

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL TEACHING PRACTICES IN KINDERGARTEN THROUGH
SECOND GRADE CLASSROOMS: A MULTIPLE-PERSPECTIVE CASE STUDY OF K-2
EDUCATORS

by

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ABSTRACT

ASHLEY MEINECKE. Social and Emotional Teaching Practices in Kindergarten through Second Grade Classrooms: A Multiple-Perspective Case Study of K-2 Educators.
(Under the direction of DR. AMY GOOD)

Despite recurring arguments over the course of a century, intentional education geared toward the whole child in schools has not occurred (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016; Sabey, 2019).

Consequently, children often emerge from high school exhibiting sufficient academic content knowledge applicable towards a successful career path, but lack social emotional skills essential for the development of optimal mental health and well-being (Butzer et al., 2016). Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social emotional well-being are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). As a result of an existing gap underlining early elementary educator perceptions and experiences of social emotional learning (SEL), the purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten through second grade classrooms. Data was collected through a qualitative multiple-perspective case study design using a semi-structured interview process. Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded using a within-case analysis. Data analysis led to the development of seven themes: 1) Defining SEL, 2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, 3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, 4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, 5) High Priority of SEL, 6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and 7) Evidence of SEL Skills. The findings of this study suggest that educators in K-2 classrooms 1) explain SEL based on aspects of the philosophy and framework set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2) place SEL as a high priority in their classrooms, 3) perceive that SEL has a positive impact and influence on students based on observations, and 4)

indicate how barriers such as under preparedness and lack of support inhibit SEL teaching in their classroom whereas positive school culture and pertinent resources greatly assist in effective facilitation of SEL.

Keywords: social emotional learning, SEL, early childhood education, elementary education, adolescent mental health, elementary curriculum

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Dr. John Paul Weber and Barbara Pease Weber, for your continuous support and inspiration throughout this achievement. As my loving mother and father, as well as firsthand published authors, I would not have had the opportunity to pursue, confidence to persevere, or motivation to attain a doctoral degree without you. I am, and always will be, forever grateful for you both.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CCSSI	Common Core State Standards Initiative
CLEP	Choose Love Enrichment Program
EPP	Educator Preparation Program
HLS	Healthful Living Standards
K-2	Kindergarten through Second Grade
K-12	Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade
LEA	Local Education Agency
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCDPI	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
NCEST	National Council on Educational Standards and Testing
NCTEP	North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process
NEGP	National Education Goals Panel
NIMH	National Institute of Mental Health
Pre-K	Pre-Kindergarten
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
TSG	Teaching Strategies Gold
WES	Weber Elementary School

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Students enrolled in pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) through twelfth grade are expected to demonstrate sufficient academic growth each year throughout their schooling experience in the United States. While mastery of academic standards is a requirement for successful grade-level completion, the quality of a well-balanced education positively affecting future success and well-being goes much further than just academic subject knowledge. Modern education in America has placed an overwhelming emphasis on boosting academic performance while overlooking social emotional skills essential for the development of optimal mental health and well-being, or Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills (Butzer et al., 2016). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2022a), SEL is defined 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” (para. 1).

Over the course of multiple decades, state learning standards have shifted learning requirements toward an academic-centered approach highlighting Mathematics and English Language Arts content (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2022a; LaVenía et al., 2015; Wixson et al., 2003). However, a child’s emotional well-being also highly impacts their drive and aptitude toward academic tasks, therefore impacting their overall success (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011). What’s more, White (2012) reports school-age children have often reported feelings of substantial stress in their daily lives, and such factors within their day-to-day environment including academic performance, peer exclusion, social pressures, and home responsibilities heavily contribute to a child’s day-to-day stress (Bazzano et al., 2018).

Numerous studies within the field of developmental science specifically suggest that cognitive growth is also directly influenced by a child's emotional maturation and social preparation for group learning (Barbarin, 2009).

Research stemming from the 1980s confirms the criticality of proactive, early action and intervention in place of reactive tactics (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Copple and Bredekamp (2009) argue the importance of applying what is widely known about how young children acquire social and emotional, as well as cognitive, physical, and academic competencies, when determining curriculum content for children. Empirical evidence supports the theory in which school-age children have capabilities in identifying and preventing stressors through self-regulation and coping strategies when given the appropriate tools and intentional opportunities to do so (White, 2012). Children demonstrating positive mental health states are more inclined to be happier, more motivated in their learning and attitude towards school, are active participants in the classroom, and have higher academic achievement than peers exhibiting a lesser mental health state (Durlak et al., 2011; Ho, 2018). In turn, having these advantageous skills profitably affect a child's social and emotional health.

Teaching SEL skills can significantly increase self-awareness, relationship skills, self-regulating abilities, decision-making skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2022a). Strategies to increase SEL skills such as mindfulness and yoga have been found to reduce stress, depression, and anger in children while improving fatigue and increasing attention span and concentration levels (Felver et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2014). Long-term outcomes of SEL have been found to positively impact families, communities, and the nation's criminal justice and healthcare systems (Sabey, 2019). SEL skills not only positively impact students' academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, but also improve the school's overall environment, ensure the

consistency of SEL skills learned, and promote cultural responsiveness (CASEL, 2022e, para. 5; Durlak et al., 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The concept of the “whole child” refers to intellectual, physical, verbal, social, and academic competencies (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015; Hyde, 2012). Despite recurring arguments over the course of a century, intentional education geared toward the whole child in school has not occurred (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016; Sabey, 2019). Consequently, children often leave high school exhibiting sufficient academic content knowledge pertinent towards a successful career path, but lacking SEL skills essential for the development of their optimal mental health and well-being (Butzer et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Copious amounts of research support how SEL programs in schools can positively impact students’ academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, improve a school’s environment and mission, ensure the consistency of vital SEL skills learned, and promote cultural responsiveness through the students’ microsystems (CASEL, 2022e, para. 5; Durlak et al., 2011). NAEYC (2021) emphasizes Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development theory highlighting how children are active learners eager to create meaning beginning from birth and are regularly saturated by and organizing the information around them through environmental interactions. Birth to age eight (or second grade in the United States) is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child’s well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). The purpose of this study is to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and

paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten through second grade classrooms. The conceptual framework for this study reflects the principles set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL is the leading enterprise of the global SEL movement today (CASEL, 2022b).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study include:

1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?

Overview of Methodology

This qualitative multiple-perspective case study took place over the course of a five-month period (May 2022-September 2022). The researcher examined the perceptions and experiences of kindergarten through second grade (K-2) full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals teaching SEL in their classroom. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher over the course of three weeks in June 2022. The setting (referred to as the pseudonym “Weber Elementary School”) was selected based on access, availability, willingness, and overall mission and vision surrounding an advocacy of health and wellness. All participants were full-time educators at the site during the 2021/2022 school year.

The researcher took part in member checking strategies to ensure agreement amongst each participant as it related to their responses shared during the interviews. Audio recording and professional transcription transpired using the Zoom platform. Marginal note taking of the transcription data during examination was employed. The researcher took part in an open coding process to determine commonalities amongst each data set separately (Merriam, 2009; Miles, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The coding methods used reflected both descriptive and in vivo approaches (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher created pattern codes, grouping the first-cycle summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, and constructs. Axial coding was employed to identify interconnections and categorize codes from the first and second cycles (Saldaña, 2021).

The researcher analyzed the data using a within case-analysis approach before conducting a cross-case inductive thematic analysis where codes derived from each case individually were reviewed collectively (Miles et al., 2014). The findings of K-2 educators were analyzed separately as a whole (within-case), as well as the findings amongst lead educators and paraprofessionals and grade levels (cross-case). Through this process, the researcher made connections among the data noting potential themes and constructs to the research questions.

Rationale and Significance

Early investments for mental health establishment must correlate with the brain development that is simultaneously occurring (Sabey, 2019). Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). If educators and classroom curricula

continue to lack SEL intentionality in early childhood classrooms, a reactive approach aiming to repair rather than prevent adolescent mental and social health damage will likely transpire.

A gap in research understanding educator perceptions and experiences of SEL exists, particularly in the foundational early years of learning in elementary school settings (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020). The demand for research investigating educator perspectives of SEL is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices nation and worldwide, as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Role of Researcher

The researcher gained permission for study execution from WES administration following IRB approval in May 2022. Consent was obtained from full-time educator participants teaching within a kindergarten, first, or second grade classroom during the 2021-2022 program year in May 2022. The researcher informed all participants of their sole voluntary involvement within this research, and that anonymity would remain throughout the duration of and following the study. Participants were also reminded of the option to withdraw from participation at any time. The researcher maintained participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the site and educator names. All interview audio recordings, summary consent documents, transcription records, and document data were stored on UNC Charlotte's password protected Dropbox. Member-checking was conducted by the researcher through verbal verification in understanding each participant's responses accurately. Additionally, a one-page summary outlining the interpretation of responses was provided to each participant within three weeks of the interview

for consensus of response agreement. Finally, interview questions were first piloted by the researcher using a current early childhood educator outside of this study.

Researcher Assumptions

This study was based on the assumption that early childhood educators' perceptions would mirror the literature by reporting how intentional SEL practices in their classroom have a positive impact towards their students' overall behaviors, mental health, and achievement.

Limitations

The researcher's biography illustrates the potential subjectivity that was crucial for the researcher to be mindful of throughout the study. Furthermore, it is important to note that perspective was considered as the researcher was the solitary instrument in the administration and analysis of the research. Due to the unprecedented state of the COVID-19 pandemic, classroom observations were not conducted, and the researcher did not conduct participant interviews at the site itself. The positive relationship between UNC Charlotte and WES allowed for the researcher to use a virtual meeting platform to conduct administrative meetings and interviews.

It is important to note that the mission of the site had previously surrounded a health and wellness approach prior to the study. Third and fourth grade teachers were not selected as a part of the sample size due to the definition of early childhood (birth through age eight) as described by NAEYC (2021) in the elementary school setting. It is important to recognize that this study took place at one elementary school, and therefore is not a reflection of all K-2 educator experiences. Although the researcher engaged in member checking strategies, the interview was a one-time examination of participants' perceptions. Finally, this study does not reflect an

evaluation of any kind (SEL curriculum, educator performance, child outcomes), but rather focused on a descriptive analysis of narrative data.

Definitions of Key Terminology

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used:

Early Childhood: birth through age 8

Educators: full-time lead teachers

Paraprofessionals: full-time teacher assistants

Social Emotional Learning (SEL): “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, 2022a).

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by highlighting an overview of the problem supporting this study. Khalsa and Butzer (2016) and Sabey (2019) argue that intentional education geared toward the whole child in schools has not occurred. Unfortunately, children often graduate high school exhibiting sufficient academic content knowledge pertinent towards a successful career path, but lack SEL skills essential for the development of their optimal mental health and well-being (Butzer et al., 2016). If classrooms continue to lack SEL intentionality, a reactive approach aiming to repair rather than prevent adolescent mental and social health damage will likely continue to transpire.

SEL programs in schools have been found to positively impact students’ academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, improve a school’s environment and mission,

ensure the consistency of vital SEL skills learned, and promote cultural responsiveness through the students' microsystems (CASEL, 2022e; Durlak et al., 2011). Birth to age eight (or second grade in the United States) is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). The demand for research investigating educator perspectives of SEL is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices nation and worldwide as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). A research gap understanding educator perceptions and experiences of SEL exists, particularly in the foundational early years of learning in elementary school settings, exists (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten through second grade classrooms. This chapter provided an overview of the methods used within this research study to answer the research questions. Qualitative data was gathered by the researcher through the administration of semi-structured interviews. The researcher analyzed data gathered from each K-2 grade level and each educator role to conduct a within-case analysis, followed by a cross-case comparative analysis as it relates to educator role (lead educator, paraprofessional) and grade level (kindergarten, first, second). The role of the researcher, researcher assumptions, and study limitations were described. Definitions of key terminology were provided.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the United States, students enrolled in Pre-K through twelfth grade are expected to demonstrate sufficient academic growth each year throughout their schooling experience. A core understanding and mastery of academic standards may be a requirement for successful grade-level completion and promotion, but the quality of a well-balanced education goes much further than just academic subject knowledge. Butzer and colleagues (2016) highlight how modern education in America places much emphasis on boosting academic performance while overlooking the importance of establishing SEL skills essential for the development of optimal mental health and well-being. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2022a), SEL is defined 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” (para. 1). Unfortunately, children often emerge from high school exhibiting content knowledge applicable towards a successful career path, but lack SEL skills essential for the development of optimal mental health and well-being (Butzer et al., 2016). This literature review presents a representation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks associated with SEL, as well as a description, analysis, and synthesis of the literature supporting the need for SEL skill development in children and classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Accumulating research indicates that children are highly influenced by their immediate and surrounding environments (Brackett et al., 2015; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; NAEYC,

2021). A child's psychological development, which involves social and emotional factors (including relationship building, coping strategies, self-regulation skills, managing feelings, problem-solving tactics), are especially affected by environmental factors (Brackett et al., 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Considering SEL programs represent a wide range of intricacies, the following segments will recognize the underlying theories related to child development and behavioral change that have informed SEL pedagogy (Brackett et al., 2015).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development

The theoretical framework guiding this study is based on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development. Bronfenbrenner's Model was previously known as the Ecological Systems Theory. This model highlights how elements such as genetics, family system, community, and social systems directly affect a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Five components embody Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model: 1) the microsystem, the layer closest to the child such as family, school, and neighborhood community; 2) the mesosystem, or the connections amongst the microsystem components such as a childcare worker and primary caregiver; 3) the exosystem, a larger system impacting the microsystem such as socioeconomic status; 4) the macrosystem, being societal norms, laws, and culture; and 5) the chronosystem, encompassing environmental effects such as divorce, climatology, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory conceives that a person's psychological development is greatly dependent upon the balance and connections among these systems. Consequently, a lack of balance can adversely lead to long-lasting negative outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses that such circumstances among the microsystem can either promote or delay growth, and that the mesosystem, specifically the relationship between school and child/family, greatly impacts a child's learning aptitude and overall development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses that one of two contexts must cohesively present themselves in each given setting for optimal development to occur. The first infers that a child needs to be provided the tools and resources to learn a skill alongside the direct guidance of a mentor who has not only mastered the skill to be learned, but also has developed a positive trusting relationship with the child. The second context mirrors the first, except it omits direct mentor guidance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Regardless, any mentor or peer able to model certain skills not yet acquired by a child is beneficial to a child's overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, both proximal and contextual factors within each system serve as fundamental responsibilities towards child development.

Conceptual Framework

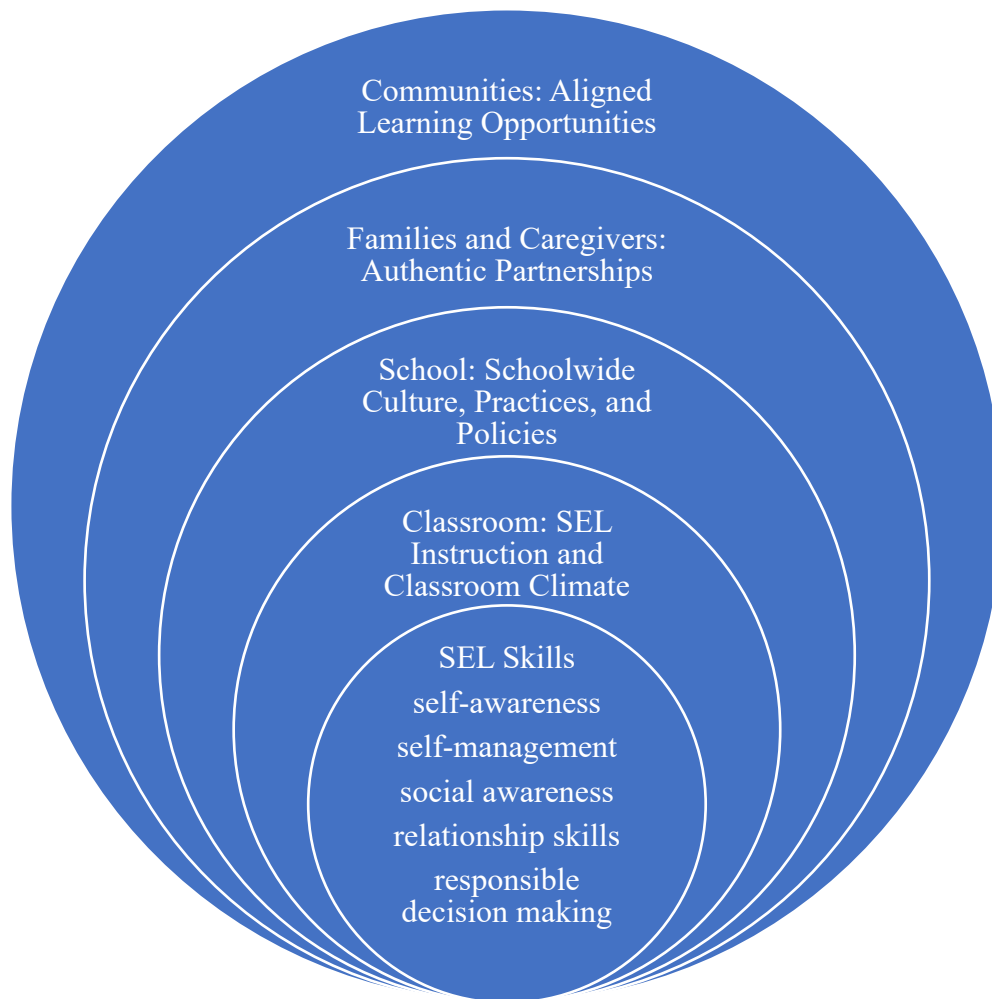
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in the philosophy of SEL set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, commonly referred to as CASEL. According to CASEL (2022b), the antiquity of SEL dates to the first bond among educators and their students. Although SEL principles, including empathy, care, and collaboration are reflected within the partnerships among a child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the justification of the field is a recent endeavor (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2022b). In 1968, a trial executed by the Child Study Center of Yale University later supported that, when the whole child was supported effectively, behavioral challenges declined and academic performance enhanced (CASEL, 2022b). This discovery led to the establishment of the 1980 New Haven Social Development Program directed by educators and researchers and was intended to further pilot and implement SEL strategies in K-12 classrooms (CASEL, 2022b). Shortly thereafter, the formation of CASEL

began in 1994, comprised of researchers, experts, and advocates aspiring to create mission and activism for social and emotional skills to be taught in schools; this was what CASEL believed to be the “missing piece” to education (CASEL 2022b, para. 9).

CASEL is the leading enterprise of the global SEL movement today (CASEL, 2022b). The term “Social Emotional Learning” can be attributed to CASEL’s efforts in this field. According to CASEL (2022a), SEL is defined 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” (para. 1). Copious amounts of research support how SEL programs in schools can not only positively impact students’ academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, but also improve the school’s environment and mission, ensuring the consistency of SEL skills learned while promoting cultural responsiveness through students’ microsystems (CASEL, 2022e, para. 5; Durlak et al., 2011).

CASEL’s mission is to integrate SEL “throughout the school’s academic curricula and culture, across the broader contexts of schoolwide practices and policies, and through ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations” (CASEL, 2022e, para. 4). The “CASEL 5” framework, shown in Figure 1, is comprised of five components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making. CASEL 5 fundamentals can be learned and applied at any and every developmental change, as early as childhood and into adulthood (CASEL, 2022a).

Figure 1*CASEL Wheel Components*

Note. Adapted from <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> licensed by CASEL

The circles within the framework mirror the systemic components within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model. The inner circle begins with SEL skills (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) learned explicitly through the secondary circle, the classroom environment and instruction (or microsystem). The leading influence within the secondary circle, the classroom educator, is responsible for implementing SEL curriculum and strategies and upholding a conducive

classroom climate. CASEL's universal approach aims to establish fair learning environments to deeply enrich all students' social, emotional, and academic learning, warranting how quality implementation becomes highly important in the effectiveness of enacting SEL (CASEL, 2022e).

Review of Literature

Brief History of Educational Standards in the United States

Historically, policymakers on the state and national level authorized school districts the responsibility of all decision making as it related to the curriculum and instruction used within their schools (Wixson et al., 2003). Not until the early 1980s after *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* is the 1983 report of the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education was published would modern American educational history be reformed. Due to curricular freedom districts were given, many based their choosing primarily on publishing company marketing and generalized recommendations (Wixson et al., 2003). In 1983, extreme scrutiny within the education community created an urge to shift prior curriculum and instruction practices specifically directed toward secondary and post-secondary education (NAEYC, 1986). Unfortunately, intensified pressure on formal academic instruction and skill for upper grades infiltrated early childhood programs and was based on fallacies of early learning (NAEYC, 1986). In 1986, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reported how “programs have changed in response to social, economic, and political forces; however, these changes have not always taken into account the basic developmental needs of young children, which have remained constant” (NAEYC, 1986, p. 4).

The 1980's standards-based reform escalating academic requirements pertinent to high school graduation lacked overall clarification, leading to inconsistencies, misperceptions, lack of student achievement, and overall failure, especially in comparison to the nation's universal

counterparts (LeVenía et al., 2015). In the early 1990s, educational reform transitioned into the formation of specific “goals”, or standards, intending to outline skills every K-12 student should exhibit (LeVenía et al., 2015; Wixson et al., 2003). The establishment of the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) was intended to oversee the advancement toward content, performance, and school delivery targets highlighted in the Educate America Act of 1994 to be reached by the year 2000 (later referred to as “Goals 2000”) (LeVenía et al., 2015; Wixson et al., 2003). With successful completion, K-12 students would “demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter and be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement and that the percentage of all students demonstrating the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge, and write and communicate effectively would increase substantially” (Wixson et al., 2003, p. 72). Subsequently, such improvement would favorably affect the economic future of the United States (Wixson et al., 2003).

The National Council on Educational Standards and Testing (NCEST) established in 1991 aimed to advise long-term policy and structure in standard and testing settings, using California’s 1980’s curriculum framework as a model (Wixson et al., 2003). The goal was for policymakers on the national level to reach consensus as it related to what skills and knowledge K-12 students should demonstrate, filtering into specific subject matter/content knowledge, testing protocol, professional development offered, and textbook use (Wixson et al., 2003). “It has not been simply the issue of consensus on what students should know and be able to do that has proven difficult” Wixson and collaborators (2003, p. 72) explained. “It has been equally difficult to achieve consensus on the fundamental nature purposes and processes associated with standards and standard-setting” (Wixson et al., 2003, p. 72). A lack of consensus pushed governors to declare that “the pursuit of national standards has failed” and individual states

would since return in the creation and implementation of school standards during the 1996 National Education Summit (Wixson et al., 2003, p. 78).

Common Core State Standards

As a result of the infamous 1996 National Education Summit ending the initiative of nationalized standards, the conception of Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was established by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (LeVenía et al., 2015). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and Mathematics are the direct result of goals set forth by the CCSSI, and were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and content experts (LeVenía et al., 2015). The intention behind the creation and utilization of the Common Core State Standards was “to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live” (CCSSI, 2022a, para. 2). As of 2021, forty-one states use CCSS as their standard course of study (CCSSI, 2022a). According to the CCSSI, CCSS reflect “a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy” (CCSSI, 2022a, para. 2). The CCSS does not reflect social or emotional components. However, the CCSSI underlines how “states routinely review their academic standards and may choose to change or add onto the standards to best meet the needs of their students” (CCSSI, 2022b, para. 1).

Child Development

The concept of a “whole child” refers to intellectual, physical, verbal, social, and academic competencies (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015; Hyde, 2012). Empathy, creativity, curiosity, discipline, self-directed, goal-oriented, and confidence are all factors contributing to the development of the whole child (Hyde, 2012). Maintaining a stable

mental health state and overall emotional well-being are crucial elements affecting a child's successes and achievements in today's classrooms (White, 2012). Furthermore, children demonstrating positive mental health conditions are better inclined to be happier, more motivated in their learning and attitude towards school, active participants in the classroom, and have higher academic achievement than peers exhibiting a lesser mental health state (Durlak et al., 2011; Ho, 2018). Nevertheless, despite recurring arguments over the course of a century, intentional education geared toward the whole child in school has not occurred (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016; Sabey 2019).

Early Development

Tremendous past and current research highlights the notion in which childhood experiences, particularly those occurring during the early years of development, vastly influence the outcomes of one's adolescence and adulthood life. For over 60 years, NAEYC has sought to promote high-quality early childhood education for all young children (NAEYC, 1994). NAEYC defines "early childhood" as the first state of development beginning from birth through age eight (NAEYC, 2021). This stage of life is precisely the time when the foundation for an overall well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). Unfortunately, NAEYC (1986) stresses that the persistent emphasis on early academics is "antithetical to what we know about how young children learn" (p. 4).

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), it is important to apply what is widely known about how young children acquire social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and academic competencies when determining curriculum content for children. Research stemming from the 1980's has confirmed the criticality of proactive, early action and intervention rather than

reactive tactics (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Furthermore, early childhood programs and curricula should be personalized to meet the needs of children instead of forcing children to adapt to the requirements of a specific program (NAEYC, 1986). All domains of child development, including physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, and linguistics are interconnected and supported by their domain counterparts (NAEYC, 2021). Beginning from birth, NAEYC (2021) emphasizes Bronfenbrenner's theory of how children are active learners, eager to create meaning through environmental interactions and organizing the information around them. Learning is vastly increased when their environment nurtures a sense of purpose and belonging (NAEYC, 2021). Growth and development occur when children are given the tools, opportunities, and practice to be challenged in achieving beyond their current mastery (NAEYC, 2021).

Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Based on studies conducted by Greenberg and Weissberg (2018), The Pennsylvania State University and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation define SEL concurrently with CASEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p. 1). Barbarin (2009) reports that these particular social, emotional, and motivational qualities pertinent to school success include “social and emotional understanding of others, initiative as learners, self-regulation, self-concept, group participation, cooperation and sense of responsibility, and interactions with peers and teachers” (p. 199). Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) emphasize the substantial amount of theoretical and empirical literature and evidence supporting social and emotional competency levels in children who demonstrate

positive social and emotional skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making exhibit resiliency when faced with stressful situations. Thus, having a concrete social and emotional foundation in the early years is critical.

Studies within the field of developmental science suggest that a child's emotional maturation and social preparation for group learning directly influences cognitive growth specifically (Barbarin, 2009). A child's emotional well-being also highly impacts their drive and aptitude toward academic tasks and therefore success (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak and colleagues (2011) further emphasize the correlation between social emotional wellbeing and academic achievement.

Mental Health in Children and Adolescents

Unfortunately, White (2012) reports that school-age children have often reported feelings of substantial stress in their daily lives. Factors such as academic performance, peer exclusion, social pressures, and home responsibilities heavily contribute to a child's day-to-day stress (Bazzano et al., 2018). Stress occurs in children as early as birth due to continuous communications within a child's environment (Napoli et al., 2005). Students with special needs including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism particularly struggle with such high anxieties, depression, and behavioral issues caused by stress (Accardo, 2017).

According to Frank and colleagues (2014), stress heavily impacts one's physical and mental health, directly shifting the way that students think, feel, and act. Accumulating evidence has shown a direct correlation between students' mental health state and academic achievement, therefore posing a substantial barrier to their full learning potential (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Frank et al., 2014). Stress has overwhelmingly been found to cause

damaging effects on a child's current and future physiological and physical health resulting in depression, anxiety, aggression, substance use, and problems forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Frank et al., 2014). Additionally, Brackett and Simmons (2015) argue how emotional distress triggers unsettling physiological effects within the sympathetic nervous system. A survey study on the occurrence of psychiatric disorders in adolescents reported that stress signals were the most regular predictors of such mental health illnesses (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). Adolescent behaviors stemming from childhood stress have often included violent conduct, drug use, sexual implications, and dropping out of school (Payton et al., 2000). Comparably, the presence of anxiety also negatively impacts students' overall achievement in school performance by disturbing their overall thinking process (Napoli et al., 2005).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), one in five children will exhibit a serious, disconcerting mental disorder by eighteen years of age (Sabey, 2019). Although mental health disorders, including schizophrenia, bipolar, and anxiety, have not been directly associated with violent behaviors or thoughts, the correlation among an established mental wellness and lack of violence has been found (Sabey, 2019). What is more, both suicide attempts and deaths among children in the United States have significantly increased since 2010 (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2021). The NIMH (2021) reports that the eighth leading cause of death in children ages five through 11 is suicide. In a study conducted by NIMH's (2021) Intramural Research Program:

Mental health concerns were identified in a third (31.4%) of the suicide deaths examined, with the most common diagnoses being attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or depression. Trauma, including suspected or confirmed cases of abuse, neglect, and domestic violence, was seen in more than a quarter (27.1%) of children who died by

suicide. Of children who were reported to have experienced trauma, almost half (40.6%) had experienced multiple traumatic events. Family-related problems, such as divorce, custody disputes, parental substance use, or a family history of suicide or mental health concerns, were seen in more than a third (39.8%) of children who died by suicide. School problems, such as expulsion, changing schools, or suspension, were also reported for almost a third (32%) of children who died by suicide. (para. 5)

Thus, a proactive approach and thoughtful consideration of all the many variables that increase a child's risk of suicide must be taken in to prevent these consequences and protect children's well-being and lives (NIMH, 2021).

Alternative Learning Environments

Accardo (2017) shares that many educators have expressed concerns in their ability to support students struggling with mental health and behavioral issues given limited funding and inadequate resources. When a student exhibits a lack of success and is unable to flourish in a typical school atmosphere, alternative educational programs are often seen as viable solutions (Frank et al., 2014). Students enrolled in alternative high schools have been found to experience one or more mental health issues, demonstrate lower self-esteem, and display a suggestively higher risk for suicide (Frank et al., 2014). Moreover, lack of program success has been found when too many programs are put into place or are implemented as a reactionary tool rather than a proactive initiative. Despite the effort, schools are often found to be overwhelmed, understaffed, and/or unprepared for effective program implementation and desirable outcomes (Payton et al., 2000).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs

NAEYC (2021) advocates how children’s social and emotional (or mental) health is a large component of foundational child development. Therefore, early investments for mental health establishment must correlate simultaneously with brain development (Sabey, 2019). SEL programs and organizations such as CASEL have not only reported favorable academic outcomes because of SEL, but additional progressive outcomes including increase in self-awareness, relationship skills, self-regulating abilities, decision-making skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2022a). Research has shown how SEL programs in schools not only positively impact students’ academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, but also improves the school’s environment and mission, ensuring the consistency of SEL skills learned, and promoting cultural responsiveness through the students’ microsystems (CASEL, 2022e, para. 5; Durlak et al., 2011).

Like academic counterparts, SEL competency levels must also be observed and assessed, “the same way we would scaffold and track traditional academic content” (Tantillo Philibert, 2018, p. 14). According to Payton and colleagues (2000), programs purposefully specializing in social and emotional development provide:

Systematic classroom instruction that enhances children’s capacities to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish pro-social goals and solve problems, and use a variety of interpersonal skills to effectively and ethically handle developmentally relevant tasks. (p. 179)

Effective mental health prevention programs and precaution not only prevents mental challenges from surfacing, but consequently positively affects families, communities, and the nation’s healthcare system (Sabey, 2019). Furthermore, CASEL (2022a) reports noteworthy correlations

between SEL taught in kindergarten and outcomes in adulthood on both an individual and societal level as it relates to public assistance and the criminal justice system.

Adolescent Stress and SEL

Educators and administrators supporting early education programs have reported many children suffering from signs of serious emotional concerns such as depression and antisocial conduct (Barbarin, 2009). SEL strategies such as mindfulness are simple to grasp and have been found to lower student stress levels and increase their level of calmness (Semple et al., 2017). When taught in early years of learning, SEL has been found to positively impact adulthood as it relates to employment, experiences with the criminal justice system, and personal relationships such as marriage (Sabey, 2019). Emotional regulation skills have also supported adolescents in controlling irrational behaviors and undesirable responses when faced with certain situations and achieving individual goals (Frank et al., 2014). White (2012) reports that there is evidence supporting the capability of school-age children diagnosing their own triggered stressors while creating and assessing coping strategies conducive to their individual preferences when given the right opportunistic platforms.

SEL as a Proactive Approach

In his 2019 documentary film titled “American Tragedy”, Sabey (2019) emphasizes the present-day mental health crisis affecting children and adolescents in our nation today. The film underlines how in most aspects of life, including physical fitness, car maintenance, and lawn care, a preventative approach is taken to ensure optimal operation. Public schools have made conscious decisions to invest in students’ physical health by providing healthy meal choices and outdoor program opportunities, reflecting that of a preventative, proactive approach. Strategies promoting positive mental health habits and screening potential suicide risks in primary care

settings could help reduce suicide in the younger adolescence (ages 5-11) age range (NIMH, 2021). Regrettably, schools have taken little proactive measures to promote and positively affect and protect students' mental health (Sabey, 2019).

SEL and Mindfulness

One way for children and adults to develop and increase their emotional awareness is through the practice of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). When focused on the present, mindfulness can help alleviate anxiety and distress, creating a healthier way to manage emotions (Dove & Costello, 2017; Semple et al., 2017). According to Schonert-Reichl and partners (2015), mindful practices in adults increase awareness of present experiences while fostering reflection, self-regulation, compassion, and care. Like adults, mindful awareness and practice are advantageous in setting the foundation of how children can use these regulatory skills in their day-to-day life (Dove & Costello, 2017). Semple and colleagues (2017) report how mindful classrooms have been found to positively impact classroom learning environments by promoting student focus and learning preparedness. A study by Bannirchelvam and colleagues (2017) added to previous advantageous findings of mindfulness in children when discovering how the TRIPLE-R program geared toward a group of third through sixth-grade students demonstrated and reported using mindfulness to regulate their emotions. Similarly, a study by Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) found that a group of fourth and fifth grade students participating in the experimental group using a SEL mindfulness-based curriculum exhibited parallel outcomes. Additional programs becoming more popular and newly surfacing schools within the U.S. include *Inner Resilience*, *Mindful Schools*, *Learning to Breathe, Calm, Headspace*, and *Choose*

Love. According to the Calm Schools initiative (Calm, 2022), violence could be eliminated from the world within one generation if eight-year-old students were taught mindful skills such as meditation.

SEL and Yoga

Yoga, a meditative and mindful practice connecting the mind and body, was developed in India centuries ago (Phillips, 2009). Designed to promote a positive physical and mental state, this mindful exercise incorporates both postures (referred to as “asanas”) and breathing techniques (known as “pranayama”) throughout the practice (Frank et al., 2014). Due to their similarities in aiming to provide a calming nature and advantageous social and emotional outcomes, the SEL strategy of mindfulness is often practiced concurrently with yoga. Scientifically, engaging the body in yoga poses and sequences not only interconnects multiple networks within the brain, but increases oxygen-rich blood throughout the brain, therefore improving overall brain function (Ratey, 2008). Yoga also constructively influences one’s physiological and psychological structures (Velásquez et al., 2015). Velásquez and colleagues (2015) report that yoga “influences the nervous system by triggering the parasympathetic nervous system, which inhibits the sympathetic nervous system responsible for causing the stress response” (p. 408).

Although Slováček and colleagues (2003) infer that most research within this field has mostly been geared towards adult practitioners since the early 2000s, studies regarding the effectiveness of yoga for improving mental, emotional, physical, and behavioral health in K-12 school settings are becoming a curiously cultivating field of study (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). Such initiatives have been progressively utilized within classrooms throughout the United States to improve students’ behavioral and academic performance (Frank et al., 2014). Yoga and mindful

meditation have been found to facilitate children's development of emotional regulation skills that benefit them in a multitude of situations (Frank et al., 2014). When students learn to be "fully-present," the quality of their learning performance has been shown to grow due to increased focus and ability to handle stressful circumstances (Napoli et al., 2005). Yoga has not only diminished stress in children, but also has decreased tension, dispersed superfluous energy, improved fatigue, and increased attention span and concentration (Frank et al., 2014). Although studies have shown that yoga optimistically affects a child's well-being while actively reducing anxiety, depression, and aggression levels, little has been researched on the effects such has on young children in general (Velasquez et al., 2015).

Fortunately for the United States, a survey by Khalsa and Butzer (2016) concluded that over thirty formally organized yoga programs within 900 schools are being utilized across the continent and in some of the United States' largest cities including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago (Tummers, 2005). Between 2019 and 2021, nationwide district spending on SEL programs increased from \$530 million to \$765 million, a total of 45 percent according to CASEL (Prothero, 2022). Nelson (2005), a fourth-grade educator experimenting with SEL strategies in her classroom in the early 2000s reported that "the positive feedback from classroom teachers following an initial experimental yoga unit encouraged me to integrate yoga as a regular part of my physical education program" (p. 26). Seeing as this exercise does not require any background theoretical knowledge, those of all intellectual levels can practice yoga (Phillips, 2009). This alone is a large advantage in implementing yoga-based programs throughout all schools and grade levels. Although the way in which schools choose to carry out these programs may differ in exact structure, most of the programs hold the same principles of yoga which include poses, breathing techniques, and strategies for relaxation and mindfulness (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016).

According to a study by Felver and colleagues (2015), participants participated in yoga sessions in place of regulatory physical education classes reported a significant decrease in anger, depression, and fatigue.

SEL Worldwide

Unlike the United States system of education, yoga is taught in public and non-government schools across the entire country of Australia (Yoga Australia, 2021). Whether embedded into the academic or physical education curricula, Australia not only recognizes the benefits of these practices (including an increase in student focus and concentration, decrease in student stress, anxiety, and depression, fewer bullying incidents, and an overall higher quality well-being), but the importance of having trained, qualified staff implement such programs (Yoga Australia, 2021). Zenergy Yoga, for example, is a program with more than 20 years of experience, 10,000 hours of classroom time, and staff cross-trained in both yoga and working with children of all ages (Zenergy Yoga, 2022). Content within such programs includes an introductory discussion about overall well-being, a mindfulness practice for children to bring awareness to their current state of the body, mind and breath, physical poses for advancement of strength, flexibility, balance and coordination, games to enhance social interaction and creativity, storytelling to stimulate imagination and meaning to the practice, and breathing techniques to improve lung capacity and calm the mind and body while introducing relaxation techniques as it relates to meditation (Yoga Australia, 2021).

Darling-Hammond (2017) reports how global counterparts including Alberta, Singapore, and Shanghai emphasize educator responsibility in the development of all aspects of the whole child, encompassing moral, ethical, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. In fact, Singapore places student social emotional health in such high regard that principals are evaluated

in not only school academic growth, but in social emotional growth and well-being as well (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In China, it is typical for every class group to be assigned a “Class Director” where social and emotional issues are addressed and counseling is provided, as Chinese jurisdictions believe that students are more likely to succeed when their emotional and social needs are supported (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Educator Experiences with SEL

Teaching SEL

Research highlighting educator experiences in teaching SEL prior to the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 is limited. In an evaluative study reviewing eight SEL programs, Semple and colleagues (2017) found teachers reporting an increase in students’ self-regulation, metacognition, focus levels, and transition time while noting a decrease in behavioral distractions, aggression, and social conflict since using SEL programs. In a more recent 2021 study seeking educator experiences of SEL practices in at-risk elementary school students, Howley and partners (2021) found that, rather than implementing specific and explicit SEL lessons, educators often taught SEL more “deliberately and consistently within the generalized curriculum” (p. 632). Educators within that study also found it helpful to form a professional learning community focusing on intentional SEL topics and issues in their classroom (Howley et al., 2021).

Personal SEL

Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) report on educators’ personal growth with social and emotional development, sharing how their “own SEL competence and well-being appears to play a crucial role in influencing the infusion of SEL into classrooms and schools” (p. 19). Students witness and learn from their teachers modeling how they manage their own

aggravations while maintaining control, focus, and adapting in certain situations (Jones, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Unfortunately, like children, many educators find themselves stressed throughout both their personal and occupational lives. According to Lambert and McCarthy (2006), stress can be defined as “the result of an interaction, or imbalance between two distinct constructs involving an internal psychological process of appraising both demands and resources” (p. 106). This feeling has been found to be characteristically caused by a “perceived imbalance of teachers’ classroom demands and resources” (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 3).

Self-reporting questionnaires asking educator participants to rate how stressful they find various aspects of their working conditions have been a common data collection method used for investigation concerning individual stress levels. Lambert and McCarthy (2006) and Semple and colleagues (2017) found a direct correlation between educator stress and problematic social and emotional behavior among students, presenting comparable results to supplementary studies conducted on triggers of educator stress. Conversely, when investigating the correlation between classroom environment and adolescent mental health in a study of over 10,000 first-grade students, educators reporting a higher level of stress than their counterparts had a greater number of students in their classroom who exhibited mental health problems (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Additionally, Schonert-Reichl (2017) reports “when teachers poorly manage the social and emotional demands of teaching, students' academic achievement and behavior both suffer (p. 137). Fortunately, Howley and colleagues (2021) recently reported how educators have intentionally made individual SEL growth and development a part of their monthly SEL support group meeting discussions in effort to become more self-aware of their social emotional strengths and needs.

Barriers and Challenging Perspectives of SEL

The CCSSI reports stagnant growth in student learning within the United States in comparison to worldwide counterparts is attributed to “uneven patchwork of academic standards that vary from state to state and do not agree on what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.” (CCSSI, 2022a, para. 3). Today, opposing views on instructional content in classrooms exists, specifically as it relates to SEL (Eichert et al., 2019; Prothero, 2022). SEL in schools is influenced by various multifaceted political and environmental factors (Howley et al., 2021). Primarily, educators have expressed frustration over the inconsistency of SEL skills learned and demonstrated throughout the child’s home-life (Howley et al., 2021). Concerns regarding the amount of instructional time SEL content would take to implement, and perhaps even hold priority over or parallel academic sectors, have been shared by both educators and school administrators (Eichert et al., 2019). Some educators even expressed their hesitation of qualification to teaching SEL components based on prior education and trainings and declared how extra teaching responsibilities would likely add stress to what is already a stressful profession (Eichert et al., 2019). Parents have widely expressed concerns of SEL in schools, highlighting how their interpretation of SEL components could interfere with Critical Race Theory and gender identity while potentially underlining values in which they do not condone (Prothero, 2022).

Chapter Summary

The above literature review examined the theoretical and conceptual frameworks in which this study was rooted. The history of standardized reform in the United States is pertinent to understanding how standards are used in our nation today. Empirical evidence supports the theory in which school-age children have capabilities in identifying and preventing stressors through self-regulation and coping strategies when given the appropriate tools and intentional

opportunities to do so (White, 2012). In turn, having these advantageous skills profitably affect their social and emotional health.

CASEL (2022a) reports that SEL has significantly increased self-awareness, relationship skills, self-regulating abilities, decision-making skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2022a). Strategies to increase SEL skills such as mindfulness and yoga have reduced stress, depression, and anger in children while improving fatigue and increasing attention span and concentration levels (Calm, 2022; Felver et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2014). Long-term outcomes have been found to positively impact families, communities, and the nation's criminal justice and healthcare systems (Sabey, 2019). SEL skills not only positively impact students' academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, also improve the school's overall environment, ensure the consistency of SEL skills learned, and promote cultural responsiveness (CASEL, 2022e; Durlak et al., 2011).

Most commonly, studies such as Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) have primarily focused research regarding SEL strategies in classrooms within the later elementary/secondary grade levels. Older adolescents tend to be less egocentric, more capable of understanding the difference between right from wrong, better able to consider perspectives and feelings of others due to neurological maturation in comparison to their younger counterparts, and typically exhibit more obvious, advanced signs of mental and behavioral challenges (Schonert-Reichl et. al, 2015). Furthermore, birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). A research gap understanding educator perceptions and experiences of SEL exists, particularly in the foundational early years of learning in elementary school settings

(Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020).

Research examining educator perspectives on SEL is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Thus, further research pertaining to early childhood educators' perceptions regarding their experience and perspectives of SEL instruction in early education classrooms is needed.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

Chapter Two highlighted that the foundation of all learning domains occurs during the early childhood years of development (NAEYC, 2021). Educators must acquire and demonstrate accurate pedagogical knowledge as well as an accurate depiction of each learning domain's hierarchical progression to promote optimal learning in children (NAEYC, 2021). Significant research demonstrating the positive outcomes associated with implementing SEL programs in classrooms worldwide was also represented throughout Chapter Two.

An existing gap underlining educator perceptions and experiences of SEL, particularly in the foundational early years of learning in elementary school settings, exists (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett et al., 2011; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020). Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). The demand for research investigating educator perspectives of and experiences with SEL, especially in the foundational years of learning, is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten through second grade.

Specifically, this chapter defines the methods used to collect and analyze qualitative data through a multiple-perspective case study in effort to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?

This chapter presents a rationale for and description of the setting, participants, and sampling procedures, as well as a detailed overview of the researcher's biography. The research design, methods for data collection and analysis, and timeline are also explained.

Setting

The site selection process for this study began during the Fall of 2021. Site access, availability, and overall mission and vision were highly prioritized in the selection process during the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. The researcher conducted a thorough investigation of elementary classrooms already exhibiting an established SEL program. A thorough investigation of elementary classrooms already exhibiting an established SEL program led to the researcher's discovery of a local public charter elementary school located in the western region of North Carolina. To maintain anonymity, the pseudonym of Weber Elementary School (WES) will be referenced as the name of the site throughout the study. WES' mission and vision prides

themselves on promoting health and wellness based on the philosophy of the whole child and a holistic approach in creating healthy, well-rounded individuals.

WES adopted North Carolina's Standard Course of Study, CCSS, as its foundation for learning standards and assessment. WES also references using North Carolina's Healthful Living Standards (HLS) on their website, comprised of Mental and Emotional Health (MEH), Personal and Consumer Health (PCH), Interpersonal Communications and Relationships (ICR), Nutrition and Physical Activity (NPA), and Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs (ATOD). Each kindergarten through fourth grade classroom is served by both a full-time lead educator and paraprofessional teaching assistant who continue with the same group of students for a two-year cyclical learning loop. There are four classrooms per grade level.

SEL Curriculum for WES

During the 2020-2021 program year, WES implemented their first year of an intentional SEL curriculum. When reflecting about overall needs, cost, and program success, the school made the decision to switch their SEL curriculum for the 2021-2022 program year to "Choose Love Enrichment Program" (CLEP), a program aligned with CASEL standards. Jesse Lewis' Choose Love Movement is a nonprofit organization founded by the mother of Jesse Lewis, a victim of the 2012 Sandy Hook Tragedy. In striving to uphold their mission to "create safer and more loving communities through no cost Character Social Emotional Development programs (CSED) that are suited for all stages of life" (Choose Love Movement, 2021a, para. 2), the "Choose Love Formula" consists of Courage, Gratitude, Forgiveness, and Compassion in Action (Choose Love Movement, 2021a). Furthermore, CLEP offers SEL programs suited from toddlers to adults. According to the Choose Love Movement (2021a), three million people across upwards of 120 countries have implemented the program's core values focusing on Growth

Mindset, Neuroscience, Mindfulness, Positive Psychology, Post-Traumatic Growth and Emotional Intelligence. Based on intended grade level, CLEP's lesson content and duration time varies.

Sample

Following consent from WES' administrative leadership, purposeful sampling of K-2 educators and paraprofessionals was conducted. The sample was determined based on the suggested age-range of early childhood education within an elementary school setting (in this case, ages five through eight) as defined by NAEYC. The sampling method proved to be the best technique as these participants directly experienced intentional SEL curriculum for the entire duration of the 2021-2022 school year, the central concept of this study (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

Participants

A total of 24 kindergarten, first, and second grade educators and paraprofessionals were invited to participate by administration and the researcher regarding their interest in participation within this study. A total of 13 out of 24 provided consent of participation within this study and qualified as it related to teaching in their role for the entire 2021/2022 program year. Due to participant scheduling conflicts, eight of the original 13 consenters followed through in their participation within the interview process. Participant interviews were purposefully not scheduled nor conducted beyond the month of June out of respect for the educators' summer schedule, fairness as it related to the memory of the educators' program year, and the overall timeline of this study. Table 1 provides the description of educator participants from WES based on participant responses to the first five interview questions.

Table 1*Weber Elementary School (WES) Educator Participants' Profiles*

Participant Pseudonym	Role (Lead Educator or Para-professional)	Grade Level (K, 1, or 2)	Years in Education (all age levels)	Years in Early Childhood Education (Birth-Age 8)	Years in Current Grade Level	Level of Education
Alex	Lead Educator	K	14	14	4	Master's Degree
Benji	Lead Educator	1	2	2	1	Bachelor's Degree
Charlie	Lead Educator	1	3	3	2	Bachelor's Degree
Devyn	Lead Educator	2	25	20	7	Bachelor's Degree/ Grad Cert.
Eli	Lead Educator	2	3	3	1	Master's Degree
Frances	Lead Educator	2	17	17	3	Bachelor's Degree
Gina	Para-professional	K	8	8	1	High School Diploma
Harper	Para-professional	2	23	23	8	High School Diploma /Some College

Research Design

Using a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Merriam, 2009), this research study was conducted through WES which had implemented a SEL curriculum for two consecutive program years (2020/2021 and 2021/222). The goal of the study was for the researcher to discover the perceptions of K-2 educators regarding their knowledge of and experiences with

SEL. The site of WES was selected based on access, availability, willingness, and overall mission and vision surrounding an advocacy of health and wellness.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted over a five month period (May 2022-September 2022). The purpose of collecting data from K-2 classroom educators was to gather information to categorize the responses into emerging themes in effort to discover the perceptions of K-2 educators overall. It is important to note that the researcher purposely did not include any interview questions regarding SEL specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic due to the nature and importance of SEL prior to the pandemic's onset. Paraprofessionals were included within the study due to their direct involvement with teaching and implementing the Choose Love Curriculum.

Qualitative data was collected through one round of semi-structured participant interviews. The researcher conducted six lead educator and two paraprofessional interviews over the course of three weeks in June 2022. Each interview consisted of 15 questions and lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. The researcher took part in member checking strategies to ensure agreement amongst each participant as it related to their responses shared during the interview process (Merriam, 2009). During each interview, the researcher ensured reliability in responses by asking for verbal verification in understanding (e.g., What I hear you saying is ___, is this correct?). Following professional transcription, the researcher examined the preliminary data and wrote memos stating the researcher's reflections, key ideas, reminders, and thoughts. A one-page summary outlining the interpretation of responses was provided to each participant within three weeks of the interview as consensus of response agreement, noting any implications potentially

inferred based on interview responses. Marginal note taking of the transcription data during examination was also employed.

The researcher took part in an inductive coding process to determine commonalities amongst each data set (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). A code is a “researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72). Miles and colleagues (2014) explain how codes represent symbolic meaning in relation to descriptive or inferential data compiled during a study. During the first cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014), particularly prominent or redundant ideas, words, and/or phrases stated by the interviewee were noted. The researcher took part in both descriptive (summarizing passages in the researcher’s terminology) and *in vivo* (direct phrases from interviewees) coding methods (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher summarized segments of data into inductive codes based on the transcription data.

During the second cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014), the researcher created pattern codes, or explanatory/inferential codes, grouping the first-cycle summaries into a smaller number of constructs. The researcher then engaged in the process of axial coding as recommended by Saldaña (2021) and Merriam (2009) to identify interconnections and categorize codes from the first and second cycles. Through this process, the researcher aimed to connect the data noting potential themes and constructs to the research questions.

Merriam (2009) emphasizes how “interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” is a viable method in ensuring comprehensive comparison and cross-check analysis (p. 216). The researcher analyzed the data using a within case-analysis of all educators followed by a cross-case inductive thematic analysis

where codes derived from lead educators and paraprofessionals as well as grade levels were reviewed comparatively to determine whether common themes were present.

Instrumentation

Participant Interview

Qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview process. The researcher developed the Participant Interview Template (Appendix C) comprised of 15 open-ended questions sought to discover the educator's background, overall understanding of SEL, experiences with SEL, priority of SEL in their classroom, and influence in which they believe SEL has on their students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each interview was conducted and recorded using the virtual platform Zoom. The interview was completed within 35 minutes or less. The initial transcription process was executed using Zoom, following an in-depth cross check of transcription by the researcher as described above.

Researcher Reflexivity and Subjectivity

According to Creswell (2013), a researcher's background and experiences highly influence how the researcher will interpret information gathered from qualitative research studies. Thus, it is critical for researchers to not only be aware of their biases, but intentionally and continuously reflect on their findings and analyses as it relates to their own subjectivity (Preissle, 2008). This process was a high priority for the researcher through the course of the study. Likewise, Peshkin (1988) enforces the importance of monitoring oneself to prevent personal sentiments to surface as impending data.

During the timeline of this study, the researcher considered themselves to be especially knowledgeable and passionate about the importance of the development based on past training experiences. In 2009, the researcher obtained a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education while

upholding a dual concentration in Early Childhood Education from Penn State University. Subsequently, the researcher's teaching career began serving children and families as a lead educator within pre-kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school settings. To benefit their own mental and physical health, the researcher began the practice of yoga and mindfulness in 2011 while simultaneously completing a Master of Science Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. In pursuit of helping adults strengthen mental and physical health, the researcher became certified as a yoga instructor in 2013, and thereafter, graduated from Drexel University in 2014.

Alongside exploring the benefits of living a mindful life, the researcher's personal and professional experiences in working with children and adults further developed their passion for advocacy in social and emotional learning and development in early childhood settings. In 2016, the researcher became a Mentor and Evaluator for the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte, a program that supports licensed North Carolina pre-kindergarten educators with the tools, resources, and mentoring and evaluation services necessary to successfully support children's growth using developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Through this experience, the researcher quickly learned how best practices based on research can be eloquently transpired into supporting educators effectively.

In 2017, the researcher began seeking a Ph.D. at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte in Curriculum and Instruction, focusing on Elementary Education. As a result of graduate research and career experience, the researcher developed a fear that such lack of such social and emotional skill development and the failure to be rooted in the teaching and learning of young children would continue to perpetuate. Likewise, the researcher discovered how little research has been conducted regarding SEL practices in early elementary grade classrooms,

where the foundation of not just academic, but also social and emotional development are established (NAEYC, 1986; 2021). In completion of this study, the researcher hopes to give back to further advance SEL curriculum within early childhood classrooms in elementary school settings.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Following May 2022 IRB approval, the researcher gained permission for study execution from WES administration. Consent was obtained from full-time educator participants teaching within a kindergarten, first, or second grade classroom for the duration of the 2021-2022 program year. The researcher informed all participants of their sole voluntary involvement within this research, and that anonymity would remain throughout the duration of and following the study. Participants were also reminded of the option to withdraw from participation at any time.

The researcher maintained participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the site and educator names. All interview audio recordings, summary consent documents, transcription records, and document data were temporarily stored on a University IRB approved platform. Finally, coded data was made available to the researcher's dissertation chair for the purpose of data verification, coding, and analysis.

Member-checking was conducted by the researcher through verbal verification in understanding each participant's responses accurately. Additionally, a one-page summary outlining the interpretation of responses was provided to each participant within three weeks of the interview for consensus of response agreement. Interview questions were piloted by the researcher prior to the study using a present educator outside of this study. An introductory meeting or informational session for participants regarding the interview questions or process

was not conducted. The interview process followed a semi-structured protocol as recommended by Guest et al. (2006). Finally, all twenty-four kindergarten, first, and second grade educators were invited to participate at the same time (during a scheduled in-person meeting with the lead researcher in May 2022) and all participants engaged in the interview process within the same timeline (during the month of June 2022), ensuring the avoidance of elite sample bias (Miles et al., 2014) and to respect the educators' summer break schedule.

Limitations

The researcher's biography illustrates the potential subjectivity that was crucial for the researcher to be aware and mindful of throughout the study. Furthermore, it is important to note that the researcher was the solitary instrument in the administration and analysis of the research. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stress how "making sense of large amounts of data, reducing raw data, identifying what is significant, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" could serve as a challenge to the researcher (p. 9) Due to the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher was not able to spend time within the site itself. Therefore, observations were not conducted. The established relationship amongst UNC Charlotte and WES allowed for the researcher to use a virtual meeting platform to conduct administrative meetings and interviews.

The mission of the site had previously surrounded a health and wellness approach prior to this study. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that educators at WES may not necessarily choose to work at a school in which they do not believe in the mission and vision. Third and fourth grade teachers were not selected as a part of the sample size due to the definition of early childhood (birth through age eight) as described by NAEYC (2021) in the elementary school setting. Finally, educators in the second year of their learning loop could potentially have an

underlying bias as it relates to having a deeper understanding of and established relationship with the students in their classroom.

This study does not reflect an evaluation of any kind (SEL curriculum, educator performance, child outcomes), and exclusively provides a descriptive analysis of narrative data. It is important to recognize the generalizability of the sample size (eight K-2 educator participants), keeping in mind this study takes place within one elementary school, and therefore is not a reflection of all K-2 educator experiences. Furthermore, the researcher conducted the interviews during the month of June, a time when all educators were recently out of the classroom due to summer vacation. This circumstance could potentially alter participants' memories from the prior school year. Although the researcher engaged in member checking strategies, the interview was a one-time examination of participants' perceptions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods used within this research study to answer the research questions. Qualitative data was gathered by the researcher through the administration of semi-structured interviews. The researcher analyzed data gathered from each educator to conduct a within-case analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis of lead educators and paraprofessionals as well as grade level. The setting, sample, instrumentation, timeline, procedures, researcher biography, validity, trustworthiness, and limitations were examined.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals (teaching assistants) who teach SEL in kindergarten through second grade. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?

Description of Case and Participants

A total of 24 kindergarten, first, and second grade WES lead educators and paraprofessionals were invited to participate in this study. The researcher informed all prospective participants of their sole voluntary involvement within this research, and that anonymity would remain throughout the duration of and following the study should they choose to participate. All participants were also given the option to withdraw from participation at any time. A total of 13 of the initial 24 invitees showed interest in providing consent of participation within this study, and qualified as it related to teaching in their role for the entire 2021-2022 program year.

The researcher scheduled a Zoom interview with each of the 13 interested participants through reserving a 45-minute block of time that best fit the participant's schedule during the month of June. The researcher sent each participant a calendar invitation for the interview, as well as a reminder email prior to the scheduled interview. Due to participant scheduling conflicts, eight of the original 13 consenters were able to follow through with participation in the interview process. All interviews lasted 35 minutes or less.

Participant interviews were purposefully not scheduled nor conducted beyond the month of June out of respect for the educators' summer schedule, fairness as it relates to the memory of each educator's program year, and the overall timeline of this study. The researcher maintained participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the site and educator names (see Table 1). All interview audio recordings, summary consent documents, transcription records, and document data were temporarily stored on the University IRB approved platform. Member-checking was conducted by the researcher through verbal verification in understanding each participant's responses. Additionally, a one-page summary outlining the interpretation of responses was provided to each participant within three weeks of the interview for consensus of response agreement. Interview questions were initially piloted by the researcher prior to the study using a present full-time early childhood educator outside of this study and site. An introductory meeting or informational session for participants regarding the interview questions or process was not conducted. As shown in Chapter Three, Table 1 provides the description of educator participants from WES based on participant responses to the first five interview questions.

Table 1*Weber Elementary School (WES) Educator Participants' Profiles*

Participant Pseudonym	Role (Lead Educator or Para-professional)	Grade Level (K, 1, or 2)	Years in Education (all age levels)	Years in Early Childhood Education (Birth-Age 8)	Years in Current Grade Level	Level of Education
Alex	Lead Educator	K	14	14	4	Master's Degree
Benji	Lead Educator	1	2	2	1	Bachelor's Degree
Charlie	Lead Educator	1	3	3	2	Bachelor's Degree
Devyn	Lead Educator	2	25	20	7	Bachelor's Degree/ Grad Cert.
Eli	Lead Educator	2	3	3	1	Master's Degree
Frances	Lead Educator	2	17	17	3	Bachelor's Degree
Gina	Para-professional	K	8	8	1	High School Diploma
Harper	Para-professional	2	23	23	8	High School Diploma /Some College

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview process. The researcher developed the Participant Interview Template (Appendix C) prior to the implementation of the study. Fifteen open-ended questions sought to discover the educators' professional background, overall understanding of SEL, experiences with SEL, priority of SEL in their classroom, and influence in which they believe SEL has on their students. Due to the

current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, each interview was conducted and recorded using the virtual platform titled “Zoom”. Each interview was completed within 35 minutes or less, and was audio recorded and transcribed using the Zoom platform.

Coding Methods

The researcher began the data analysis process by engaging in an in-depth cross-check of transcription of each interview, making any necessary changes to the transcription based on accuracy of the audio recording. Following transcription, the researcher began the first cycle of open coding, noting prominent and/or repetitive ideas, words, and phrases stated by the interviewee within each of the eight interviews (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). The researcher took part in both descriptive (summarizing passages/phrases using the researcher’s terminology) and in vivo (direct phrases from interviewees) coding methods (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher summarized segments of data into inductive codes based on the individualized transcription data.

The findings of each K-2 educator were analyzed by the researcher separately during the first cycle of coding. During the second cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014), the researcher created pattern codes, or explanatory/inferential codes, grouping the first-cycle summaries into a smaller number of constructs. The researcher then engaged in the process of axial coding as recommended by Saldaña (2021) and Merriam (2009) to identify interconnections and categorize codes from the first and second cycles. Through this process, the researcher aimed to connect the data noting potential themes and constructs to the research questions.

Development of Categories and Themes

The researcher engaged in the process of development and refinement of categories based on the inductive coding in congruence with ongoing discussions among the highly qualified and

appointed dissertation chair, Dr. Amy Good. Various categories were concluded from the axial coding process, creating specific categories led to the identification of overarching themes. Each theme was connected to each of the research questions. Each of the four research questions were used as the foundation of the organization of categories and themes.

Cross-Case Analysis

Educator Role

The researcher conducted a cross-case analysis based on educator role. During this process, the researcher reviewed the responses between lead educators and paraprofessionals comparatively to determine whether common themes were present specifically among roles (lead educators versus paraprofessionals). No significant data was found indicating different perspectives among roles specifically. Common categories and codes were present among both lead educators and paraprofessionals throughout each theme.

Grade Level

The researcher conducted a cross-case analysis based on educator grade level. During this process, the researcher reviewed the responses between kindergarten, first, and second grade level educators comparatively to determine whether common themes were present specifically among grade levels. No significant data was found indicating different perspectives among grade levels. Common categories and codes were present among all grade level educators throughout each theme.

Discussion of Themes

Seven themes emerged during the data coding process: 1) Defining Social Emotional Learning, 2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, 3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, 4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, 5) High Priority of SEL, 6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and

7) Evidence of SEL Skills. Each theme is discussed and related to each of the four research questions and are supported by categorical and coded evidence.

Theme One: Defining Social Emotional Learning

Theme one, Defining Social Emotional Learning, contributes to research question one (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?) The researcher found that participant responses to interview questions six (Describe your understanding of “Social Emotional Learning”. How would you define it?) and 10 (In what ways do you promote social and emotional growth within your students?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The categories supporting this theme include describing SEL skills and terminology and difficult to define. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Theme One: Defining Social Emotional Learning: Categories and Frequency of Codes

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Describing SEL Skills and Terminology	
(a) building community and relationships	7
(b) child independence, confidence, and individuality	3
(c) child interactions and problem solving	5
(d) Choose Love Program	7
(e) positive reinforcement	2
(f) self-management	5
(g) understanding and communicating emotions	6
(h) whole child approach	7
Category Two: Difficult to Define	
(a) detailed and complex concept	3

Theme One, Category One: Describing SEL Skills and Terminology

Throughout educator interviews, participants were asked to describe their understanding of SEL. The following descriptive phrases/terminology emerged: (a) building community and relationships, (b) child independence, confidence, and individuality, (c) child interactions and problem solving, (d) Choose Love Program, (e) positive reinforcement, (f) self-management, (g) understanding and communicating emotions, and (h) whole child approach.

Theme One, Category One, Code A: Building Community and Relationships. Seven educators discussed how building community and relationships is an integral part of SEL. Devyn stated how her class “is just big on relationship building” in both peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult aspects. “I can honestly say, I feel like by the end of the year every single student trusted us,” she shared, emphasizing how developing trust is crucial when building relationships with students. Harper declared the importance of giving “everybody a chance to really get to know some other people.” Gina indicated how making connections, both amongst children peer-to-peer as well as child-to-adult, constitutes as an aspect SEL. Benji shared how skills such as kindness and respect specifically play a role in SEL development. Likewise, Charlie noted how developing empathy towards others plays a key role in SEL. Frances shared the importance of unification, specifying how “kids need to know that we're a whole community supporting them. It's not just their family. It's all of us there to help.”

Theme One, Category One, Code B: Child Independence, Confidence, and Individuality. Three educators discussed child independence and individuality when sharing their understanding of SEL. Devyn discussed how SEL plays a part in developing children’s autonomy, and how building confidence is a crucial element of SEL. Eli indicated that individualization and acceptance is another key factor, emphasizing how SEL is “making sure to

understand that each student is their own individual person.” Similarly, Frances shared how a supportive SEL environment is when students can “be who they are and express who they are.”

Theme One, Category One, Code C: Child Interactions and Problem Solving. Five educators highlighted the notion of child interactions among one another as an integral part of SEL. Alex shared how SEL requires intentional conversations among students. Charlie spoke about interactions among students, stating that SEL is when they are “taking ownership with their friendships.” Comparably, Devyn mentioned SEL is how “children interact with one another,” and during peer conflict, she encourages students to “talk and listen to one another and do not interrupt.” Harper referenced ways in which SEL can help eliminate peer bullying. In effort to avoid such behavior, she encourages her students to talk out their concerns with one another. Benji too referenced student interactions, sharing how SEL is “teaching children how to interact with each other in a healthy way to be successful in relationships and communication”, and encourages her students to “treat others the way you want to be treated” in effort to promote positive relationships.

Theme One, Category One, Code D: Choose Love Program. Seven educators referenced the Choose Love Program when sharing their understanding of SEL. “Choose Love is the main focus,” Alex stated. Educators shared how the Choose Love Curriculum aids in helping students understand and manage feelings and lends itself to creating a structure in promoting students’ SEL growth and development. During morning meeting and closing circle, Alex’s students share any situation(s) that come to mind in relation to the lesson and ways to handle it. Eli explained the layout of the curriculum, stating how each section of the curriculum was a different SEL component:

For example, one section would be about forgiveness. One section would be about gratitude. One section will be about compassion, you know. Each section was a different subject, and then within that section for five or six weeks, you would go over and talk about more in depth, whatever that subject was. And with that there would be videos to watch, maybe a read aloud. Maybe a journal entry prompt, maybe in an activity that they would do as a whole class to show something. Different things like that throughout each week that covered whatever topic that we were talking about was helpful.

Frances also shared the use of journaling in her classroom:

I mean, some children still struggle to be able to vocalize their thoughts. I think being able to write it down, or draw a picture kind of helped us get a better understanding, especially for children, that still were struggling to find the words express how they were feeling.

Charlie mentioned her students making connections made from the Choose Love Program, and how she prioritizes celebrating when students demonstrate and apply skills learned from the lesson. Both Harper and Gina shared how they apply concepts presented in any given Choose Love Lesson to situations that arise throughout the week with their students.

Theme One, Category One, Code E: Positive Reinforcement. Two educators noted positive reinforcement as a prominent factor associated with SEL. “When we notice the child handling a situation the ‘right’ way, be it an argument or something happened, if we see a kid initiate a healthy apologetic conversation or dialogue, they get a lot of praise when that is noticed,” Benji reported. “I noticed a student taking deep breaths, so I called them out and said ‘I am really glad you are doing that and that you’re ready to join us. You recognized your own need to have to calm down.’” Benji went on to say that recognizing and reinforcing students’

positive behaviors and choices is especially noteworthy during their interactions at recess.

Charlie also shared how she relays positive reinforcement to her students when she sees them applying a learned SEL concept such as verbalizing emotions.

Theme One, Category One, Code F: Self-Management. Five educators discussed elements of self-management and regulation when sharing their understanding of SEL. Breathwork was a commonality among Benji, Alex, and Gina. Benji also shared details about her designated “calm down” space in place of a behavioral chart:

I have students that need a lot of work when it comes to self-regulation. I tried behavior chart systems to help. For example, if a student has a meltdown, they would cross a circle off the chart that he needed a reminder to calm down. The point of the chart was supposed to be crossing off a lot of circles, so next time I am upset and I take deep breaths, then I won't have to cross off a circle and I will be able to handle it myself. However, she described her displeasure in utilizing that strategy as she felt it was negative and not motivating for students.

Harper and Frances also shared about their quiet corner. “We have a quiet corner that allows them to just relax,” Harper stated. “We might put a timer on, and they can rejoin us. And then, you know, sometimes they don't want to talk about it, and sometimes we'll talk about it.” Frances echoed, explaining the ways in which she utilizes it in her classroom. “We always had a quiet spot, you know. There's always a handful [of students] every year that just could benefit from a quiet spot of going to calm down before even being able to have a conversation about what happened.”

Theme One, Category One, Code G: Understanding and Communicating Emotions. Six educators shared their viewpoint expressing a relation between SEL and understanding and

communicating emotions. Alex explained SEL as “what's going on emotionally, and how that affects them.” Similarly, Eli stated how SEL focuses most on a child’s “heart and emotions.” Charlie shared how SEL is the “ability to describe how they are feeling in ways other than mad, sad, or happy” and “using bigger words with deeper understanding of what those words are.” Frances emphasized how optimal SEL happens in an environment where students can “explore emotions and understand how important it is to be able to understand their own emotions.”

Devyn reflected on an experience she had with a student who progressed in her development of the SEL skills of understanding and communicating emotions, sharing how the student “came in very shy and didn't know how to facilitate play with others” and “didn't know how to speak up for herself when something bothered her.” Devyn said that, by the end of the school year, this student had learned the skills to speak up to both her teachers and her peers, letting them know when something was bothering her or if she didn’t like something. Likewise, Gina also stated how she encourages her students to voice how they are feeling while also asking students to reflect on what caused the specific emotion that they are experiencing.

Theme One, Category One, Code H: Whole Child Approach. Seven educators described the whole child approach as a crucial part of their understanding of SEL. “It’s not just academics,” Alex expressed. “It’s what’s going on emotionally, and how they interact with others. You can't, you know, teach all these children in your classroom without, you know, addressing social issues and emotional issues.” Both Gina and Harper shared their viewpoint that teaching and learning is not just academic-based but teaching the whole child. Benji noted how SEL must come before academics, “because if the kids are very low in social emotional development, then those are gonna be problems that will get in the way of their academic learning.” Similarly, Eli stated how SEL is “first and foremost, even above teaching academics,

is teaching them as a whole,” and that SEL is “as important as academics, and I don't think that it's prioritized enough. And it should be.”

Eli, Frances, and Devyn commented on how SEL is the child's overall well-being. “I feel like our country is so big right now on catching them academically. And how, ‘We gotta get there! We gotta get it!’,” Devyn shared. She elaborated, saying:

But I feel like we need to catch up to them. Like, we need to slow down a little bit and say, hold on a second. These kids were outside of the real world for a year and a half, and we need to meet them where they are. And if we can meet them where they are, then they're gonna thrive, and they're gonna get there. But we're just shoving it down their throats and overwhelming them and giving them anxiety.

Theme One, Category Two: Difficult to Define

Educators were asked to define SEL. In crafting their definition, the notions of SEL as a detailed and complex concept emerged.

Theme One, Category Two, Code A: Detailed and Complex Concept. Three educators noted their difficulty in defining SEL. “I have a hard time being concise,” Benji stated, whereas Devyn commented that the idea of SEL is “complex.” Frances noted how defining SEL is “really hard to put into words to be honest. I feel like we've always done it, but to be able to actually define it, it's a totally different thing.”

Theme Two: Preparedness in Teaching SEL

Theme two, Preparedness in Teaching SEL, contributes to research question two (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?) The researcher found that participant responses to interview questions seven (What are your experiences (work experiences, educational experiences, professional development

experiences) as it relates to Social Emotional Learning?), eight (In what ways would you describe your familiarity with incorporating Social Emotional Learning and skill development into your teaching practices?), and 15 (Do you find there are any barriers or challenges as it relates to implementing Social Emotional Learning?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The categories supporting this theme include Educator Preparation Program experience, school setting, other teaching experience, and personal experiences. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Two: Preparedness in Teaching SEL: Categories and Frequency of Codes

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Educator Preparation Program Experience	
(a) lack of pertinent learning opportunities/coursework	
4	
Category Two: School Setting	
(a) school culture	6
(b) school professional development	3
(c) school resources	3
Category Three: Other Teaching Experience	
(a) early childhood teaching experiences	2
Category Four: Personal Experience	
(a) personal relationships	3

Theme Two, Category One: Educator Preparation Program Experience

Educators were asked to describe their familiarity with incorporating Social Emotional Learning and skill development into their teaching practices. Upon reflection, educators discussed their experience with previous Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs). The concept of lack of training and coursework emerged.

Theme Two, Category One, Code A: Lack of Pertinent Learning

Opportunities/Coursework. Four educators commented that their lack of preparation in teaching SEL attributed to their associated EPP. “I would say, and I think a lot of people would probably agree, that I wish we went through more of like, social emotional teaching training in college. Because of how foundational and important it is to know how to teach children,” Benji stated. “I really wish we had more classroom and behavior management. Like classes and field experience, or experiences that focused on learning how to teach that.”

Charlie also shared her frustration with her EPP experience. “I feel like most of what I got from UNCC was about cultural and like, diversity stuff. Like, I don't remember anything in particular about social emotional learning.” Eli echoed Benji and Charlie, expressing how her undergraduate coursework never really “talked about that” and expressed her desire in wanting to learn more about teaching SEL. Frances reported that she had never experienced any SEL training until she began teaching at WES.

Theme Two, Category Two: School Setting

In describing their familiarity with incorporating Social Emotional Learning and skill development into their teaching practices, educators discussed the impact of school setting. The ideas of (a) school mission/culture, (b) school professional development, and (c) school resources were discussed.

Theme Two, Category Two, Code A: School Culture. Six educators discussed how school mission and culture affects their experiences and familiarity with SEL. “The school I’m in now has a much bigger focus on SEL,” Benji stated, sharing that this philosophy is why she feels so content at her school. “At this school, across the board, it is a strongly held belief with my admin pressing it upon us and the kids, and we’re all like, just really on board with how foundational it is.” Alex and Eli echoed Benji, stating how WES places a big focus on SEL. “This is the only place that I’ve known that’s officially done a SEL curriculum,” Eli shared. “Which I think blows my mind. Because it’s, I believe it’s so very important, but that’s the only experience I’ve had. I can think of, you know, a couple of schools that I that I’ve been a part of that it just doesn’t seem to be a priority.”

Frances too shared this view of WES’ culture, stating “I think I’ve taught 17 years, but it really wasn’t until I started at WES where really became a part of my daily curricula.” Upon reflecting on first moments teaching at WES, she shared “For the first time, I remember walking into a classroom and thinking like, yes, like this is what should be happening.” She continued highlighting WES’ culture, saying:

There’s a lot of like silent pull aside “let’s talk about this”. If you go down our hallways, it’s really special to see that. Like there’s usually always a private conversation happening in the hallway to talk to a child about how they’re feeling, or there’s some sort of movement break for a child that might need a little bit of extra movement before they can have a conversation.

Frances concluded her thought by sharing “People remember that you are a kind person. And I think we make that one of the biggest focuses at our school.”

Charlie attributed her familiarity to SEL dating back to her volunteer work at the school during her high school years. “There's just a different understanding, and acceptance and support that the kids have for each other, because of instilling the importance of that social emotional learning,” she conveyed, explaining that this emphasis on SEL was very opposite from her undergraduate clinical experience. Benji also mentioned how WES was very different from the school she was previously employed at and shared how she vividly sees the “positive effects of focusing on it so much more in the school.” “I wish that we did in my previous school as well. I think it would have helped me and the kids function a lot better in many ways,” she stated. She went on to say that “the public school I was in last year, it was kind of like, SEL was kind of like this cherry on top things like ‘oh, and we also need to do this’, when really it should have been more foundational.”

Contradictory to Benji’s experience, Devyn shared her positive experience of working in a prior school whose philosophy placed much emphasis SEL skills such as child autonomy and ownership. Eli emphasized the importance of SEL reflected in all school’s values. “I think more schools need to realize, especially now, that all of the chaos going on, they need to know how to handle things and how to handle all the big things that are going on in the world.”

Theme Two, Category Two, Code B: School Professional Development. Three educators discussed how their experiences and familiarity with SEL is impacted by school professional development. “I mean honestly, I feel like since I’ve been at WES, I feel like I’ve been more familiar and more educated through staff development, online professional development,” Alex affirmed. “And you know, our team gets together and we go over different things, like how we can better, you know, serve our students in that social and emotional realm.” Charlie and Harper stated how their knowledge of SEL has grown through WES’ offerings of

various professional development opportunities, including those associated with the Choose Love programs, assorted online workshops, and certain professional learning opportunities conducted by the school's social worker.

Theme Two, Category Two, Code C: School Resources. Three educators discussed how their experiences and familiarity with SEL is impacted by the availability of school resources. One aspect of school resources was the notion of a full-time paraprofessional. "We really utilize our teacher assistants, so someone can continue teaching and leading the class while the other teacher goes and addresses those issues" Alex noted. "I can't imagine how difficult it would be if I didn't have that extra person in the classroom with me. I definitely think it's easier for us because we do have that other teacher in the classroom." Benji reflected upon a time that she did not have a full-time paraprofessional in the classroom. "If I had a TA to help me handle situations like that in my school last year, that would have been a world of difference." Gina stated how SEL was "fairly easy to implement" because she was fortunate enough to have the necessary resources in place to do so at WES. "If you don't have a support person that can hone in on the those children, they kind of get lost in the cracks."

Theme Two, Category Three: Other Teaching Experience

Educators reflected on other teaching experience when discussing their familiarity and preparedness with SEL. Specifically, early childhood teaching experience was referenced.

Theme Two, Category Three, Code A: Early Childhood Teaching Experience. Two educators referenced their past teaching experience in early childhood classrooms as a contributing factor toward their familiarity with teaching SEL. "I taught preschool before working at WES. I learned a lot of what I know there, just by working at a school where we believed more in independence, even at a younger age, teaching children how to talk to one

another rather than having somebody fix everything for them,” Devyn shared. “That was kind of the core, I think of where my understanding took off with how I do things now.” Gina echoed Devyn’s experience, sharing how her early childhood teaching experience also impacted her understanding of SEL:

As a preschool teacher, the just checking in on kids and of course, getting personal details about their family and things to help understand where they were coming from. And maybe some of the behaviors we might see, or maybe a sadness, or whatever a three-year-old would be dealing with at that time.

Theme Two, Category Four: Personal Experiences

Educators drew conclusions from their own personal experiences when discussing their familiarity and preparedness with SEL. Such experiences included personal relationships.

Theme Two, Category Four, Code A: Personal Relationships. Three educators referenced individual personal experiences playing a role in their understanding of the concept of SEL. Devyn commented that current suicide rates in adolescents are exceptionally high. “I have a personal friend whose daughter almost succeeded in that,” she asserted, followed by commenting on her experience as a mother. “I’m raising a 16-year-old son by myself as it is, and I see the effects of what everything is taken on these kids. So, it [SEL] is something I believe is more important than anything.” Devyn continued by sharing more about her role as mother impacting her perspective of SEL:

I mean, he started high school in the middle of all this. And I’ve seen him become, slowly become a man through the thick of everything going on in the world, and I’ve seen the toll it’s taken on him, and he had a good foundation. So, I can only imagine the kids who don’t start off with a good foundation.

Devyn concluded by sharing that if children are not set up with essential resources and support necessary to acquire a solid social emotional foundation, “it's going to be even harder when they go through puberty.”

Frances and Gina also shared how being a mother played a vital part in their understanding of SEL. “I think when I became a mom, that kind of helped facilitate that even more, because I, you know, you're kind of doing it with your own kids as well,” Frances said. “Now that I’m a teacher and a parent, like, I have learned how important, I want my own child to, to just be a good person. Like I want her to understand other people's feelings.” Gina shared how her home experience also played a significant role in her classroom teaching. “In the process of beginning our adoption, I became very aware of trauma,” she shared. “And with that, I started to learn a little bit more about, kind of the brain and, and sort of things that children go through.” Gina attributed her knowledge of incorporating SEL skills into her classroom and teaching to these experiences, sharing what a difference it made, both for her students and own child.

Theme Three: Barriers of Teaching SEL

Theme three, Barriers of Teaching SEL, contributes to research question two (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?) The researcher found that participant responses to interview question 15 (Do you find there are any barriers or challenges as it relates to implementing Social Emotional Learning?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The category supporting this theme includes challenges in implementing SEL. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 4.

Table 4*Theme Three: Barriers of Teaching SEL: Categories and Frequency of Codes*

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Challenges in Implementing SEL	
(a) lack of community support	4
(b) lack of SEL teaching preparation	3
(c) lack of sufficient time/priority	4
(d) paraprofessional implementation of SEL	1

Theme Three, Category One: Challenges in Implementing SEL

Educators shared their perspective relating to barriers and challenges of implementing SEL. Such barriers included (a) lack of community support, (b) lack of SEL teaching preparation, (c) lack of sufficient time/priority, and (d) paraprofessional implementation of SEL.

Theme Three, Category One, Code A: Lack of Community Support. Four educators stated that lack of community support serves as a challenge of implementing SEL. “It can be difficult when you feel like what you're teaching a child in school is not aligning with what they're being taught at home,” Benji acknowledged. She shared an example of a child demonstrating disrespectful behaviors at school, and when brought to the parent’s attention, she witnessed the parent tell her child “For whatever you reason, your teachers don't get it. They don't like it that way at school. So, you kind of unfortunately, you're gonna have to do it their way.” Both Harper and Charlie also expressed their frustration with parental philosophies. “I think the biggest thing is not all homes find value in the same things,” Charlie highlighted, following up by saying:

I just feel like the things that we value at home may not be that we're like valuing everybody or valuing others like we should. And so I think that that's sometimes difficult when they've learned and they've learned behaviors from home, it's hard to break those behaviors and, I mean, you can do your best to break those behaviors, but a lot of times that's difficult if at home doesn't see the social emotional learning and the value of it that we do at school.

Eli spoke about her feelings towards other school members' viewpoints of SEL, sharing "I don't think enough people, teachers, students, administration in general, think high enough of it to even put it into practice. And that's a barrier as well, just not realizing the need for it."

Theme Three, Category One, Code B: Lack of SEL Teaching Preparation. Three educators indicated that lack of teaching preparation attributed to their challenges in implementing SEL. "As far as like, school to become a teacher, like, they don't really talk about that [SEL]" Eli shared. "So, I mean, I skilled one to 10, I would say maybe a four as far as familiarity [with SEL]." Benji reiterated Eli's point, stating "I really wish we had more classroom and behavior management [in college]. Like classes and field experience, or experiences that focused on learning how to teach that." Charlie too said most of her EPP experience was culture and diversity driven, lacking any SEL content whatsoever.

Theme Three, Category One, Code C: Lack of Sufficient Time/Priority. Four educators indicated that time was a profound challenge of implementing SEL effectively. "There is not enough time in the day, ever," Devyn revealed in sharing her concern with time. "A lot of times, you're rush rush rush, and then you can't get to everything you wish you could get to with them emotionally." She went on to share:

I strongly feel like we need to put the brakes on a little bit academically, because there is so much stuff that we have to cram in every day. And I felt like this year more than ever, there was so much. And it was like, hold on a second, like this child can't get through the door in 20 minutes to unpack her backpack and get herself organized. And now you want me to throw this test and this test? It was too much. And a lot of times, it's like, you have to decide okay, do I get to this lesson because I have this assessment to do and report cards, or can I slow down and change it? And this child's really upset and asked a question about death, and I need to stop my lesson and talk about this for 20 minutes. So, I think, finding more balance with the time and realizing that if we can slow down a little bit and give them what they need, they're gonna, like I said earlier, they're gonna be where they need to be by the time to graduate high school.

Alex echoed Devyn, stating “As teachers we want to get through our day, we want to check off our list, we want to get this and this done. And I think that's really the biggest, you know, the biggest challenge so in a nutshell is time and prioritizing [SEL].” She went on to say “You know, you've got 20 some students in your classroom, and it is busy. And you know, just making that time to make sure that, you know, you make a big deal out of those little issues that may seem little to us, but are huge to them.” Eli shared her struggle similar to Alex in finding the time to prioritize SEL. “I would probably say that, even though we do have a, or we're supposed to have a set time for the curriculum that we have, I think that probably one of the biggest barriers is time,” she stated. “That, even though we do have a set time for it, it's always been one of those things where, you know, it's one more thing to add to our already crammed day. And sometimes I feel like it's easy to just push it aside, or to shorten it. Because we have a million other things to

do, and, you know, only the eight-hour school day.” Frances echoed Eli’s frustration with lack sufficient time for SEL:

I wish I had more time. I wish I could dedicate more to that [SEL]. There's so many things coming at us at one time, and trying to make sure we could get to it all or like maybe a certain situation should have been given more time to have a more personal conversation, but we were in a hurry. So, I think a lot of that is just time, you know, like how much time we have to dedicate to each little situation. I think that is an ongoing battle.

Theme Three, Category One, Code D: Paraprofessional Implementation of SEL.

One educator shared that paraprofessional implementation of SEL was a barrier in her classroom. “If the lead teacher and the TA aren't on the same page about how to handle a situation that is an opportunity for SEL teaching, that can be difficult,” Benji noted. “I've had a hard time just kind of getting on the same page about the way that I think a conversation with students in an SEL learning opportunity should be handled.” She emphasized how she feels like it is crucial for students to learn “correct” SEL skills, sharing:

I kind of have a hard time like knowing, okay, should, like, I talk with her about that later, or should I step in and kind of redirect. And, you know, I’m like, oh, I don't wanna be like a control freak about this. But, I did this year end up doing kind of a lot of stepping in and redirecting. And it put some tension between me and the person I’m working with.

Theme Four: Educator Roles and Responsibilities

Theme four, Educator Roles and Responsibilities, contributes to research question two (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it

relates to SEL?) The researcher found that the participant responses to interview questions 14 (What do you believe your role is in developing your student's Social Emotional Learning skills?) and 10 (In what ways do you promote social and emotional growth within your students?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The categories supporting this theme include lead educator roles and responsibilities and paraprofessional roles and responsibilities. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Theme Four: Educator Roles and Responsibilities: Categories and Frequency of Codes

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Lead Educator Roles and Responsibilities	
(a) facilitator of classroom learning environment	8
(b) facilitator of home/school relationship	5
(c) implicit teaching of SEL	8
Category Two: Paraprofessional Roles and Responsibilities	
(a) explicit teaching of SEL	5

Theme Four, Category One: Lead Educator Roles and Responsibilities

In describing experiences with SEL, educators discussed roles and responsibilities pertinent to the lead educator. The concepts of (a) facilitator of classroom learning environment, (b) facilitator of home/school relationship, and (c) implicit teaching of SEL emerged.

Theme Four, Category One, Code A: Facilitator of Classroom Learning

Environment. Eight educators highlighted how the lead educator's role in developing students' SEL skills is their responsibility of facilitating the classroom learning environment. Modeling

appropriate social emotional behaviors and problem-solving skills was noted as a prominent teaching component for lead educators by Alex and Charlie. Charlie and Devyn also emphasized the significance of providing reminders as necessary referencing past concepts learned. “We’re huge on our class promise,” Devyn shared. “And every time I see something going on with the class as a whole or with you know, more of the general population in the classroom, we’ll go back and we’ll read the promise, and we’ll talk about what it means.” Devyn elaborated on this practice, sharing:

One of the biggest things that I go over is one the last line: “This is who we are, even when no one is watching.” And I talk to them a lot about, you know, integrity, and how making sure that you’re not just doing the right thing because somebody’s telling you to or somebody’s watching, or because you could get in trouble. It’s because it’s the right thing to do.

Modeling and fostering relationship building was also noted as an essential lead educator responsibility. Gina noted how vital it is to “just make a connection” with her students, and how critical it is to get to know their “personal life.” “We need to know all those things and the details before we just make an assumption that somebody’s upset because of a situation that might not be the case,” she elaborated. Eli mentioned how building a partnership with her students is a top priority for her as well:

I wanna come alongside of them and partner with them as their figuring out what social emotional learning is, and what emotions are. And how to deal with hard situations. You know, I don’t wanna come down on top of them. I want to come beside them as more of a partner and walk with them through whatever it is that they need to learn or walk through.

Frances shared the importance modeling interactions with both among her students and colleagues at WES:

I think it's showing them, not only how, like, through conversations, but also like seeing it in the way I interact with them. Or how I interact with my coworkers, or how I might handle situation. Like I feel like I'm there to help not only facilitate it, but also model it that they're seeing what it looks like. And that I follow the same guidance that they're following, that I'm, you know, following through on how I want to be treated, and how I'm treating other people.

Harper also emphasized collaboration among one another, stating how she pairs students in different ways to maximize group work experiences and build relationships among peers.

Creating and maintaining a safe environment for all students was referenced by Benji, Devyn, Harper, and Charlie and as a prime obligation of lead educators. Devyn noted how her “biggest job every day” is to keep her students safe, specifying how safety is not just physical, but emotional as well. Harper echoed the importance of safety, sharing “I feel like that is my role, that when they come, that they feel safe, and if they need help or something, they’re not afraid to ask me.” Likewise, Charlie acknowledged that, without educators placing emphasis on SEL, “your classroom may not feel like a safe place for all of your students, and those students that maybe don't feel that it's a safe place, they're not gonna learn anything.”

Individualizing based on student need and learning style was also noted as a prominent responsibility of lead educators. Eli correlated differentiating SEL to that of academic counterparts. “When it comes to [teaching SEL], there's that, you know, making sure to teach differentiation, the way you know you teach math reading, science, whatever.” Frances also highlighted the importance of welcoming individuality, sharing that educators are met with the

duty to “create an environment where they're able to be who they are and express who they are.” Benji highlighted the importance of setting up the classroom environment in a way that supports SEL skills, such as by adding an area designated for self-regulation. Eli stated that it is the lead educator’s responsibility to provide appropriate classroom resources, such as fidget toys, for students in effort to successfully meet unique SEL needs.

Eli, Devyn, Gina, and Frances illustrated how teaching specific emotion words and ways to cope with emotions was also seen as a crucial role for lead educators. “I definitely feel like, with the events of everything, with Covid, with everything, with George Floyd, with Black Lives Matter, just everything in general, that these kids really need to know more about what's going on around them and learn how to have compassion,” Devyn shared. “So that for me was something I put my heart and soul into, and I saw amazing things come out of it.” Frances stated how the lead educator’s biggest role is “helping them understand their feelings and other people's feelings” and to “teach children how to be empathetic, and how to care about others, and how to say I'm sorry when you know you've done, you know, like you've made a mistake.” Finally, Alex and Frances stated that the overall duration of the time that the lead educator has with students also plays a significant role on SEL skill development. “I mean we're with them a long time throughout the day. So, I definitely think I have a huge impact,” Alex shared, whereas Frances noted how SEL is “a part of our constant interaction with them.”

Theme Four, Category One, Code B: Facilitator of Home/School Relationship. Five educators highlighted how the lead educator’s role in developing students’ SEL skills is through facilitation of a positive home and school relationship. Benji declared how partnering with parents to “teach children how to function socially and emotionally” is crucial for a student’s SEL development and success. Although educators play a large influence in student’s lives, Alex

and Charlie stated how family partnership plays an equal role. Frances agreed, sharing that “I think kids need to know that we're a whole community supporting them. It's not just their family. It's all of us there to help.” Devyn also placed emphasis on making the learning component of SEL a priority during parent-teacher conferences throughout the year.

Theme Four, Category One, Code C: Implicit Teaching of SEL. Eight educators agreed that lead educators primarily teach SEL at WES implicitly. According to all participants, concepts learned from the weekly explicit Choose Love Program were referenced by lead educators throughout the day and week. “We have a lot of, I always call them family meetings, because I consider us a family,” Frances shared. “But there's a lot of those, about like how the way you're interacting with each other is not okay, and I didn't like the tone that I was hearing when we were at P.E.” Gina stated how her teaching of SEL has become “natural” throughout “conversations just in our everyday practice.” She continued by saying “I really feel like it all just goes together. I don't really think about how I teach [SEL], it's just kind of a way that we've just become accustomed to.”

Theme Four, Category Two: Paraprofessional Roles and Responsibilities

Educators discussed roles and responsibilities pertinent to the paraprofessional when describing experiences with SEL. The notion of explicit teaching of SEL was established.

Theme Four, Category Two, Code A: Explicit Teaching of SEL. Five educators specified explicit teaching of SEL as it related to paraprofessional roles and responsibilities. At WES, the full-time paraprofessional in the classroom is responsible for teaching the Choose Love lesson explicitly each week. Alex, Devyn, and Gina shared how the paraprofessionals often create individualized moments with students to model and facilitate SEL skills based on unique need. “We really utilize our teacher assistants, so someone can continue teaching and leading the

class while the other teacher goes and addresses those [SEL] issues,” Alex stated. Devyn echoed Alex, noting how her assistant can:

Pull a student aside to give them a break if they are having an emotional day, or if they need a movement break. If there's conflict and they just need a few moments, you know, we have like a quiet space in the classroom. Things like that just kind of give them a chance to help self-regulate and not feel like they're being watched by everybody, you know, as a center of attention.

Gina emphasized how this arrangement also helps the lead teacher in continuing on with the instructional lesson rather than having to stop to address “why a student is upset or a student is acting a certain way.”

Theme Five: High Priority of SEL

Theme five, High Priority of SEL, contributes to research question three (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?). The researcher found that the participant responses to interview question 13 (Describe the level of priority that Social Emotional Learning has within your classroom) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The category supporting this theme is prominent importance of SEL. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Theme Five: High Priority of SEL: Categories and Frequency of Codes

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Prominent Importance of SEL	
(a) high overall priority	4
(b) priority post-COVID-19	5

Theme Five, Category One: Prominent Importance of SEL

Educators were asked to describe how they prioritize SEL in their classrooms. The concept of prominent importance of SEL emerged.

Theme Five, Category One, Code A: High Overall Priority. Four educators specified that SEL is a high priority in their classroom. Alex referenced the importance of making time to have important SEL-based conversations. “I guess you could say that it is more important to address some issue with a child than it is to teach that math lesson that day, or, you know, finish that last cute activity or whatever,” she reported. “So that's really our mindset as we go throughout our day.” Benji noted that SEL was her top priority next to student safety. Frances argued that, although academic content is important, “I want them to walk away from each day like, really understanding each other,” and that SEL is “probably top on my priority list when it comes to what they're getting from that year with me.” Gina stated that, in her particular role as the classroom paraprofessional, students’ social emotional wellbeing is the main focus.

Theme Five, Category One, Code B: Priority Post COVID-19. Five educators referenced SEL being a top priority specifically after the COVID-19 pandemic. “With the past two years, this year I feel like the priority has definitely been heightened,” Alex articulated. “We knew going into this year that it [SEL] was gonna have to be a huge importance placed on that that part of their learning.” Devyn added to that concept, saying “independent skills” and “daily tasks of routine” on the students’ behalf were “lacking.” “I feel like, if Covid taught us anything, it's that we need to be in school,” she said. “Kids need to have some sort of group situation, where they're learning rules and routines and communication, and how to work, you know, as a whole group together and cooperate and to learn how to respect adult outside of their home.”

Benji, Frances, and Harper also mentioned how COVID-19 vastly affected students' SEL skills. "I think after Covid, you know, we really had to work twice as hard to make sure that they felt supported and understood," Frances expressed.

Theme Six: SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students

Theme six, SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, contributes to research question four (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?). The researcher found that the participant responses to interview question 11 (What impact or influence do you believe SEL has on your students?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The category supporting this theme include criticality of SEL. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Theme Six: SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students: Categories and Frequency of Codes

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: Criticality of SEL	
(a) fundamental to learning and development	7

Theme Six, Category One: Criticality of SEL

Educators were asked how they believe SEL activities have impacted and/or influenced their students. The concept of SEL criticality emerged.

Theme Six, Category One, Code A: Fundamental to Learning and Development.

Seven educators expressed their feelings of SEL being fundamental to children's overall learning and development. With the implementation of SEL, Alex and Benji affirmed that students grew to positively interact and handle conflict appropriately with one another. "They are proud of

themselves when they make those choices,” Benji also added. According to Alex, Eli, Frances and Gina, SEL allowed students to not only effectively understand and communicate their emotions but accept their feelings as well. “We as society are so quick to say that we should be happy,” Gina declared. “We can't be sad, or we can't be frustrated, can't be angry. But angry is an okay place to be. So, I think that, that's a big huge thing for me, is explaining to them that like, these are all things are okay to feel, and that there's nothing wrong with that.”

Charlie stated how SEL is the foundation for students to feel safe, loved and appreciated. Furthermore, learning about and understanding peer differences led students to develop an acceptance and appreciation for diversity, “whether it is a different ethnicity, or they speak a different language at home, they are in a different religion, or if they are an exceptional child” she expressed. Finally, Devyn emphasized that SEL is a fundamental counterpart to academic growth. “I think a lot of the kids started to academically show their skills once they got the social skills back in place, because they were so delayed overall socially and emotionally that it affected them everywhere else.”

Theme Seven: Evidence of SEL Skills

Theme seven, Evidence of SEL Skills, contributes to research question four (In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?). The researcher found that the participant responses to interview question 12 (What evidence do you have that shows when a student has acquired a SEL skill?) most heavily contributed to the development of this theme. The categories supporting this theme include (a) informal formative observational data collection and (b) summative Choose Love survey. The coded data frequency supporting this theme and the corresponding categories is shown in Table 8.

Table 8*Theme Seven: Evidence of SEL Skills: Categories and Frequency of Codes*

Categories and Codes	WES Participants
Category One: SEL Data	
(a) formative observational data collection	8
(b) summative Choose Love survey	1

Theme Seven, Category One: SEL Data

Educators were asked to share if and/or how they collect evidence of SEL skills. When describing evidence collected in the classroom, the ideas of (a) formative observational data collection and (b) summative Choose Love survey were described

Theme Seven, Category One, Code A: Formative Observational Data Collection. All eight participants stated that observational formative data was the only form of data collection used as it related to collecting evidence related to student SEL skill development. Participants specified that, when they observe students applying appropriate SEL skills in applicable real-life situations, it signifies that they have learned the corresponding skill. For example, Charlie said she recognizes growth when her students apply problem-solving skills learned and “stop coming to me because they're having a problem with a peer, and they're able to work through that problem with their peer.” Eli also shared that knowing whether a child has acquired a SEL skill is similar to that of academic skills. “Like when you teach a new math concept, you know, like okay, are they getting it or not? They're able to apply it to something later.” Gina follows up with her students’ learning by asking questions such as “What do we need to do here?” or “What can we do to feel better” and can see student growth and understanding of SEL based on their responses.

Theme Seven, Category One, Code B: Summative Choose Love Survey. Benji shared that her class took a pre and post learning Choose Love survey at the beginning and end of the school year. The survey consisted of questions such as “Do you feel like you are kind to others?”. Students were required to circle the corresponding circle with teacher assistance in reading the questions and answer choices. Benji expressed that, due to her students’ lack of paper pencil assessment experience, she did not consider the assessment to be a valid form of SEL skills or understanding. “When we turned those into our school social worker, she like, gave us like the school results like in a graph. And it was pretty wonky,” she expressed. “And I wasn’t shocked, because I’m still like, well yeah, they can’t really do like just a here is a paper and a pencil survey, circle your answers, rate yourself on these things.” Benji stated that she did not consider this data when reflecting upon her students SEL skill development during the 2021-2022 school year.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of results for this study. A total of eight K-2 educators consented in participation of this study. Data analysis, coding, and development of categories and themes were discussed. Seven themes emerged during analysis: 1) Defining Social Emotional Learning, 2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, 3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, 4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, 5) High Priority of SEL, 6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and 7) Evidence of SEL Skills. The researcher explained each of the seven themes in detail, relating each theme to each of the four research questions. No significant data was found indicating different perspectives among either educator roles nor grade levels during the cross-case analysis as common themes, categories, and codes emerged throughout all roles/grade levels.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-perspective case study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten, first, and second grade. This chapter provides a rich discussion, as well as implications of the research, in effort to answer the research questions below:

1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?

This chapter examines major findings related to the literature presented in Chapter Two regarding SEL classroom instruction and adolescent mental health. Connections between the findings, theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development), and conceptual framework (CASEL) for this study are noted. Recommendations and implications for educators, community partners, and school and district administrators based on this study are provided. Representation of additional limitations are also discussed. Implications for future research conclude this chapter.

General Overview of Results and Discussion of Findings

Through a semi-structured interviews process, the researcher collected qualitative data that led to the development of the following seven themes: 1) Defining Social Emotional Learning, 2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, 3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, 4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, 5) High Priority of SEL, 6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and 7) Evidence of SEL Skills. Specific findings of educator perspectives and experiences in relation to each theme and research question are discussed and noted (see Table 9). Key concepts and interconnectedness of past literature, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks for this study are included.

Table 9

Interconnectedness of Research Questions, Themes, and Key Findings

Research Question	Theme(s)	Key Findings
1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?	One: Defining Social Emotional Learning	Educators explain SEL: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • based on aspects of the philosophy and framework set forth by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) • using the Choose Love Curriculum
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?	Two: Preparedness in Teaching SEL Three: Barriers of Teaching SEL Four: Educators Roles and Responsibilities	Educators indicated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • barriers such as under preparedness and lack of support inhibit SEL teaching in their classroom • positive school culture and pertinent resources greatly assist in effective facilitation of SEL • specific responsibilities as it relates to implementing SEL • parental and personal experience positively impacted their understanding of SEL
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?	Five: High Priority of SEL	Educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • place SEL as a high priority in their classrooms through implicit and explicit SEL instruction • struggle with the challenge of not having an appropriate amount of time allocated for SEL instruction

4. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?	Six: SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students Seven: Evidence of SEL Skills	Educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> perceive that SEL has an overall positive impact and influence on students' social emotional development based on observations
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Theme One: Defining Social Emotional Learning

Participants within this study were asked to describe their understanding of SEL. The following descriptive phrases/terminology emerged: (a) building community and relationships, (b) child independence, confidence, and individuality, (c) child interactions and problem solving, (d) Choose Love Program, (e) positive reinforcement, (f) self-management, (g) understanding and communicating emotions, and (h) whole child approach. Additionally, notions of SEL as a detailed and complex concept emerged.

Category One: Describing SEL Skills and Terminology

When asked to define social emotional learning, educators used keywords emulating those within the CASEL 5 framework (CASEL, 2022a). As stated in Chapter Two, the inner circle of CASEL's framework describes five specific SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2022a). The inner (the CASEL 5) and secondary (the child's classroom) circles of the CASEL framework support the theoretical framework for this study, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development, when describing the components within a child's microsystem (in this case, the child's classroom environment, teacher, and skills taught/modeled by the teacher) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The most frequently used SEL descriptors were the codes described within theme one, category one (see Table 2). These included building community and relationships, child independence, confidence, and individuality, child interactions and problem solving, positive reinforcement, self-management, understanding and communicating emotions, and whole child approach. The importance of recognizing the uniformity among educator responses in their explanation of SEL and the components described in the CASEL 5 is to highlight the connection portraying current SEL research and educators' understanding of SEL. According to standard three of the North Carolina Teaching Evaluation Process (NCTEP), educators should demonstrate a proficient level of competency as it relates to subject-matter content knowledge associated with their teaching specialty (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2022b).

Category Two: Difficult to Define

While participants seemed to have a sufficient understanding of SEL based on the CASEL 5, three educators voiced challenges associated with accurately defining SEL as it related to their perception of the definition's complexity (theme one, category two: difficult to define). Furthermore, seven educators referenced the Choose Love program when defining SEL. Although Choose Love is a curriculum designed to teach SEL skills and character education, one curriculum alone does not define SEL itself. Furthermore, Choose Love is not a CASEL certified SEL program (Choose Love, 2021c).

Theme Two: Preparedness in Teaching SEL

Educators were asked to describe their familiarity with incorporating Social Emotional Learning and skill development into their teaching practices. Upon reflection, educators referenced EPP experiences, school setting, other teaching experience, and personal experiences.

Category One: Educator Preparation Program Experience

Four of the six lead educators in this study indicated that their respective EPP experiences negatively impacted their familiarity, ability, and confidence as it relates to implementing SEL (see Table 3). Regrettably, low educator self-confidence and aptitude, as well as inadequate SEL professional learning opportunities, has hindered effective SEL implementation (Durlak, 2016). Schonert-Reichl (2017) reports that, as of 2017, minimal EPPs had started to embed research, theory, and application of SEL into their teacher preservice programs. If educators are not learning strategies presented within their preservice programs that promote effective SEL teaching as they are in their reading and mathematics counterparts, the lack of SEL in classrooms will likely perpetuate. As a result, adverse adolescent mental health development will likely continue to transpire. This lack of aptitude could also continue to negatively impact educator confidence as Durlak (2016) mentions, as well as increase stress levels resulting from problematic student behaviors (Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Semple et al., 2017).

Category Two: School Setting

In relation to school setting, educators emphasized how school culture geared toward the whole child positively impacted their philosophy of and ability to implement SEL effectively. This concept supports the valuable influence that CASEL's (2022d) third inner circle (see Figure 1), schoolwide culture, practices, and policies, has on students' acquisition of SEL skills. CASEL (2022d) reports how "SEL efforts both contribute to and depend upon a school climate where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and engaged" (para. 2.). Furthermore, Durlak (2016) highlights how a positive school climate related to SEL has also been found to increase student attendance and academic achievement. Durlak (2016) also notes that, based on past

evaluative studies, SEL programs are generally more likely to continue if they become a part of the school's mission and daily practice, and that lack of staff buy-in serves as a challenge when it comes to effective SEL implementation. In this study, six educators specifically referenced WES as having an affirmative, uplifting whole-child atmosphere, indicating how this approach promotes overall morale and a deeper ability to implement SEL successfully. Educators also highlighted that past experiences in various school settings did not reflect the positive culture and emphasis that WES places on SEL.

Participants within this study stated how school resources, including SEL curriculum, professional development opportunities, and classroom support staff contributed immensely to their knowledge and implementation of SEL. This perspective reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory in which children need to be provided tools and resources to learn a given skill.

According to Schonert-Reichl (2017):

when teachers lacked key ingredients for teaching, ranging from basic resources such as paper and pencils and heat to child-friendly furnishings and computers, students exhibited higher levels of externalizing problems (arguing, fighting, impulsive behavior, and the like), interpersonal problems (for example, trouble expressing emotions and resolving conflicts), and internalizing problems (such as anxiety, sadness, and low self-esteem). (p.

141)

Educators specifically placed high emphasis on the impact that the appointed full-time teaching paraprofessional in WES classrooms has on their ability to embrace and teach SEL effectively in their classrooms. While WES employs these paraprofessionals to support each grade level classroom by choice, these positions are not guaranteed or required as lead educator counterparts within other public schools in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2022a).

Category Three: Other Teaching Experience

Educators shared how their past teaching experiences positively contributed to their understanding and preparedness of teaching SEL. It is important to note that past career experiences among all eight participants fell within age range of early childhood development (see Table 1). Two educators mentioned how their past experiences in pre-kindergarten classrooms specifically contributed to their knowledge, understanding, and priority of SEL. This finding is not surprising as the NAEYC (2018) highlights how social emotional development must be emphasized in preschool classrooms as SEL heavily affects a child's learning and development overall. In North Carolina, licensed pre-kindergarten educators are required to follow the standard course of study, Foundations for Early Learning and Development, per standard three of the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2022b). Foundations for Early Learning and Development specifically includes social emotional development as one of the five learning domains (North Carolina Division of Health and Human Services [NCDHHS], 2021).

Category Four: Personal Experience

Finally, three educators noted how their personal experiences, specifically parenting experiences, contributed to their overall preparedness, acceptance, and understanding of SEL. Seldom research has been conducted regarding the impact of parental experiences on effective teacher pedagogy. Further research on this topic is needed.

Theme Three: Barriers of Teaching SEL

Educators shared their perspective relating to barriers and challenges of implementing SEL. Such barriers included (a) lack of community support, (b) lack of SEL teaching preparation, (c) lack of sufficient time/priority, and (d) paraprofessional implementation of SEL.

Category One: Challenges in Implementing SEL

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model highlights how a child's mesosystem, or the connections amongst the microsystem components (such as the childcare worker and primary caregiver) heavily impacts child development. Likewise, the third inner circle with the CASEL framework underlines the importance of an interconnectedness among families and caregivers (CASEL, 2022e). According to CASEL (2022d), "evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into the home, and families are far more likely to form partnerships with schools when their schools' norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences" (para. 2). Unfortunately, when sharing barriers of implementing SEL, participants noted how community support (specifically parental support) was a noticeable challenge (see Table 4). Chapter Two states how parents have expressed concerns highlighting how their interpretation of SEL components could interfere with some of their familial beliefs and values (Prothero, 2022). However, social and emotional development has been found to excel when schools and families build authentic partnerships (CASEL, 2022d).

In effort to maximize familial support and nurture the family/school relationship as it relates to SEL, CASEL (2022d) suggests that schools embed "decision-making processes that ensure that families, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, are part of planning, implementing, and continuously improving SEL" (para. 2). Educators also expressed how lack of support from administration and overall school culture in prior school experiences served as a challenge to implementing SEL. "It is incorrect to assume that only front-line providers (i.e., teachers and other school staff) bear the sole responsibility for effective implementation", Durlak (2016) states (p. 340). Rather, successful infiltration of SEL

schoolwide “involves ongoing planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement by all members of the school community” (CASEL, 2022d, para. 2).

Four educators shared how lack of teaching and learning about SEL through their EPP experience specifically led to a perceived under qualification and lack of preparedness in understanding SEL (see Table 4), therefore serving as a challenge in implementing SEL overall. Durlak (2016) notes how inadequate SEL training is undeniably a barrier to effective SEL implementation. As stated in Chapter Two, educators have previously expressed hesitation as it relates to their qualifications in teaching SEL based on prior education and trainings (Eichert et al., 2019). According to Darling-Hammond (2017), robust world-wide educational systems “place a strong emphasis on providing prospective teachers with a solid grounding in knowledge and experience to ensure that all teachers are ready to practice from the start” (p. 105). Unfortunately, educator responses underlined how prospective EPPs failed to successfully prepare them for this expectation. This lack of knowledge and preparedness (and therefore unbalanced ratio of resources and demands) that has been found to contribute to the ineffective teaching of SEL may also adversely affect factors such as educator stress, confidence, and burnout (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2009).

Educators highlighted the aspect of time as a vast barrier to implementing SEL effectively. Although educators described paraprofessionals implementing the explicit Choose Love SEL lesson weekly, the notion of having enough time in the daily schedule was still perceived as a tributary struggle. Educators noted how academic priorities sometimes took precedence over significant SEL conversations naturally occurring in the classroom, as these moments were not considered to be an “official” part of the daily schedule. As a result, these vital conversations were sometimes avoided, condensed, or led into the timeslots for other

scheduled components. The literature within Chapter Two echoes this challenge, ascertaining how educators and school administrators have voiced concerns over the amount of instructional time SEL content would take to implement, and perhaps even hold priority over, or parallel, academic sectors (Eichert et al., 2019). Chapter Two also highlights how teacher stress levels can be negatively impacted by high classroom demands (such as academic instruction and achievement) and low abundance of resources (in this case, time in the daily schedule) (Lambert et al., 2015). However, when embedded both implicitly and explicitly throughout the school day, SEL in schools has been found to positively impact students' academic success (CASEL, 2022e; Durlak et al., 2011), contradicting concerns regarding academics being underprioritized due to SEL content implementation.

Finally, one educator noted the challenge they noticed in their appointed paraprofessional's understanding and implementation of SEL. As CASEL (2022d) highlights, classroom and school partnerships must be paramount for effective SEL implementation. WES educators stated how paraprofessionals are charged with instructing the explicit Choose Love curriculum lesson, as well as implicit instances that may require children to be guided in a more private manner and away from the whole group setting. If educators, including paraprofessionals, are not adequately trained on teaching effective SEL strategies, adverse outcomes described in Chapter Two could continue to transpire.

Theme Four: Educator Roles and Responsibilities

In describing experiences with SEL, educators discussed roles and responsibilities pertinent to both the lead educator and paraprofessional.

Category One: Lead Educator Roles and Responsibilities

All educators within this study stressed how lead educator facilitation of the classroom environment was a key factor in maximizing SEL in the classroom (see Table 5). Both Bronfenbrenner (1979) and CASEL (2022e) highlight that the educator is a leading factor in a child's microsystem and in executing the CASEL 5 through SEL instruction. Modeling appropriate behaviors was a commonality among participants as it relates to responsibilities of the lead educator. Jones (2013) agrees with this concept, emphasizing how students witness and learn from their teachers modeling certain situations. In addition to modeling behaviors, teaching students about emotions and how to effectively handle various emotions was discussed as a key commitment for lead educators. Howley and colleagues (2021) share that, often, "researchers and practitioners are more concerned with teaching and idealizing good behaviors that they forget the need to acknowledge and teach students that, for example, conflict is a natural and normal part of social interaction" (p. 632). This theory echoes participant perceptions of the lead educator assuming responsibility for teaching students to not only understand, communicate, and work through their emotions and conflicts, but to accept and embrace these types of feelings and situations as well.

Creating a conducive, safe, and trusting environment was also noted by participants as a prominent responsibility of lead educators. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model stresses the importance of developing a positive trusting relationship with the child in maximizing learning and growth. Schonert-Reichl (2017) also reports that "children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks" (p. 139). In addition to the responsibilities illustrated, providing applicable learning tools and resources, nurturing opportunities for relationship building, fostering 21st century skills such collaboration and problem solving, individualizing based on student needs,

cultures, and differences, and facilitating the home/school relationship were also highlighted as key factors for lead educators among participants. Relevantly, all lead educator responsibilities referenced are current expectations of proficient licensed educators within the state of North Carolina as noted throughout the evaluative components within standards one through five of the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2022b).

All participants highlighted how SEL was a naturally embedded practice throughout their teaching, stating that they primarily taught SEL implicitly throughout their instructional day (see Table 5). A recent study by Howley and colleagues (2021) found rather than specific and explicit SEL lessons, educators often taught SEL more intentionally and consistently within their generalized curriculum. This type of SEL pedagogy is ideal according to Durlak (2016) who reports how “those attempting to follow a programme manual or series of lesson plans on their own rarely achieve high-quality implementation or desirable programme outcomes” due to the complexity of such content that cannot necessarily be explained in curricular format (p. 338).

Category Two: Paraprofessional Roles and Responsibilities

Five educators referenced the paraprofessional role as responsible for teaching the Choose Love curriculum explicitly. Moreover, participants indicated that, in addition to the explicit curriculum, paraprofessionals typically address SEL concerns with individual students privately away from the class when instruction was in session. Although lead educators highlighted how this arrangement is especially helpful when it comes to staying on track with the daily schedule and teaching of academic counterparts, paraprofessionals at both WES and within the state of North Carolina are not required to be licensed educators, nor uphold a bachelor’s degree per NCDPI (2022c). This could be concerning as appropriate and effective research-based

instruction should be performed by highly qualified educators (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005).

Theme Five: High Priority of SEL

Educators were asked to describe how they prioritize SEL in their classrooms. The concept of prominent importance of SEL emerged.

Category One: Prominent Importance of SEL

Although participants indicated that time was a challenging barrier to effectively implement SEL, seven participants collectively said that they still consider SEL to be a high priority in their classroom (see Table 6). Specifically, five participants mentioned how SEL is especially a high priority post the COVID-19 pandemic. The abundance of literature highlighted in Chapter Two illustrated the positive outcomes that SEL programs and instruction has on students and illustrates how the lack of emphasis on SEL in schools has been a nationwide concern prior to 2020. As Zieher and colleagues (2021) note, “school-level prioritization and support for SEL, as well as SEL classroom instruction practices, varied greatly before” (p. 389).

Theme Six: SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students

Educators were asked how they believe SEL activities have impacted and/or influenced their students. The concept of SEL criticality emerged.

Category One: Criticality of SEL

Seven participants emphasized how SEL had a positive impact and influence on the students in their classroom (see Table 7). This concept echoes the literature illustrated in Chapter Two highlighting the advantageous outcomes of SEL programs and instruction on the development and success of the whole child. For example, demonstrating SEL skills not only positively impact students’ academic, social, personal, and professional livelihoods, but also

improve the school's overall environment, ensure the consistency of SEL skills learned, and promote cultural responsiveness (CASEL, 2022e, para. 5; Durlak et al., 2011). Teaching SEL skills have been found to significantly increase self-awareness, relationship skills, self-regulating abilities, decision-making skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2022a). Strategies to increase SEL skills such as mindfulness and yoga can reduce stress, depression, and anger in children while improving fatigue and increasing attention span and concentration levels (Calm, 2022; Felver et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2014). Long-term outcomes have also been found to positively impact families, communities, and the nation's criminal justice and healthcare systems (Sabey, 2019).

Theme Seven: Evidence of SEL Skills

Educators were asked to share if and/or how they collect evidence of SEL skills. When describing evidence collected in the classroom, the ideas of (a) formative observational data collection and (b) summative Choose Love survey were described.

Category One: SEL Data

All eight participants stated how they solely collect and use observational data to assess their students' SEL skill development (see Table 8). It can be concluded that this approach is both formative (as it is ongoing), yet informal (as participants described how such SEL data "collection" is not officially recorded, collected, or analyzed). One participant mentioned implementing a formal pre- and post-SEL assessment created by Choose Love curriculum, but emphasized how this summative approach resulted in inaccurate findings. This finding was not anticipated as none of the participants referenced using the North Carolina's Healthful Living Standards (HLS) in relation to SEL data collection. WES references the utilization of these standards on their school website. According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), overwhelming evidence

confirms that social and emotional skills can in fact be measured. Tantillo Philibert (2018) agrees, stressing how SEL competency levels must also be observed, documented, and assessed in the same manner of its academic counterparts.

Additional Limitations

After conducting the study, the researcher recognized additional limitations that were unable to be determined prior to instrumentation and/or the data analysis processes. First, all participant career experiences were within classrooms teaching children between a birth through age eight age range. Since the 1980s, NAEYC has been advocating for best practices focusing on whole child development to occur throughout all early childhood classrooms, as birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). It should be taken into consideration that the past early childhood career experience participants from this study could have advantageously affected the perceptions and experiences of SEL overall. Secondly, the researcher discovered that the Zoom platform utilized a visual transcription feature, potentially serving as a distraction for participants during the interview process. Finally, WES utilized two different SEL curriculums in two consecutive school years (2020/2021 and 2021/2022). It is important to consider that learning and applying new curricular content for all educators could have affected the teaching and data collection process of SEL.

Recommendations and Implications for Stakeholders

Early investments for mental health establishment must correlate with the brain development that is simultaneously occurring (Sabey, 2019). Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and

when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). If educators and classroom curricula continue to lack SEL intentionality in early childhood classrooms, a reactive approach aiming to repair rather than prevent adolescent mental and social health damage will likely transpire based on past trajectory. As a result of an existing gap underlining educator perceptions and experiences of SEL particularly in the early elementary grades, the purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms. The demand for research investigating educator perspectives of SEL is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices nation and worldwide as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Based on the data analysis and results of this study, recommendations and implications for stakeholders including educators, community partners such as Educator Preparation Programs and family members, and school district administrators are described (see Table 10).

Table 10

Recommendations and Implications for Stakeholders

Research Question	Key Findings	Recommendation
1. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators explain Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?	Educators explain SEL: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • based on aspects of the philosophy and framework set forth Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) • using the Choose Love Curriculum 	Educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attend professional learning opportunities to grow a deeper SEL knowledge/understanding • lead educators teach most of the implicit/explicit SEL Community: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPPs embed SEL in pre-service programs School/District:

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> offer appropriate professional learning opportunities and resources aligned for optimal SEL implementation
2. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators describe their experiences as it relates to SEL?	<p>Educators indicated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> barriers such as under preparedness and lack of support inhibit SEL teaching in their classroom positive school culture and pertinent resources greatly assist in effective facilitation of SEL specific responsibilities as it relates to implementing SEL parental and personal experience positively impacted their understanding of SEL 	<p>Educators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> nurture family partnerships by informing families of the research behind SEL lead educators teach most of the implicit/explicit SEL <p>Community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EPPs embed SEL in pre-service programs families commit to a deeper understanding of SEL and partnership with educators/schools <p>School/District:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> instill and uphold a whole child school culture prioritize health and well-being of staff offer appropriate professional learning opportunities and resources aligned for optimal SEL implementation provide framework/platform for effective SEL implementation and data collection
3. In what ways do kindergarten, first, and second grade educators prioritize SEL in their classrooms?	<p>Educators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> place SEL as a high priority in their classrooms through implicit and explicit SEL instruction struggle with the challenge of not having an appropriate amount of time allocated for SEL instruction 	<p>Educators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> lead educators teach most of the implicit/explicit SEL <p>Community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EPPs embed SEL in pre-service programs home/school partnership among educators and families <p>School/District:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> instill and uphold a whole child school culture provide framework/platform for effective SEL instruction and data collection
4. In what ways do kindergarten,	Educators:	<p>Educators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> formal SEL data collection

first, and second grade educators view how SEL activities have influenced students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> perceive that SEL has an overall positive impact and influence on students' social emotional development based on observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lead educators teach most of the implicit/explicit SEL instruction based on qualifications <p>Community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EPPs embed SEL in pre-service programs home/school partnership among educators and families <p>School/District:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide framework/platform for effective SEL instruction and data collection prioritize health and well-being of staff offer appropriate professional learning opportunities and resources aligned for optimal SEL implementation
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Educators

Data analysis led to the development of seven themes. Specifically, theme three, barriers of teaching SEL (see Table 4), theme four, educator roles and responsibilities (see Table 5), and theme seven, evidence of SEL skills (see Table 8) contributed to the recommendations and implications for educators. Formal SEL data collection, SEL instruction and learning opportunities and family partnerships are discussed.

Formal SEL Data Collection

All eight participants stated that observational data was the exclusive form of accurate data collection used as it related to collecting evidence regarding SEL skill development in students. Educators described noting student growth in a formative manner. Participants specified when they observe students applying appropriate SEL skills in applicable real-life situations, it signifies that they have learned the corresponding skill. However, participants noted

that no formal SEL data was recorded, nor analyzed, and the use of North Carolina's HLS was not referenced.

According to Tantillo Philibert (2018), "SEL competencies must be scaffolded and tracked, the same way we would scaffold and track traditional academic content" (p. 14). It is important that educators formally assess, record, and analyze their students' SEL competencies using both formative and summative approaches to ensure growth is occurring and best meet each student's individual need. Furthermore, educators should be using corresponding assessment data to appropriately plan SEL learning opportunities as they do for academic counterparts. Formative and summative assessment data collection and utilization throughout all learning standards/content areas is a requirement of a proficient educator in the state of North Carolina per the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2022b).

Although there are multiple ways educators can formatively track and measure SEL competencies and growth, one assessment approach is for educators to utilize the nationally recognized assessment measurement system titled "Teaching Strategies Gold" (TSG). TSG (2022) is a formative approach to assessing academic and SEL proficiencies naturally occurring in the classroom. Specifically, the SEL section includes the following components: 1) Regulates Own Emotions and Behaviors (manages feelings, follows limits and expectations, and takes care of own needs appropriately), 2) Establishes and Sustains Positive Relationships (forms relationships with adults, responds to emotional cues, interacts with peers, and makes friends), and 3) Participates Cooperatively and Constructively in Group Situations (balances needs and rights of self and others and solves social problems). TSG measurement progressions are designed to align with various state standards for children within the birth to third grade age ranges and reflects both the Foundations for Early Learning Standards and HLS of North

Carolina (TSG, 2022). Valuably, these components mirror the key CASEL 5 SEL competencies, ensuring a research-based approach.

As it relates to summative assessments, educators are encouraged to offer developmentally age-appropriate opportunities to track student progress long-term. Age-appropriate pre- and post-assessments should be administered to determine long-term student growth and need. Behavioral records should be analyzed throughout various segments of the year (for example, the onset of student enrollment compared to the end of year). Finally, formative checkpoints could also be used as a snapshot of a student progression at certain points throughout the school year.

Schonert-Reichl (2017) highlights how lack of educator resources has been found to negatively impact and exacerbate students' externalizing, interpersonal, and internalizing problems. Participants expressed how WES' administration did a remarkable job at providing the necessary resources to implement SEL successfully. Formal data noting the progress of external, interpersonal, and internal student factors could help further solidify which resources especially contribute toward students' SEL growth to ensure the priority of such is sustained.

SEL Instruction and Professional Learning

In the state of North Carolina, a Local Education Agency (LEA) is responsible for providing licensure support to all public-school lead licensed educators (NCDPI, 2022a). As a part of this licensure process, lead licensed educators are required to first obtain a bachelor's degree prior to being issued their teaching license, participate in the NCTEP to ensure proficient ratings are upheld based on state educator standards, and maintain an active licensure status while teaching in the classroom (NCDPI, 2022a). Paraprofessional teaching assistants, however, are not required to obtain a bachelor's degree, uphold or maintain a teaching license, or undergo

the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2022c). Therefore, proficiency based on educator standards is not necessarily required, nor measured, for North Carolina paraprofessional teaching assistants. Due to licensure status and formal education requirements, it is encouraged that lead licensed educator be responsible for the majority of explicit and implicit teaching of SEL competencies.

The literature indicates how an assigned curriculum designated for SEL instruction is not standard nationwide. Although SEL programs have been found to be advantageous, Durlak (2016) notes the importance of not relying on curriculum alone, but rather implicitly embedding SEL opportunities throughout the school day. This allows educators and schools the opportunity to implement SEL instruction successfully without necessarily needing a formal curriculum in place. Additionally, participants within this study noted that it could be beneficial for SEL strategies to be taught more intentionally throughout the week as a supplement to the once a week Choose Love lesson. Perhaps educators could utilize the “Calm Schools” initiative that provides free online access for educators to intentionally embed age appropriate SEL strategies and techniques such as mindfulness into classrooms nationwide as a supplement to their implicit SEL instruction (Calm, 2022). Finally, educators must establish and grow their knowledge through learning opportunities as it relates to best practices and strategies associated with SEL to ensure effective implementation and educator proficiency.

Family Partnerships

Participants indicated that it was the lead educator’s responsibility to develop a family partnership in effort to successfully implement and support students’ SEL (ultimately strengthening their students’ mesosystem). Both CASEL (2022d) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlight the criticality of a well-established partnership among families and schools. However, participants noted that parental buy-in and acceptance of SEL overall was a challenge. Educators

are encouraged to continue to nurture the child's mesosystem by working to establish a positive and informative connection with their students' families. Sending home research-based newsletters, reader-appropriate research, key SEL strategies for caregivers, and alignment to state standards such as HLS are recommended to help alleviate this challenge.

Community Partners

Through examining the results and thematic data of this study, theme two, preparedness in teaching SEL (see Table 3) and theme three, barriers of teaching SEL (see Table 4) contributed to the recommendations and implications for community stakeholders. Educator Preparation Programs and home/school partnerships are discussed.

Educator Preparation Programs

Educators shared how lack of teaching and learning about SEL through their EPP experience specifically led to their perceived underqualification and lack of preparedness in understanding SEL (see Table 4). Consequently, educators shared how this under preparedness served as a barrier to implementing SEL. Three educators voiced challenges associated with accurately defining SEL as it related to their perception of the definition's complexity. Furthermore, seven educators referenced the Choose Love program when defining SEL. Although Choose Love is a curriculum designed to teach SEL skills and character education, educators must understand that one curriculum alone does not necessarily define nor describe SEL.

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2021), 3.5 million educators taught in public schools nationwide during the 2017-2018 school year. As of 2017, Schonert-Reichl (2017) reported that minimal EPPs had started to embed research, theory, and application of SEL into their teacher preservice programs. If educators are not learning strategies presented

within their preservice programs that promote effective SEL teaching as they are in their reading and mathematics counterparts, the lack of SEL in classrooms will likely perpetuate. Educators must explicitly be taught and assessed on best practices as they relate to universal SEL strategies and standardized expectations to corresponding age level progressions, just as they are for academic counterparts. Moreover, educators need to be taught the difference between a competency domain (mathematics, language arts, SEL) and published learning curriculums as curriculums alone do not necessarily describe or define the broader associated learning competency.

EPPs must offer preservice opportunities in their programs for educators to learn about SEL research and theory and implement evidence-based SEL practices learned in their student teaching endeavors (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Schonert-Reichl (2017) reports that San Jose State University's Center for Reaching and Teaching the Whole Child is:

committed to embedding the social-emotional dimension of teaching and learning into the university's teacher preparation program. Preservice courses, such as math and science methods or classroom management, have been revised to include SEL content.

The faculty has also developed an observation protocol with an SEL orientation for mentor teachers and university supervisors to use when they observe student teaching. (p.

149)

Correspondingly, the University of British Columbia offers a 12-month post-baccalaureate SEL teacher preparation cohort where candidates “are taught active learning approaches that help to create a safe, caring, and participatory classroom and school environment” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 149). It is encouraged that EPPs worldwide recognize the need for and offer these types of opportunities for educators. Finally, pre-service programs should consider creating a

partnership with their internal counselor education programs for more in depth and streamlined SEL content development and execution among students.

Home/School Partnerships

As stated in educator recommendations and implications, it is crucial for families to partner with educators to maximize their child's learning and development (CASEL, 2022d; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Families must make a committed effort to better understand SEL. Furthermore, families must not only become more accepting of SEL, but advocate for SEL in their child's classroom due to the advantageous benefits of universal SEL strategies. Researching such benefits and strategies independently could ultimately help cultivate the home/school partnership pertinent for child development and student success.

School and District Administration

Through examining the results and thematic data of this study, theme two, preparedness in teaching SEL (see Table 3), theme three, barriers of teaching SEL (see Table 4), theme four, educator roles and responsibilities (see Table 5), theme five, high priority of SEL (see Table 6), theme six, SEL as a positive influence/impact on students (see Table 7), and theme seven, evidence of SEL skills (see Table 8) contributed to the recommendations and implications for school and district administrative stakeholders. These members include principals, assistant principals, school counselors, superintendents, board members, and other decision-makers. School culture, SEL resources and learning opportunities, SEL program implementation and data collection, and educator roles are discussed.

School Culture

Educators emphasized how school culture positively impacts their philosophy of and ability to implement SEL effectively. This concept echoes the influence that CASEL's (2022d)

third inner circle (see Figure 1), schoolwide culture, practices, and policies, has on students' acquisition of SEL skills. CASEL (2022d) reports how "SEL efforts both contribute to and depend upon a school climate where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and engaged" (para. 2.). Furthermore, Durlak (2016) highlights how positive school climate related to SEL has increased both student attendance and academic achievement. Durlak (2016) also notes that, based on past evaluative studies, SEL programs are generally more likely to continue if they become a part of the school's mission and daily practice, and that lack of staff buy-in serves as a challenge when it comes to effective SEL implementation.

Schools worldwide are encouraged to create and maintain a positive school-wide culture through increasing the overall understanding and appreciation of SEL schoolwide, implementing research-based SEL strategies both in and outside of classroom, and adopting a whole-child schoolwide approach. School leaders should also prioritize fostering environments equitable for SEL that accurately reflects culturally sustaining pedagogy (White et al., 2022). In effort to obtain a high regard and respect for the profession while enhancing staff morale, society, including schools and districts, must view educators and the field as a research-informed and research-engaged profession (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Finally, schools are encouraged to promote and uphold a culture where teachers' personal social and emotional wellness is prioritized through offering leave time, wellness activities and opportunities, and classroom breaks. McCarthy and colleagues (2009) emphasize that educator emotional exhaustion is a leading cause of educator burnout. To help alleviate this concern, Zieher and colleagues (2021) also recommend for schools to:

develop structures to support educator self-care, for example, by providing time to prioritize their own needs or space to get SE support (e.g., a virtual or physical debrief room). Other school structures might include ways for instructional staff to briefly hand

off responsibility during instruction if they have an emotional need to do so. Intentionally integrating school mental health professionals in developing these structures can further foster community and play a critical role in building and sustaining well-being and supportive relationships among all the adults in the school. (p. 395)

SEL Resources and Learning Opportunities

CASEL (2022c) emphasizes the vital role states serve in ensuring high-quality SEL in classrooms nationwide. Educators within this study stated how school resources, including SEL curriculum, professional development opportunities, and classroom support staff, contributed immensely to their knowledge and implementation of SEL. This perspective reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory in which children need to be provided tools and resources to learn a given skill. Darling-Hammond (2017) suggests that educators must be offered ample, ongoing opportunities to "continually hone in and improve their practice and keep learning so that they can become better and better each year" (p. 105). SEL webinars and mentorship opportunities can aid in the SEL learning process for educators. Furthermore, educators specifically placed high emphasis on the impact that the appointed full-time teaching paraprofessional in WES classrooms has on their ability to embrace and teach SEL in their classrooms.

SEL Program Implementation, Data Collection, and Standards Framework

SEL competencies must be recorded and measured in the same manner as academic counterparts (Tantillo Philibert, 2018). It is important that schools provide educators with the tools, of which include a research based SEL program. Common classroom curriculums have often reflected a heteronormative approach, perhaps of which included implicit binary references, resulting in long-lasting negative effects on today's youth (Mayo, 2013). According to Gay (2018), culturally relevant teaching can be defined as "using the cultural knowledge, prior

experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 36). Through this notion, students’ unique cultural individualities and experiences are the intentional primary avenue for effective teaching practice (Gay, 2018). Schools must take this concern into high account when selecting an appropriate SEL curriculum. Further, an associated framework illustrating age-level learning progressions, to intentionally teach, assess, record, and analyze students’ SEL competencies. Formative and summative assessment data collection and utilization throughout all learning standards/content areas is a requirement of a proficient educator in the state of North Carolina per the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2022b). For example, schools teaching children birth through grade three could utilize the TSG (2022) progressions as their framework and formative approach in assessing SEL proficiencies naturally occurring in the classroom. Schools following the CCSS are encouraged to utilize the CASEL 5 and implement a CASEL-certified SEL program (2022c) as a necessary classroom component and supplement to the academic sectors of CCSS. Ideally, CCSS and other developmental frameworks should be redesigned to include a vital SEL component.

Although states are encouraged to prioritize and acquire the necessary funding to allocate these types of resources to aid the lead educator in classroom and SEL support (CASEL, 2022c), limited access and opportunities in schools today exists (Trottman & Wiggan, 2009). Schools unable to acquire such resources (including support staff, SEL curricula, and professional development learning opportunities) due to factors such as lack of funding should consider providing educators with free alternative methods for professional development, curriculum, learning standards, and developmental progressions.

Educator Roles

Due to the unique nature of educator licensure requirements and formal education requirements across states, it is encouraged that school administrators understand each lead educator's qualification related to licensure and degree status. Appropriate and effective research-based instruction should be performed by highly qualified educators (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). "It does not matter if teachers have access to an exceptional curriculum", Ladson-Billings (2011) shares, "if they do not have the instructional skills to teach all students" (p. 37). Additionally, experienced educators (such as veteran teachers or those with prior early childhood teaching experience) may demonstrate more confidence and effectiveness as it relates to their SEL teaching abilities. Darling-Hammond (2017) emphasizes how effective educational systems "provide teachers with the time to work with and learn from colleagues and to conduct their own research to test and measure the effects of innovative practices" (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 105). Educators demonstrating proficiency or higher in the area of SEL could provide mentorship to their colleagues as it relates to effective SEL implementation.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the findings and implications of this study, the following recommendations are discussed for future research.

Personal SEL Development of Educators

With such beneficial findings of SEL for students, further research on educators' overall mental health must be conducted to discover the impact that SEL programs may have on educators' social emotional well-being. Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) report how "teachers' own SEL competence and well-being appears to play a crucial role in influencing the infusion of SEL into classrooms and schools, and future research is needed that examines

changes that occur in teachers as a result of implementing a SEL program that integrates mindfulness practices” (p. 19). Furthermore, Jones (2013) stresses how students witness and learn from their teachers modeling how they manage their own aggravations while maintaining control, focus, and adapting in certain situations. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model states that any child mentor must be able to model certain skills not yet acquired by a child (in this case, SEL skills). Discovering the ways in which educators may be personally impacted by SEL is critical in future research.

SEL Post-COVID-19

Supplementary research on SEL post-COVID-19 is needed. The topic and implementation of SEL has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as “school-level prioritization and support for SEL, as well as SEL classroom instruction practices, varied greatly before” (Zieher et al., 2021, p. 389). Therefore, it is likely that educators have more experiences and therefore perceptions of SEL in general.

Methods for Future Research

The initial sample size for this study was 24 full-time kindergarten, first, and second grade lead educators and paraprofessionals. As a result of extenuating factors discussed in Chapter Three, eight educators participated within this study based on their willingness and eligibility. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies with a larger sample size to gather a broader sense of the overall the perceptions and experiences of K-2 full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals. Researchers should also consider broadening this study across greater regions, and in schools that do not necessarily reflect an outward whole-child approach.

Researchers are encouraged to consider implementing a mixed-methods approach within future studies. Qualitative components such as educator surveys and document analysis could

contribute additional unique and informative findings on this subject. For example, the collection and analysis of behavioral documents/referrals throughout the year could seek to determine whether ongoing SEL instruction impacted the number of referrals as the year evolved. Educator anecdotal records regarding child behavior could also be collected and analyzed to examine the type of concern being noted, as well as the types of SEL strategies that have been implemented to address the concern.

Additional cross-case analyses regarding educator perceptions and experiences is suggested. Years of experience, licensure level type, degree type/level, and grade level experience are factors that should further be examined in effort to discover common themes among these groupings. Finally, the analysis of longitudinal case study data over the course of multiple years could allow researchers to identify prospective long-term outcomes of educators and students who have implemented SEL over the course of a longer time span than one program year.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Through a semi-structured interviews process, the researcher collected qualitative data that led to the development of the following seven themes: 1) Defining Social Emotional Learning, 2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, 3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, 4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, 5) High Priority of SEL, 6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and 7) Evidence of SEL Skills. The findings of this study suggest that educators in K-2 classrooms 1) explain SEL based on aspects of the philosophy and framework set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2) place SEL as a high priority in their

classrooms, 3) perceive that SEL has a positive impact and influence on students based on observations, and 4) indicate how barriers such as under preparedness and lack of support inhibit SEL teaching in their classroom whereas positive school culture and pertinent resources greatly assist in effective facilitation of SEL.

Based on the results of this study, lead educators are encouraged to 1) engage in formal SEL instruction, data collection, and analysis, and 2) nurture family partnerships to ensure an understanding and application of SEL is present in students' homes. EPPs are encouraged to intentionally integrate SEL components into their pre-service teaching programs. Families are encouraged to research SEL in effort better understand the advantageous benefits and partner with educators and schools. Finally, it is recommended that administrative decision makers 1) create and uphold a positive school culture representative of SEL, 2) prioritize the SEL and well-being of educators, 3) offer appropriate professional learning opportunities and resources designated to optimize the implementation and effectiveness of SEL, 4) adopt a standardized framework reflecting SEL competencies, (5) implement a system for collection and analysis of SEL data, and (6) ensure highly qualified teachers are implementing SEL in their classrooms.

Implications for future research include (1) broaden the methodology and scope of this study, (2) discover ways in which educators may be personally impacted by SEL, and (3) gather further educator experiences and perceptions regarding SEL post-COVID-19.

Conclusion

Despite recurring arguments over the course of a century, intentional education geared toward the whole child in schools has not occurred (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016; Sabey, 2019). Consequently, children often emerge from high school exhibiting sufficient academic content knowledge applicable towards a successful career path, but lacking social emotional skills

essential for the development of optimal mental health and well-being (Butzer et al., 2016). According to CASEL (2022a), the leading enterprise of the global SEL movement, teaching SEL skills has been found to significantly increase self-awareness, relationship skills, self-regulating abilities, decision-making skills, and social awareness. What's more, numerous studies within the field of developmental science suggest that cognitive growth specifically is also directly influenced by a child's emotional maturation and social preparation for group learning (Barbarin, 2009). Strategies to increase SEL skills have been found to reduce stress, depression, and anger in children while improving fatigue and increasing attention span and concentration levels (Felver et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2014). Children demonstrating positive mental health states are more inclined to be happier, more motivated in their learning and attitude towards school, are active participants in the classroom, and have higher academic achievement than peers exhibiting a lesser mental health state (Durlak et al., 2011; Ho, 2018). Long-term outcomes of SEL have been found to positively impact families, communities, and the nation's criminal justice and healthcare systems (Sabey, 2019).

While SEL has been found to advantageously affect students in many grade levels, early investments for mental health establishment must correlate with the brain development that is simultaneously occurring (Sabey, 2019). Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). The demand for research investigating educator perspectives of SEL is vital to the advancement of effective SEL practices nation and worldwide, as learning and development in the classroom begins with the educator (Aidman & Price, 2018; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; CASEL, 2022d; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012;

Kennedy, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The existing gap underlining early elementary educator perceptions and experiences of SEL specifically is what led to the purpose of this study.

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and experiences of full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach SEL in K-2 classrooms. Data was collected through a qualitative multiple-perspective case study design using a semi-structured interview process. Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded using a within-case analysis. Data analysis led to the development of seven themes: (1) Defining SEL, (2) Preparedness in Teaching SEL, (3) Barriers of Teaching SEL, (4) Educator Roles and Responsibilities, (5) High Priority of SEL, (6) SEL as a Positive Influence/Impact on Students, and (7) Evidence of SEL Skills. The findings of this study suggest that educators in K-2 classrooms (1) explain SEL based on aspects of the philosophy and framework set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), (2) place SEL as a high priority in their classrooms, (3) perceive that SEL has a positive impact and influence on students based on observations, and (4) indicate how barriers such as under preparedness and lack of support inhibit SEL teaching in their classroom whereas positive school culture and pertinent resources greatly assist in effective facilitation of SEL.

Based on the results of this study, lead educators are encouraged to (1) engage in formal SEL instruction, data collection, and analysis, and (2) nurture family partnerships to ensure an understanding and application of SEL is present in students' homes. EPPs are encouraged to intentionally integrate SEL components into their pre-service teaching programs. Families are encouraged to research SEL in effort to better understand the advantageous benefits and partner with educators and schools. Finally, it is recommended that administrative decision makers do the following (1) create and uphold a positive school culture representative of SEL, (2) prioritize

the SEL and well-being of educators, (3) offer appropriate professional learning opportunities and resources designated to optimize the implementation and effectiveness of SEL, (4) adopt a standardized framework reflecting SEL competencies, (5) implement a system for collection and analysis of SEL data, and (6) ensure highly qualified teachers are implementing SEL in their classrooms. Implications for future research include (1) broaden the methodology and scope of this study, (2) discover the ways in which educators may be personally impacted by SEL, and (3) gather further educator experiences and perceptions regarding SEL post COVID-19.

Birth to age eight is precisely the time when the foundation of the whole child's well-being, health, and learning originates, and when the building blocks for future academic success and social-emotional wellbeing are established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 1986). The results of this study suggest that K-2 educators need appropriate resources, support, and guidance to effectively implement SEL skills and strategies in which they believe are vital to children's growth and well-being. Stakeholders must work collectively in taking a proactive approach to intentionally implement SEL in classrooms for the betterment of the lives of children and society.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

Dear (Principal Name),

My name is Ashley Meinecke. I am currently a doctoral student at UNC Charlotte and a Regional Lead within the Department of Educational Leadership. I met recently with (point of contact) to discuss a research project for my doctoral dissertation. During our meeting, they shared a little bit about (school name), which is the reason for my email.

My research entails better understanding K-2 educator and paraprofessionals' perceptions of Social Emotional Learning in their classroom. It does not involve students or classroom observations.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about my project and answer any questions you have. Feel welcome to email or call me anytime. If you prefer to discuss this in person, I would also be happy to visit your school to meet with you.

I truly appreciate your consideration of helping me with my dissertation. I look forward to speaking with you soon!

Sincerely,

Ashley Meinecke
Doctoral Candidate
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Amy Good, PhD
Dissertation Advisor
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Drew Polly
Dissertation Advisor
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Consent to be Part of a Research Study

Title of the Project: Intentional Social and Emotional Teaching Practices in Kindergarten through Second Grade Classrooms: A Multiple-Perspective Case Study of K-2 Educators

Principal Investigator: Ashley Meinecke, UNC Charlotte

Faculty Advisors: Amy Good, PhD & Drew Polly, PhD, UNC Charlotte

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to discover the perceptions and experiences of kindergarten-second grade full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within their classrooms.
- You will be asked to participate in an interview regarding your experiences with SEL.
- If you agree to participate it will require approximately 45 minutes of your time.
- There are no foreseeable risks involved with your participation in this research study.
- Benefits of sharing your experiences as they relate to SEL could contribute significant knowledge to this field within education.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the perceptions and experiences of kindergarten-second grade full-time lead educators and paraprofessionals who teach Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within their classrooms.

Why are you being asked to participate in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an elementary (K-2) lead educator or paraprofessional.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your personal and professional teaching experiences as they relate to SEL. This interview, which may be audio recorded and will take place via an online communication platform (Zoom). No video will be used. You will create an alternate ID (pseudonym) before logging onto Zoom to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Your time commitment will take about 45 minutes. You will be given the opportunity to read the interview transcript summary within a week after the interview to check for accuracy.

What benefits might I experience?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study. However, other teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and education policymakers may benefit from the information you provide in the study.

What risks might I experience?

There are no foreseeable risks involved in your participation of this study. The dignity, rights, and well-being of all participants in this study will take priority at all times.

How will my information be protected?

Your identity and responses will remain confidential. The data collected from this study will only be accessible to the researcher and the researcher's dissertation committee members. All audio recordings will be destroyed after the data analysis process. The results of this study are intended to be published. To protect your privacy, we will not include any information that could identify you. Your interview transcript data will remain confidential and secured on UNC Charlotte's password protected Dropbox. Additionally, your identity will be represented by a pseudonym in the research.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you. In order to best respect your schedule, all interviews are scheduled to be concluded by the end of June 2022.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. You will be given the option to decline to answer any or all questions and terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions about this research, you may contact Ashley Meinecke, aweber21@uncc.edu, Dr. Amy Good, agood5@uncc.edu, or Dr. Drew Polly, abpolly@uncc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the UNCC Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be a participant within this study. Make sure you understand the premise and purpose of this study before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you may contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Name (PRINT)

Email Address (PRINT)

Signature	Date
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Name and signature of person obtaining consent	Date
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APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW

Educator/Paraprofessional Interview

Demographics:

1. What is your current role in your school?
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
3. How many years have you taught in early childhood education (defined by NAEYC as birth-age 8/second grade)?
4. How many years of experience within your current role do you have?
5. What is your level of education?

SEL Related Questions:

6. Describe your understanding of “Social Emotional Learning”.
 - a. How would you define it?
7. What are your experiences as it relates to Social Emotional Learning?
 - a. work experiences
 - b. educational experiences
 - c. professional development experiences
8. In what ways would you describe your familiarity with incorporating Social Emotional Learning and skill development into your teaching practices?
9. Do you find yourself integrating the teaching of these skills more implicitly or explicitly?
Why?
10. In what ways do you promote social and emotional growth within your students?

Follow-up for more information: (here are a few examples:

- a. relationship building

- b. mindful practices
- c. coping strategies
- d. self-regulation skills
- e. managing feelings
- f. problem-solving tactics

11. What impact or influence do you believe SEL has on your students?
12. What evidence do you have that shows when a student has acquired a SEL skill?
13. Describe the level of priority that Social Emotional Learning has within your classroom?
 - a. Personal priority
 - b. Daily schedule
14. What do you believe your role is in developing your student's Social Emotional Learning skills?
15. Do you find there are any barriers or challenges as it relates to implementing Social Emotional Learning?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT SUMMARY AND THANK YOU

Dear (Participant Name),

Thank you so much for volunteering to participate in my study regarding SEL practices in your classroom. I have attached your interview summary. Should you have any questions or want to clarify anything, please do not hesitate to contact me!

Have a WONDERFUL summer!

Sincerely,

Ashley Meinecke