring social media platforms for key words related to mental health and schools. Data was also collected through focus groups involving parents of children who received special education services, district superintendents, and teachers (CDC Foundation, 2021).

The CDC Foundation's Monitoring School COVID-19 Prevention Strategies project (2021) uncovered significant findings related to teacher mental health and confirmed that it was affected by new instructional challenges and obstacles to implementing COVID-19 prevention measures. Specifically, 27% of teachers reported symptoms consistent with clinical depression, 37% identified symptoms in line with generalized anxiety. Additionally, 19% of teachers said that they increased their use of alcohol to deal with pandemic-related stress (CDC Foundation, 2021). Teachers who reported more difficulty focusing on their work compared to before the pandemic or who said that they had difficulty implementing COVID-19 prevention measures were more than two times as likely to report experiencing mental health distress and anxiety. Also worth noting, educators whose students were 100% virtual as of March of 2021 had higher rates of symptoms of anxiety and depression when compared to other educators who were not teaching 100% virtually (CDC Foundation, 2021).

Addressing concerns was crucial to supporting teacher wellness and success. School administrators continued to build upon what teachers said was beneficial during the pandemic. Among the things that they needed professionally and personally, teachers highlighted clear and consistent communication, flexibility, reasonable expectations, simple words of appreciation for doing hard work, enabling staff connection and team building, and resources for teacher mental health (Chan, 2021). Most appreciated was schools' work on facilitating teacher connections and social emotional health. Organizations such as the Center for Child and Family Policy emphasized that it was vital for school administrators to implement a structure of support focused on the wellness needs of their staff (Center for Child and Family Policy, 2020).

Research suggested there were simple things that schools and districts could do to address the social and emotional wellness needs of their staff members. One thing was to provide teachers and staff members with community resources that would assist with physical and emotional well-being. Many schools and districts increased their support by expanding Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). EAPs were designed to connect staff with mental and behavioral health resources (The CDC Foundation, 2021; Superville, 2022). Through use of an employer-sponsored EAP, employees received benefits that provided behavioral and mental health to those experiencing personal or work-related difficulties (Brooks & Ling, 2020).

Historically, EAP usage had been lower in most organizations prior to the pandemic, but many employers responded to the pandemic by bulking up their EAPs with enhanced access to mental health services, reduced or eliminated cost sharing for mental health, and also lowered eligibility requirements for employees who sought services (International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, 2020). The Indianapolis Public School District even conducted focus groups to further their understanding of employee needs. Through the focus groups, the district learned that many teachers needed mental health support, but the programs offered through their existing EAP were not always available at the best times for educators. The district then partnered with online therapy app, Talkspace, so that staff would have free access to therapists at any time that worked best with their personal schedule (Superville, 2022).

It was not enough to simply have an EAP available to staff. In earlier research, Azzone et al. (2009) argued that employers who promoted EAP services and provided additional on-site activities showed higher levels of EAP utilization due to increased

"familiarity with and confidence in the efficacy of EAP services" (p. 352). Many employers, including school districts, indicated growing concern that they were not as equipped as they could be to help their employees in the area of mental health and admitted they did not have a clear strategy for addressing those needs (Wells et al., 2020). Low employee utilization of EAPS was usually due to the lack of ongoing and enthusiastic promotion of the type of programs that EAPs offered and how they could be used by both employees and supervisors (Agovino, 2019). Effective promotion of EAPs required reeducating employees on the type of services available to them and how to access them confidentially (Brooks & Ling, 2020). School districts were wise when they responded to their employees' growing mental health needs through continual positive and detailed promotion of the services offered through their EAPs.

Beyond promoting the utilization of an EAP, it was also advised that schools focused on training their staff in the area of self-care. To be able to provide the best support and education to their students, teachers and staff needed an environment in which their well-being was a priority, and their social-emotional needs were met as well (Ferren, 2021). Providing SEL and self-care supports for educators was shown to benefit students and school communities. Research conducted by Pennsylvania State University revealed that educators who developed their own SEL skills improved their personal well-being and the social, academic and emotional growth of their students (Greenburg et al., 2016). Conversely, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that teachers who were mandated to teach SEL without being given professional opportunities to develop their own SEL skills actually worsened the SEL skills of their students (Zakrzewsk, 2014).

Schools and districts benefited from training staff on self-care, supporting adult SEL, and prioritizing strategies and structures that gave staff the time and resources they needed to incorporate self-care strategies into their lives. To support this, the U.S. Department of Education allowed for funds from the American Rescue Plan (2021) to be used to address educators' social and emotional needs in the section entitled "Supporting Educator and Staff Stability and Well-Being" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Districts had additional funds to employ new strategies and targeted supports to ensure that they addressed educators' social and emotional and self-care needs. Actions that some schools took were simple and sustainable, such as providing healthy school lunch and snack options for staff, encouraging short walks or "brain breaks" during the workday, promoting the use of sick and vacation time, adjusting school calendars to include mental health days for staff and students, and incorporating wellness practices such as yoga into the workplace (Comprehensive Center Network, 2020; Reach Out Schools, 2022).

A school or district's adoption of a research backed SEL program was also proven to have positive effects on teacher well-being. One example of this was a study published in School Mental Health (2021) that involved 112 educators. The study investigated the benefits of trauma-informed training and MindUP curriculum delivery on educator attitudes and burnout. The resulting data showed that educators who used their trauma-informed training in combination with MindUP embraced trauma-sensitive attitudes, reported less emotional exhaustion, and experienced less burnout. Compared to their peers without similar training and experience, educators who taught MindUP reported

increased levels of personal accomplishment, self-efficacy, and self-care (Kim et al., 2021).

Using a mindfulness-based program also helped teachers buffer the effects of stress (Meiklejohn et al., 2012) and allowed them to indirectly benefit from the curriculum as they practiced and modeled the SEL/mindfulness skills that they endorsed in their work with students (De Carvalho et al., 2017). Most teachers who implemented a mindfulness-based SEL program scored higher than a comparison group in attributes such as self-awareness, feelings of personal accomplishment, and awareness of surroundings (Zinsser et al., 2016). Teachers who taught in settings that were intentional in their implementation of SEL programs felt more supported in handling challenging behaviors and experienced higher job satisfaction (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2019).This was aligned with past research that showed that it was equally important for SEL programs to help teachers and administrators develop their own social and emotional skills, allowing for the incorporation SEL techniques to occur regularly throughout the school (Elias et al., 2001; Elias et al., 2006; Elias et al., 1997). It was safe to conclude that mindfulness-based SEL programs benefited not only the students, but also the teacher as the school became a place where social and emotional matters were openly valued, discussed, and practiced; resulting in a more positive and supportive culture (Katz et al., 2020).

Summary

The literature and research confirmed a need to transform educational systems in the United States (and throughout the world) to promote student and teacher well-being (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Jagers et al., 2018; SEL for Educators, 2022). The new sense of urgency came from increases in social-emotional needs, rising mental health issues, and

the understanding that academic gaps caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were most effectively addressed in schools that embedded SEL skills into all parts of the school day. By developing a school community's proficiencies in the areas of emotional intelligence and regulation, social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, a school supported the mental and emotional well-being of teachers and students (DePaoli et al., 2017).

SEL was considered the missing piece in education. It represented a part of learning that was without a doubt tied to school success and positive student performance but had not been clearly addressed or given much focused attention until recently (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021). A wealth of research had been done to examine the effectiveness of SEL programs designed to promote various social and emotional skills (Payton et al., 2008). The evidence that supported SEL came from many strands of thorough research. This included several program evaluations that were conducted in the United States and around the world (Mahoney et al., 2021). Overwhelmingly, review of research demonstrated that well-implemented, universal SEL programming promoted a broad range of short and long-term benefits that had positive impact on the academic progress and behaviors of students in grades K - 12 (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016). High-quality SEL programs led to multiple benefits in every review.

Well-designed SEL programs, such as MindUP, Second Step, and Responsive Classroom, were impactful in both school and after-school settings and were good for *all* students, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, of if they had behavioral or emotional

problems (Taylor et al., 2017). SEL programs were effective and applicable in elementary and middle schools in urban, rural, and suburban settings. SEL programs improved students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance while also reducing students' conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2010). One estimate was that 27% more students would improve their academic performance as a result of intentional SEL practices in their classroom/school and 24% more would have positive changes in social behaviors and decreased levels of distress (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019). SEL programming also improved students' academic performance by 11 to 17%, showing a positive educational benefit (Taylor et al., 2017). Long term, there was a very positive correlation between strong social emotional attributes and higher reported levels of overall well-being in a person's life up to 18 years later (Taylor et al., 2017).

Educators were historically subjected to different types of daily psychological and physical stressors, prior to the pandemic. Literature published over the past several decades identified that educators experienced above average stress levels when compared to other professionals. Those high levels of stress were connected to greater burnout and lower teacher retention (Pogere et al., 2019). Researchers noted the serious risk to well-being and unfavorable health effects of disasters like COVID-19 on the general population (Morganstein & Ursano, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic only magnified the high levels of stress among educators.

The review of literature also confirmed that, even in trying circumstances, the most effective and long-lasting teachers often demonstrated an understanding of the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the necessity of trauma informed

and SEL practices for whole-child development. Those impactful educators prioritized finding ways to embed vital practices related to the whole-child throughout the workday (Cipriano et al., 2020). Additionally, effective teachers coped successfully with their own emotional responses to the behaviors of their students as well as situational stressors in order to perform successfully (Cipriano et al., 2020).

Not every educator had the skills to address the academic and social-emotional needs of their students. Despite the increase in awareness of the positive impact of SEL, recent studies showed that most educators were not prepared in any formal way for the daily strains of constantly managing their own emotional reactions and expressions so that they could meet the demands of classroom performance, especially with the heightened stress brought about by the pandemic (Brown & Valenti, 2013; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Their stressful experiences, negative feelings in the classroom, and the loss of the psychic rewards of teaching resulted in decreased performance and burnout in addition to poor student outcomes over time (Hamilton & Dross, 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Regarding school administrators, the most valuable school leaders understood the importance of creating an environment that developed the social emotional competencies of staff. Because teachers' own social emotional competencies (SECs) and well-being were key factors that influenced their performance as well as student outcomes, it was imperative that teachers cultivated their personal SECs early on to manage their stress adequately. If they did not do so, their instruction suffered, impacting student well-being and achievement (Greenberg et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kaufman &

Diliberti, 2021). This was especially important when managing the trauma created by unprecedented times (Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2021).

The School Superintendents Association [AASA] survey (2022) of 600 school superintendents showed that school leaders intended to meet the challenge of using federal funds for student mental health and developmental needs. As of March of 2022, 82% of districts planned to use money to expand supports for students' social, mental, emotional, and physical health development (AASA, 2022). Considering the knowledge that schools that addressed the SEL needs and well-being of students ultimately positively impacted the SEL needs and well-being of staff, the benefit of those federally funded supports was magnified (McGraw Hill, 2021). Intentionality, planning, and identifying the right resources were critical when meeting a school community's needs as life returned to what would have been considered "normal" prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

Purpose

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate educators' feelings of preparedness to address students' social and emotional learning needs as they returned to a five day a week school schedule after the significant disruptions to the school environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most schools in the United States, the urban charter schools where the research took place had to shut down, switching without advance warning to completely virtual learning in March of 2020. The following school year, learning remained entirely virtual from August through October of 2020. Once students were able to come back on campus in the fall of the 2020-2021 school year, they still only received in-person instruction two days a week due to the social distancing requirements for schools in the city of Saint Louis, which only allowed for half of the students to be on campus at once. It was not until the spring of 2021 that students returned to campus four days a week, with instruction remaining virtual on Fridays to allow for deep cleaning of the district's campuses.

The researcher believed that a mixed-methods study would provide the richest opportunity for gaining insight into educators' experiences when supporting their students' social and emotional needs after a year and a half of significant interruption. By mixing quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher anticipated that they would come to a deeper understanding of the phenomena of what educators faced as they navigated children's needs in a mid-pandemic environment where the majority of students had experienced increased family stress, social isolation, and learning loss, among other factors. Predicting complex social and emotional learning challenges, the

researcher decided a mixed-methods design would synergize multiple data sources and would best assist in the understanding of a complicated subject (Poth & Munce, 2020). Utilizing mixed methods research allowed for purposeful data consolidation which permitted the researcher to experience the widest view of their study by enabling them to view a phenomenon from different perspectives and research lenses (Shorten & Smith, 2017).

Hoping to generalize the findings to the experiences of educators in an urban environment and develop a detailed view of the meaning of the phenomenon for individual staff members, the advantages of collecting both closed-ended quantitative data and open-ended qualitative data supported the best understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative data gained from individual educator interviews and classroom/workspace observations provided depth in the research inquiry as the researcher gained a deeper insight into the phenomenon through educators' narratives and by watching them interact with students in their individual roles. A quantitative approach of data collection brought breadth to the study by supporting the researcher with data about different aspects of addressing students' social and emotional learning needs in a mid-pandemic environment. Mixing the two data collection methods helped to produce a more complete picture and provided opportunity for a greater assortment of views. This resulted in extra reflection which enriched the researcher's understanding of the participants' experiences. This understanding could then be used to support districts, schools, and educators as they navigate future tragedies/significant school disruptions that would inevitably happen in the future. Findings from mixed-methods research offered a more holistic view of the phenomenon and provided additional insights into

different components which might help for generating substantive theories down the road (Ventakesh et al., 2013).

Surveys, Methodology, Reliability

Prior to requesting research approval from Lindenwood University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher identified and received permission to use a portion of a survey published by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). The 2014 survey, entitled "Self-assessing social and emotional instruction and competencies: A tool for teachers" (Yoder, 2014) fit with the goal of understanding educators' preparedness and ability to address the social-emotional learning needs of their students. Before sending out the surveys, the researcher also obtained approval from the Executive Director of the school district to distribute the surveys to staff members at the four campuses located in the Saint Louis region. After IRB approval was granted, the researcher distributed the first survey, created through Qualtrics, in October of 2020. This included a Survey Research Consent form and went out to all educators in the urban Mid-western network of four K - 8 schools.

The minimum number of desired survey responses was 15, and the initial Qualtrics survey yielded 23 responses. The first questions of the survey asked respondents to indicate the number of years that they worked in education and their level of prior training in the area of social-emotional learning. The preceding questions asked educators to reflect on how well they implemented a variety of practices that influenced students' social, emotional, and academic skills through positive social interactions. In order to assist with eliminating any bias, the researcher's assistant—the Dean of Students at one of the campuses and co-chair of the district's SEL committee—de-identified all

responses and assigned respondents numbers so that the researcher could match up first and second survey responses.

At the end of the first survey, respondents were asked to volunteer to be interviewed and observed in their classroom/workspace, though this was not required if someone completed the survey. A goal of 6 respondents was set and a total of 13 educators volunteered to be interviewed and observed. The researcher and research assistant completed the observations and interviews together. Interviews were conducted using a set of identical questions that were used for each participant in order to gain insight into their feelings and experiences as they worked with students during the 2021-2022 school year. After all interviews were completed, the researcher coded responses for themes.

Each educator who volunteered to be interviewed was also observed twice in their classroom/workspace. Both observations were conducted on the same day of the week at the same time of day for each individual participant. During each 20–30-minute observation, the researcher and assistant recorded everything that the participants and their students said and did to code for themes and allow for later correlations to survey results. They scored each observation according to a rubric that focused on the areas of classroom instruction and classroom environment. After observations, the researcher and co-observer compared their rubrics and discussed observations and findings together in order to reflect on the social and emotional learning practices (or lack thereof) that they witnessed. This practice also helped to eliminate unintentional bias during observations and interviews. After all qualitative data collection methods were completed, transcribed conversations and notes were coded for themes.

Nine weeks after distributing the first survey, a second identical Qualtrics-generated survey was sent out to the initial respondents. The same survey was used in order to see if educators' practices that influence social and emotional learning increased or decreased as the school year went on. Once received, the responses were again de-identified and numbered by the assistant so that first and second survey responses could be used to compare the responses of those who responded to both the first and second surveys without the researcher seeing the name of the respondent in conjunction with their responses.

After responses to both surveys had been collected, the first step was to use Chronbach's alpha to see how closely related the self-assessment items were as a group. This practice determined if the surveys were consistent and reliable before moving forward with analysis. A reliability coefficient of .70 or higher was considered "acceptable" in most research situations. With a Chronbach's alpha of .884, the questions used in the research were considered reliable. The surveys were backed by research.

Next, responses from the groups were assigned values according to a Likert Scale (1 - 5). T-tests were then conducted using the mean values from each data set (mean difference), the standard deviation of each group, and the number of data values of each group. After that, responses for the 13 self-reflection items were recategorized by years of experience and prior training/knowledge. The T-tests helped to identify whether the difference between the groups represented a true difference. Higher values of t-scores would have shown that a large difference existed between the sets according to years of experience and prior training/knowledge. Smaller t-test values would have showed the more similarity between the sample sets. The smaller t-test values showed that the self-

assessment responses were quite similar despite years of experience and prior training/knowledge. The data from the two surveys were also compared with one another to see if responses reflected that educators' use of practices that impacted the social and emotional learning of students increased or decreased in the months between administration of the first and second surveys.

Questions and Null Hypotheses

Research Question 1: 1. What are educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices?

Research Question 2: What correlations, if any, are there between educators' perceptions of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 3: What correlations, if any, are there between years of experience in education and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 4: How do the identified themes that emerged from interviews impact educators' positive/negative perceptions of their preparedness to address the SEL needs of their students?

Research Question 5: What is observed (classroom instructional practices, classroom environment, behavior management and disciplinary strategies) in classrooms and schools where teachers give culture a high rating?

Research Question 6: What supports and coaching are needed for educators to implement social and emotional learning into their teaching practices?

Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between prior professional development related to SEL and educators' self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture.

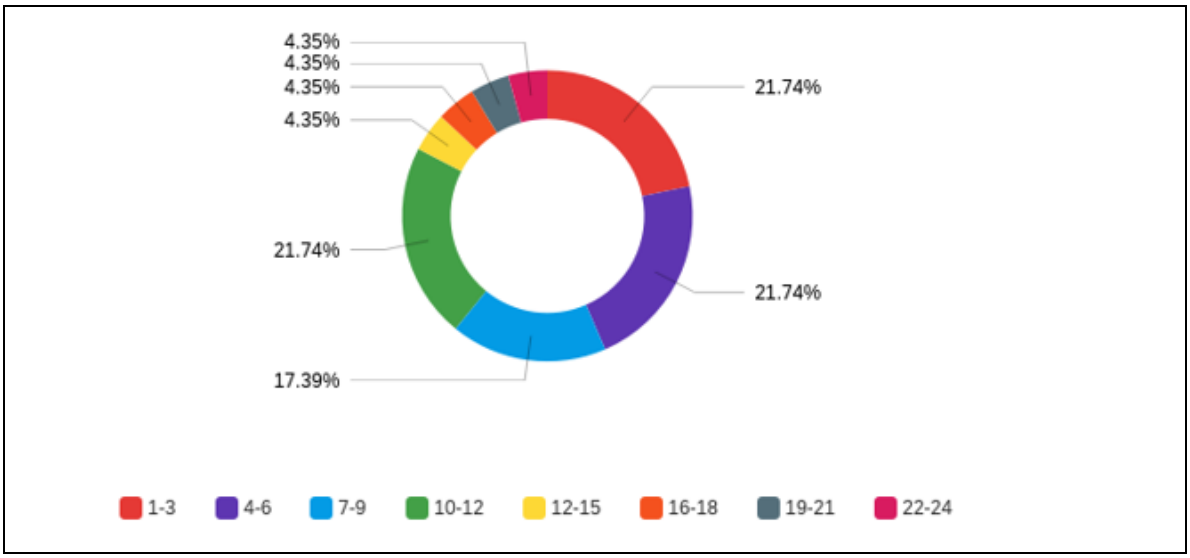
Limitations

The research included two identical surveys that were distributed nine weeks apart, classroom/workplace observations, and educator interviews. While every effort was made to keep the observations and interviews reliable by using an observation rubric and the same interview questions for all participants, these methods of data collection could still be influenced by the presence of the researcher. Another possible limitation was that, while the training and development provided to the educators at the four campuses were the same during the summer and fall, individual schools may have purchased additional curriculum and materials for their teachers to use. Educators might have been working with different materials as they addressed the social-emotional learning needs of students. One final limitation was the social and emotional wellness of

the staff members themselves. It was possible that things such as educator burn out and stress—or, on the positive side, educator joy and fulfillment—could play into their perceptions of how things were going in their classrooms/workspaces. After the research was conducted, additional limitations were considered in Chapter Four.

Figure 3:

Data Samples



Number of Years Worked in Education, Included in Study Sample

Summary

The researcher used quantitative and qualitative data in this mixed methods study to investigate educators' feelings of preparedness to address the social and emotional learning needs of students as they returned to campus after months of significant disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative data from surveys was used to see if there was any correlation between years of experience and prior training/knowledge compared with educators' self-assessment ratings on their use of 13 practices related to social and emotional learning in the classroom. Themes that were gleaned from interviews and observations resulted in qualitative data that shed further

light on the specific experiences of educators. The mixed-methods approach was used to gain the most holistic insight that could be used to make recommendations for future disruptive events that would undoubtedly impact the field of education in the decades to come. Chapter Four explained the results from the mixed-methods study described in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Introduction

Chapter Three focused on the plan utilized to collect data; Chapter Four focused on the results from the data that were collected. A mixed-methods approach was used to gain the most holistic insight that could be used to make recommendations for future disruptive events that would undoubtedly impact the field of education in the decades to come. This chapter showed both qualitative and quantitative results.

Qualitative data was collected through in person interviews with survey respondents and classroom observations that were conducted in respondents' classrooms or workspaces. For those educators who volunteered to be observed, two separate classroom observations occurred at different points in time. The researcher and a co-observer conducted the observations and interviews together and compared notes and interpretations throughout the research process. The use of co-observations and identical rubrics during observations helped to ensure reliability of results and decreased the opportunity for bias to play into qualitative results.

Quantitative data was collected from two surveys that were administered to a voluntary group of staff members that served the small network of four urban schools in the Midwestern city where the research took place. The survey used in the research came from Section 1 of a survey from the American Institute for Research (AIR). entitled Self-assessing Social and Emotional Instruction and Competence: A Tool for Teachers (Yoder, 2014). Used after obtaining prior permission from AIR, the researcher selected all of the questions from the Social Interactions portion of the survey, which focused on teacher practices that influenced students' social, emotional, and academic skills. After

survey, interview, and observation data were gathered, the research questions were investigated, and hypotheses were tested.

On October 25, 2021, 98 educators who served in the small network of four urban K - 8 schools in a Midwestern city received the appropriate consent forms and a link to complete a Qualtrics survey designed to investigate the hypotheses. All survey responses were voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were assured that their answers were non-evaluative and would be kept confidential to the researcher, who was an administrator at one of the schools at that time. Only the co-observer, who was the Dean of Students at one of the campuses and not responsible for staff evaluations, would see identifying information, solely for the purpose of matching first and second survey responses to be used for comparison. The deadline to complete the first survey was November 5, 2021. Of the 97 invited, 23 educators responded to all of the first survey questions.

On February 21, 2022, the same survey was once again distributed through Qualtrics to the group of 23 respondents who took the first survey to determine if there were significant differences in their answers from the first survey to the second survey. If responses changed in the months between administration of the first and second surveys, it would be of interest to see if educators' use of practices that influenced students' social and emotional learning had increased or decreased. The deadline provided to complete the second survey was March 4, 2022. Of the 24 initial participants, 17 responded to all of the survey questions in the second survey.

After survey administration, the identical surveys were determined to have high internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha measure. A reliability coefficient of .70 or higher was considered acceptable in most research. With an alpha coefficient for the 13

survey items of .884, the items used for the purpose of this research had relatively high internal consistency. Therefore, the surveys were considered very reliable.

The first question in both surveys asked educators to indicate the number of years they had worked in the field of education. A total of 23 educators chose to respond to the first survey and data came primarily from respondents who had spent 12 years or less in the field of education. For the first survey that was administered at the end of October in 2021, five responses came from those who worked in the field of education for one to three years, five came from those with four to six years of experience, four respondents indicated seven to nine years of experience, and five had 10 to 12 years of experience. The categories of 13 to 15, 16 to 18, 19 to 21, and 22 to 24 years of experience each had one respondent per category.

The second survey, which was identical to the first survey, was administered at the end of February in 2022. Only those who responded to the first survey were invited to complete the second, resulting in 17 responses. Again, data came primarily from respondents who had spent 12 years or less in the field of education. For the second survey, three responses came from those who worked in the field for 1 - 3 years, three came from those with 4 - 6 years of experience, five respondents indicated 7 - 9 years of experience, and four had 10 - 12 years of experience. The categories of 13 - 15 and 19 - 21 years of experience each had one respondent. Those who indicated 16 - 18 and 22 - 24 years of experience on the first survey did not respond to the second survey.

The second question on each survey asked educators to indicate their level of training in teaching practices that facilitated students' social and emotional learning. Educators indicated either no training/knowledge, some training/knowledge, or

significant training/knowledge. Results from the 23 responses to the first survey indicated that 15 respondents had some training/knowledge and 8 had significant training/knowledge. Not one educator said that they did not have any training/knowledge.

Figure 4

Prior Training or Knowledge Response Counts: Survey 1

Q2 - How much training or knowledge do you feel that you have in the areas of teaching practices that lead to students' Social and Emotional Learning?		
	Count	**Number of Responses**
No Training / Knowledge	**0**	**0**
Some Training/ Knowledge	**15**	**15**
Significant Training / Knowledge	**8**	**8**

Of the 17 respondents to the second survey, 11 indicated that they had some training/knowledge and 6 indicated that they had significant training/knowledge. Again, none of the respondents reported that they had no training or knowledge.

Figure 5

Prior Training or Knowledge Response Counts: Survey 2

Q2 - How much training or knowledge do you feel that you have in the areas of teaching practices that lead to students' Social and Emotional Learning?		
	Count	**Number of Responses**
No Training / Knowledge	**0**	**0**
Some Training/ Knowledge	**11**	**11**
Significant Training / Knowledge	**6**	**6**

During data analysis, recode values were assigned in Qualtrics to responses for the first two questions. This aided in analysis when correlating responses to self-assessment items with years of experience and training/knowledge in order to see if those factors had any

impact on an educators' use of practices that impacted students' social and emotional learning.

After educators shared their years of experience in education and training/knowledge in SEL, a Likert Scale was assigned to the 13 self-assessment statements from the original American Institute for Research (AIR) survey. These statements addressed the research questions related to social and emotional classroom practices. When answering, educators responded in one of the following ways to each statement: I do not implement this practice, I struggle to implement this practice, I implement this practice reasonably well, I generally implement this practice well, and I implement this practice extremely well.

Each survey question was presented below along with the data collected from both surveys. All of the self-assessment items along with the corresponding statistical and line charts for the October and February survey administrations were included. The significance or insignificance of the data was examined later. If T-tests indicated potential significance of years of experience and prior training/knowledge for an individual survey item, further testing was done in the form of a Kruskal-Wallis Test to determine if there were indeed statistically significant differences between the groups.

Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

The first question in both self-assessment surveys inquired about educators' years of experience in education. To address the first hypothesis, responses were coded in

terms of years of experience (1 - 3, 4 - 6. 7 - 9, 10 - 12, 13 - 15, 16 - 18, 19 - 21, and 22 - 24). A T-test was run to compare the survey responses by years of experience to determine whether differences were statistically significant. The results of the T-test were expressed in terms of probability (*p*-value). If the *p*-value was below 0.05, it was determined that the impact of years of experience was significant.

T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both self-assessment surveys. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of different years of experience. The mean for the respondents with 1 - 3 years of experience was 3.96. The average mean for the respondents with 4 - 6 years of experience was 3.86. Means for those who indicated 7 - 9 and 10 - 12 years of experience were 4.20 and 3.97, respectively. The average mean for those with 12 or more years of experience was 3.79. When reviewed, there was not statistical significance indicated in the difference between the means for the different categories when compared to their responses to the self-assessment survey items. Data showed that years of experience did not have a significant impact on the urban educator's use of social and emotional teaching practices in a mid-pandemic environment. The null hypothesis was not rejected.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between prior professional development related to SEL and educators' self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

The second question in both self-assessment surveys inquired about educators' amount of prior training/knowledge in social and emotional learning teaching practices. To address the second hypothesis, responses were coded in terms of amount of prior

training/knowledge (none, some, or significant). A T-test was run to compare the survey responses by amount of prior training/knowledge to determine whether differences in responses among the groups were statistically significant. The results of the T-test were expressed in terms of probability (*p*-value). If the *p*-value was below 0.05, it was determined that the impact of amount of prior training/knowledge in areas that impact social and emotional learning was significant.

T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both self-assessment surveys. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of prior training/knowledge. Most questions did not reveal that amount of training/knowledge had a significant impact on the educator's use of social and emotional teaching practices. Four outliers were question 3 (tying consequences to the rule that was broken), question 4 (holding class discussions with students), question 8 (connecting choices to consequences), and question 9 (arranging experiences to teach responsibility), which showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys. A Kruskal-Wallis test was then used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for those four specific survey items. *p*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. The *p*-values for all of the questions were higher than 0.05, which was not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that amount of training/knowledge did not significantly impact SEL teaching practices when related to those specific items.

There were two additional self-assessment items that emerged in both surveys as potentially statistically significant when connected to amount of prior training/knowledge

in the area of social and emotional learning. Educators with significant training/knowledge rated themselves higher on question 7 (promoting positive behaviors through encouragement) and question 11 (demonstrating care for how and what students learn). Using a T-test for equality of means, the p-value for question 7 was 0.0717 and 0.0031for question 11. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. Educators with significant training/knowledge rated themselves significantly higher in these two areas, which resulted in a statistical significance between training/knowledge and the SEL-related teacher practices of promoting positive behaviors through encouragement and demonstrating care for how and what students learn. However, the results of both surveys did not reveal that significant training/knowledge impacted all or even the majority of areas on the two self-assessment surveys. As a result, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

This hypothesis was not directly addressed through the survey questions. Therefore, quantitative data did not allow for accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis. This question was answered through the findings of the qualitative research that was conducted.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture.

This hypothesis was not directly addressed through the survey questions. Therefore, quantitative data did not allow for accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis.

This question was answered through the findings of the qualitative research that was conducted.

Figure 6

Survey 1, Question 1: October 25-November 5, 2021

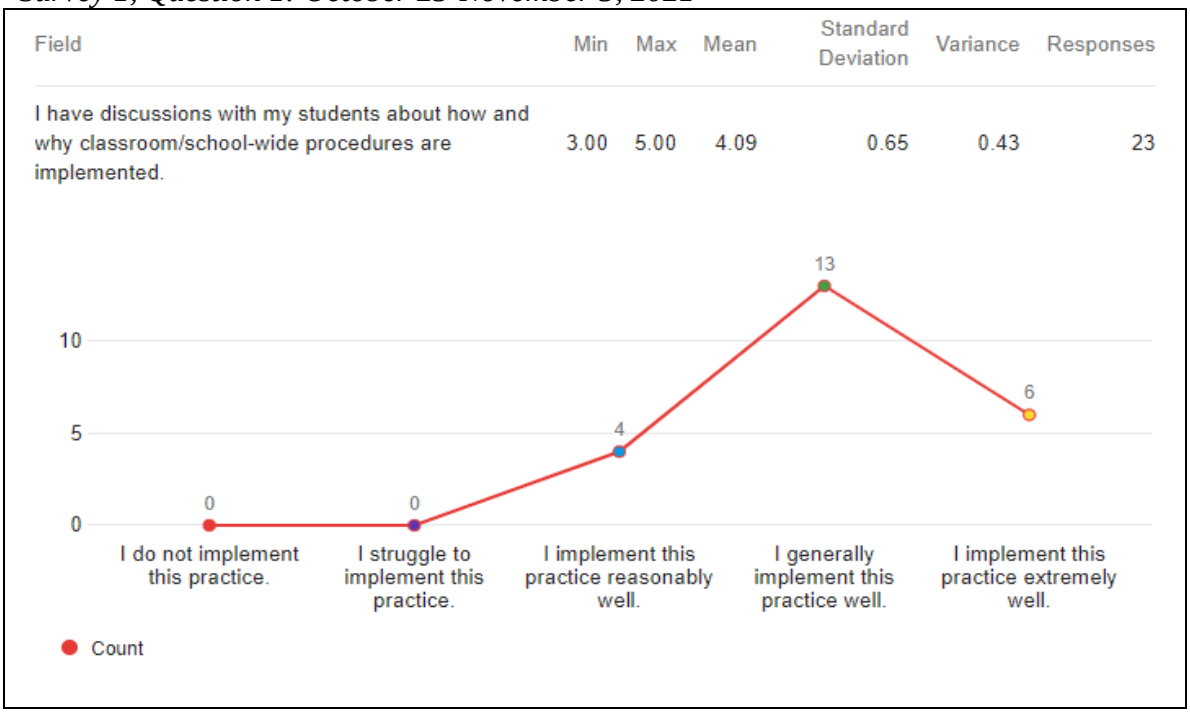
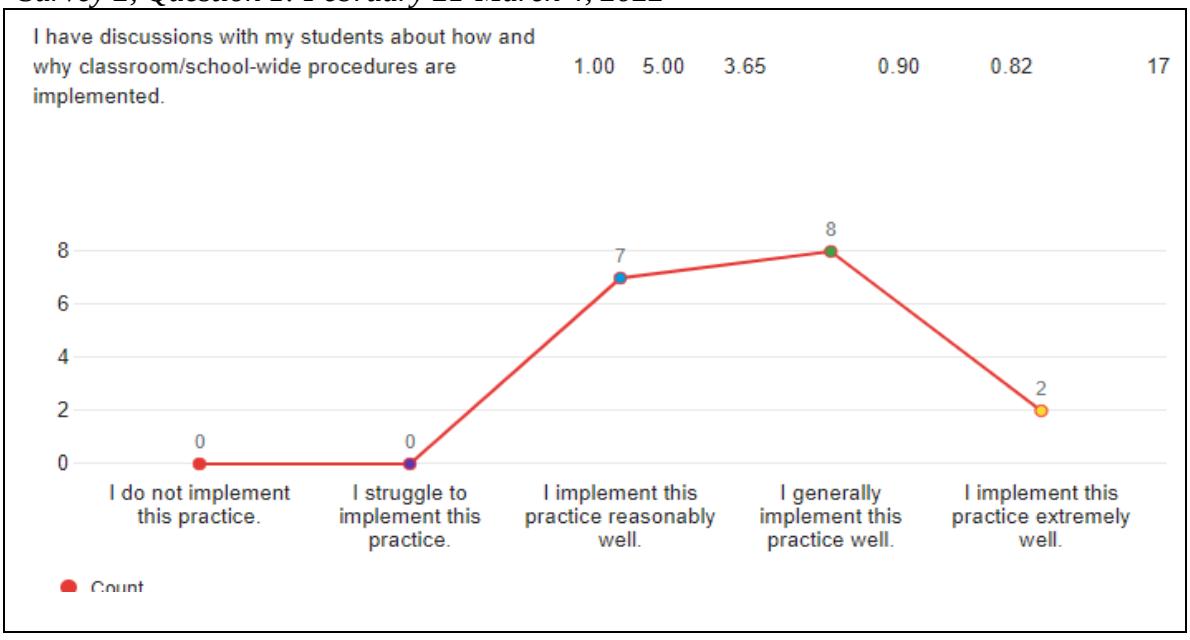


Figure 7

Survey 2, Question 1: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 8

Survey 1, Question 2: October 25-November 5, 2021

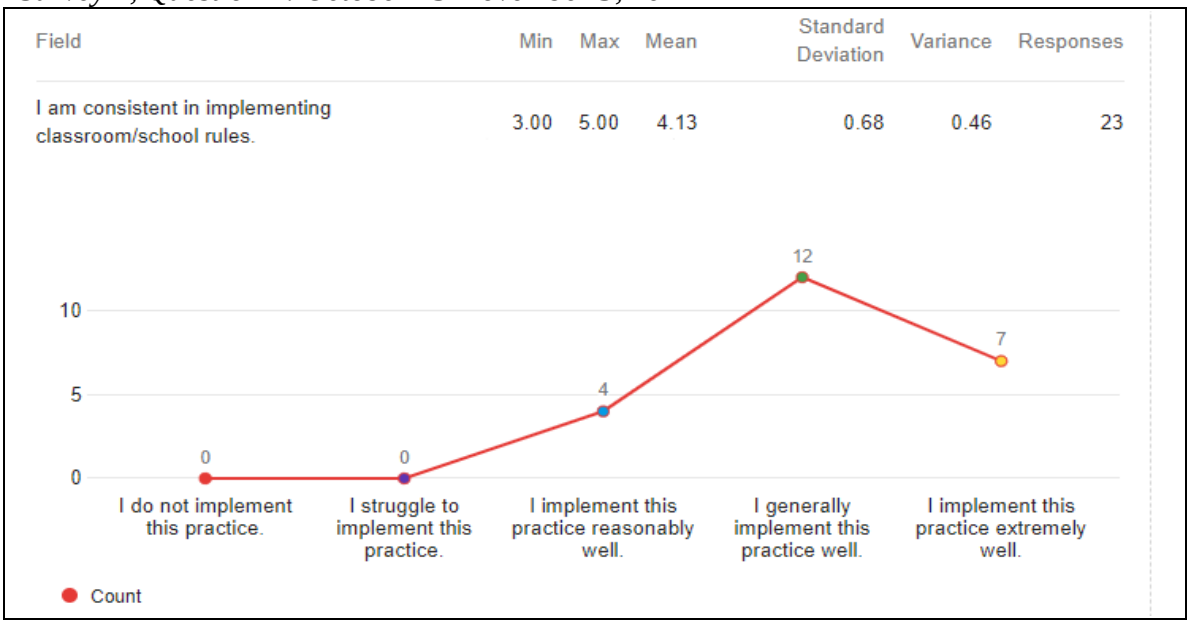
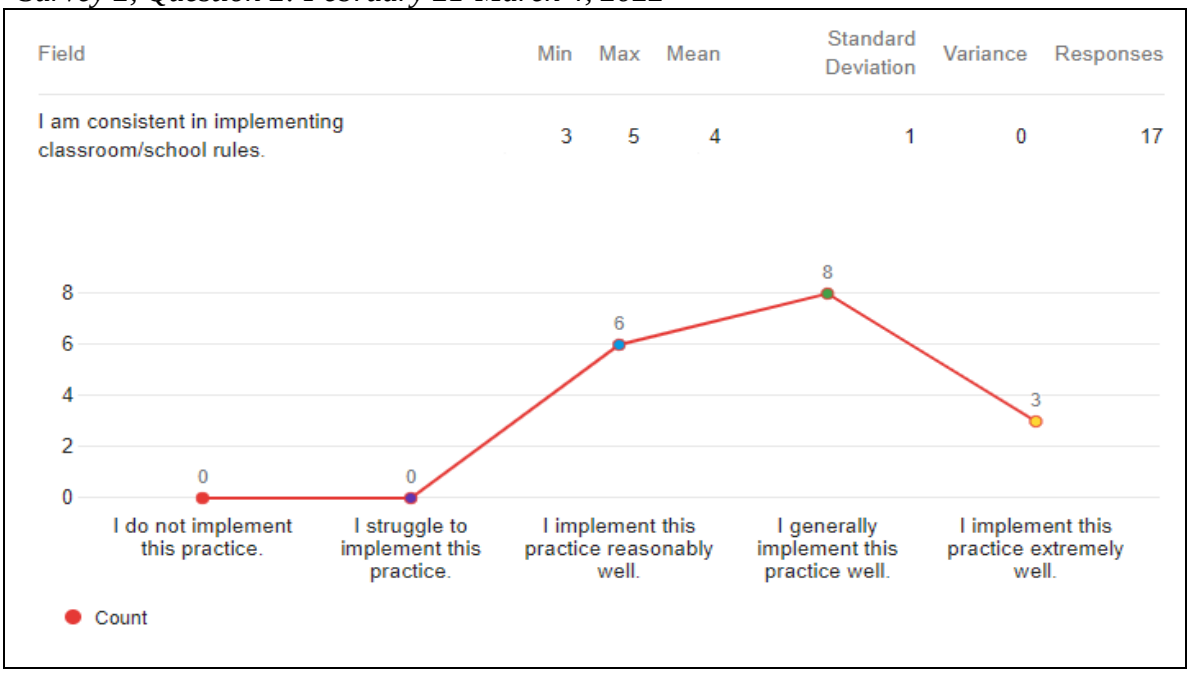


Figure 9

Survey 2, Question 2: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 10

Survey 1, Question 3: October 25-November 5, 2021

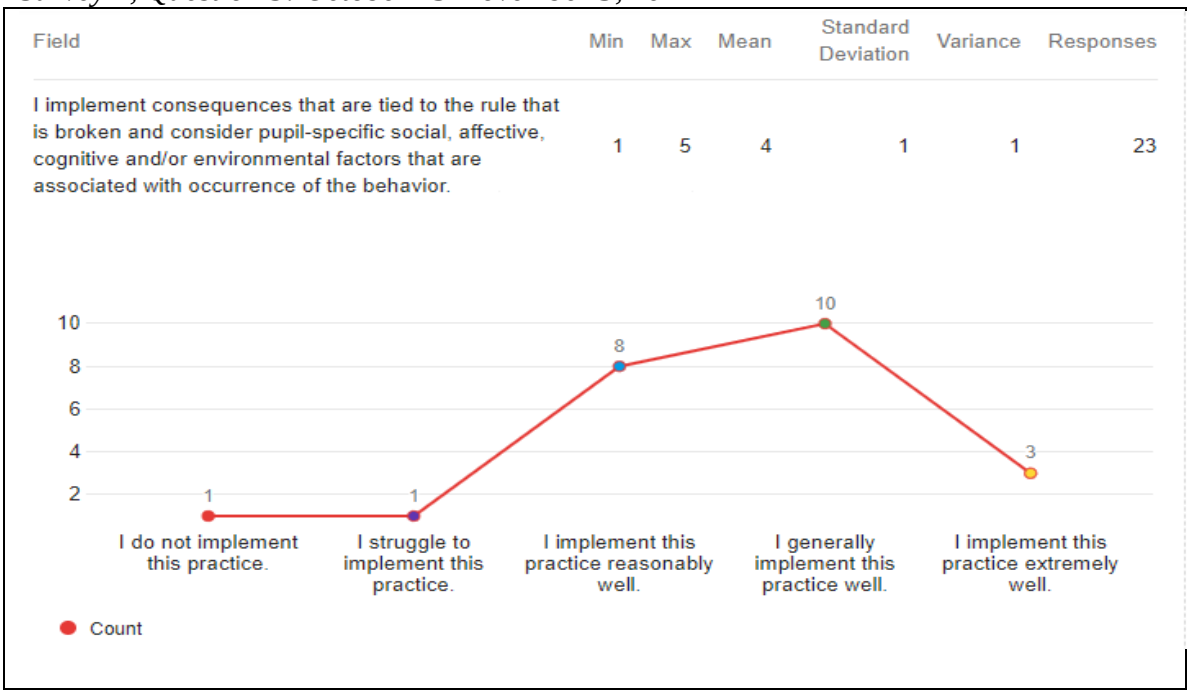
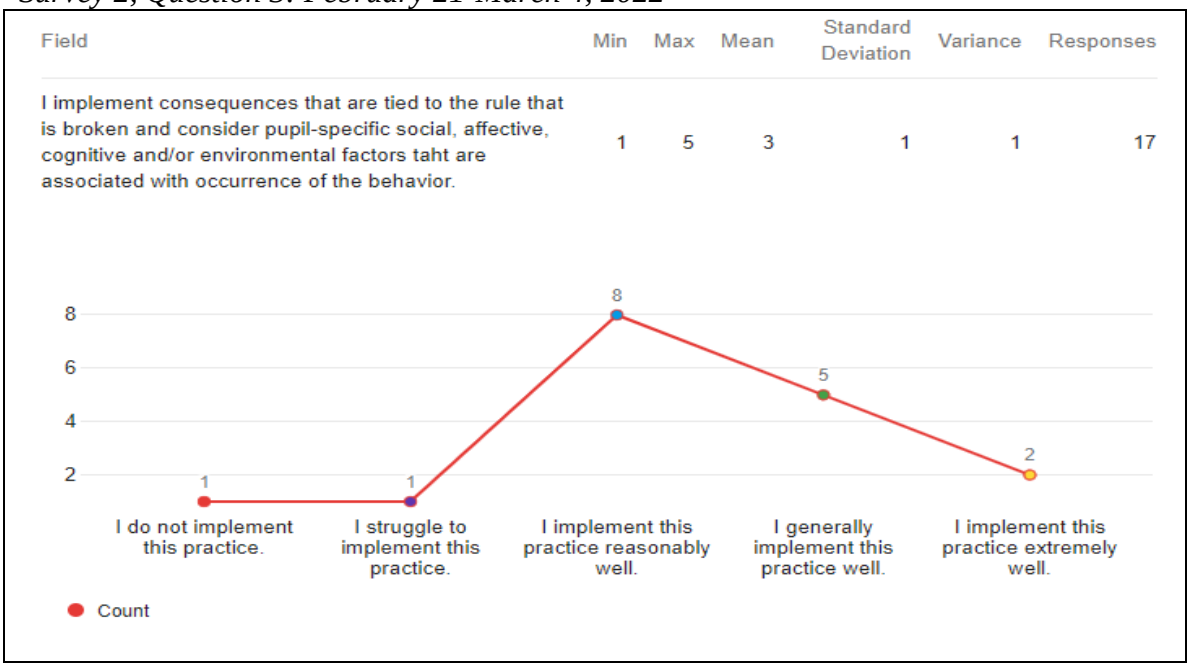


Figure 11

Survey 2, Question 3: February 21-March 4, 2022



After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both self-assessment surveys, Question 3 was one of the self-assessment

items that emerged as potentially significant. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of different years of experience and prior training/knowledge. Most questions did not reveal that amount of training/knowledge had a significant impact on the educator's use of social and emotional teaching practices. Question 3 (tying consequences to the rule that was broken) was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. The *p*-values for question 3 (found in the Summary Analysis later in Chapter Four) were higher than 0.05, which was not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that amount of training/knowledge did not significantly impact SEL teaching practices related to tying consequences to the rule that was broken.

Figure 12

Survey 1, Question 4: October 25-November 5, 2021

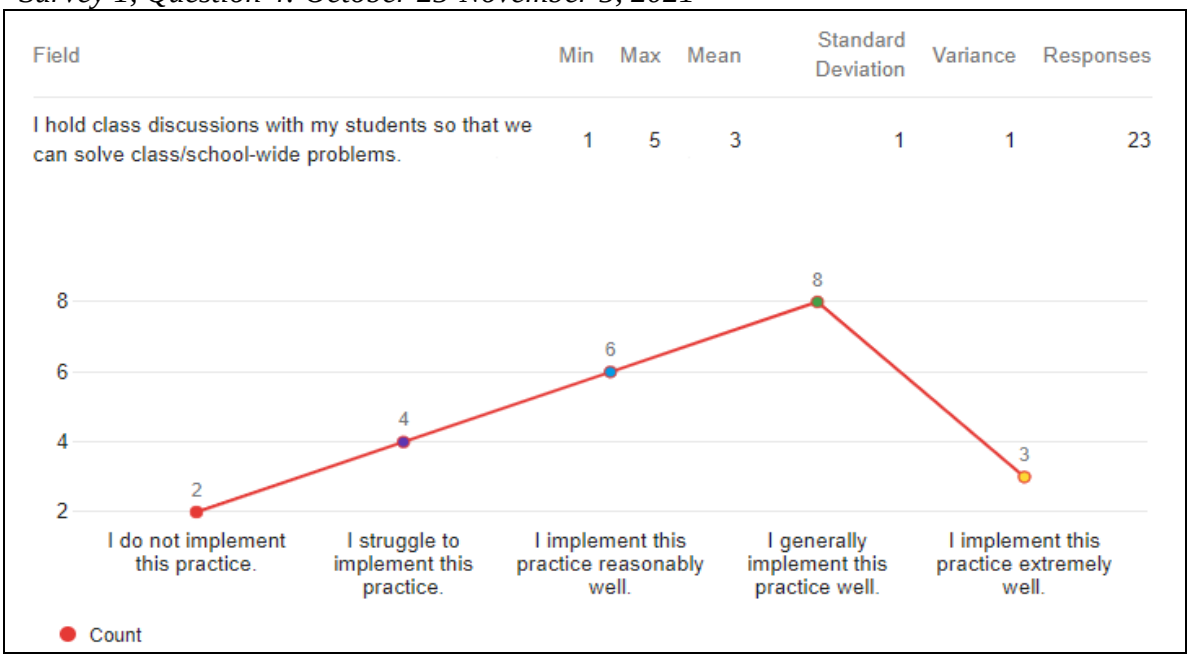
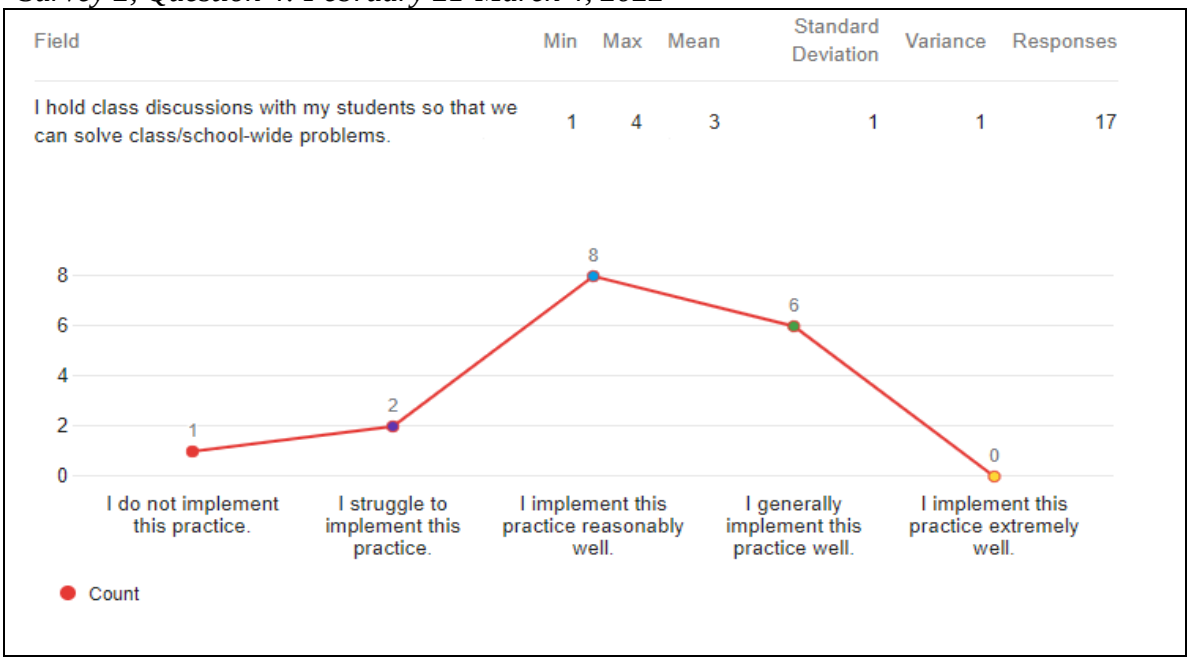


Figure 13

Survey 2, Question 4: February 21-March 4, 2022



After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both of the self-assessment surveys, Question 4 (holding class discussions to solve problems) was one of the self-assessment items that emerged as potentially significant as it was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of different years of experience and prior training/knowledge. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. The *p*-values for question 4 (found in the Summary Analysis later in Chapter Four) were higher than 0.05, which was not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that amount of training/knowledge did not significantly impact SEL teaching practices related to holding class discussions to solve problems.

Figure 14

Survey 1, Question 5: October 25-November 5, 2021

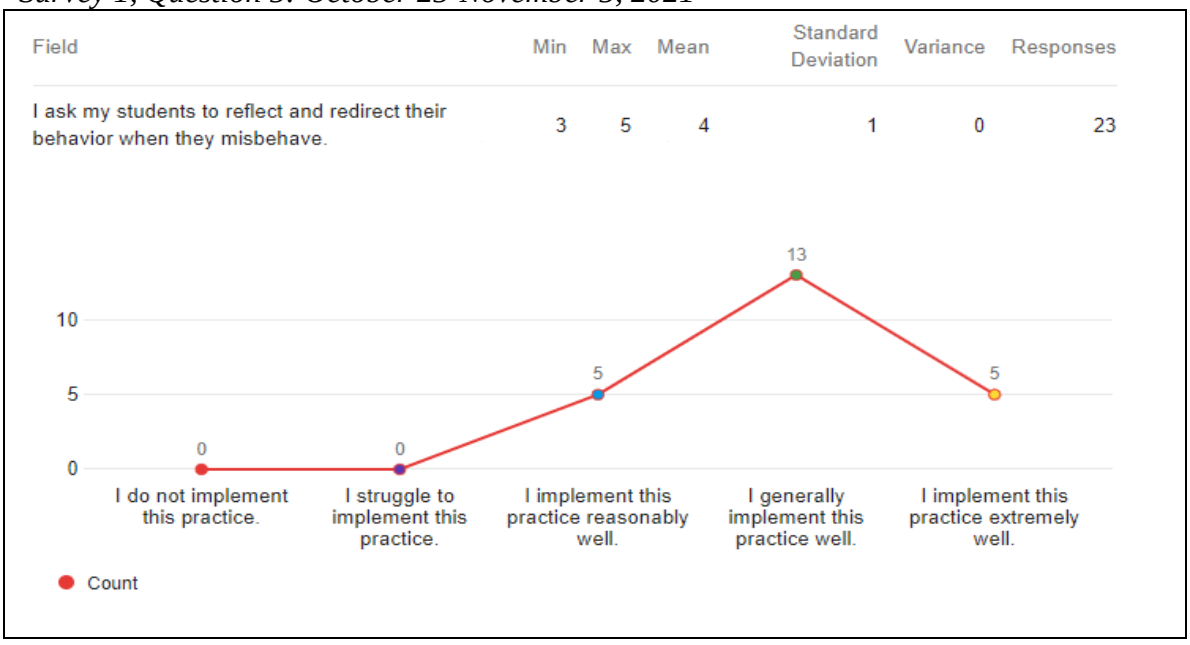
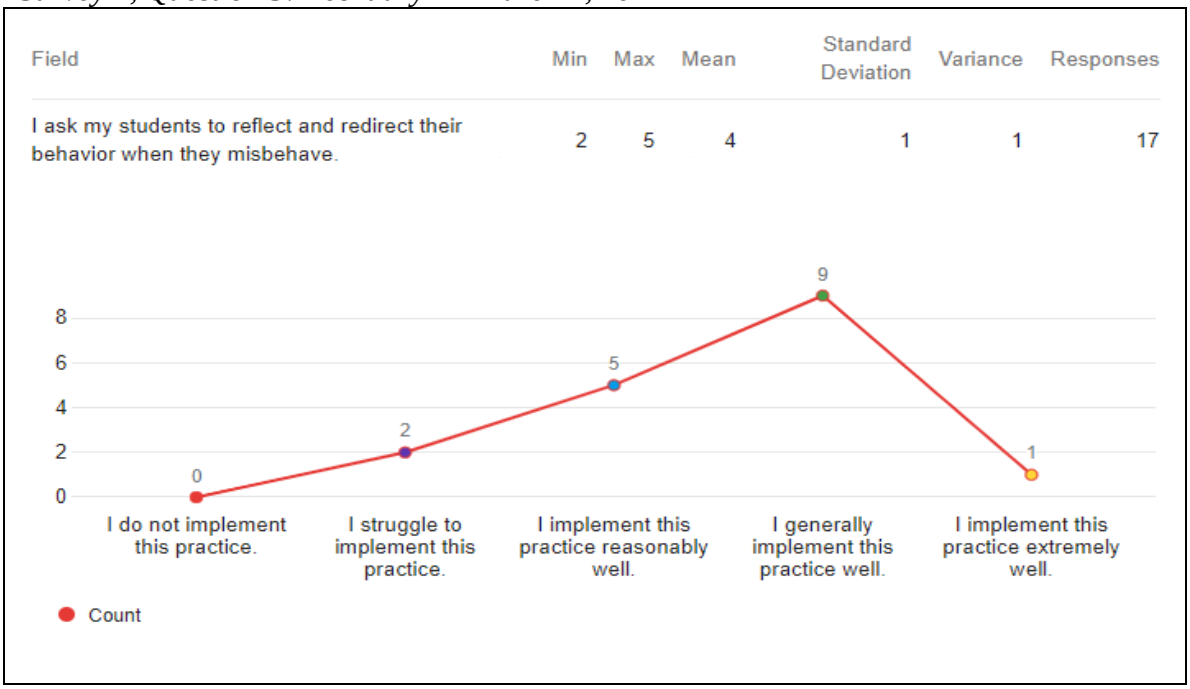


Figure 15

Survey 2, Question 5: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 16

Survey 1, Question 6: October 25-November 5, 2021

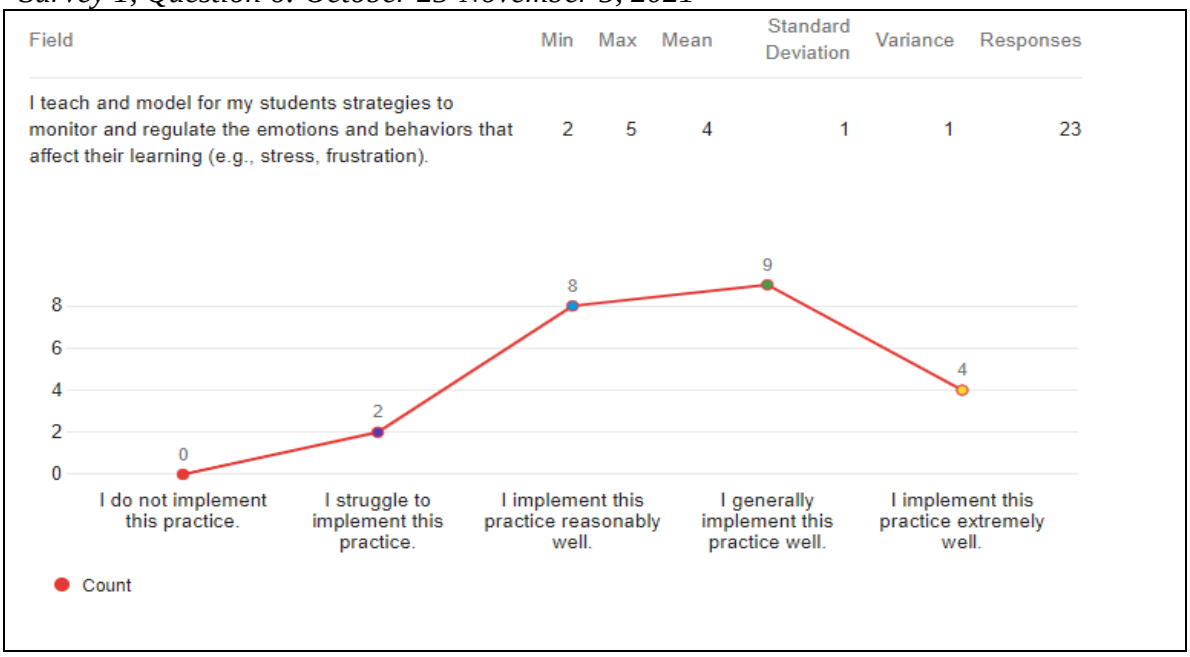
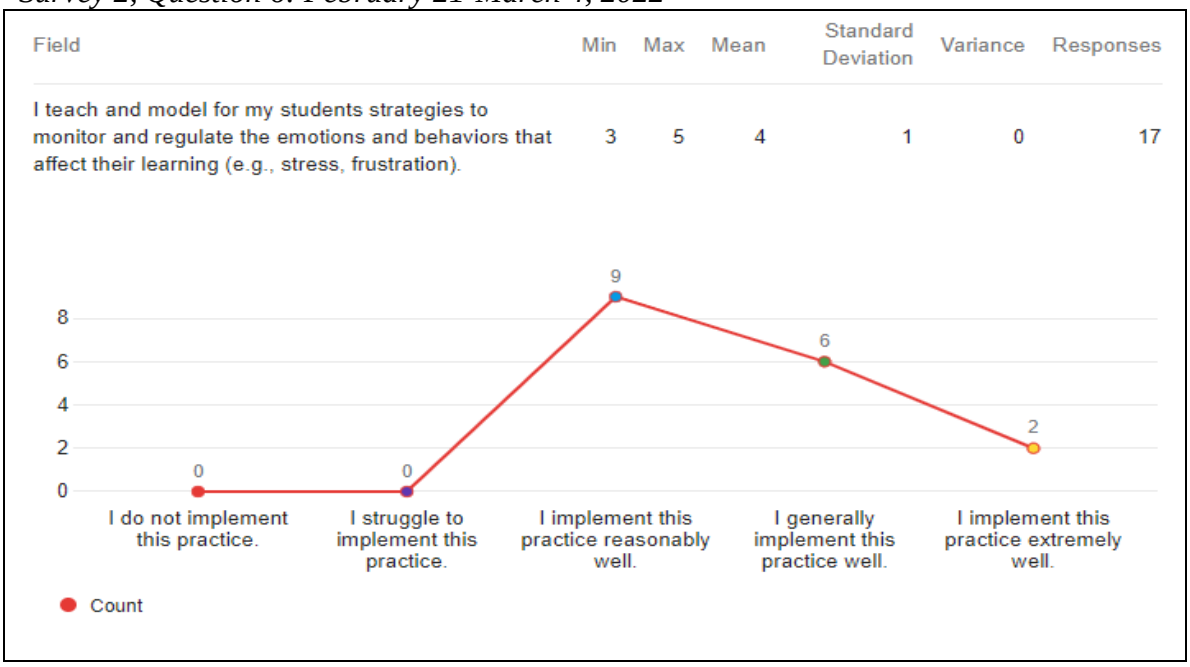


Figure 17

Survey 2, Question 6: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 18

Survey 1, Question 7: October 25-November 5, 2021

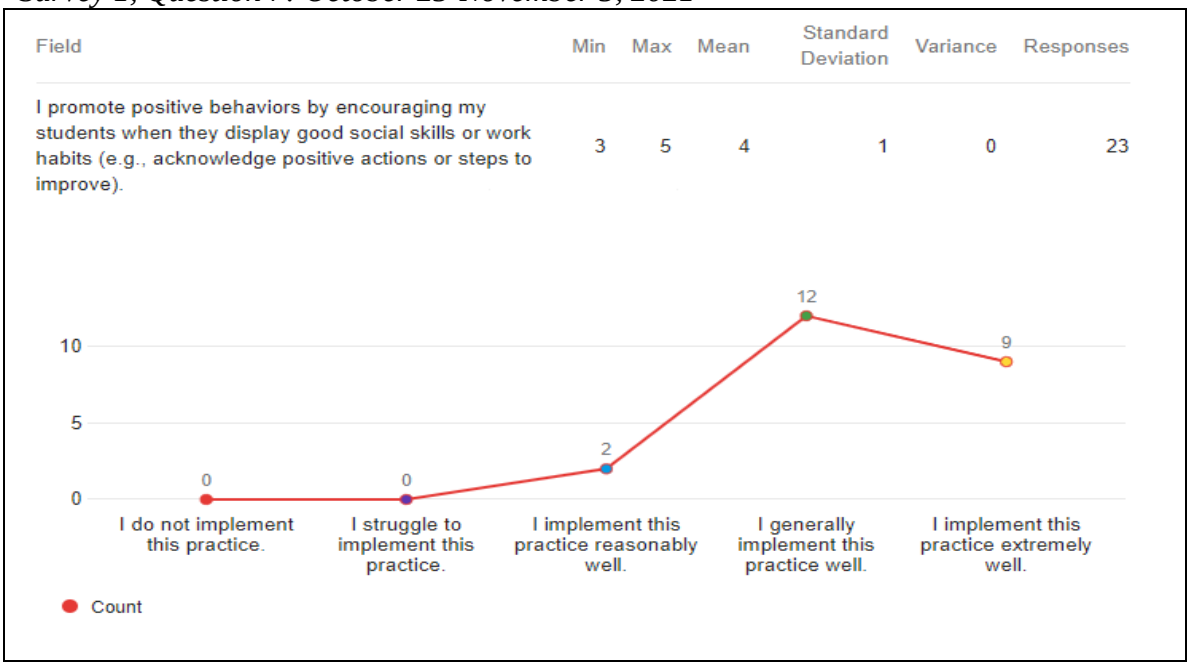


Figure 19

Survey 2, Question 7: February 21-March 4, 2022

Further testing was conducted to explore significance of responses to this self-assessment item.

After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both of the self-assessment surveys, Question 7 (promoting positive behaviors by encouraging students) was one of the two self-assessment items that emerged as potentially significant as it was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys, with educators who indicated "significant" prior training and knowledge rating themselves notably higher than those with "some" training and knowledge. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on prior training/knowledge. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

Using a T-test for equality of means, the average one-sided *p* for question 7 (found in the Summary Analysis later in Chapter Four) was 0.0717. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. There was a statistical significance between amount of training/knowledge and this specific teacher behavior. However, the results of both surveys did not reveal that significant training/knowledge impacted all or even the majority of areas on the self-assessments. As a result, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Figure 20

Survey 1, Question 8: October 25-November 5, 2021

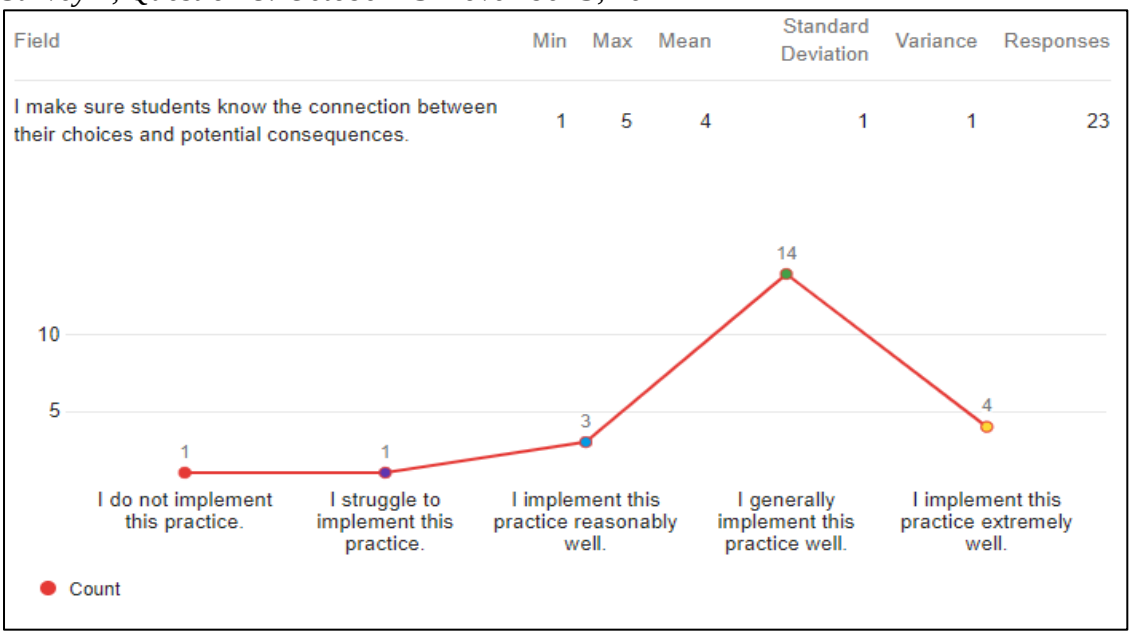
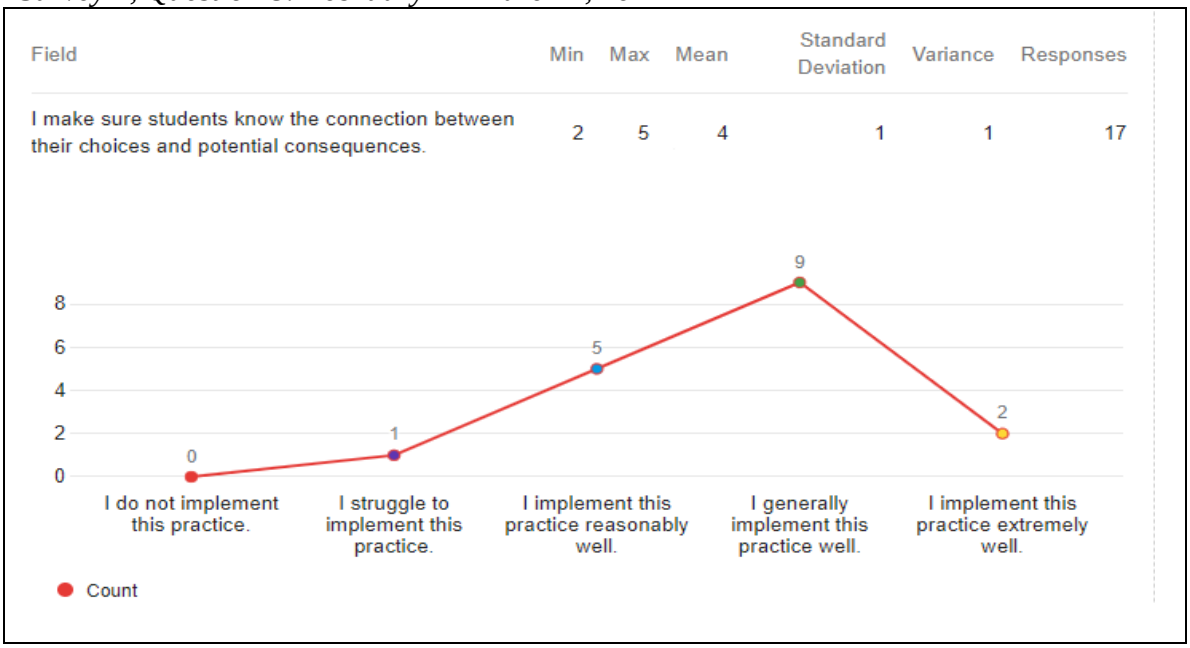


Figure 21

Survey 2, Question 8: February 21-March 4, 2022



After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both self-assessment surveys, Question 8 (tying choices to consequences) was one of the self-assessment items that emerged as potentially significant as it was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of different years of experience and prior training/knowledge. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. The *p*-values for Question 8 were higher than 0.05, which was not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that amount of training/knowledge did not significantly impact SEL teaching practices related to tying choices to consequences.

Figure 22

Survey 1, Question 9: October 25-November 5, 2021

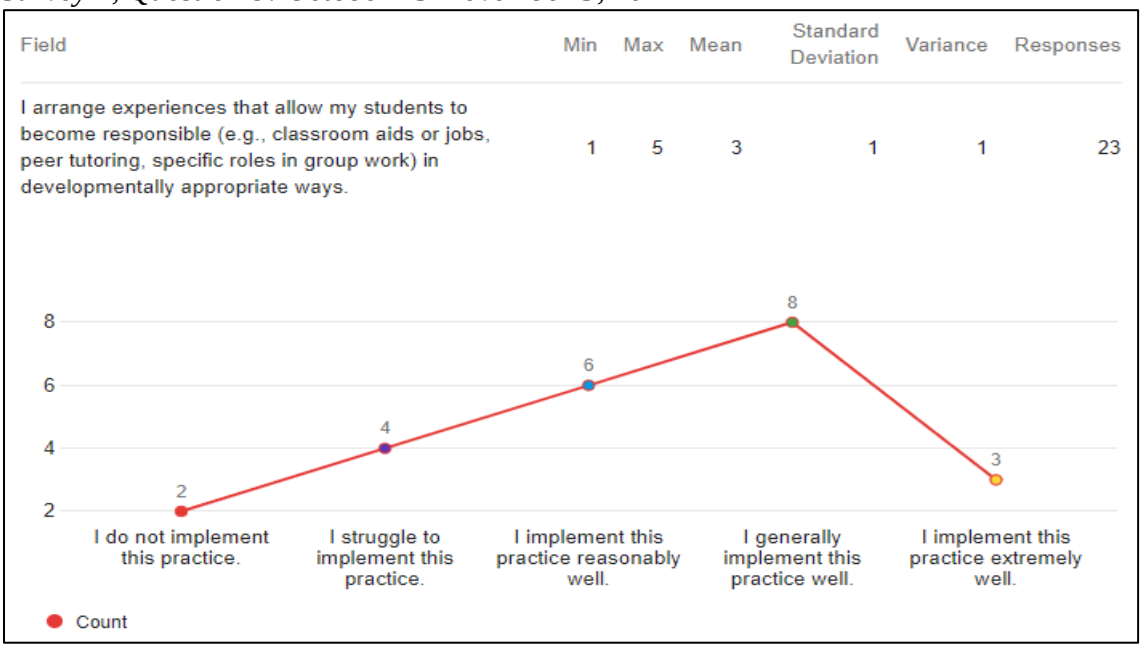
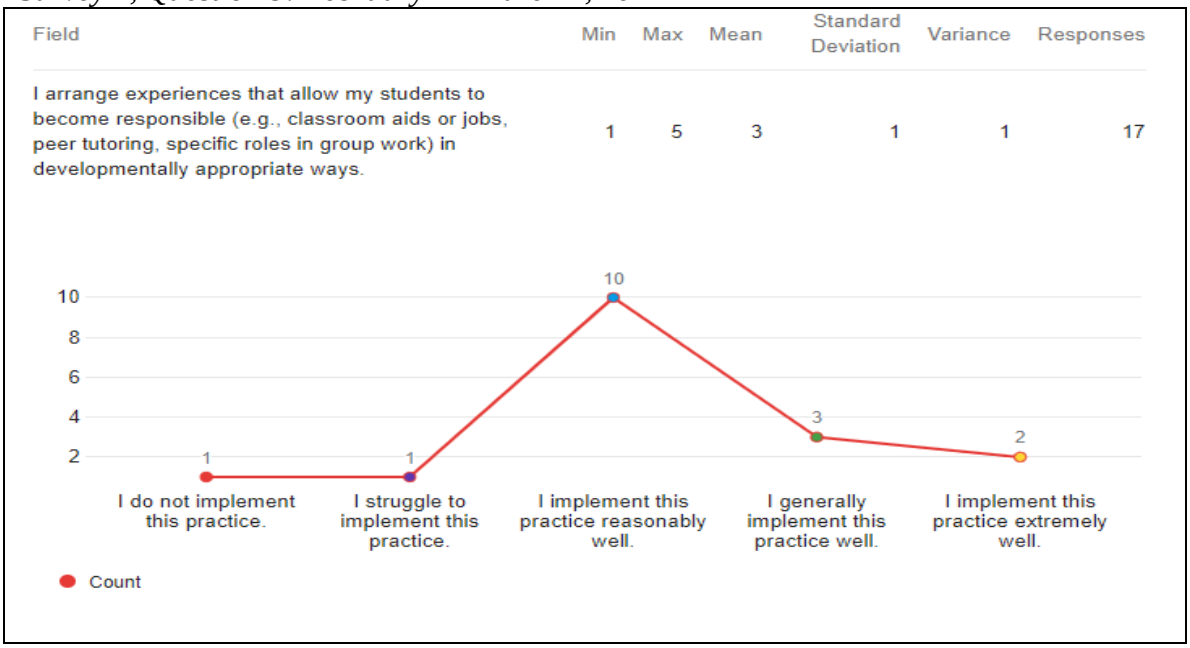


Figure 23

Survey 2, Question 9: February 21-March 4, 2022



After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both self-assessment surveys, Question 9 (arranging experiences to become responsible) was one of the self-assessment items that emerged as potentially significant as it was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on the categories of different years of experience and prior training/knowledge. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. The *p*-values for question 9 (found in the Summary Analysis later in Chapter Four) were higher than 0.05, which was not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that amount of training/knowledge did not significantly impact SEL teaching practices related to arranging experiences that teach students to become responsible.

Figure 24

Survey 1, Question 10: October 25-November 5, 2021

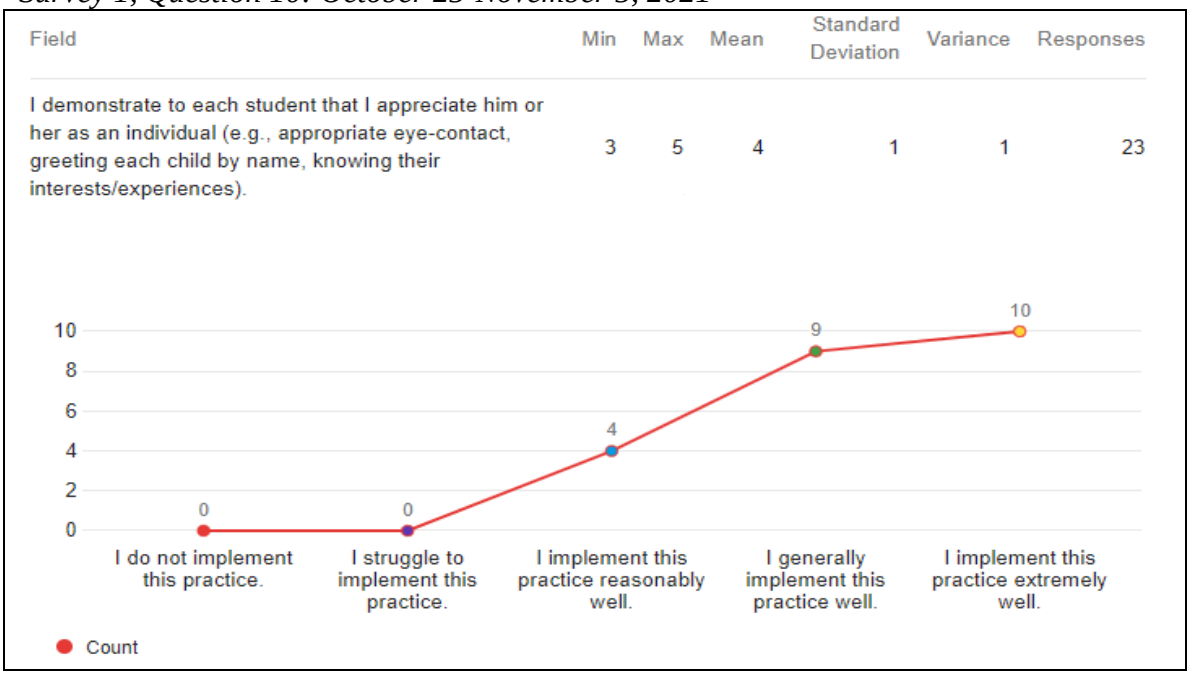
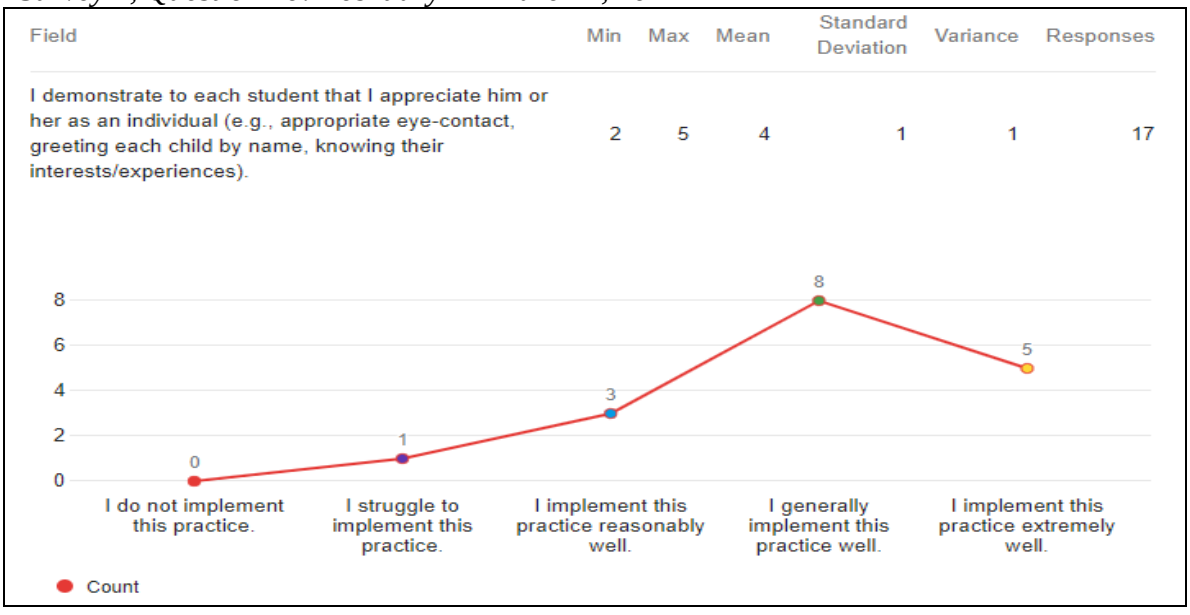


Figure 25

Survey 2, Question 10: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 26

Survey 1, Question 11: October 25-November 5, 2021

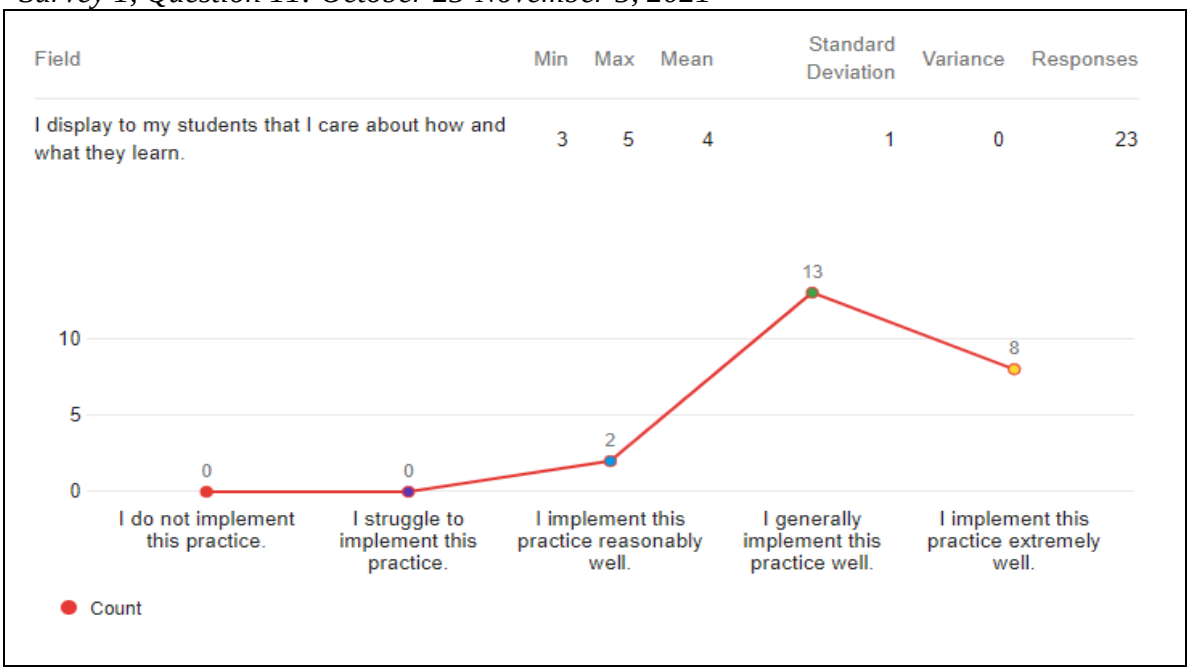
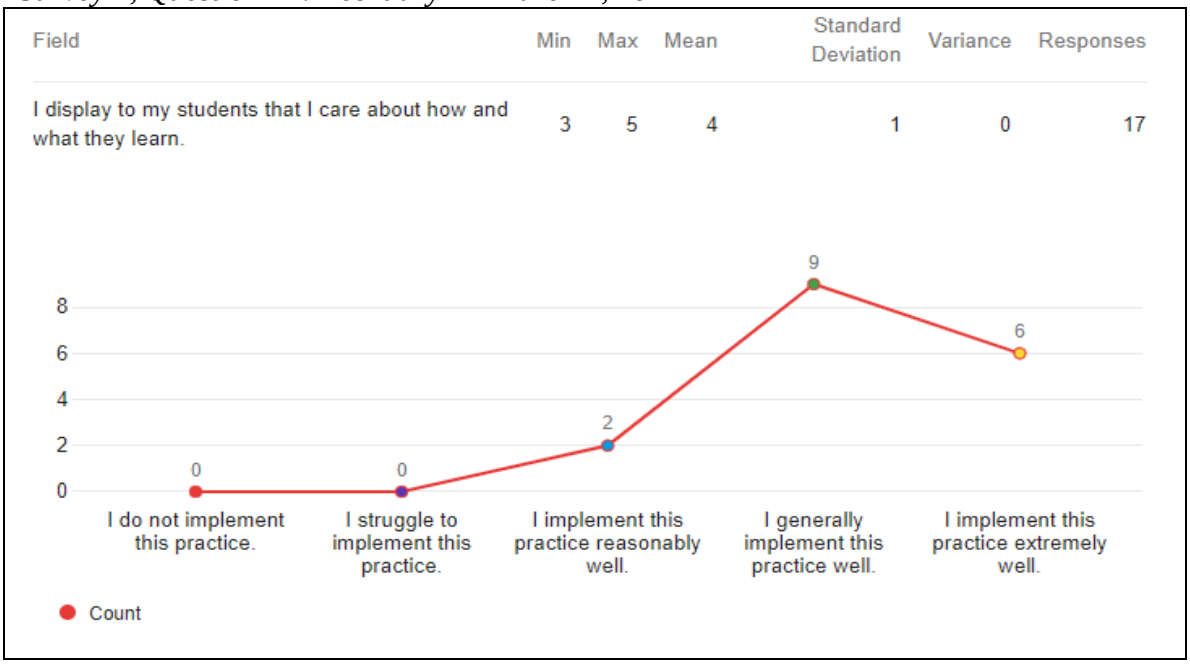


Figure 27

Survey 2, Question 11: February 21-March 4, 2022



Further testing was conducted to explore the significance of responses to this self-assessment item.

After T-tests were used to create the mean and standard deviation for each question on both of the self-assessment surveys, Question 1 (displaying care for how and what students learn) was one of the two self-assessment items that emerged as potentially significant as it was one of the questions that showed the lowest means and highest standard deviations in both surveys, with educators who indicated "significant" prior training and knowledge rating themselves notably higher than those with "some" training and knowledge. The researcher then compared the resulting means and standard deviations based on prior training/knowledge. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to calculate whether there was statistical significance related to amount of training/knowledge for this specific survey items. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

Using a T-test for equality of means, the average one-sided *p* for Question 11 was 0.0031. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered significant. There was a statistical significance between amount of training/knowledge and this specific teacher behavior. However, the results of both surveys did not reveal that significant training/knowledge impacted all or even the majority of areas on the self-assessments. As a result, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Figure 28

Survey 1, Question 12: October 25-November 5, 2021

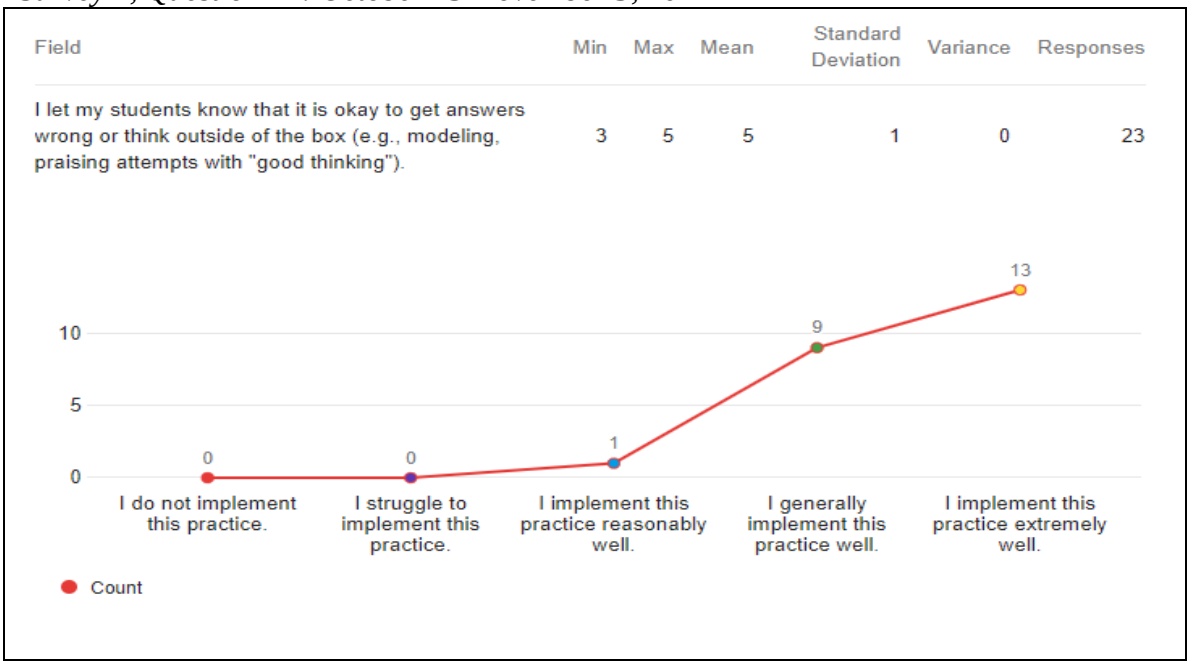
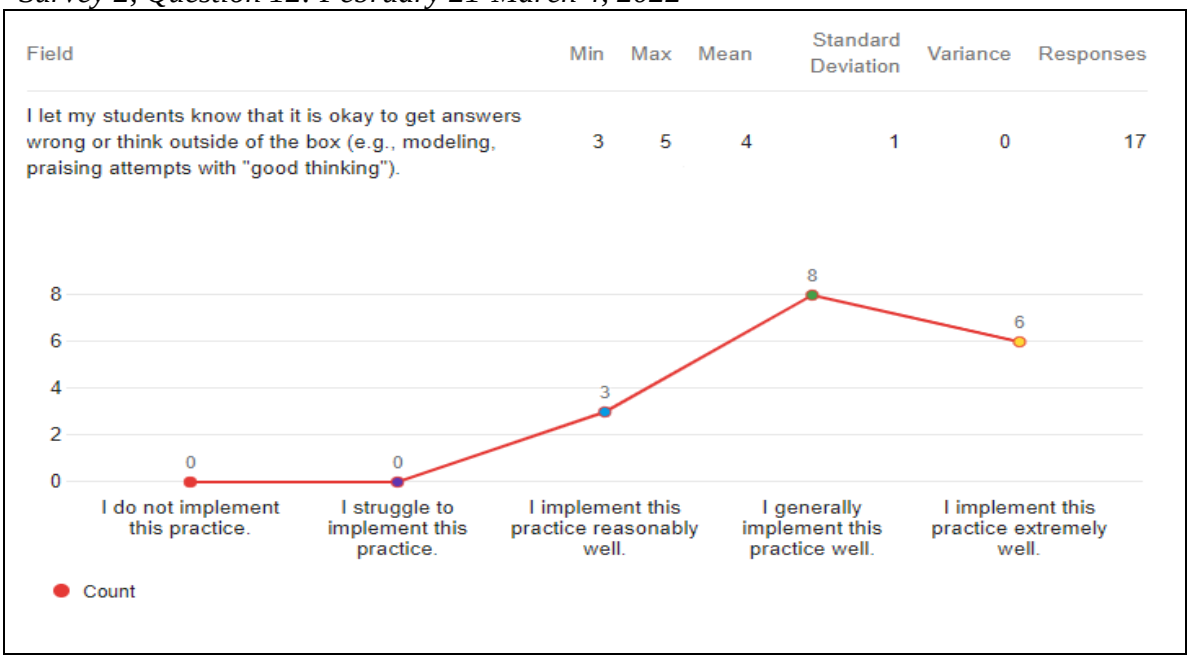


Figure 29

Survey 2, Question 12: February 21-March 4, 2022



No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

Figure 30

Survey 1, Question 13: October 25-November 5, 2021

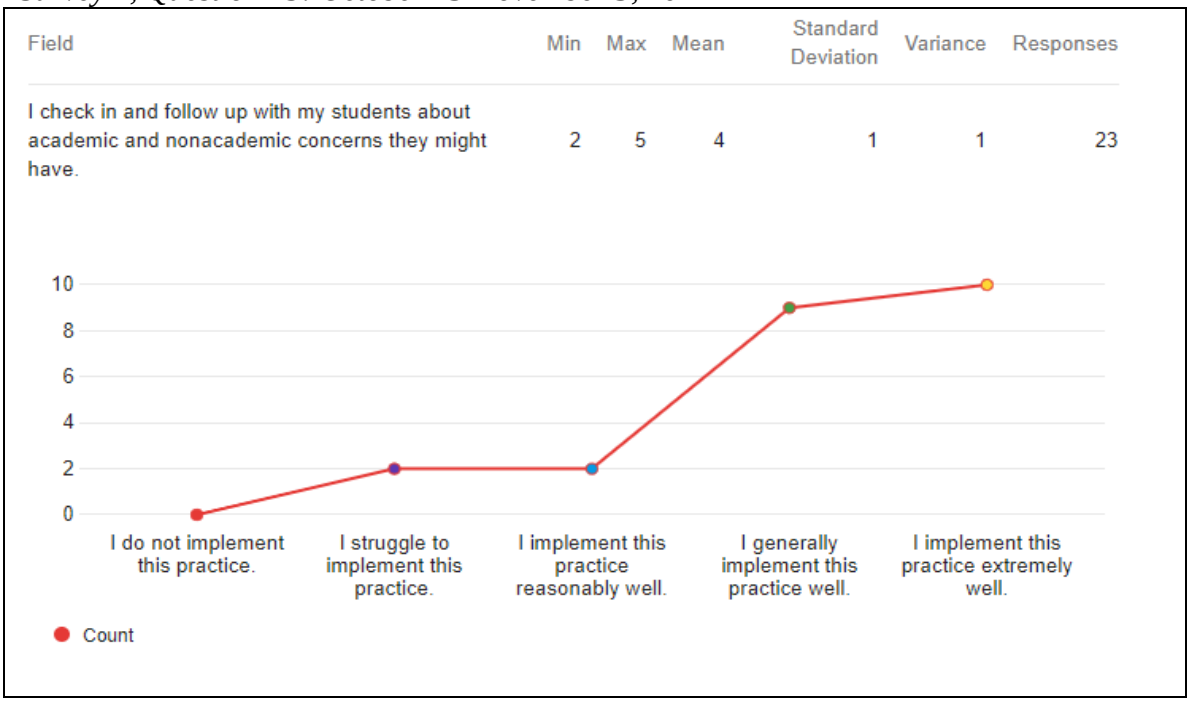
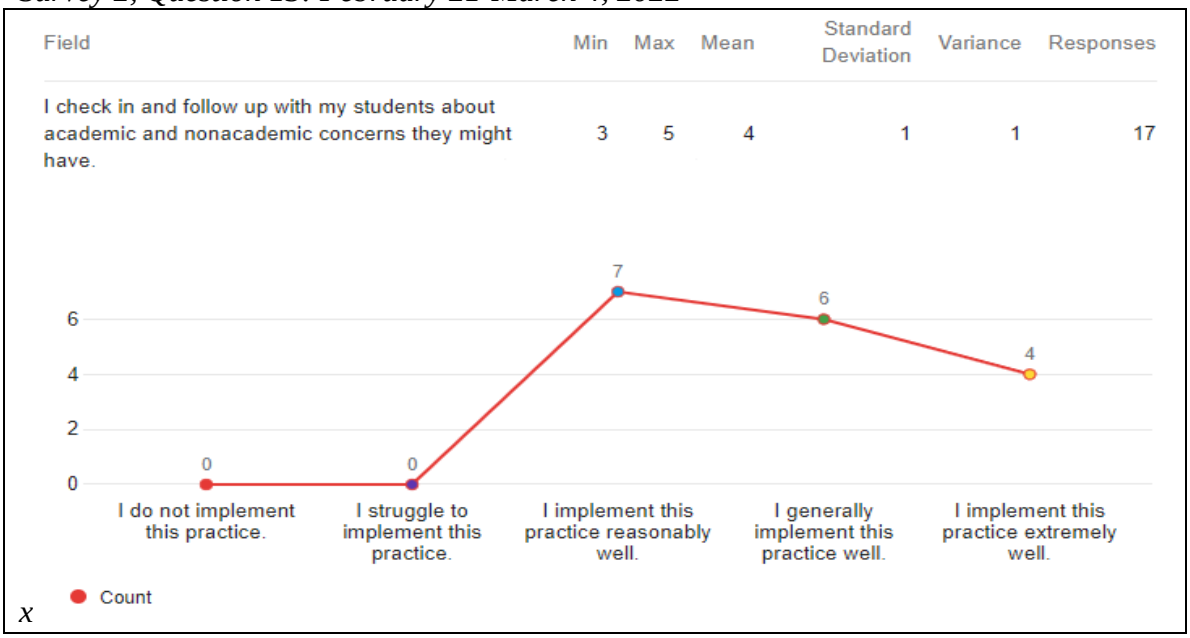


Figure 31

Survey 2, Question 13: February 21-March 4, 2022



x

No potential statistical significance emerged for this self-assessment item.

In summary, the previously identified categories of student-centered discipline (questions 3 and 4) and responsibility and choice (questions 8 and 9) stood out as four of the six questions with the lowest means and highest standard deviations. Question 3 required educators to reflect on their implementation of consequences that were tied to the rule that was broken and consideration of pupil-specific factors associated with the behavior and an average mean of 3.57 and standard deviation of 0.945. Question 4 asked educators about their utilization of class discussions to solve classroom or schoolwide problems and had an average mean of 3.26 and standard deviation of 1.176. Question 8 dealt with a teacher's assistance in helping students connect their choices to consequences and resulted in an average mean of 3.83 and standard deviation of 0.937. Question 9, with an average mean of 3.26 and standard deviation of 1.176, was in regard to whether a teacher arranged experiences that allowed their students to become responsible in developmentally appropriate ways.

An Analysis of Variance test (ANOVA) that focused on the four "nearly" significant survey questions and two statistically significant questions was conducted on each item to measure if respondents' self-assessments of their teaching practices that impacted students' social-emotional learning changed in those areas in the time between the two survey administrations. The 17 responses from the second survey were matched up with those from the first to see if anything significant was revealed. The research utilized unpaired f-tests to determine whether or not the 17 participants' use of SEL conscious classroom practices changed as the 2021-2022 school year progressed. A significance level of .05 was utilized to determine statistical significance. In each test, a *p*-value greater than 0.05 was indicated. The ANOVA revealed that, regardless of years

of experience or amount of training/knowledge, no significant difference in the use of any of the social-emotional learning practices on the self-assessment surveys from fall of 2020 to spring of 2021 (the time between the surveys). Overall, deviations from the null hypotheses were not statistically significant and none of the null hypotheses were rejected.

Table 1

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 3

S1 Question 3- Implementation of Consequences Mean	S2 Question 3- Implementation of Consequences Mean	Question 3- Difference of Means	95% Confidence Interval
4.29412	4.23529	0.05883	-0.3431 to 0.4607

p value= 0.7675

Table 2

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 4

S1 Question 4- Class Discussions to Solve Problems Mean	S2 Question 4- Class Discussions to Solve Problems Mean	Question 4- Difference of Means	95% Confidence Interval
3.23529	3.11765	0.1176	-0.6318 to 0.8671

p value= 0.7512

Table 3

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 8

S1 Question 8-Connection Between Choices and Consequences Mean	S2 Question 8-Connection Between Choices and Consequences Mean	Question 8-Difference of Means	95% Confidence Interval
3.88235	3.70588	0.1765	-0.4196 to 0.7726

p value= 0.5507

The common value for "significant" was $p < .05$. Though the *p*-value for question 8 was the closest to .05, there was no such thing as "slightly significant," meaning that the data for this question was insignificant as well.

Table 4

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 9

S1 Question 9-Arrange Experiences to Teach Responsibility Mean	S2 Question 9-Arrange Experiences to Teach Responsibility Mean	Question 9-Difference of Means	95% Confidence Interval
3.29412	3.23529	0.05882	-0.6675 to 0.7852

p value= 0.87

Self-assessment questions 7 (promoting positive behaviors through encouragement) and 11 (displaying care for how and what students learn) were two self-assessment items that emerged in both surveys as potentially statistically significant when connected to amount of prior training/knowledge. Educators with significant training/knowledge rated themselves higher on questions 7 and 11. For purposes of

confidentiality, the co-researcher matched up the 17 responses from the first survey with the 17 respondents who completed the second survey and data was compared among educators' level of training in SEL practices (none, some, significant). A Kruskal-Wallis test focused on this statistically significant question was conducted to measure if respondents' level of training impacted their self-assessment of this item (display care for how and what students learn). The 17 responses from the second survey were divided by those who indicated they had "some" level of training and those who had "significant" levels of training. The research utilized unpaired f-tests to determine whether or not the 17 participants' use of SEL conscious classroom practices changed as the 2021-2022 school year progressed or if their amount of prior training/knowledge impacted their use of the practice. A significance level of .05 was utilized to determine statistical significance.

For these two self-assessment items, comparison of means tests were run to compare the responses of those with "some" training and knowledge and those with "significant" training and knowledge. A *p*-value of 0.0717 was indicated for question 7 and a *p*-value of 0.0031 was indicated for question 11. The p values for both items were determined to be significant at $p < .05$. Though the data revealed statistical significance for these two questions, the results of both surveys did not reveal that significant training/knowledge impacted all or even the majority of areas on the self-assessments. As a result, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 5

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 7- Comparison of Means

Some Training	Significant Training	Question 7
Question 7- Promote Positive Behaviors Through Encouragement	Question 7- Promote Positive Behaviors Through Encouragement	Difference of Means=0.500
Some Training	Significant Training	
Mean= 4.13	Mean= 4.63	
SD= 0.64	SD= 0.518	

p = 0.0717

Table 6

Summary Data for Self-Assessment Question 11 - Comparison of Means

Some Training	Significant Training	Question 11
Question 11- Displaying Care for How and What Students Learn	Question 11- Displaying Care for How and What Students Learn`	Difference of Means 0.75
Some Training Mean= 4	Significant Training Mean= 4.75	
SD= 0.535	SD= 0.463	

p value= 0.0031

Qualitative Data

The researcher obtained qualitative data by inviting respondents to the first survey administered in fall of 2020 to volunteer to be interviewed once and observed in their classroom/workspace twice. An initial goal of 6 volunteers was set by the researcher. Out of the 23 respondents to the first survey, a total of 13 educators volunteered to be

interviewed and observed. When it came time for interviews and observations to take place during the third quarter, three of those staff members no longer worked for the schools where the research took place, resulting in a final total of 10 participants. Of those who volunteered, nine identified as female and one identified as male. All of them had worked in the field of education between 4 and 11 years. It was also of note that the educators represented only two of the four K - 8 schools in the urban Mid-West network where the research took place.

The researcher and research assistant completed the observations and interviews together, which ensured reliability of results and decreased the opportunity for bias to play into qualitative data. Interviews were conducted using a predetermined set of questions designed to gain insight into educators' feelings and experiences as they worked with students during the 2021-2022 school year, during an ongoing pandemic. After all interviews were completed, the researcher coded the transcribed interviews for themes.

During interviews, educators were asked to first describe what a "typical" school day looked like for them. After that, the researcher and co-researcher inquired about what was working well and what was not working so well when the educators reflected on the 2020-2021 school year. Then, the researchers queried about specific challenges unique to the particular school year that were not the same as what interviewees had experienced in the past. Educators were asked to compare the start of the 2020-2021 school year to prior years in their careers. Next, educators shared their views on their particular campus' school climate at that point in time and their intention/ability to implement SEL practices in their role. The final portion of the interview required the educators to describe the first,

second, and third quarters of the 2020-2021 school year in three words each and then give three words to describe their hopes for the fourth quarter.

The 10 educators who volunteered to be interviewed were also observed twice in their classroom/workspace. Both observations were conducted on the same day of the week at the same time of day for each individual participant. During each 20–30-minute observation, the researcher and assistant recorded everything that the participants and their students said and did to code for themes and allow for later correlations to survey results. They also scored each observation according to a rubric that focused on the areas of classroom instruction and classroom environment. The researcher and co-observer discussed observations and findings together and reflected on the social and emotional learning practices (or lack thereof) that they witnessed. This practice assisted in identifying themes and also helped to ensure that bias was not a part of observations. After all observations were completed, transcribed conversations and notes were coded for themes.

Research Question 1: What are educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment?

Research Question 2: What correlations, if any, are there between educators' perceptions of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 3: What correlations, if any, are there between years of experience in education and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 4: How do the identified themes that emerged from interviews impact educators' positive/negative perceptions of their preparedness to address the SEL needs of their students?

Research Question 5: What is observed (classroom instructional practices, classroom environment, behavior management and disciplinary strategies) in classrooms and schools where teachers give culture a high rating?

Research Question 6: What supports and coaching are needed for educators to implement social and emotional learning into their teaching practices?

The research questions were answered through identification of themes that emerged from interviews and classroom/workplace observations, which took place within the third quarter of the 2020-2021 school year.

Theme 1: Feelings of Emotional and Physical Exhaustion

During interviews, each of the 13 educators mentioned being tired, exhausted, or overwhelmed. As participant 6 explained,

> Kids and grownups are tired. The grownups at school and the grownups at home are tired. Kids are coming (to school) in dirty clothes or hungry. It has been hard to address all of the needs while also keeping up with expectations and what we are supposed to accomplish (academically).

Another participant also identified as being tired, working through their own trauma, and processing their own experiences. That educator, along with several others, mentioned having their own young children at home and husbands who were either educators or in another field significantly impacted by the pandemic. Challenges were both professional and personal. Educator 5 said, "We have 23 students who are all on

different levels. We are making so many decisions and addressing so many new needs. It is exhausting." The comments of Educator 4 were similar. "The return to in person learning has been really hard. I think the teachers are exhausted. It goes beyond the pandemic." In one way or another, each educator conveyed that the expectations imposed on teachers at that time felt completely unrealistic, which contributed to their exhaustion. "Kids say I do not look okay and ask if I am okay. I say I am great but they can tell I am worn out. I get no break."

This theme answered Research Question 1 regarding teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social-emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment. It also correlated with Research Question 4 which centered on how the themes that emerged impacted educators' abilities to address their students' social-emotional needs. Though each of the educators quoted indicated "some" or "significant" training/knowledge in teaching practices that impact social-emotional learning, they felt that their personal exhaustion was a barrier to providing students with what they needed. As Educator 3 shared,

> Being physically tired is one major challenge. Educating takes a lot of effort and brain power. We are emotionally invested in kids and their families. We are pouring from an empty cup. Trying to make things fun and exciting takes a lot out of you.

Educators described feeling drained as a result of trying to remain calm and supportive during students' extreme emotional reactions, such as ripping up a teacher's lovingly created bulletin boards, throwing chairs, or running out of the classroom. "The physical exhaustion is getting better but the emotional exhaustion of giving and giving

and giving is a lot." Educator 3's analogy of "pouring from an empty cup" was woven throughout the interviews. Staff members indicated that they were giving all they had and most felt they just could possibly not give any more.

Theme 2: Educators' Feelings of Overwhelm/Emotional Dysregulation

Interviews revealed that educators identified as being overwhelmed and, at times, dysregulated themselves, which made it harder for them to be impactful in the area of their students' social-emotional learning. This correlated with the self-assessment item on the surveys that stated, "I teach and model for my students strategies to monitor and regulate the emotions and behaviors that affect their learning (e.g. stress, frustration)," which had more "I struggle to implement this practice" and "I implement this practice reasonably well" responses on the first survey than the other self-assessment items. As Educator 6 reflected,

> I feel that I have always focused on being very intentional, but this year has been the most challenging because I myself am struggling with being overwhelmed and dysregulated…I want my kids' experiences at school to be positive and healthy, but I am struggling to feel positive and healthy. It has been tough.

Another interviewee, Educator 5, shared the same sentiment and identified that when an educator teaches and implements SEL skills, they then had the permission and space to learn and practice the same skills as well. They felt that it would be helpful for students to see their own teachers working on their own personal social and emotional growth. Educator 2 identified a sense of overwhelm that came from deciding between family, health, and coming to work.

> My mom is really high-risk. When I am at work, I feel guilty about being at work. It's a constant overwhelming mental guilt struggle. I am going through IVF. If I was to get exposed here, I ruin chances of something that is important to me.

Along those lines, Educator 6 reported that things felt "crazy" as they were teaching a new curriculum, managing their own family, and struggling personally to keep up with the demands of work and home. Educator 7 admitted that it was difficult to control their own anxiety and annoyance.

> It's not the kids- it's you and what's going on in the world. Adults need to sit down and be made to pay attention to their emotions and how to handle them. We have to learn how to control our internal emotions, facial expressions, etc.

Educators repeatedly recognized that their own feelings of overwhelm and dysregulation impacted their ability to model and teach the social-emotional learning skills and strategies needed by their students, regardless of how much those educators believed in the importance of SEL practices or had been trained in SEL.

Theme 3: New Challenge to the Work of Educators: Student Behavior

Conversations with educators resulted in the identification of new struggles brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which would certainly not be the last disruptive event in education. Paying attention to the unique challenges could assist in developing plans to address future interruptions to education such as weather-related catastrophes, natural events like earthquakes, pandemics or outbreaks of illness, school shootings, or any other event that caused closure or disturbance to educational environments.

The first challenge that emerged throughout interviews with educators was the perceived increase in a lack of respect, anger, and anxiety within students in all grades, but most notably in kindergarten and first grades. Educator 1 reported dealing with behaviors that they had never seen before, especially in kindergarten and first grade at the beginning of the year. That point was reiterated by Educator 6 who hypothesized, "Kindergarteners don't have the executive functioning or social skills they would have had if they had gone to preschool or daycare. We are trying to help them function." Educator 10 looked back on the start of the school year and sadly shared, "The first day of K there was a lot there." Their use of the "a lot" was in reference to extreme student behaviors and they went on to describe being punched, hit, bit, screamed at by their students who were five or six years old. "Usually, the first week of school is pretty quiet, but not this year."

Along those lines, Educator 2 said, "A lot of them (students) were internalizing feeling anxious or sad. They looked fine on the outside. They had to learn how to reach out and say what they need." Teachers explained what it was like to try to teach with frequent behavioral interruptions. "You will probably see outbursts. You will probably see me have to sit down and gather myself," said Educator 4 when asked what a typical school day looked like. "One of my biggest challenges is trying to get the content in when there is so much behavior management needed," reflected Educator 9.

Theme 4: New Challenge to the Work of Educators: Impact of Virtual Learning

During interviews, educators often ruminated on some of the challenges introduced by virtual learning and an increase in screen-time. Educator 4 spoke about one particular second grade student who was assigned a classroom job. The teacher lamented

that the student could not handle the decisions and responsibilities of the typical classroom job on their own. Instead of the job giving the child a sense of pride, it gave them anxiety. When reflecting on why that student and others struggled so much with the classroom job, the teacher hypothesized, "I think it comes from them being home learning virtually and their parents have done so much for them. They struggle to function away from the computer." Educator 7 noted that the first graders at their school had been "the most challenging." "You can tell they have spent so much time on the computer on YouTube and TikTok. They think that they are so mature but they are not."

A middle school teacher, Educator 5, agreed that students struggled to return to school after being at home learning on the computer for so long. As they described what it was like to welcome their middle school students back to campus, the teacher shared that they felt they were having the first day of school for children who had never experienced school before. It was as if they were teaching 10–13-year-old kindergarteners in some cases. The same teacher shared that middle school students seemed to have spent a lot of additional time on inappropriate/mature content while online or home alone during virtual learning. As a result, that teacher saw "emotionally and socially immature students combined with mature content. It's a tough combo." Another middle school teacher agreed with that sentiment. "There are just so many immature behaviors. I have to teach them how to be a human in a school." Middle school students were doing and saying things that were more typical of younger children, things that they should have grown out of.

Though most comments on the impact of virtual learning were focused on the negative impacts, there were two positive themes that emerged. The first was noted by

Educator 4 who reported that the first semester's hybrid schedule (half of the class on campus and the other half virtual) did have one benefit. "The class sizes have worked well. It is smaller during hybrid and works out for space and overall emotions to have more space between the kids." Three other educators agreed with that point and mentioned that the smaller class sizes created a calmer classroom environment and felt more manageable. Though they felt rushed while simultaneously getting their classrooms ready according to COVID-19 guidelines and participating in two weeks of professional development before the first day of school, having fewer students in the classroom at once made it feel a bit more manageable. Said one of those who was interviewed, "We did not have to address every child's needs at the same time. It was easier with 12 in the room instead of 24."

The second positive theme was that virtual learning allowed educators to take care of their physical needs. "I was able to go to the bathroom AND eat lunch!" exclaimed Educator 8. Another went on to appreciate that their lunch time did not mean making copies while "shoving food" in their mouth. Other educators expressed that they missed the ability simply to use the restroom whenever they needed to or to take a 10 to 15-minute walk when they were feeling stressed. While educators missed interacting with their students, they acknowledged that having time to eat, use the restroom, and take small breaks was appreciated.

Theme 5: New Challenge to the Work of Educators: Lack of Adequate Staffing

The urban Mid-western network of K - 8 schools faced extreme staffing issues due to the combination of a teacher shortage that hit urban education particularly hard and high rates of staff absences due to Covid exposure or illness. In addition, the teacher

turnover rate that the schools experienced during the first quarter was higher than in previous years. Educator 1 shared, "At the beginning, COVID was always a challenge because people were constantly out. Not having a full staff every day was super, super stressful. Now (third quarter), we are almost fully staffed and things are a bit better." Educator 3 remembered how teacher turnover impacted the first quarter. "Teachers leaving in the beginning of the year was hard. The people who were here (did not quit) were missing days here and there more often and we had to cover." Those sentiments matched the feelings of Educator 4 who expressed that it was incredibly hard to constantly have teachers coming and going. What made it even harder for Educator 4 was that, sometimes those who left were their friends. Some of those who left at least had made the hard school days more bearable and fun. "You feel like your branches are off and no one can fix it. I really think this is the way that education will keep going."

Theme 6: The Impact of School Facilities, Operations, and District-Level Decisions

During interviews, educators acknowledged that there were mixed feelings about returning to in-person learning within their schools. There were some positive things that the schools' board and management company put in place to make them feel that the health of staff was a priority. Educators mentioned that purchases such as thermal scanners for daily temp checks, masks for students and staff, hand sanitizers on the walls outside of every room, and water bottles to use in place of drinking fountains were things that made them feel more at ease when coming back to school during an ongoing pandemic.

The educators also appreciated that the school board began to understand how difficult their jobs were as the year went on and made modifications to the school

calendar, such as adding two days to Thanksgiving break and two mental health days in the second semester, to provide more breaks for staff and students. Educator 5 said,

> I follow an Instragram Account called Teacher Misery. She (the creator) compiled stories from other teachers about the nonsense they have to deal with. One story was about mandatory self-care from her admin. You never feel that you are doing enough as a teacher. I love that we (the schools involved in the study) have mental health days and we are calling it that.

Educators felt that the people at the board and district levels who were in charge of making decisions were mostly working from home and could not possibly comprehend what was actually happening in the schools. When the educators within the network received additional days off for wellness, that went a long way. Educator 9 shared,

> I get frustrated with a lot of things that have happened this year, but I do appreciate the mental health days. People (board members, administrators, regional team) are starting to recognize what they are expecting of us and what we are giving them. Educator 10 laughed, "Avoid the irony of things like having a mandatory PD on self-care at the end of the day. It has to be something that I can actually implement and does not require extra time and thought."

There were also comments on how board, regional team, and network decisions had negative impacts on educators. One of the things often mentioned were the mixed messages that were communicated. Illustrations of these mixed messages included, "It's okay that you're behind (academically) BUT you still have to meet these proficiency goals." "We should be using NWEA (nationally normed ELA and math assessment), but it's not important. We should use STEP (reading assessment), but it's not important." The

educators felt they were being asked to do a lot and receiving mixed messaging. "Do what you can, but also when we (administrators or regional team) come in (to classrooms) we are going to look for ALL of it." Expectations seemed to be too much. The educators felt responsible for closing academic gaps that had widened dramatically in the past year while also helping children through a highly traumatic experience.

Teachers also mentioned how weaknesses in facilities and operations added on stressors during an already challenging time. Comments that demonstrated this included the following: "Whoever made the school year calendar hated teachers. We started way too early (August 8). We weren't ready." "The heat was out for two days." "The schedule is just weird and more complicated this year. We are required to fit everything in but the daily schedule we have been given is unrealistic." "The start of the school year was extremely stressful for teachers. We did not have materials on time. We could not get familiar with the curriculum. Getting ready for the unknown was nearly impossible." "My classroom has been above 95 degrees numerous times. Can we fix this? It makes everything worse."

Theme 7: Educators Desired an Intentional SEL Curriculum

Both the researcher and co-interviewer/observer served on the district's SEL Curriculum Committee that was working to select an SEL curriculum during the time of the research. During their conversations, they often wondered if teachers would be overwhelmed by another new curriculum and if would seem like "one more thing" to add into the already packed school day. One of the unexpected themes that emerged during interviews was that educators repeatedly expressed a deep interest in having a quality SEL curriculum available to use district-wide. Educator 1 shared, "I know that those

things (SEL topics) are taught, but we are not pushing to implement them all the time. I want to hear the same language throughout the building.

> Doing that survey (the research survey) was really good. It impacted me and made me be more intentional about how I'm interacting with my highflyers, my wanderers, button pushers. Just looking at the survey reminded me of what I need to do. A curriculum would help me even more.

Several educators felt that if the district had implemented a universal SEL curriculum they would not have seen as many emotional outbursts and would have had common tools to teach students to identify and manage their emotions. "We need common languages and common procedures." In the words of Educator 6,

> We have kids who are buffers between their two psychotic parents. Six-year-old mediators. How do they come to school to learn how to read if they do not have the emotional or cognitive ability to do that? If we are going to look at reading and math goals, we should look at SEL goals too. That requires a curriculum.

Teachers also felt that a school wide SEL program would help the adults, not just the students. As one educator mentioned,

> I need SEL as an adult. People might not understand it and be reluctant, but ever since I started teaching, I realized that the SEL piece is of utmost importance. If a child cannot understand and handle their emotions, they cannot be academically successful. I cannot do my job.

Those sentiments were shared by others who participated in the interviews. There was an expression of need for tools to control personal anxiety and annoyance as an adult. "It's not just the kids. Adults need to sit down and be made to pay attention to

their emotions and how to handle them." In moments of vulnerability, teachers described having to work through their own traumas and mental health and how those struggles impacted their effectiveness as an educator.

> Educators implementing SEL skills leaves space for us to learn those skills as well. It is helpful for kids to see their own teachers working on and implementing those things. There is not a disconnect when everyone is working on it together. A common curriculum would help us all understand each other a little better.

Theme 8: The Effectiveness of SEL Teaching Practices in One Specific Classroom

Without it being a specific part of the questions that were asked, three out of the 10 educators interviewed identified Teacher X's classroom as being a model of how an ideal classroom looked, operated, and felt, specifically as those things related to teaching practices that focus on social-emotional learning. This helped to answer Research Question 5, which asked what is observed in classrooms where teachers give culture a high rating. Educator 1 said,

> Teacher X) is an SEL genius. She has the Zones of Regulation (Kuyper, 2015) and a calm down corner in her room. The students know how to use them. She has sticker charts for struggling students and interventions that have really changed behaviors with the hardest behavior kids. We have to do the extra things. She does.

Educator 7 identified the same teacher as a model.

> (Teacher X) is a really good example of doing SEL stuff in general. We point to her and it's sometimes hard to get everyone to buy into it. But when you walk into

her classroom and watch what's happening, you cannot argue that what she's doing is not working.

Another educator recalled being in (Teacher X's) classroom a few years prior and being reminded of what an SEL-centered classroom looked like. "The classroom was so calm. All of the kids were working and could be independent. The whole space was set up to support them and they knew what to do if they were having a hard time."

Teacher X happened to be one of the educators who volunteered to be interviewed and observed for the study. While in their classroom, the researcher and co-observer both rated this educator the highest on the classroom observation rubric. One of the things that was noted was that there was clear evidence that SEL was embedded into the content of academic lessons and in every part of the school day. As students worked in small reading groups with the teacher or independently, they were seen practicing the SEL skills needed to self-regulate and be successful in the work that they were doing. During the entire observation, the teacher was aware of what was happening in the whole classroom, not just in their small group. Teacher X actively monitored students' engagement and respectfully redirected when needed. The atmosphere was welcoming and highly organized. Interactions were warm, respectful, equitable, affirming, personal, and culturally responsive.

During Teacher X's interview, they shared about how SEL practices had impacted their classroom culture. "It has been amazing. It is a safe place to make mistakes. We have built up a lot of confidence…How do we have fun so that we can get rid of anxiety? What do we enjoy?" The teacher described how SEL was their primary focus during the first six weeks of school, knowing that those efforts would positively impact the

remainder of the year. A big part of the first weeks of school was teaching students to use Zones to identify and constructively manage their emotions, something that they had learned about two years prior to the research interview when they had a student who was extremely explosive. The child would throw things, yell, and leave the classroom on a frequent basis. Due to the constant and sometimes frightening disruptions, it was hard for the teacher to teach and the other students to learn. The school counselor worked with that child and taught them the Zones of Regulation. This helped the child identify strategies to use when she felt herself entering a certain zone. That student then had the opportunity to teach it to the whole class and everyone started using it. During virtual learning, the class even used the Zones of Regulation to check in with each other on Google Classroom.

Teacher X also reported several additional SEL-focused practices that positively impacted her classroom. She and her teaching assistant utilized check-ins on a regular basis. "We do daily check ins. I ask them what they need from me. Now they have ideas of what to ask for." Check-ins ensure that students are always greeted at the classroom door in the morning. If anyone is having a bad morning or seems "off," their teachers remember to check in with that student several more times throughout the day. The class also does what they call "GLAD Time." At the end of the day, each person reports on something they are grateful for, something they learned, some things they accomplished, or something they found delightful. The feelings of gratitude and success help each child and teacher leave the day with a positive memory.

Summary

Quantitative data from the mixed methods study revealed that years of experience did not have a significant impact on teachers' feelings of preparedness to implement social-emotional learning strategies in a mid-pandemic environment. The quantitative data also did not reveal that an educator's prior/training knowledge had significant impact on their feelings of preparedness to implement a wide variety of social-emotional learning strategies in a mid-pandemic environment. Questions 7 (promoting positive behaviors through encouragement) and 11 (displaying care for how and what students learn) were the self-assessment items that emerged in both surveys as statistically significant when connected to amount of prior training/knowledge. Educators with significant levels of training and knowledge in SEL practices rated themselves higher on both of those items. It could be deduced that, even in the most trying educational environments and during increased personal/professional stress, educators were at least more likely to incorporate those two practices into their work.

Qualitative data from interviews and observations revealed themes that assisted with the research questions. The first theme was that educators were emotionally and physically exhausted. Despite their years of experience or prior training/knowledge in SEL strategies, their personal exhaustion was often a barrier to being able to successfully implement SEL. A second theme was that educators were challenged by their own personal feelings of overwhelm and dysregulation, making it harder to model and teach vital SEL skills to the students in their charge. Many of them felt they were just trying to get through the day and meet all of the expectations put on them.

The next three themes identified challenges that came about which were unique to the COVID-19 pandemic The first was the challenge of virtual learning, which educators

felt decreased the social and academic skills of their students, making it harder for them to reacclimate to an in-person school environment. The impact of school facilities, operations, and district level decisions also fell within themes that came about as a result of the pandemic. There were positive things such as providing mental health days, personal protective equipment, and enhanced sanitization measures that teachers felt addressed their needs as they went back to in-person learning. There were also negative things that arose in this category, including starting the school year too early, giving mixed messages to teachers related to expectations or having too high of expectations, and experiencing the toll of being constantly short-staffed.

A sixth theme was that teachers desired an intentionally chosen SEL curriculum that would address the needs of students district wide. Educators wanted a common language that everyone used and understood, no matter what campus they worked at. They also hypothesized that SEL curriculum would help the adults during the struggles and trauma of the pandemic, not just the children. Educators understood that in order to teach and model SEL practices, you had to have first learned them yourself.

Finally, a specific classroom emerged as an example of what successful use of SEL could look like in an elementary setting. By using Zones of Regulation, intentional student check-ins, and having tight routines and procedures, the learning environment was one that prioritized social and emotional learning in order to achieve future academic success. The practices observed in the classroom were intentional and not just randomly chosen. Consistency of implementation was key. As a result, that teacher's classroom was associated with learning, gratitude, peace, respect, and celebration.

Summary

As a mixed-methods study conducted during the phenomenon of being an educator in a mid-pandemic urban environment, the data was anticipated to reveal significant themes, and it certainly did. The first themes identified had to do with educators' personal states of emotional and physical exhaustion. Most also shared that they were overwhelmed and experiencing more difficulty than usual in regulating their own emotions. There were also themes of new challenges that had been introduced to the work of educators because of the pandemic. Educators found themselves impacted by an upsurge in difficult and complicated student behaviors, the adverse effects of a long period of virtual learning, and a lack of adequate and consistent staffing. Interviews also exposed themes related to the importance and impact of facilities, operations, and district level decisions. A final theme was the educators' desire for a research-based and intentionally chosen SEL curriculum that would be used district wide. Quantitative data showed that, despite an educators' previous years of experience or amount of prior training/knowledge, these themes largely remained the same.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Reflection

Introduction

Chapter Four focused on the data that was collected; Chapter Five focused on the conclusions reached after administering the surveys, conducting observations, and completing educator interviews. The study was summarized, results were explained, and limitations were reviewed. Finally, there was a synopsis of conclusions and recommendations for future research.

The purpose of the mixed methods study was to evaluate urban educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning strategies in their classrooms/workspaces as well as to understand what educators experienced as their students returned to a five day a week school schedule after a year and a half of disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also sought to determine if there was any significance related to educators' years of experience and prior training in teaching practices related to social-emotional learning and their insights as they returned to a typical school schedule in a mid-pandemic environment.

Those involved in the study included educators from four K - 8 public charter schools located in an urban Mid-western environment. By using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the researcher hoped to contribute to current research on the impact of a global pandemic on the social and emotional needs of students and the experiences of school staff. Quantitative data was obtained by the administration of two identical surveys which addressed educators' perceptions of their abilities to implement a variety of SEL strategies in their classrooms. Qualitative data was gained through interviews and observations. Qualitative data collection addressed the experiences of

educators as they worked with students in a mid-pandemic environment after a significant period of learning disruption, increased loss and trauma, and social isolation.

There was myriad of research available regarding the intentional teaching practices that impacted social and emotional learning and their influence on children—the influence of SEL on learning outcomes, feelings of well-being, behavior in school, mental health, and long-term outcomes, to name a few. However, the researcher found that some unique themes emerged from a mixed-methods phenomenological study in a particular environment during the 2021-2022 school year. The educators in the four urban Mid-western public schools where the study took place welcomed back approximately 900 students after the COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted the school environment from March of 2020 through May of 2021. From mid-March through mid-October of 2020, only virtual learning was provided to students. Even when on campus learning was offered again, some students' parents chose for them to remain virtual for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year.

The researcher anticipated that, after a year of unpredictability, increased trauma, decreased socialization opportunities, lack of consistent support of the school environment, decreases in academic outcomes, and increases in mental health issues, educators would see an increase in their students' need for social and emotional learning. The researcher wondered about teachers' feelings of preparedness to use specific teaching strategies that influence the social and emotional learning of their students, specifically in the period of time when students were returning to campus after momentous disruption. Though survey questions did not directly address the impact of

COVID-19, the researcher looked for themes that arose through open-ended comments and in interviews.

The four urban Mid-western public K - 8 schools where the research took place primarily served children from marginalized communities. An average of 85% of students' families qualified for free and reduced lunch, at least 85% of students were non-White, and many of the students had already experienced at least one adverse childhood experience such as violence, neglect, having a family member die by violence or suicide, growing up in a household with substance abuse or mental health issues, or having an incarcerated parent (CDC, 2020). Recently, the additional layer of trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was inserted into students' lives as well. The school closures that were a result of the global pandemic compounded its impact on the social-emotional learning of children and increased the number of "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs) that many children experienced. According to educational researcher Venola Mason (2021),

> Many students will be found in a psychological predicament perplexed by grief, anxiety, and confusion while searching for a sense of normalcy. This is coupled with preexisting disparities and inequities while trying to establish ways to succeed in a different and, to some, strange way of learning. (para. 3).

The researcher believed that their study would contribute to the field by focusing on the phenomenon of returning to full-time, on-campus learning following the height of the pandemic. The commonalities that emerged between educators with different years of experience in education/varying professional development in SEL and their ratings of perceived classroom and school culture could be revealing in terms of what resources,

supports, and professional development made an impact on classroom and school culture during unprecedented events such as pandemics, natural disasters, or other catastrophic situations. Research could be used to assist school leaders in knowing a) what educators' experiences were as they started the 2021-2022 school year and if there were additional SEL supports needed when emerging from a pandemic or another type of disruptive situation and b) what the difference was, if any, in perceived classroom and school culture when a teacher had a certain number of years of experience in education or a certain level of knowledge regarding social and emotional teaching practices.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1: What are educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment?

Research Question 2: What correlations, if any, are there between educators' perceptions of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Research Question 3: How do the identified themes that emerged from interviews impact educators' positive/negative perceptions of their preparedness to address the SEL needs of their students?

Research Question 4: What is observed (classroom instructional practices, classroom environment, behavior management and disciplinary strategies) in classrooms and schools where teachers give culture a high rating?

Research Question 5: What supports and coaching are needed for educators to implement social and emotional learning into their teaching practices?

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture.

Limitations

The mixed methods research included two identical surveys that were distributed through Qualtrics nine weeks apart, classroom/workplace observations, and educator interviews. While every effort was made to keep the observations and interviews reliable by using an observation rubric and the same interview questions for all participants, the methods of data collection could still have been influenced because of familiarity with or the presence of the researcher and the co-observer/interviewer, who both worked in the district where the research occurred. To address this possible limitation when obtaining quantitative data, survey respondents were assured that any identifying survey information would not be seen by the researcher. The research assistant removed identifying information and matched survey responses to help with decreasing the potential for bias. Those who participated in observations and interviews were also

assured both verbally and in writing that the process was non-evaluative and that what was observed in classrooms/workspaces would be discussed by the researcher and co-observer/interviewer but not with anyone else (other administrators, teachers, supervisors, staff members, etc.). This assurance was given so that educators felt uninhibited in their responses and more comfortable being open and transparent.

Another predicted limitation was that, while the training and development provided to the educators at the four campuses were the same during the district-wide summer professional development, individual schools may have provided additional professional development and resources as the school year progressed. Educators might have been working with different materials as they addressed the social-emotional learning needs of students. The focus and priorities of the building administrators at each campus may have also been a factor in the educators' experiences.

The final limitation that was considered at the beginning of the study was the social and emotional wellness of the staff members themselves. It was possible that things such as educator burn out and stress (or, on the positive side, educator joy and fulfillment) could play into their perceptions of how things were going in their classrooms/workspaces. The educators' levels of personal wellness could perhaps skew their perceptions of what SEL-related practices they were or were not implementing as well as their analysis of how effective they were in their implementation of those practices.

As the research continued, limitations other than the ones initially identified emerged, the first being that not all four campuses ended up being represented in the research. The invitation to participate was extended to educators and staff members from

all four K - 8 campuses in the urban Mid-western public-school network where the research took place. However, only two of the four campuses were represented by those who chose to take the surveys and participate in observations and interviews. The two campuses where the research took place were the more "high-performing" of the four, with state test scores closer to the state average, lower student-to-teacher ratios, and greater numbers of experienced certified educators with advanced degrees. A more well-rounded picture of the educator experience within the district might have been obtained with representation from the other two campuses, especially in light of the more significant challenges faced by students and staff at those locations. While useful learnings were still gained, the sample was unfortunately not entirely representative of the target population.

Another limitation that could have been a factor was the participants' own beliefs about the importance of social and emotional learning practices. As participation was voluntary, those who chose to take the time to respond and participate in the research most likely valued social and emotional learning and prioritized it as a part of their work in one way or another. With the purpose of getting the broadest picture of the experiences of educators, the research could have benefited from the survey responses of those who felt that they had "no training" or would have indicated that they "do not implement" or "struggle to implement" the reflection items on the two Qualtrics surveys. The qualitative research also could have benefited from interviewing and observing educators who struggled to or did not implement practices that impacted the social and emotional learning needs of students. Their perspectives and classroom/workplace behaviors could

have enhanced the themes and findings that emerged, resulting in a greater depth of understanding.

Additionally, the research could have been somewhat hindered by the decrease in responses to the second survey. The first survey had a total of 23 educator responses while the second survey had 17 responses. Interestingly, at least three of the six staff members who did not respond to the second survey no longer worked for the schools by the time the second survey was distributed. Given the findings from the review of literature in chapter two and the themes that emerged during qualitative research, there could potentially have been useful insight gained from additional survey responses, observations, and interviews of the staff members who quit before the end of the school year. The review of literature in Chapter Two highlighted the fact that public educators were the most likely to report high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout during the pandemic. These types of struggles often led to resignations. Assuming that might have been the case for those educators who left their jobs before filling out the second survey, their experiences and thoughts might have provided an even stronger understanding of educators' feelings of preparedness to address the social and emotional learning needs of students in a mid-pandemic environment. There may have also been additional learnings on the support that those educators would have found helpful before making the choice to leave their positions.

A final limitation was that none of the respondents to either of the two surveys indicated that they had "no training or knowledge" in the area of practices that influenced social and emotional learning. There could perhaps have been more self-assessment items determined to have statistical significance as related to training/knowledge if there was

representation by those without any training or knowledge. It would have been interesting to learn what practices those who had no training or knowledge still felt they implemented well and which ones they struggled to implement. This information could have been used by school leaders to develop focused professional development that targeted the areas most likely to be harder for educators without prior training to develop on their own.

Conclusions

Five research questions and two out of the four original hypotheses were investigated to determine educators' feelings of preparedness to address the social-emotional needs of students in a mid-pandemic environment. The investigation also shed light on whether or not years of experience or amount of prior training impacted teachers' use of classroom/workspace practices that were connected to the social and emotional learning needs of students. Quantitative data gained from two identical educator surveys and quantitative findings from observations and interviews were reviewed in this study.

Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1: What are educators' perceptions of their preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices in a mid-pandemic environment?

During interviews, educators revealed at minimum a general, if not significant, knowledge of teaching practices that impacted the social and emotional learning needs of students. They mentioned their intentions to utilize a variety of practices such as holding morning meetings, using tools such as the Zones of Regulation (Kuyper, 2015), conducting individual student check ins, practicing routines and procedures, and celebrating success and growth. They perceived themselves as capable and prepared to

welcome back children who would undoubtedly need increased support as they returned to campus five days a week after major disruptions to their lives and education.

The educators involved in this research were aligned with educators involved in other recent SEL/pandemic focused research in that they felt it was important to incorporate social and emotional learning practices into their work and they had some degree of the knowledge and skill needed to implement. According to recent survey data from the EdWeek Research Center (Bushweller, 2022), more than a third of the teachers, principals, and district leaders surveyed said they planned on utilizing social-emotional learning strategies and more than a half said they considered SEL a transformational way to improve schools or, at least, a promising idea. However, despite intention and ability, the group of educators involved in this research ran into the same obstacles that educators throughout the nation identified, which were addressed in depth in the answer to Research Question 3.

Research Question 2*:* What correlations, if any, are there between educators' perceptions of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices and ratings of classroom/school culture?

Overall, the educators involved in the research indicated that they felt prepared and at least somewhat knowledgeable and trained in using specific classroom practices that impacted the social and emotional learning needs of students. Historically, research demonstrated that during a typical school year, this would likely have resulted in more positive ratings of classroom and school culture. Data gained from studies conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that when educators were trained in the behavioral and emotional factors that influenced teaching and learning in the classroom,

they felt better equipped to implement strategies that deterred students' aggressive behaviors and promoted a positive learning atmosphere. When SEL was used to cultivate a trusting climate with a sense of shared purpose, research showed increases in educators' ratings in areas of school culture and job satisfaction (Alvarez, 2007; Donohoo et al., 2018; Lodisso, 2019).

However, this proved not to be as true during an atypical school year like the one the educators involved in the research experienced. Even though they felt at least somewhat trained and knowledgeable in SEL practices, their descriptions and ratings of classroom and school culture were largely negative. During interviews, educators were asked to describe each of the first three quarters of the school year in three words each for each quarter. In describing the first quarter (when students returned to a hybrid schedule in October of 2020 after being fully virtual since March of 2020), most educators chose words such as overwhelming, disorganized, stressful, chaotic, challenging, uncertain, and even "absolute f***ery." The most positive word that was used to describe the first quarter was excited. Despite the chaos and uncertainty, teachers were still eager to see their students again and experience what could be described as the internal, personal rewards of teaching. However, that excitement did not ultimately help to balance out the educators' feelings towards the difficulties presented at that unique period in time in education.

When compared with the descriptors of first quarter, educators' descriptions of the second and third quarters included more words and phrases with positive connotations. Terms such as growth, adaptability, relationships, grateful, smoother, enjoyable, more organized, calmer, hopeful, family, cohesive, and exciting were used.

The more positive language tended to be used by teachers who later shared in interviews things like feeling that their classrooms and school buildings had settled into routines, expressed that they had the resources to be effective, and had built caring relationships with their students and other staff members. Words and phrases with negative connotations that were used to describe the second and third quarter included words like tired, angry, defeated, unstable, annoyance and disappointing. Notably, those who expressed the most negative feelings about the second and third quarters were those who also identified staffing issues and not having enough time as major problems in their work. This was discussed more in depth in the answer to Research Question 3.

Research Question 3: How do the identified themes that emerged from interviews impact educators' positive/negative perceptions of their preparedness to address the SEL needs of their students?

As a phenomenological study, the data were anticipated to reveal significant themes, and it certainly did. The first themes identified had to do with educators' personal states of emotional and physical exhaustion. Most also shared that they were overwhelmed and experiencing more difficulty than usual in regulating their own emotions. There were also themes of new challenges that had been introduced to the work of educators as a result of the pandemic. Educators found themselves impacted by an upsurge in difficult and complicated student behaviors, the adverse effects of a long period of virtual learning, and a lack of adequate and consistent staffing. Interviews also exposed themes related to the importance and impact of facilities, operations, and district level decisions. A final theme was the educators' desire for a research-based and intentionally chosen SEL curriculum that would be used district wide. A more in-depth

exploration of the themes was discussed in the Recommendations section of Chapter Five.

` ***Research Question 4:*** *What* is observed (classroom instructional practices, classroom environment, behavior management and disciplinary strategies) in classrooms and schools where teachers give culture a high rating?

Without it being a direct part of the questions that were asked, three out of the 10 educators interviewed identified one of their colleague's (Teacher X's) classroom as being a model of how an ideal classroom looked, operated, and felt like, specifically as those things related to teaching practices that focused on social and emotional learning. This helped to answer Research Question 5, which asked what was observed in classrooms where teachers gave culture a high rating. The practices that the interviewees identified as occurring in this specific lower elementary classroom were aligned with Chapter Two's review of literature. The practices also correlated with the self-reflection items in the surveys and classroom observation rubrics which focused on positive social interactions that influenced students' social, emotional, and academic skills.

Teacher X, the teacher who was identified by their colleagues as having created a highly effective classroom culture through their use of SEL focused practices, was one of the educators who volunteered to be observed and interviewed for the purposes of this study. During their visit to Teacher X's classroom, the observers noted that the classroom atmosphere was positive, welcoming, and incredibly organized. Attention to details such as seating arrangements allowed students to work successfully in small groups and independently as well. The teacher table was located in an area of the room that allowed them to continually scan the class and make sure their students were on track. It was not

just the classroom set up that contributed to Teacher X's success, the following responses to interview questions and practices noticed during classroom observations were indicators of behaviors that resulted in an exceedingly successful use of social and emotional practices:

Teacher X's Classroom Environment, Management, and Discipline Strategies

It was clear during observation in Teacher X's classroom that classroom routines and procedures had been explicitly taught and practiced, which resulted in a calm and orderly learning environment. The classroom contained 30 students, all of whom seemed to understand their role in making the environment a safe and positive place to learn. Students knew what to do if they needed a sharp pencil, where to put their papers when they finished their work, their choices for occupying their time if they finished their independent learning before everyone else and were able to transition between activities and locations without disruption to their learning or the learning of others. During their interview, Teacher X mentioned that they "hit SEL hard during the first six weeks of school." Students were not just taught what to do, but *why* attention to routines and procedures was important. As members of the classroom family, the students seemed to take pride in their classroom culture during the observation.

During observation, Teacher X was heard reminding students of expectations (rules) prior to starting independent work time for the majority of students while five students worked in a small group reading lesson at the teacher table. Throughout the lesson, the teacher actively monitored all learners, skillfully making sure the independent learners were meeting expectations and that each member of the small group had the opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Students in the small group were seen using

nonverbal gestures to enhance engagement and give each other feedback. For example, they gave each other "shine" (wiggling their fingers) to encourage someone while they were thinking, made a hand motion to signal that they agreed or connected with another student's thoughts, and participated in a quick, joyful cheer to celebrate their learning at the end of small group time.

Teacher X's Classroom Expectations

Classroom expectations focused on safety and respect were attractively displayed and focused on desired behaviors instead of telling students what not to do. Restorative practices that impacted students social and emotional learning had clearly been taught and students were able to utilize them independently. Posters that displayed the Zones of Regulation were located in several areas of the classroom. When a student became overwhelmed by difficult work, they were able to identify their feelings and relocate to the calm down corner. After about five minutes of using deep breathing techniques and squeezing a stuffed animal, the child returned to their learning without further teacher direction or intervention.

During Teacher X's interview, they reflected on how their students were doing emotionally during the return to in person learning. "A lot of them (students) were internalizing. They were anxious or sad, but they looked fine on the outside. They had to learn how to reach out and say what they need." The teacher shared that, in past years, students seemed to need support identifying when they were getting angry. By using the Zones of Regulation, students were taught how to recognize anger and come up with personal strategies that would help them get calm, reset, and return to their classroom activities. During the time of the research, Teacher X felt that children's needs had

shifted more to focus on self-soothing instead of anger. Students benefited from learning how to calm themselves when they were feeling anxious, finding activities that they enjoyed, and finding ways to have fun even when worried. Even during virtual learning, Teacher X used the Zones of Regulation to check in with students throughout the day. The teacher demonstrated a deep awareness of her students' needs and experiences which allowed for the development of holistic classroom expectations and supports that fostered self-regulation.

Teacher X's Interaction and Communication Style

During observation, Teacher X's language and communication style was respectful, warm, and equitable. They consistently used student names when conversing during small group teaching, enthusiastically noticed each child's contributions, and encouraged them effectively. Students in the small group did not shut down or tune out if they did not get an answer right or struggled to contribute. When asked about Teacher X's use of intentional strategies that impacted students' social and emotional learning, the teacher responded, "It has been amazing. Our classroom is a safe place to make mistakes. We have built up a lot of confidence." The classroom as a safe place was truly apparent during observation.

Teacher X's Use of Student Check Ins

Teacher X's interview also revealed the priority and effectiveness of daily student check-ins. Each morning, the teacher and teaching assistant in the classroom made sure that every child was greeted individually at the classroom door. If it seemed that a child was having a rough start to the day, the teaching assistant would text Teacher X who then prioritized checking in with that child at different points in the school day. At the

beginning of the school year during social and emotional lessons, students were also provided with the language and permission to ask for what they needed. When the teacher or teaching assistant noticed that a child was off or struggling, they asked the child what they needed. Students knew that they could choose from a variety of options like asking for a hug, putting their head down, requesting time to talk to a trusted adult, or getting a drink of water. After interviewing and observing Teacher X, the researcher understood why Teacher X's colleagues had identified their classroom culture as an exemplar.

Research Question 5: What supports and coaching are needed for educators to implement social and emotional learning into their teaching practices?

The COVID-19 pandemic would not be the last disruptive event in the history of education. Using learnings from the experiences of teachers and the wealth of research conducted during/after that period in time prepared educational leaders, schools, and districts for addressing similar issues that could arise as a result of the next inevitable catastrophic situations caused by natural events such as earthquakes or hurricanes, pandemics, war, school shootings, etc.

Educators first required support to address their personal heightened states of emotional and physical exhaustion. Largely overwhelmed and experiencing more difficulty than usual in regulating their own emotions, educators also needed tools to help with these feelings. Beyond the personal impacts to physical and mental health, educators needed assistance in understanding and managing the increase in difficult and complicated student behaviors, the adverse effects of a long period of virtual learning and dealing with the impact of a lack of adequate and consistent staffing. The research also

revealed themes related to how district-level decisions could aid in creating a more positive experience during chaotic times. The Recommendations section at the end of Chapter Five thoroughly addressed specific ideas for support.

Hypothesis 1*:* There is a relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices.

The researcher explored the relationship between an educator's years of experience and their self-assessments of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning practices. By conducting data analysis of educator responses to the self-reflection items on two identical surveys, it was determined that years of experience in the field alone did not have a significant impact on an educators' use of practices that influence the social and emotional learning of students in this particular study.

This determination was in line with other research that suggested experience was not consistently a predictor of educator quality, though classroom management and social supports for students did tend to improve with each year of experience (Stahnke & Blomeke, 2021). In 2020, researchers from the University of Virginia, Queensland University of Technology, and Macquarie University conducted a thorough review of a variety of studies related to educator experience. Their review showed that there was limited support and mixed evidence for the assertion that, in any area, beginning teachers were less competent than teachers with more years of experience. Some of the reviewed studies showed correlations between teaching quality and teacher experience while other studies in the review provided no evidence that experience made a difference (Graham et al., 2020). It was concluded through this study and a review of other research that

educators' years of experience is not a definite indicator of higher quality academic, social, or behavioral outcomes for students. The null hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There is a relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

The researcher examined the relationship between prior training and knowledge in the area of social and emotional learning strategies and their self-assessments of their use of classroom practices that impact social and emotional learning. Of the 13 self-assessment statements on the educator surveys, only two questions had statistically significant responses when it came to an educator's prior training and knowledge and their rating of their use of a specific practice that influenced social and emotional learning. One of those survey items was number 7, which asked that educators rate themselves in their use of encouragement to promote positive student behaviors. The other survey item was number 11, which required that educators rate themselves on displaying care for how and what students learn. Educators who reported that they had significant training/knowledge rated themselves "I generally implement this practice well" or "I implement this practice extremely well," resulting in higher points on the Likert Scale and a statistical difference between the responses of those educators who said they only had "some" training and knowledge.

This finding connected with other research, much of it which was centered on mindful practices that impacted social and emotional learning in classrooms. Educators who focused on positive student behaviors or displayed care for how and what students learn tended to teach and approach their students with authenticity, awareness, and

compassion (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Mindful, compassionate educators who were trained in contemplative practices that influenced social and emotional learning demonstrated caring, calm, and kind behaviors at a higher rate. Those caring behaviors had meaningful impact on students' perceptions of school and, ultimately, their academic and social outcomes (Whitehead et al., 2020). Though the null hypothesis was not rejected as there were only two self-assessment items that were statistically significant, it was still an important finding to note.

Hypothesis 3*:* There is a relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture.

The third original hypothesis focused on the relationship between educators' ratings of their preparedness to implement SEL teaching practices and their ratings of overall school and classroom culture. Upon reflection, the researcher realized that the surveys and data did not directly answer the question of their ratings of classroom and school culture. However, themes related to classroom and school culture did emerge during qualitative analysis and were included.

Hypothesis 4: There is a relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture.

The fourth original hypothesis focused on the relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and educators' perceptions of classroom and school culture. Upon reflection, the researcher realized that the surveys and data did not directly answer the question of their ratings of classroom and school culture as they related to the

pandemic. However, themes related to how the pandemic impacted classroom and school culture did emerge during qualitative analysis and were included.

Summary of Findings and Accompanying Recommendations

When quantitative and qualitative data were compared, an interesting finding emerged. While quantitative data gained through surveys showed that educators felt they were at least somewhat prepared to implement practices that influenced students' social and emotional learning, qualitative data gained from interview responses revealed that the educators' feelings of overwhelm and higher rates of stress may have impacted their ability to use the skills they initially desired to implement in their classrooms.

There were eight themes that emerged during educator interviews and observations. The first two were personal and had to do with feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion as well as feelings of personal overwhelm and dysregulation. The next three themes had to do with specific difficulties that were a result of the new realities caused by the pandemic. In conversation, educators spoke about increases in challenging student behaviors, the impact of virtual learning, and the unprecedented lack of adequate staffing in their schools. The sixth theme that emerged was the impact of district level decisions regarding things like school year calendar decisions, operations, and facilities. Qualitative data also revealed the educators' desire for an intentional SEL curriculum to use in their work and, finally, the effectiveness of the practices observed in one specific elementary teacher's classroom.

The themes encompassed what was needed as schools continued to address the unique needs brought about by the pandemic. Most importantly, the researcher believed

that the themes provided ideas for how school leaders and districts could be better prepared to address momentous disruptive events in the future.

Recommendation 1:

School leaders, especially those in urban environments, should keep in mind that during trying times in education, greater amounts of years of experience and prior training/knowledge do not necessarily make educators' work any easier. Particularly in urban education, staff faced unique challenges that took an extraordinary toll on even experienced and well-trained educators.

During especially trying times, school leaders should see *all* of the educators that they work with as needing additional support, regardless of years of experience, training, or knowledge. It is not safe to assume that the more inexperienced teachers on a staff need the most support. Everyone is likely struggling more than usual. Remind staff of the importance of simple things like getting good rest, eating healthfully, exercising, and finding ways to reduce stress. Even better than simply reminding them, provide staff with supports in doing those things. Leadership should aim to intentionally connect with each staff member, even those typically viewed as "the strong ones" or capable of handling just about anything that comes their way.

Recommendation 2:

School leaders should keep in mind that, during trying times in education, educators in urban environments experience even more significant personal and professional challenges.

In schools where the needs were highest, educators were most likely to experience symptoms of secondary trauma because of being indirectly exposed to trauma through the

experiences of their students. They often heard stories from their students about things like parent/guardian job loss, lack of consistent access to food while not at school, and increased anxiety or depression. Constantly having to support children going through extremely hard times led to greater rates of educator burnout, characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion as well as a reduced feeling of personal accomplishment (Hart & Nash, 2020; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2011).

During disruptive events in schools, leaders in urban education (and all educational environments, for that matter) should assume that each of their staff members is experiencing some level of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma and then interact with those staff members accordingly. Teachers should not be made to feel like they are not doing enough or that they need to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of their students. Emphasizing the importance of boundaries, self- care, and recognizing the signs of burn out went a long way with educators. When educators expressed that they were fatigued, burned out, or felt depressed, the most effective leaders did not address those feelings as shortcomings or weaknesses.

Principals, district-level leaders, and city officials must keep in mind that extended periods of virtual learning can have adverse effects on staff and students. They need to weigh whether the risks and impact of extended periods of school closures are absolutely necessary. For example, the schools in which the research took place were in an urban environment with stricter COVID protocols when compared to surrounding counties. The tighter COVID guidelines meant that the students and staff members in those schools did not have the option to return to full-time on campus learning for at least five months longer than the students and staff of schools just minutes away from the

city's boundaries. The literature review pointed to the negative impact of long periods of virtual learning. One notable data point was that those educators whose students were 100% virtual as of March of 2021 had higher rates of symptoms of anxiety and depression when compared to other educators who were not teaching 100% virtually. School leaders who elect for long periods of virtual learning during future disruptive events should be mindful of the inevitable, research-based negative impacts on staff and students. A priority should be to work with counseling staff or human resources departments to help the educators in their buildings identify the physical and emotional symptoms associated with burnout, secondary trauma, anxiety, and depression and provide resources for those who need them.

Recommendation 3:

Schools and systems should adopt and implement a research-based social and emotional learning program/curriculum in "normal" times. This establishes a foundation of preparedness for both staff and students, allowing for more effective work to be done during the disruptive event and for quicker recovery after.

The researcher remembered working with an educational consultant who frequently visited the four schools involved in the research during the 2021-2022 school year. The consultant was a leader in successful urban East Coast schools that had the same types of needs and similar demographics. As the consultant spoke about the mid-pandemic academic focus of the schools that he led, the researcher and her colleagues asked *how* the schools were already able to be so focused on academic recovery when their own schools were still working hard to simply manage behaviors and help students learn how to "do school" again. The consultant's reply made perfect sense—their schools

had adopted a social and emotional learning curriculum years ago and had effectively implemented that program district-wide prior to the pandemic. When staff and students' worlds were rocked by pandemic-related school closures, they already had a solid foundation, common language, and set of strategies to address social and emotional needs during virtual learning and after the return to school. This matched the findings in the review of literature which emphasized the importance of integrating SEL throughout the systems and structures of a district to support all staff and students (Mahoney et al., 2021). Every department, school, and role must embrace SEL as a core part of all work and a catalyst for reaching shared goals. SEL is even more advantageous as a proactive instead of reactive measure.

There is tremendous value in using high-quality, evidence-based curriculum, incorporating social and emotional learning into academic subjects, and creating a school culture that supports social and emotional learning. The first priority should always be to intentionally give the adults in the school what they need to build their own personal social and emotional competencies. As a professional, modeling those competencies is often even more difficult in stressful situations such as those caused by the pandemic and, even in typical times, teaching unfailingly ranks among the highest-stress professions. The challenges of working in the field of education make the need for adult SEL even greater. Stress and burnout often impair the effectiveness of a teachers' instruction and classroom climate, which then hampered the growth of their students, both socially and academically (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Given that relationships and modeling are so important for student social and emotional growth, their teachers first have to build their own social and emotional awareness and capacity. Then, they are better able to

focus on imparting those skills to students. After SEL curriculum is chosen, intentional professional development is a must. Right from the start of a school year, staff need to experience professional development that teaches why SEL is important and builds their personal capacities and tool kits. While SEL-focused back to school learning is important, administrators must not consider that to be enough. SEL language, strategies, and tools need to be incorporated into staff meetings, communication, PD opportunities, and simple workplace interactions throughout the entire school year.

Part of leaders' and districts' hesitation to adopt SEL curriculum seemed to be that they did not want to add another curriculum to educators' plates or require minutes for SEL instruction to be added to an already packed school day schedule, especially during times that were already stressful and overwhelming. However, during the educator interviews conducted for the purpose of the research, both the researcher and co-interviewer were surprised to hear that teachers embraced the idea of being provided with an intentional SEL curriculum, would gladly make room for it in their daily schedules, and did not mind if they needed to participate in additional professional development meetings. The educators recognized and embraced the potential positive impact of a research-based social and emotional learning program. Districts should not assume that SEL curriculum will feel like an additional burden. It is something that staff actually urgently desire and would gladly prioritize.

Recommendation 4:

School leaders should approach their handling of catastrophic events with an assumption that the mental and physical health of educators will likely decrease. With that knowledge, a plan should be put in place to address those needs.

The educators who volunteered to be interviewed for the research were open about their own mental states during the pandemic. They were emotionally exhausted, stressed, and overwhelmed. Though they were not directly asked about their own mental health issues, it was safe to assume that they experienced the same increases in rates of educator depression, anxiety, and burnout that were discussed in the literature review. To address these issues, districts need to integrate SEL practices with their core educational priorities. Opportunities for adult SEL and community-building needed to be intentionally planned and implemented throughout each school year (CASEL, 2021).

As a school leader, the researcher started the practice of creating a "culture calendar". This entailed mapping out the school year with a lens on practices that support the social and emotional needs of the educators in the school building. The first focus is on professional learning. Each staff meeting, professional development day, and monthly collaboration meeting includes an opportunity to learn about or utilize strategies that support social and emotional learning. During the 2022-2023 school year, the staff at the elementary school where the researcher works had a choice of SEL related books such as Conscious Discipline, Help for Billy, or The Body Keeps the Score. After staff members chose the book that most interested them, they were assigned to groups and participated in book studies with their colleagues throughout the school year. Research showed that when teachers take care of their own SEL, stress levels decrease and job satisfaction increases. The results are warm relationships within the school community and better outcomes for students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Beyond PD, staff meeting and collaboration days include a few minutes to incorporate intentional SEL practices that educators can then translate into the classroom. Ideas from the Welcoming and Inclusion

Activities, Engaging Strategies, and Optimistic Closure sections of the CASEL Signature Practices Playbook (CASEL, 2019) work to quickly build community among adults while simultaneously introducing them to simple ideas that they can use in their elementary classrooms.

The culture calendar also is focused on fun opportunities to build relationships among the adults in the building. Relationships among staff are understood to be critical as Dr. Joshi explained in Building Resilience Among Educators (Newman & Antonelli, 2022). In any field, those who last the longest and enjoy their work the most are the ones who are sustained by the relationships they have with their colleagues. In the progressively difficult work of education, connection and belonging are more important than ever. Staff members must feel valued and know that there is at least one person (hopefully more) at work with whom they can vent, laugh, celebrate, and share ideas. After school gatherings, silly staff games around the holidays, and practices like acknowledging staff birthdays or personal milestones are little things that bring people together and infuse joy into each day. To help increase adult wellness, administrators should see themselves not just as academic or operational leaders, but as facilitators of connections and builders of culture.

Research pointed to educators' need for more time for themselves during the workday as well as more personal resources to support mental and physical health. Knowing that, an additional recommendation would be for school leaders to make sure to protect teacher planning time as much as possible. Avoid unnecessary meetings and delegate time-sucking tasks such as data entry to support staff members/teaching assistants in the building so that teachers can focus on planning and preparation without

having to devote additional hours outside of the contracted workday. Work with local fitness clubs to offer reduced price classes or memberships to educators, invite a yoga instructor to lead a six-week course for those who are interested, or just send out a casual invitation for staff to join in a walk after school one day. Additionally, use common forms of staff communication (weekly email updates, faculty meetings, posters in the work room) to remind staff of the benefits associated with their Employee Assistance Plan, keep them updated on district wellness initiatives, and provide information on FMLA when needed.

Recommendation 5:

During disruptive/catastrophic events, school leaders should accept that there will likely be an uptick in challenging and disruptive student behaviors, especially in urban environments where there are typically more students who have adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma. Leaders should be prepared to support educators and students with managing increases in undesired behaviors.

The review of literature confirmed that 87% of public schools reported the negative impact of the pandemic on the social and emotional development of students and 84% agreed or strongly agreed that students' behavior development was adversely affected (NCES, 2022). In the schools where the research occurred as well as schools throughout the United States, there were higher and more severe incidents of classroom disruption and disrespectful actions towards staff. It is recommended that schools and districts have well laid plans for supporting educators who are managing increases in undesired behaviors.

The first thing which has already been mentioned is to have a research-based SEL program implemented district-wide. The initial impact of this action is that the adults within the district will develop their own social and emotional competencies, making them more capable of modeling and building those same competencies within their students. Instead of triggering or punishing challenging student behaviors, SEL gives adults the skills to teach, practice, and model the strategies that their students need. Over time, this will lead to decreases in unsafe and unwanted student behaviors and create an environment where learning can be the focus.

At the building level, it is suggested that expectations, appropriate behaviors, and classroom/schoolwide routines and procedures be retaught and practiced, especially after students have been away from school for an extended period. Prior to the first day of school, administrators and counselors should work with teachers to plan out their classroom routines and procedures and make sure they have a script for exactly how they will roll out their expectations to students. Tape pathways on the classroom floors, create hand signals for students to request things like a trip to the bathroom or a sharpened pencil, and create organizational systems that help the classroom to run smoothly. Plan out intentional community building activities and think about how to build individual relationships with students—especially the "toughest" ones. An investment in this type of planning will yield high returns.

As for school-wide procedures, it is important to have a common expectation and language for behaviors in areas like hallways, bathrooms, cafeteria, and outside during arrival and dismissal. The researcher found that the practice of having students go through stations to practice desired behaviors throughout the school building during the

first days of school resulted in a calmer and more positive school culture. The leaders of the stations framed the expectations in the positive, praised students when they executed procedures correctly, and focused on creating a sense of pride and responsibility. This was helpful at the beginning of any school year but was even more crucial as children returned to school after being in largely unstructured environments with fewer opportunities to practice social skills for a long period of time. This type of proactive work results in a calmer and smoother school day.

Even with the best laid proactive plans, negative behaviors will undoubtedly happen. A 2019 study by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that 2.6 million students were suspended from school during a singular school year and that Black students were twice as likely to be suspended than students from other races (NCES, 2019). Punitive practices had been found to do more harm than good, leading to the recommendation that restorative discipline practices should be utilized as frequently as possible. Educators should aim to view student behaviors through a trauma-informed/lagging skill lens and determine the function of a behavior. For example, is a child seeking attention, even if it is for doing the wrong thing? If so, what strategies can be put in place so that they receive the desired attention for positive behaviors instead? Restorative practices help educators work with a student to examine the root of their actions, identify and practice acceptable ways to handle themselves, and repair any harm that they may have done.

Another recommendation is that schools create a system for collaborating about students who have high rates of disruptive or unsafe behaviors. Counselors, student support interventionists, and administrators should schedule standing meetings with

teaching teams, at least monthly, so that students of concern can be discussed. A plan for behavioral interventions and reinforcements should be implemented and monitored for a specific period of time determined by the team, usually 4 - 6 weeks. If data reveals that the supports resulted in behavior change, the team will continue use and decide on a future date to follow up on the student/group of students and make sure that things are continuing to go well. If data revealed that the interventions did not work, the team should determine next steps such as different interventions or even referral to the school psychologist for further testing. The team should also partner with outside organizations to offer families counseling and behavioral resources.

The researcher also advocates for frequent, informal check-ins with staff members who have students with highly challenging behaviors. These staff members tend to need extra help as experiencing things like watching their beautifully decorated bulletin boards ripped up by an angry 6-year-old, having their cup of coffee dumped on the floor by a student, or being bitten by a dysregulated child can take an emotional toll on a teacher. Administrators and counseling staff members need to note which teachers are supporting the most high-needs students and do simple things to show them they are seen and valued. Examples of supportive actions include stopping by those educators' classrooms before school to thank them for their patience and dedication, teaching their class for 30-60 minutes so that they can take a break if needed, or writing the staff member a note of encouragement. Make sure that their struggle is recognized and that they are taken care of.

Recommendation 6:

With the goal of lessening the negative impact of inadequate staffing on existing committed staff members, school leaders should have a plan for times when their schools are not fully staffed.

Pre-COVID findings of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 2015) showed that in high-poverty urban schools, like the ones in which the research took place, teacher attrition was greater. In those schools, an average of 10% of teachers left teaching in a given year. High-poverty urban schools already were more likely to lose staff members during the school year. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing staffing issues, resulting in 72% of public schools in the United States reporting an increase in teacher absences during the 2021-202 school year (NCES, 2022). Along those lines, 99% of public schools said that it was more difficult to find substitute teachers to cover classes during the 2021-2022 school year (NCES, 2022). This was the case for the schools in which the research took place and resulted in a need for administrators, counselors, instructional coaches, and non-teaching staff members to cover classes. Often, when there was absolutely no one available to teach a class, other teachers would give up their planning time to cover or the class without a teacher would be divided and combined with other classrooms. These types of strategies were used "always" or "very frequently" during the 2021-2022 school year in 59% of public schools in the United States (NCES, 2022).

Inconsistent staffing took a toll on morale and culture. As one interviewee reflected,

> It would be easier to implement social emotional learning practices if there was more stability in the school environment. As well, in the grade levels I teach, there have been staffing issues all year—we lost a teacher mid-year (and struggled with inconsistent behavior and attendance before the teacher's departure) and the environment has been generally chaotic afterwards. I don't think we can effectively teach SEL practices with an environment that fosters so much dysregulation.

The teachers who were interviewed lamented that the hard work of teaching was made even more complicated by having to give up precious planning time or take on additional students without additional resources. The researcher recommended several things to address this issue.

The first recommendation is for school leaders, human resources departments, and districts to be proactive and aggressive in recruiting and hiring teachers so that their schools are as close to fully staffed as possible before the first day of school. Strategies such as attending college job fairs, promoting an organization's schools by getting involved in the community, and offering current employees generous bonuses for making referrals that lead to hires are actions that impact staffing in a positive manner. If a school or district is unable to offer competitive salaries to teachers, the focus should be to at least create a positive, joyful, and thriving workplace culture that people want to be a part of.

Regardless of proactive measures, the current trends in urban education led us to the assumption that teachers will quit or have high rates of absences during the school year, especially in urban environments. Knowing this, administrators must start the

school year with a plan to address staffing issues and then clearly communicate that plan to existing staff so that they are, at minimum, confident that leadership is aware of the problems and working to address them. Leaders must make room in the budget to hire at least one Teaching Assistant, hopefully more, and train them in general use of curriculum and resources so that they can serve as a substitute teacher in a pinch. Administrators, counselors, and other support staff should serve as substitute teachers as often as schedules allow to take some of that load off of teachers. Districts should offer additional compensation in the form of stipends or at least pay teachers for lost planning time if they have to cover a class. Of course, leaders need to always express gratitude to those who cover and perform duties not within their job descriptions and to let them know that the sacrifices they are making for the good of the students in the building have not gone unnoticed.

In the rare situation when an outside substitute teacher is available to cover a job, school leaders and staff members should make every effort so that those substitutes want to return. Simple gestures like having snacks and bottles of water ready in the office for when subs arrive, go a long way in making substitutes feel like a valued part of the school community. It is also important for students to learn ahead of time how to greet "guest teachers" and to take pride in being helpful to the substitute during the school day. School leaders should make every effort to check in on classrooms that have substitutes and make sure that all is going well and to see if the substitute needs anything. At the end of the day, administrators or office staff who make intercom announcements during dismissal should use that as one last opportunity to let substitute teachers know that their presence was appreciated. Practices that are welcoming and supportive of substitutes

increase the likelihood that they will return and, hopefully, will help to decrease daily staffing issues and lessen the amount of extra stress on other staff members.

Recommendation 7:

District-level leadership should be aware of and have plans to address the impact of district-level decisions on the experiences of staff members during challenging events.

During educator interviews, the researcher found that the impact of district-level decisions in the areas of school year calendar, facilities, and school operations had notable impacts, both negative and positive, on the experiences of educators as they returned to work after a long period of disruption. This section shares suggestions as to what district officials can do to best support educators during trying times.

When the educators who were interviewed for the purposes of this research were asked to describe the first quarter in three words, many of them used words that conveyed feelings of stress and chaos. Further probing revealed that the stress was initially a result of the first day of school being bumped up to August 8, 2021. This date was at least two weeks earlier than the start dates of other schools, not just locally, but state-wide. The well-meaning school board made this calendar decision to add unrequired weeks to the school year in order to address the significant student learning losses caused by school closures. However, the schools were not prepared to start at the beginning of August, which most likely had an adverse (rather than positive) impact on student learning. Some of the most often mentioned stressors included that not one of the four schools was fully staffed prior to the first day of school, curriculum and materials had not been delivered to classrooms, not all staff had the technology and access that they needed for themselves or their students, and classrooms had not yet been set up according to social-distancing

protocols and COVID-19 guidelines mandated by the city. With this in mind, school boards and calendar committees must take *all* factors into account when making significant decisions that impact the experience of students and teachers.

On a positive note, the staff members who were interviewed for the research mentioned feelings of appreciation that the school board and district leadership made adjustments to the school calendar throughout the school year, resulting in the addition of a total of four mental health days for educators. Teachers were gifted with two extra days before Thanksgiving break began and two mental health days during the second semester. By making these changes, leadership demonstrated that they valued staff wellness and provided opportunities for their self-care. As one educator shared, "I love that we have mental health days, and we are calling it that." In the event of future educational disruptions, it is advised that evaluating the school year calendar and building in days for staff to focus on their own well-being goes a long way in creating a more positive and productive work force.

The other learning that emerged was the importance of having adequately prepared facilities. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff felt reassured when they knew there were plans for social distancing, sanitation, and other measures taken to mitigate illness. Actions such as using thermal scanners to check temperatures before entry, requiring the completion of daily wellness questionnaires for students and staff, enhancing daily sanitation measures, teaching students proper handwashing/hygiene practices, and requiring the wearing of masks except for when eating and drinking gave staff members increased peace as they returned to working with a population of students and families who were most likely to be adversely affected by illness. In any disastrous

event, especially during a pandemic, updating facilities accordingly and communicating the plan with all stakeholders is vital. Additionally, having a plan for quickly and permanently addressing common facility concerns such as problems with heating and cooling systems, rodents, and plumbing is of utmost importance. The educators who were interviewed for the research made it clear that, when they were already stretched thin, even a few hours in a space that was not well-maintained or comfortable pushed them to their breaking point.

Conclusion

During traumatic and disruptive events, school and district leaders need to be mindful of unique needs that could emerge and plan accordingly. Regardless of years of experience or prior training/knowledge, all staff will likely need increased support. Addressing social and emotional learning, the mental/behavioral health needs of students and staff, staffing issues, and the impact of district decisions must be of high priority. Closing the gaps in academic skills will always be an important objective. However, it must not be forgotten that students will not be capable of engaging in formal learning unless they feel safe and supported.

During challenging times, districts should not rely on individuals to create and implement a patchwork of support plans. The goal should be to create clarity and alignment through strategic planning. Efforts should be made to develop a system of supports that addresses academic needs, emotional and mental wellness, behavioral challenges, facility needs, and staffing issues. Once developed, those supports must be communicated and consistently available to all students and adults in each school building. The most important outcome of the identified supports is the positive impacts

they have on educators which then multiplies the positive impacts on students. As Teacher X poignantly asked, "I can't change the world, but how can I change my classroom?" A meaningful understanding of the themes and recommendations that emerged from educators' experiences in a mid-pandemic environment will result in highly supportive leadership that equips teachers to change their classrooms…and hopefully, eventually, even the world.

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Appendix A: Permission to Use AIR Survey

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Appendix B: AIR Survey Questions

Section 2: Instructional Interactions

Part A. Teaching Practices. Think about how often you implement a variety of practices that influence students' social, emotional, and academic skills. Think about how often you implement teaching practices that focus on positive instructional interactions. Using a scale of 1 to 5, rate how often and how well you use these practices.

1—I do not implement this practice
2—I struggle to implement this practice
3—I implement this practice reasonably well
4—I generally implement this practice well
5—I implement this practice extremely well

5. Cooperative Learning/Group Learning		
SEL Instructional Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
a. I encourage my students to work with other students when they have trouble with an assignment.		
b. I create learning experiences in which my students depend on each other.		
c. I create learning experiences in which my students must apply positive social skills to be successful.		
d. I hold individuals and the group accountable for learning during small-group work.		
e. I provide opportunities for my students to share their work and receive feedback from each other.		
f. I provide space to allow my students to collaboratively process how they work together and monitor their progress toward their goal.		
g. I give students feedback on how they interact with and learn from others during cooperative learning experiences.		

2. Teacher Language		
SEL Instructional Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
a. I promote positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good social skills (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).		
b. I promote positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good work habits (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).		
c. I let my students know how their effort leads to positive results with specific affirmation.		

3. Responsibility and Choice		
SEL Instructional Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
a. I let my students help plan how they are going to learn in developmentally appropriate ways.		
b. I ask for student input when making decisions about how the classroom will operate in developmentally appropriate ways.		
c. I give students meaningful choices (with parameters) on what they can work on.		
d. I make sure students make the connection between their choices and potential consequences.		
e. I arrange experiences that allow my students to become responsible (e.g., classroom aids or jobs, peer tutoring, specific roles in group work) in developmentally appropriate ways.		

4. Warmth and Support		
SEL Instructional Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
a. I demonstrate to each student that I appreciate him or her as an individual (e.g., appropriate eye-contact, greeting each child by name).		
b. I use the interests and experiences of my students when teaching.		
c. I display to my students that I care about how and what they learn.		
d. I let my students know that it is okay to get answers wrong or think outside of the box (e.g., modeling, praising attempts with "good thinking").		
e. I check in with my students about academic and nonacademic concerns they might have.		
f. I follow up with my students when they have a problem or concern.		
g. I create structures in the classroom where my students feel included and appreciated (e.g., morning meetings, small moments, whole-class share outs).		

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Appendix C: Interview Introduction and Questions

Educator Interview Introduction:

The researcher and co-observer will begin by expressing appreciation for the participant's time and participation in the research. It will be shared that the co-observer will ask the interview questions and that researcher will be typing up the conversation verbatim in order to transcribe the interview and look for themes. Verbal permission to do so will be obtained. The participant will be reminded of the purpose of the research, which is to explore educators' feelings of preparedness and ability to implement social and emotional learning practices during/after an event that has caused great disruption to the learning and teaching environment. Participants will also be assured that all survey responses and answers to interview questions are non-evaluative and will be kept confidential.

Experience Questions: *The researcher intentionally made these questions broad in order to see if SEL themes come up without educators being prompted.*

If I was to follow you through a typical school day, what experiences would I be likely to see you having?

What has been working well so far this quarter?

What has not been working well this quarter?

What specific challenges have you been facing as an educator?

Feelings Questions:

Experienced Educator**:** How do you feel about the start of the school year compared to other school years?

New Educator: How do you feel about the start of the school year? Is this what you expected your first year in education to be like?

What are three words that you would use to describe the first quarter of the school year (second quarter, third quarter)?

What are three words that describe your hopes for the fourth quarter of the school year?

In the first survey that you completed, you indicated a certain level of intention/ability to implement varying teaching practices that impact social and emotional learning. How do you feel that those teaching practices (or lack of) have impacted your classroom culture and your students?

Possible Prompts if the Interviewers Need the Participant to Elaborate on their Answer:

· Tell me more about that…

· Do you have an example of that to share?

· What in your experience makes you come to that conclusion?

Appendix D: Observational Rubric/Co-Observer Conversational Guide

Dittmer Rubric

SEL Walkthrough 2021

School _____ Observer Name _____ Date _____

Using this non-evaluative rubric, the observer will score each component from 4 (highly effective) to 1 (needs improvement). Rubrics will later be used to facilitate conversations and reflections between co-observers. *Criteria listed under each rating level are examples or guides for what each numeric score looks like during an observation, not an all-inclusive or exclusive description.*

Classroom Instruction	4	3	2	1	Classroom/Subject Observed Component Score/Notes
Expectations and Learning Goals	Teacher effectively engages students about purpose, expectations, and SEL I Can statements throughout the entire lesson. Both the teacher & students clearly connect lesson to prior learning and personal experience.	Teacher communicates purpose, expectations, or SEL I Can statements for the lesson. Teacher effectively connects lesson to either prior learning or personal experience.	Expectations for lesson could be inferred from teacher. Teacher may attempt to connect lesson to prior learning or personal experience.	Teacher does not clearly communicate expectations of lesson. No evidence of lesson connecting to prior learning or personal experience.	
Explicit Teaching of SEL Skills	SEL skills are directly taught with explicit reference to their value and when/how to apply them. Teacher explicitly models, discusses and reinforces SEL I Can Statements, competencies and skills. Evidence that most students are receptive.	Evidence that some SEL I Can Statements and competencies have been taught or communicated; Teacher encourages students to practice SEL skills with one another and some are receptive.	Limited evidence that some SEL I Can Statements and competencies have been taught or communicated. Teacher may encourage students to practice SEL skills but few students are receptive.	No evidence that SEL I Can Statements and competencies have been explicitly taught or teacher is unsuccessful in engaging students to develop and practice SEL skills.	
SEL Integrated into Instructional Content	Clear evidence that SEL is effectively embedded into content of academic lessons; relevance of SEL to that content is highlighted and discussed.	Some evidence that teacher teaches or has taught SEL skills development in academic lessons.	Limited evidence of integration of SEL with academics	No integration of SEL into academic content.	
Use of Interactive Pedagogies	Teacher uses lesson-appropriate interactive or collaborative pedagogies that enable students to develop & practice SEL skills.	Some evidence that teacher uses interactive or collaborative pedagogies that enable students to develop SEL skills.	Limited evidence that teacher uses interactive pedagogies that enable students to develop SEL skills.	Interactive pedagogies are not effectively and appropriately introduced or supported.	
2e. Teacher Feedback and Monitoring	Teacher teaches for conceptual understanding and provides tailored feedback. Teacher actively monitors students' engagement and understanding throughout lesson.	Teacher provides generalized feedback to most students; attempts to monitor students' engagement and understanding throughout lesson.	Teacher provides generalized feedback to a few students; makes at least one attempt to monitor student engagement or understanding.	Teacher provides minimal or no feedback to students; does not monitor student engagement or understanding.	
Student Engagement	Most students are engaged in the lesson with interest, curiosity, motivation and passion. Electronic devices are only used for classwork (if applicable).	Some students are engaged in the lesson with interest, curiosity, motivation and passion. Electronic devices are mostly used for classwork (if applicable).	Few students are engaged in the lesson with interest, curiosity, motivation or passion; some are easily distracted. Electronic devices are used for something other than classwork (if applicable).	Students are not engaged with interest, curiosity, motivation or passion or are distracted/disruptive during the lesson. Electronic devices are distracting and not used appropriately (if applicable).	

SEL definition: a process through which children and adults learn to recognize and manage emotions, demonstrate care and concern for others, develop positive relationships, make good decisions, and behave ethically, respectfully, and responsibly.
SEL core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making.

Revised 9/14/17

2g. Student Collaboration	Students collaborate efficiently & respectfully with each other throughout most of the lesson.	Students collaborate with efficiency.	Students may be collaborating but with little efficiency.	No evidence of student collaboration.	
Teacher as a Facilitator	Teacher is highly effective in facilitating student learning; uses open-ended questioning & "wait time;" lesson is student-centered while teacher acts as a guide; all students participate in the learning environment.	Teacher uses strategies to encourage learning and most students participate; teacher prompts students to join in discussion.	Teacher encourages learning and some students participate, majority of the lesson is teacher directed.	Teacher is unsuccessful in facilitating learning. Teacher talk time highly outweighs student talk time; few students participate.	
Student Reflection	Teacher allows time for individual and collective student reflection by encouraging critical thinking to debrief academic & social-emotional learning.	Teacher allots some time for either individual or collective student reflection by encouraging critical thinking to debrief academic or social-emotional learning.	Teacher may encourage students to reflect on the lesson but doesn't allow time for it during class or the reflection does not encourage critical thinking.	Teacher does not engage student reflection.	

Classroom Environment, Management, Discipline	4	3	2	1	Classroom/Subject Observed Component Score/Notes
Classroom Atmosphere	Classroom atmosphere is cheerful, welcoming, and organized. Seating arrangements enable students to see/ talk/ work directly with one another.	Classroom atmosphere is pleasant. Students are seated in a way that allows for some interaction or collaboration.	Classroom atmosphere is adequate. Seating may not be conducive for interaction/ collaboration among students.	Evidence of some disorder in the classroom atmosphere. Seating arrangements are not conducive to student interaction or collaboration.	
Classroom Rules	Classroom rules for safety and respect are visibly posted and reflect student input and restorative language. No evidence of a public student behavior tracking system.	Classroom rules are posted but may not include student input or restorative language. No evidence of public student behavior tracking system.	Classroom rules may be displayed but not easily visible. A student behavior tracking system may be visible.	Classroom rules are not displayed. Student behavior tracking system may be visible and actively used in the classroom.	
Student Behavior	All students willingly follow class rules, routines and procedures. Students treat teacher(s) and peers with respect. Students are responsive to teacher guidance & feedback.	Most students appear to follow class rules, routines and procedures and treat teacher(s) and peers with respect. Most students are appropriately responsive to teacher guidance/feedback.	Some students are compliant to class rules, routines and procedures and show adequate respect, and are fairly receptive to teacher guidance.	Most students do not appear to know and/or follow class rules, routines or procedures. Some students are disobedient and/or disrespectful in response to teacher guidance.	
Behavior Management	Teacher handles individual behavior problems quickly, discreetly, respectfully, and with cultural sensitivity; promotes & allows time for self-regulation; cues students verbally & non-verbally as to expected behaviors. Teacher consistently follows through until resolve. OR no evidence of any student misbehavior	Teacher attempts to redirect behavior problems respectfully and discreetly. Teacher response to misconduct is consistent. Teacher makes more than one attempt to redirect problems.	Teacher response to behavior problems appears to be consistent, but is conspicuous and takes some time away from lesson. After first attempt, teacher does not follow through to ensure problem is resolved.	Teacher does not attempt or is unsuccessful in the attempt to efficiently redirect misbehavior. Considerable time is taken away from instruction to address student behavior problems. OR teacher unsuitably ignores misbehavior.	

SEL definition: social and emotional learning is a process through which children and adults learn to recognize and manage emotions, demonstrate care and concern for others, develop positive relationships, make good decisions, and behave ethically, respectfully, and responsibly.
SEL core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making.

Revised 9/14/17

Teacher Interaction and Communication	Teacher interacts warmly, respectfully, equitably with students; actively engages the majority of students; affirms students' contributions; uses student names. Teacher language is encouraging, effective, and culturally responsive.	Teacher interactions with students are pleasant overall. Teacher invites participation from most students and engages some students. Teacher language is mostly effective.	Teacher interactions with students are neutral. Teacher engages few students; minimal evidence of teacher affirming student contributions. Teacher language is somewhat effective.	Teacher interactions with students are poor and/or inconsistent. Teacher is unsuccessful in engaging all students or soliciting student participation/ contribution. Teacher language is harsh or ineffective.	
Student Voice	Students have developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant voice, choice, & leadership opportunities. Teacher encourages students to share their opinions and many students contribute.	Evidence of some opportunities for students to develop their voice and leadership skills. Students are invited to share opinions and some contribute.	Students have some opportunities to develop their voice. Teacher offers some encouragement for students to share but few contribute.	Students have few opportunities to develop their voice and/or teacher does not invite students to share opinions.	
Student Work Displayed	A variety of meaningful, creative, and recent student work is prominently displayed and clearly tied to learning goals/objectives.	Some recent student work is visibly displayed in at least one area of the room.	Student work may be displayed but not easily visible and/or current.	Student work is not noticeably displayed, or the work displayed is at a very basic level and/or generic.	

Appendix E: Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

Survey Research Consent Form

A Mixed Methods Investigation of Educators' Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning and their Mid--Pandemic Classroom Environment in an Urban Setting

You are asked to participate in a survey being conducted by Emily Dittmer under the guidance of Dr.Beth Rapoff at Lindenwood University. We are doing this study to examine educators' feelings of preparedness to implement social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies in the workplace and their perceptions of classroom/school culture during the first semester of the 2021-22 school year. If you choose to participate, you will complete two identical 19 question surveys within 9 weeks. It will take about 10-15 minutes to complete each survey.

Answering this survey(s) is voluntary. We will be asking all staff memberabout 70 other people to answer these questions.

At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview and classroom/workplace observations. The interview can be either in person, over the phone, or on Zoom. The **non-evaluative, confidential** observations will be in person at your specific EAGLE campus. If you are open to workplace observation, we will observe twice during the first semester and spend 20-30 minutes per observation. The confidential interviews will last about 30 minutes and will entail reflecting on your experiences during the first semester of the 2021-22 school year.

What are the risks of this study?

We do not anticipate any risks related to your participation other than those encountered in daily life. You do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or you can stop taking the survey at any time.

We will be collecting data that could identify you, but each survey response will receive a code so that we will not know who answered each survey. The code connecting you and your data will be destroyed as soon as possible. We do not intend to include any information that could identify you in any publication or presentation.

Will anyone know my identity?

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The only people who will be able to see your data are: members of the research team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, representatives of state or federal agencies.

What are the benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board Director, Michael Leary, at (636) 949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu. You can contact the researcher, Emily Dittmer at (314)283-7132 or eam279@lindenwood.edu .You may also contact Dr.Beth Rapoff at brapoff@lindenwood.edu .

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

Emily Dittmer, Ed.S.

Vitae

Colleges and Universities

1994-1998: Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from Concordia University-Nebraska; 2005-2008: Master of Arts in Educational Administration from Lindenwood University; 2010-2017: Educational Specialist in Educational Administration; 2021-present: pursuing Doctor of Education in Educational Administration from Lindenwood University.

Employment History

2022-Present: Principal at Journey Elementary in the Wentzville School District

2015-2022: Founding Principal at EAGLE College Prep, Saint Louis, MO

2013-2015: Assistant Principal at Ellisville Elementary in the Rockwood School District

2004-2013: Music Teacher at Ellisville Elementary in the Rockwood School District

1998-2004: Teacher at Christ Community Lutheran School, Kirkwood, MO

Awards

2022: Administrator of the Year for EAGLE College Preparatory Schools, St. Louis, MO

2013: Rockwood School District Board of Education Award Recipient

2012: Character Education Partnership "Promising Practices" Award Recipient

2009: Emerson Excellence in Teaching Award

2009: Elementary Teacher of the Year for the Rockwood School District

2009: Ellisville Elementary Teacher of the Year