A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS

by

Justin Allen Whittenbarger

Liberty University

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

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2022
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APPROVED BY:

Michael Patrick, Ed.D., Committee Chair

James Eller, Ed.D., Committee Member
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of teachers related to social and emotional learning (SEL) in the rural Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee. This study examined individual, explicit experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students. Bandura’s social cognitive theory primarily guided this study as it relates closely to the behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that all play a role in the way a teacher responds to professional learning. The data collection involved a qualifying survey, a questionnaire, interviews with participants (novice teachers and veteran teachers), and a focus group. Data analysis included a full description of the researcher’s personal experiences with the phenomenon with a focus toward the participants’ views of importance of the phenomenon. Significant statements were examined about participants experiencing the phenomenon. What and how statements were noted verbatim during the analysis of data. The findings highlight the need for high-quality, impactful training related to SEL. While some SEL trainings have been offered and the district does seem to believe in the importance of SEL as related to students, the experiences of participants indicated a lack of depth and relevance in their SEL professional learning that may translate to positive change with students.

*Keywords*: professional development, social and emotional learning, interventions, fidelity, impact, relationships
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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to teachers across the globe working tirelessly to meet the ever-changing needs of students. The role of education in a society can never be understated. Educators are truly shaping subsequent generations, and effective teachers with a laser-like focus on doing what is best for students must be nonnegotiable.
Acknowledgments

I thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for helping me along this journey. Without Him, there is no way I could have persevered and been successful. Numerous prayers have been lifted seeking His guidance and direction. Without question, my wife and son have made great sacrifices along this journey; they have my unwavering love and appreciation for the support shown along the way. There are numerous individuals who have either directly or indirectly influenced my career in education. To begin listing each one would undoubtedly leave someone out. However, each significant individual along the way has pushed me to be better than I was before and helped me maintain a focus on doing what is best for students.
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**List of Abbreviations**

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Child Development Associate (CDA)

Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Professional Development (PD)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Recognizing and understanding that teachers have varying experiences related to social and emotional learning (SEL) is key to improving the learning of both students and teachers. Examining the impacts of SEL through the lens of teachers’ experiences and professional learning aligns closely with constructivist views (Vygotsky, 1978) of participants constructing meaning from their learning processes. Although constructivist views are germane to this topic, it is teachers’ self-efficacy, derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, that is the force behind educators understanding that their own capabilities can bring about greater student engagement and learning. A sense of belonging plays a key role in psychological functioning, and schools have opportunities to facilitate a sense of belonging for children (Allen et al., 2018). Just as Darling-Hammond (2005) referenced the discrepancy between the amount of time spent in China and Japan versus the United States with collegial work, Postholm (2012) further postulated on the benefits to students when teachers have opportunities to own their professional learning.

A qualitative study examining educators’ experiences surrounding SEL and their knowledge of SEL would be examined as part of the study. Postholm (2012) reinforced the idea that teachers learn best in their school environment given varying cultural and structural influences in each school. In considering the research questions, it would be important to examine educator experiences that exist related to SEL affecting classroom environment and how SEL plays a role in lesson planning and interventions throughout the day. Also worthy of consideration would be educators’ experiences related to SEL affecting student success in light of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Additionally, addressing educators’ perspectives of
trainings related to student success could allow for more in-depth analysis through an examination any prior SEL trainings educators have attended. A multinational study by Hammerness et al. (2020) concluded that teacher candidates in the United States (and other countries) lack necessary opportunities to analyze student learning and student work samples during their preparation. Hammerness et al. (2020) continued that teacher candidates would be well served to understand that the complexities of teaching are not always presented during their preparation. The point reiterated by the above is that PD for teachers must be examined for an understanding of their experiences in order to achieve greater effectiveness. Purposeful planning of professional learning should occur by examining desired improvements to student learning and examining evidence to reflect improvements (Guskey, 2012).

**Background**

Teacher self-efficacy, derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, is a driving force behind educators understanding that their own capabilities can bring about greater student engagement and learning. According to Joyce and Calhoun (2015), “Schools simply have to generate higher and more equitable learning and strive to be healthier social systems. Students, society, and the economic system will benefit simultaneously” (p. 43). Teachers are typically guided by standards; while states provide academic standards with standardized assessments, the need to address the social and emotional needs of students has states calling for the adoption of standards for social and emotional learning programs (Eklund et al., 2018). Eklund et al. further indicated that SEL programs have increased in use due to research conducted about intensive and targeted social and emotional learning. All states have social and emotional learning standards for preschool, but only 11 states incorporate such standards in grades K-12 (Eklund et al., 2018).
Students must have their needs addressed in an ever-changing world, and fostering competence surrounding social and emotional learning is paramount.

**Historical Context**

The teacher recertification process in the 1970’s was a driving force behind what is now known as PD (Joyce & Calhoun, 2015). Federal initiatives led to PD sessions about new regulations, districts were now authorized to offer PD within boundaries allowing teachers to avoid after school and weekends at a university, and the changes to PD were overall well received (Joyce & Calhoun, 2015). In the late 1980’s, school districts began shifting to more of a site-based management approach that placed many of the operational and PD responsibilities on the principal; the 1990’s ushered in the professional learning community (PLC) concept, which molded well with site-based management (Joyce & Calhoun, 2015). Dixon et al. (2014) illustrated that teacher candidates are graduating from preparation programs without requisite skills for classroom realities, and school districts must offer relevant, effective PD to close the gaps. Darling-Hammond (2006) discussed the importance of strong teacher preparation programs and the cohesion that must exist between theory and practice, especially in how programs must assist novice teachers in understanding the process of learning along with social and cultural contexts.

Educators fostering healthy relationships and helping students forge pathways to better lives can improve and break vicious cycles currently in place that are impacting society (Allen, et al., 2018). Corcoran et al. (2018) noted that in addition to academic mandates and standardized testing tied to evaluations, teachers must balance meeting students’ social and emotional needs in order to facilitate student learning. Corcoran et al. (2018) discussed providing teachers with the necessary training and tools to help students regulate and ensure their brains were ready to learn.
Fox et al. (2015), along with Valiandes and Neophytou (2018), discussed aspects of professional development for teachers that contribute to student success; these studies exemplified the importance of differentiated professional learning opportunities to ensure student success.

**Social Context**

Social and emotional learning is an essential component of education as it helps children become healthier and happier people (Bar-On, 2005). Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) contended that SEL programs in schools have distinct benefits for students; these benefits included increased academic achievement and increased social and emotional competencies. The research of Smith and Low (2013) concluded that SEL is not the answer in and of itself to undesired student behavior; yet, incorporating SEL into the classroom is a key component to establishing positive social interactions amongst students. Barnett (2019) indicated the importance of funding, resources, and training related to teachers properly incorporating SEL to improve achievement. The mindset that SEL is beyond the scope of a teacher’s responsibility exists, so districts must be proactive in providing effective training to combat such a mindset (Barnett, 2019).

In considering how teachers’ experiences related to PD can be impactful, Shaha et al. (2015) demonstrated how a well-designed teacher observation system can be partnered with effective, proven PD and have positive impacts on student achievement; this system worked in a plethora of states to improve student achievement. Much like the research of Barnett (2019) and Buettner et al. (2016), relevant professional development must be combined with quality teacher preparation programs to best meet the SEL needs of students. Teachers’ experiences during professional development are crucial to understand (Powell & Bodur, 2019). In order to move the needle regarding student success and allow teachers to have a strong sense of efficacy, it is
imperative to understand that both positive and negative emotions of teachers during PD have subsequent consequences; learning opportunities presented holistically should consider teachers’ experiences and vary from those presented to more focused groups of teachers (Gaines et al., 2019).

**Theoretical Context**

Theories relevant to emotion and learning (Pekrun, 2006), perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001), adult learning (Knowles, 1984) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) all reinforce the importance of this study. Pekrun’s (2006) control-value theory of emotion is key to understanding how emotions play a significant role in learning and motivation of teachers. A study by Gaines et al. (2019) reinforced the idea of emotions playing a key role in the professional learning of teachers; this was closely aligned with Pekrun’s (2006) control-value theory of emotion, which discussed how both positive and negative emotions play a significant role in the learning and motivation of teachers. Bandura’s (2001) work surrounding social cognitive theory examined behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that all play a role in individuals’ responses. Examining social cognitive theory relates to perceived self-efficacy, and teachers’ perceived self-efficacy rises when they feel empowered to make positive changes for students. Studies by Dixon et al. (2014) and Barnett (2019) examined teacher efficacy and aligned closely with Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory and teachers’ perceived self-efficacy.

Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984) is important to understand the perceptions of teachers as related to professional development. Knowles (1984) offered several assumptions of adult learning related to teachers and their perceptions of professional learning: self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. A
study by Visser et al. (2014) explored how teachers in grades K-12 used a social network, Twitter, as part of a personal learning network to exchange ideas, knowledge, and collaborate. This type of adult learning goes against the grain with conventional models of PD; this aligns with Knowles’s (1984) assumptions of adult learners as it explores a new avenue for meeting the learning needs of teachers. Additionally, Smith (2020) discussed how teachers are beginning to employ maker principles and activities in their classrooms; teachers must experience this type of learning in order to effectively implement and better meet the needs of their students. These types of makerspace learning opportunities for teachers align with the works of Knowles (1984) and Wenger’s (1999) Communities of Practice Framework; in this type of framework, individuals have a shared enterprise with others.

Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) focused on educating the whole child and the related benefits with SEL; there was a key focus on teachers instilling ethical competence in students. Allowing for this type of knowledge being co-constructed from one’s environment aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism. Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory postulated that knowledge is co-constructed with one’s environment; this idea of co-constructed knowledge and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) relate closely to perceptions of effective, differentiated professional learning of teachers. Morcom (2014) also indicated experiences (emotions and relationships) are essential components of the learning process; this research study attributed much of its model to sociocultural theory and zone of proximal development (ZPD) per the work of Vygotsky (1978). There is a distinct difference between learning and knowledge according to social constructivist theory (Churcher et al., 2014). Learning through collaboration is possible but learning itself is an individual process that may be aided though the knowledge obtained in environmental circumstances. Collaborative learning,
collaboration in a community of practice, and scaffolding within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) were all listed and described as being essential to the social and emotional connections tied to cognitive learning (Churcher et al., 2014). This aligns closely with capturing the experiences of teachers addressing SEL with their students. The PD experiences of teachers and their resulting perceived self-efficacy as it relates to SEL warrants consideration as exemplified in the purpose of this study.

**Situation to Self**

It is desirous that this study provides a lens for assisting teachers and fostering improvement in meeting the diverse SEL needs of students. As a school administrator, I have seen diverse needs among teachers related to SEL. My experiences in education motivated me to conduct a study examining educators’ experiences related to SEL. Social and emotional learning has continued to take a front seat in education, much more than in years past, and a deliberate focus on SEL is relevant. Thinking about experiences with PD, it is important to recognize that there are assumptions about PD with teachers; often, a lack of familiarity with SEL and the potential impacts related to effective SEL interventions are present. Hofer and Pintrich (1997) discussed how epistemological beliefs are individuals’ representations held about knowledge and knowing. The way(s) a person comes to know information and the beliefs held about knowing influence a person’s cognitive processes (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Epistemological beliefs related to a social constructivism interpretive framework led to this choice of research; social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) postulated that knowledge is co-constructed with one’s environment.

I am passionate that learning is an individual process spurred through effective reflection. Churcher et al. (2014) referenced a distinct difference between learning and knowledge
according to social constructivist theory. Collaborative learning certainly exists; however, Churcher et al. emphasized the individual nature of learning based on knowledge from one’s circumstances. These epistemological beliefs are rooted in my personal, philosophical paradigm that teachers must reflect on their experiences while gaining a greater understanding and knowledge of SEL. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), reality is constructed between the researcher and the researched while shaped by individual experiences in a social constructivism framework. With an emphasis on lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), this study will allow individual experiences and perspectives of teachers related to SEL to drive the study.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is the SEL needs of students are not consistently met by both novice and veteran educators who have varied experiences related to differentiated professional learning to effectively address the needs of students, including SEL, and the exigency to meet students’ needs requires varying levels of support (Gaines et al., 2019; Gannoe et al., 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019). Gannoe et al. (2019) discussed the importance of considering generational differences with teachers when offering support and the importance of proper guidance regarding professional learning for both novice and veteran teachers. Work surrounding the importance of a teacher’s role in classroom climate (Kashy-Rosenbaum et al., 2017) and how mindfulness-based interventions have proven to positively affect teachers’ performance and well-being (Hwang et al., 2017) reinforce the need for teachers to be properly supported in their professional learning. Sprott (2018) provided a differentiated professional development framework study exploring advanced teachers’ descriptions of what helped them be effective; one of the key takeaways was the importance of collaborative reflection, which aligns closely with the social constructivist views of Vygotsky (1978).
Administrators encourage educators to be reflective and to implement purposeful instructional activities; likewise, administrators must be equally purposeful in providing professional development opportunities for educators to best meet the learning needs of students (Guskey, 2012). Work surrounding educating the whole child (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017), the impact of SEL in schools (Dixon et al., 2014), and the importance of teacher reflection to improve (Fox et al., 2015) all indicate issues related to educators’ PD experiences in schools. Educators put trust in how they assess student learning by examining the effectiveness of their strategies through portfolios of student work, common formative assessments, and classroom content assessments; educators feel best equipped to assess the progress of students via their own assessments (Guskey, 2012). With all the research about professional development and SEL, there is scant research that examines high performing schools and the connection to quality SEL. There also appears to be a gap in the research when examining teachers’ experiences, perceptions, and confidence in implementing SEL interventions with fidelity. This phenomenological study differs from past studies in that it directly examines teachers’ professional learning experiences related to addressing students’ SEL needs.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee (pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of locations and persons). Educators’ experiences and perceptions of SEL are generally defined through their understanding of and impact of SEL. The theory guiding this study is Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory. Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory is designed from a framework of triadic reciprocal nature that links personal, behavioral, and environmental variables to a
person’s perceived self-efficacy. Teachers’ perceived self-efficacy climbs if they feel empowered to make positive changes for students. In this study, the experiences of educators in differentiated professional learning and their understanding of SEL is key. Proverbs 23:7a reads, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (*New American Standard Version Bible, 1971/1995*).

**Significance of the Study**

Understanding the experiences of educators related to SEL is important to examine as it may directly impact the achievement of students (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Experiences of educators while participating in professional development are crucial to understand, because the positive or negative perceptions during the learning impact the receptivity of the teacher to the learning (Gaines et al., 2019; Powell & Bodur, 2019). Educators are often left out of the equation when discussing SEL (Gregory & Fergus, 2017), because the focus in schools is typically on helping students.

**Empirical**

Educators reflecting on their own experiences and perceptions of SEL in addressing the needs of students may lead to necessary transitions for improvement. Transition was defined as a change in status that makes adult learning necessary (Brickell, 1982), and this definition of transition aligns closely with the idea of this study, where educators’ experiences with ever-changing SEL needs of students will be examined. Brickell (1982) addressed reasons that adults learn and discussed a transition hypothesis; in this hypothesis, rapid social change and changing family patterns were listed as two of the forces requiring one to obtain new knowledge, skills, and new attitudes or values. A gap exists in current literature that explains teachers’ reflections to improve based on their experiences in professional learning to address the diverse SEL needs of students. Most applicable to this research study regarding teachers’ experiences are the ideas of
supports and self-discussed by Schlossberg (2011). This study will provide needed context for implementing transitions for improvement related to the desired SEL experiences of teachers. The idea of supports available during a transition is highly relevant; educators need support in making adjustments to their instruction and implementing SEL strategies with fidelity to best meet the needs of students. The idea of self as presented by Schlossberg (2011) is closely related to the reflective practices necessary for continued improvement.

**Theoretical**

Programs in schools, whether academic or behavioral, are just programs (Murphy, 2017). Schlossberg’s (2011) transition model addressed dealing with transition events (either anticipated or non-anticipated events that transpired) and nonevents (events that never transpired) in life and employed a 4-Ss system for coping with transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies. Administrators must have an awareness of the needs of the faculty and also consider Schlossberg’s (2011) idea of self, which is one of the four Ss. Self refers to one’s inner strength and resiliency during a transition; optimism is key (Schlossberg, 2011). With optimism being paramount during a transition (Schlossberg, 2011), administrators must know those educators who are more inclined to optimism and those more inclined to pessimism. It is paramount to understand how educators describe the constructs of support, self, situation, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011) during professional learning opportunities. This research study will contribute to the knowledge base of understanding teachers’ responses during PD and reinforce the importance of differentiated, effective learning opportunities for teachers to meet the varying needs of students. This aligns with the work of Bandura’s (2001) self-efficacy and social cognitive theory as behavioral, personal, and environmental factors all contribute to educators’ responses during professional development. Teachers’ perceived self-efficacy rises when they
feel empowered through their experiences to make positive changes for students (Bandura, 2001).

**Practical**

Teachers may gain requisite knowledge from this study, as it will reinforce the idea of two key elements for student success: rigor and pastoral care (Murphy, 2017). Without proper rigor and pastoral care, which Murphy (2017) referred to as the DNA in the building, a program that has been successful in one school would not necessarily have the same impact or success rate in another. Administrators understanding the DNA of a staff and having clear knowledge of what educators need to improve may do much to improve the learning of students. As such, considerations must be given to how teachers perceive professional development based on their own emotional issues. Although students are typically the primary consideration regarding SEL in schools, Gregory and Fergus (2017) demonstrated that both adults’ and students’ social and emotional learning competencies are significant to success. The experiences of educators in meeting the diverse needs of students are worthy of examination, because understanding the experiences of educators during professional learning opportunities and understanding the impact of SEL interventions may play a role in improving student success.

**Research Questions**

Understanding teachers’ experiences with SEL aligns with perceived self-efficacy, derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory. Research is clear that educators who understand their own capabilities can bring about greater student engagement and learning.

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee?
The experiences of educators related to SEL are important to examine as properly implementing SEL strategies may directly impact the achievement of students (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). This central research question relates to experiences, and there appear to be gaps in perceptions and confidence with modern teachers implementing SEL interventions with fidelity (Dixon et al., 2014). Bandura’s (2001) work surrounding social cognitive theory examined behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that all contribute to individuals’ responses in situations, such as professional development.

**Research Sub-question One**

How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change?

Resources, funding, and training related to the proper incorporation of SEL strategies and interventions by teachers are paramount to student success (Barnett, 2019). This research sub-question relates closely to Schlossberg’s (2011) views of support in that levels of support during a transition are significant. Perceived self-efficacy of teachers climbs when they feel empowered to make positive changes in the classroom; this question has a key connection to Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory, which examined how behavioral, environmental, and personal factors affect responses to professional learning. Cohesion must exist between theory and practice, especially in how programs must assist educators in understanding the process of learning along with social and cultural contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

**Research Sub-question Two**

What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom?
Purposeful planning of professional learning should occur by examining desired improvements to student learning and examining evidence to reflect improvements (Guskey, 2012). This research sub-question emphasizes that professional development for teachers must also consider their emotions. Emotions during a professional learning experience have proven to have subsequent consequences (Gaines et al., 2019). Educator self-efficacy is key to educators understanding that their own capabilities may improve student engagement and learning (Bandura, 1986). Individual efficacy and collective efficacy are connected as an individual’s perception of the organization is related to the individual’s perceived self-efficacy (Zakeri et al., 2016).

**Definitions**

1. *Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)* – Adverse childhood experiences refer to physical or mental maltreatment during childhood. Such experiences may lead to a variety of mental illnesses and physical health issues later in life, and there are 9 identified types of ACEs: serious economic hardship, witnessing or experiencing violence in the neighborhood, alcohol, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues in home, divorce, loss of parents to death or incarceration, social rejection via racial and/or ethnic discrimination (Wissow et al., 2016).

2. *Differentiated professional development (PD)* – Differentiated professional development includes providing teachers and staff with a variety of professional learning opportunities to meet their diverse needs as adult learners. Professional development for teachers must take their life cycle of learning into consideration, whether they are experienced educators or early career educators (Fox et al., 2015).
3. **Social and emotional interventions** – Social and emotional interventions refer to practices that regularly incorporate students’ social and emotional needs into the learning curriculum to enhance students’ self-awareness (Stillman et al., 2018). Programs targeting specific behaviors have increased in use resulting from research conducted about targeted SEL programs (Eklund et al., 2018).

4. **Social and emotional learning (SEL)** – SEL involves equipping students with the necessary tools to control their emotions and can do much to alleviate confrontations between students (Smith and Low, 2013).

**Summary**

Educators have varied experiences related to addressing the SEL needs of students and require varying levels of support to meet the needs of students. Educators feel best equipped to assess the progress of students via their own assessments (Guskey, 2012). Likewise, administrators should encourage educators to be reflective and to implement purposeful instructional activities; administrators must be equally purposeful in providing professional development opportunities for educators to best meet the learning needs of students (Guskey, 2012). Work surrounding educating the whole child (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017), the impact of SEL in schools (Dixon et al., 2014), and the importance of teacher reflection to improve (Fox, et al., 2015) all indicate issues related to educators’ experiences in schools. In addition, educators’ experiences related to students’ mental health and ACEs are important; according to Panayiotou et al. (2019), mental health plays a significant factor in the academic success of students; academic progress will come with students who have experienced trauma once their social and emotional needs are properly addressed and learning can occur.
Panayiotou et al. (2019) also addressed the thought that the mental health of educators should be considered. The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to understand the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in order to mitigate the problem of not adequately addressing SEL in schools. This phenomenological study differs from past studies in that it directly examines teachers’ experiences related to addressing students’ SEL needs. Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory will drive this study as this theory is designed from a framework of triadic reciprocal nature that links personal, behavioral, and environmental variables to a person’s perceived self-efficacy. Teachers’ perceived self-efficacy climbs when they feel empowered to make positive changes for students. Check and Schutt (2012) indicated that teachers are, by nature, reflective individuals, and administrators must use that reflective aspect to elicit improvement. Given the varied experiences of teachers related to SEL, the reflective nature of teachers must be fostered and emphasized through effective PD while striving to consistently address the unmet SEL needs of students.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the problem of novice and veteran educators’ varied experiences related to differentiated professional learning to effectively address the needs of students, including SEL needs, and needing varying levels of support to meet the needs of students. This chapter will present a review of the current literature related to teachers’ professional development (PD) as connected to social and emotional learning (SEL). In the first section, Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which is relevant to perceived self-efficacy, will be discussed. This discussion will be followed by a synthesis of recent literature regarding differentiated professional learning for teachers, teacher efficacy, and social and emotional learning. Last, literature surrounding the impact of effective social and emotional interventions will be addressed. In the end, a gap in the literature will be identified, presenting a viable need for understanding teachers’ experiences in meeting the SEL needs of students.

Theoretical Framework

Humans embody complex learning and emotional systems that all play a role in how learning transpires. Whether the learner is young or mature, considerations of learning processes must be present in order for learning to be effective. Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory serves as the guiding theory in this study to understanding the experiences of teachers in meeting the social and emotional learning needs of students.

Social Cognitive Theory

Behavioral, personal, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986) all play a role in the way a teacher experiences professional learning, and these factors should be considered when providing differentiated professional learning for teachers to best meet the SEL needs of
students. The collective belief that teachers can positively impact students relates closely to social cognitive theory; the perceived self-efficacy of teachers climbs when they feel empowered to make positive changes for students (Bandura, 2001). Social cognitive theory was designed from a framework of triadic reciprocal nature that linked personal, behavioral, and environmental variables to a person’s perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). It is through an examination of teachers’ perceived self-efficacy in this study and social cognitive theory that a greater understanding of their professional development needs may be revealed to best meet the SEL needs of students.

Social cognitive theory originated in the 1960’s as social learning theory and evolved into what is now social cognitive theory in 1986. The basic premise of social cognitive theory is that learning transpires in a social context with personal, behavioral, and environmental factors working in an intertwined model of causality (Bandura, 2001). In a sense, the three factors are reciprocal in nature as they function off one another. This idea of multiple factors affecting the human experience closely relates to this study of understanding the experiences of peer educators in meeting the SEL needs of students. Effectively meeting the diverse professional learning needs of teachers is a challenge; however, there can be great benefits to students who interact with teachers properly trained in SEL and those who have a keen awareness of their own social and emotional competence (Barnett, 2019; Smith & Low, 2013).

The social cognitive theory model embodies interactive agency: both human and collective agency. Human agency is the issue of knowing what it means to be human. There are several factors contributing to the idea of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). Collective agency is the concept that people can effectively work together to produce desirable results; this work often leads to the
perceived efficacy of the group being able to accomplish what the collective individuals could not (Bandura, 2001). Educators’ experiences in learning and working together to best meet the SEL needs of students entails both human and collective agency. In addition, the work of Zakeri et al. (2016) demonstrated the importance of teachers’ self-efficacy and collective efficacy as there is a significant correlation between the two. While individual efficacy and collective efficacy have often been examined separately in research, there is a clear connection between individual efficacy and the individual’s perception of the organization for which he works (Zakeri et al., 2016). This relates closely to the idea of this study, which examines the experiences of peer educators in meeting the diverse SEL needs of students; organizations (schools) must provide PD to individual teachers that properly address the needs within the organization to successfully meet the SEL needs of students. The research questions within this study will demonstrate how social cognitive theory shapes the importance of differentiated PD for teachers to best meet the SEL needs of students.

**Related Literature**

Improving teachers’ ability to reflect, to utilize their professional learning, to build collective efficacy, and to understand their personal and emotional connections to learning all contribute to better meeting the needs of students. Facilitating a sense of belonging for students, being proactive regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandates, properly scaffolding SEL interventions, understanding the connections to SEL and academic achievement, overcoming funding obstacles, and understanding that teacher preparation programs often overlook SEL in their programs are covered in the following literature review. All demonstrate the importance of connecting the professional learning experience of teachers to SEL in order to help students attain success.
**Professional Development**

Both novice and veteran teachers need support in developing an ability to critically reflect in order to best meet the diverse needs of students; reflection is a key component of teachers’ learning and improvement processes with the ultimate goal of helping students achieve both behaviorally and academically (Fox et al., 2015). Ebersold et al. (2019) posited that the experiences of teachers as related to their well-being are impacted by need satisfaction and need frustration; there are distinct benefits for examining these aspects in considering the autonomy support of teachers at the school level. Fox et al. (2015) examined differences between early career and experienced teachers to appropriately reflect, utilize their professional learning, and how their teaching impact was influenced by advanced coursework; in this study, researchers were focused on the learning of novice and veteran teachers. In similar fashion, a qualitative research study by Valiandes and Neophytou (2018) sought to examine findings of the Teachers’ Professional Development Program for Differentiated Instruction to gauge teacher confidence before and after related to differentiated instructional practices. This research study examined and identified the changes that the program facilitated to instructional practices, achievement (student), perceptions and attitudes surrounding differentiated instruction (teachers), and teachers’ perceptions of the program.

The Fox et al. (2015) study took place in an advanced master’s degree program in a large university located on the east coast of the United States. There were 47 participants in the research study comprised of a wide range of experience levels and teachers in multiple content areas. Prompted reflections written at specified points during the course sequence and post-program interviews conducted one year after coursework completion were used as data sources. The participants of this study also needed support in teacher research practices as they refined
their specific content knowledge and applied it in their classrooms to best meet students’ needs (Fox et al., 2015). In similar fashion, Valiandes and Neophytou (2018) reinforced the concept that effective, high-quality PD for teachers can be impactful and affect student achievement. Professional development for teachers, as indicated in the results of the studies by Fox et al. (2015) and Valiandes and Neophytou (2018), must take their life cycle of learning into consideration as educators; an additional key takeaway of the Fox et al. (2015) study was that teacher reflection is powerful and fosters growth.

Ongoing professional development in the United States is lacking compared to other countries, and a large gap exists when comparing times that colleagues have to refine instructional practices to best meet the needs of students (Darling-Hammond, 2005). A study by Westling (2010) utilized a questionnaire that was completed by 70 teachers who reflected about themselves and challenging students. Thirty-two general education and 38 special education teachers were represented in this study that was conducted in the southeastern United States. A lack of support was noted in the study with most teachers indicating a distinct lack of effective strategies to deal with challenging student behaviors. Special education teachers had a distinguishable trend of note: less than 60% felt they had adequate pre-service and in-service preparation to successfully address challenging students. The majority of participants in the study felt that challenging behavior was learned and was subject to improvement. Unfortunately, teachers also indicated a sense of ineffectiveness associated with their lack of preparation to appropriately address challenging behavior.

Furthermore, teachers in Japan and China spend approximately 20 hours per week with collegial work (lesson planning, demonstrations of teaching, conducting research, study groups, etc.) compared to little or no time for teachers in the United States to conduct such during the
school day (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Gannoe et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of also considering generational differences among teachers. While Baby Boomers need to hear about their value to an organization and Gen Xers value their independence, a Millennial teacher needs to feel rapport with supervisors and feel an affiliation with the organization (Gannoe et al., 2019). Modern school administrators face challenges with encouraging teachers to “want for themselves” when it comes to PD (Gannoe et al., 2019, p. 24). Not all teachers have the same beliefs and/or positive understanding of SEL; consequently, this variation can impact the ways teachers behave, teach, and interact with students in their classrooms (Collie et al., 2015).

Meissel et al. (2016) posited that school reform has historically demanded a considerable focus centering on teacher improvement and development. The reasoning behind such focus is the notion of teachers having the greatest impact on student achievement. The importance of educator professional development has never been higher (Guskey, 2000). Meissel et al. (2016) proposed moving beyond the process to product model and implementing a more dynamic approach. This dynamic approach should incorporate complexities of the learning environment to yield more desirable results from PD. This study suggested that the Literacy Professional Development Project offered characteristics of core conceptual features indicative of effective PD. Although there was a noted lack of confidence with teaching writing, significant gains in student writing were made by students in this study; these gains were attributed to the buy-in and acceptance of teachers to the PD. This aligns closely with Bandura’s (2001) perceived self-efficacy as participants held a shared theory of improvement throughout the project. Meissel et al. (2016) continued that examining evidence of teachers’ learning needs and providing PD based on the school’s needs was paramount. Meissel et al. (2016) also noted the importance of
collaborative partnerships between educators, administrators, and all levels of the educational system working in a cohesive manner.

**Professional Development Learning Implications**

Both Kyriakides et al. (2017) and Prast et al. (2018) presented clear findings related to effective PD implementation and implications. Teachers need sufficient time to gradually move from one stage of learning to the next. This idea of gradual learning for educators posits that their experience levels should determine the type of professional learning needed. Egert et al. (2020) discussed educational quality being rooted in high-quality interactions between teachers and children. Furthermore, Egert et al. (2020) indicated international research that suggested a relatively high level of interactions exist that support classroom organization along with emotions. However, the same international research referenced by Egert et al. (2020) suggested the quality of instructional support leaves much to be desired. This study utilized the “Teaching Through Interactions” framework (Hamre et al., 2013). The meta-analysis revealed an overall statistically significant professional development effect of $g = 0.39$ (SE = .08) (Egert et al., 2020). The results of the study indicated that high-quality professional development programs may improve interactions between teachers and students.

The Dynamic Approach supports the idea that teacher improvement should stem from the development of teaching skills that directly contribute to students’ positive learning results (Kyriakides et al., 2017). Kyriakides et al. (2017) further posited that differentiated professional development should be offered to meet teachers’ learning needs while fostering critical reflection. A quantitative research study by Kyriakides et al. (2017) investigated the impact that a long-term program based on the Dynamic Approach can have on the quality of teaching. Primary education teachers participated in a school-based PD program with a three-year duration. The
106 teachers who volunteered to participate ranged from one to twenty-eight years of teaching experience. It is important to understand the experiences of teachers related to PD as Kyriakides et al. (2017) and Prast et al. (2018) presented clear findings related to effective PD implementation and positive implications. The study conducted by Kyriakides et al. (2017) had some important education policy implications as it supported the assumption that teachers need varying degrees of time as they progress through their professional learning experiences to best meet the diverse needs of students.

Both general education and special education teachers overwhelmingly agreed that there exists an overall lack of support for their behavioral challenges with students (Westling, 2010). Teachers in both categories felt least supported by district administrators, behavior specialists, and community agencies (Westling, 2010). Teachers’ professional learning to meet the diverse needs of students was exemplified via a quantitative research study by Prast et al. (2018). This study investigated whether teacher PD about differentiation had a positive effect on student achievement in primary school mathematics. An important success factor in this project was that teachers were provided with the skills and knowledge to use ability grouping as a means to differentiate instruction. These skills were closely tied to improved instructional practices rather than simply documenting differentiation. The results of this research study demonstrated that PD about differentiation in mathematics had the potential to raise the achievement of all students (Prast et al., 2018). Both Kyriakides et al. (2017) and Prast et al. (2018) supported the idea that teachers’ experiences in specific, proven professional development can positively impact students as demonstrated through the results of their respective studies.

An (2018) studied the effects of a PD for teachers geared toward digital games in the classroom setting. Of interesting note was the impact of teachers’ freedom to choose digital
games based on the level of appropriateness for their students. An’s (2018) study could potentially inform administrators about providing opportunities for teachers to have a voice in selecting their own professional learning. The limitations of existing games had a negative impact on their receptiveness to the program. Teachers who were unable to find games that went beyond standard practice and drill games of which they were already familiar demonstrated a skeptical attitude with the PD. An (2018) found that teachers who had ownership in the development of the experience (background knowledge) helped improve their overall understanding of the PD assignments. This is significant as it could inform administrators about the importance of laying the foundation for learning in PD before expecting positive change. This information aligns closely with Neumerski’s (2013) work that indicated the importance of mastery and principal support in professional learning experiences.

An (2018) further indicated that exposing teachers to a variety of digital games and providing opportunities to design their own gaming experiences could help them understand their potential using the DGBL program. At the conclusion of the course, participants demonstrated significant changes in their attitudes, perceptions, and self-efficacy. It was conclusive that teachers should be involved in the process of the educational game design to ensure fidelity (An, 2018). A constant from Neumerski’s (2013) work is that instructional leadership is a key enabler to quality teaching in the classroom. There are clear links to effective instructional leadership and quality teaching and learning; Neumerski (2013) postulated that specific behaviors could be linked to instructional practices and ultimately, student learning. In similar fashion, An’s (2018) study had significant PD implications in that it demonstrated that the PD experience had a positive influence on behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions could go beyond teachers’ perceptions and attitudes. Furthermore, An (2018) demonstrated that involving teachers in
multiple facets of a program can lead to a broader understanding and greater fidelity with implementation of the program.

**Teacher Efficacy**

Loughland and Ryan (2020) posited that teachers’ collective efficacy is a significant factor in student achievement; as such, school leaders should be effectively involved in teacher PD. In referencing collective efficacy, Loughland and Ryan (2020) referenced Hattie’s (2015) research indicating an effect size of 1.57 toward student achievement. This research study utilized focus groups with leaders of school-based teams of teachers; the idea of “communicative competency” was emphasized as the voices of all team members should be heard (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). Similarly, Neumerski (2013) intended to reveal insights about instructional leadership by examining literature surrounding the following: traditional instructional leadership, teacher instructional leadership, and coach instructional leadership. A constant from Neumerski’s (2013) work was that instructional leadership is a key enabler to quality teaching in the classroom. There are clear links to effective instructional leadership and quality teaching and learning; Neumerski (2013) postulated that specific behaviors could be linked to instructional practices and ultimately, student learning.

Scaffolding teachers in their PD with a voice in their learning enables their collective efficacy to climb. Additionally, this information surrounding communicative competency can influence future teacher leaders as a greater understanding of increasing teachers’ collective efficacy is noted (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). Similarly, An (2018) demonstrated that involving teachers in multiple facets of a program can lead to a greater knowledge and fidelity within the program. Loughland and Ryan (2020) noted mastery, social persuasion, affective states, and vicarious experiences as motivational sources of collective efficacy. In addition, teachers having
the ability to make judgments based on their analysis of the issue/task/assignment enhances collective efficacy (Hattie, 2015). Loughland and Ryan (2020) went on to describe the importance of collaboration as it relates to PD; effective PD is key for motivation and ongoing support, and teachers should feel a sense of ownership in the process. Neumerski (2013) noted the importance of mastery experiences for teachers and effective instructional leadership as a lever for quality teaching.

Yoo (2016) conducted a study examining the effect of an online PD learning experience on teachers’ self efficacy. The study included 148 teachers across the K-12 spectrum; 126 females and 22 males were included in the study. Yoo (2016) administered the Teachers Self-Efficacy Scale twice to participants with a five-week period between administrations. Participants also completed a self-analysis of their score change from the first to second administrations of the Teachers Self-Efficacy Scale. Neumerski (2013) discussed the importance of mastery and principal support in professional learning experiences, and it is important to note the importance of teachers incorporating reflection to improve instructional practices. Yoo (2016) sought to not only measure the effect of PD, but also to analyze how teachers interpret their changes between administrations of the survey. The findings of Yoo’s (2016) study indicated that teacher efficacy rose in conjunction with their online PD experience. Administrators should be cognizant of how PD experiences may impact collective teacher efficacy.

There is no standard, universal approach when it comes to teaching modern students, yet employing differentiation in classrooms has proven to increase meeting the varying needs of students (Dixon et al., 2014). In a qualitative research study, Dixon et al. (2014) examined teacher efficacy and the relationship to differentiated instructional practices. Teacher candidates
are often leaving their university or college preparation programs unprepared for the realities of the classroom; as a result, school districts must offer relevant, effective PD to reduce the gaps. A study by Zakeri et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of both teachers’ self-efficacy and their collective efficacy; this study found a strong correlation to both. Zakeri et al. (2016) stated, “Teacher training programs should not limit their focus merely to pedagogical knowledge but give more attention to providing teachers with skills and experiences which they can currently only acquire after they start real teaching within an organization” (p. 165).

In the Dixon et al. (2014) study, there were two school districts selected for participation. District 1, with over 4,000 students in the high school, could be classified as white-collar as it was in a suburban area with an elevated socioeconomic standard. District 2, which would belong to more of a blue-collar demographic due to being in a midsized industrial city, had a diverse student body. The research study by Dixon et al. (2014) demonstrated that teachers in the process of differentiating instruction to best meet the learning needs of students valued teacher efficacy and relevant professional development. The Zakeri et al. (2016) study, with 55 novice language teachers, indicated that collective efficacy and self-efficacy were interdependent in achieving desired organizational outcomes. The above are important considerations when examining the experiences of peer educators in meeting the diverse SEL needs of students as fostering efficacy can be consequential.

**Teacher Experiences in Professional Development and Collaboration**

Teachers’ positive and negative emotions during PD affect subsequent consequences connected to the emotional experiences (Gaines et al., 2019). Gaines et al. conducted a qualitative study to examine the “antecedents and consequences of teachers' subjective emotional experiences” in various PD sessions (p. 55). Sprott’s (2018) qualitative, narrative research study
used a differentiated professional development framework and explored advanced teachers’ descriptions of what aided them in developing teaching skills and universal competencies. The central finding of the study was that participants valued time and space which enhanced opportunities for collaborative reflection (Sprott, 2018). Similarly, Visser et al. (2014) described how teachers in grades K-12 used Twitter as part of a personal learning network to exchange ideas, knowledge, and collaborate. An (2018) conducted a study with significant PD implications in that it demonstrated that the PD experience had a positive influence on behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions could go beyond teachers’ perceptions and attitudes. An (2018) further demonstrated that involving teachers in multiple facets of a program can lead to a broader understanding and greater fidelity with implementation of the program.

During the Gaines et al. (2019) study, teachers were interviewed three times: the first interview was asking about all past PD experiences, and the second and third interviews focused directly on PD sessions that had just occurred. Emotions in PD are significant, and pleasant emotional experiences had positive consequences for these teachers; unpleasant emotional experiences had, not surprisingly, negative consequences (Gaines et al., 2019). The research findings suggested that differentiated professional learning can yield positive results. For example, whole-group faculty meetings should focus on complex holistic matters, such as beliefs, vision, or mission. More focused and refined professional learning should be applied to those teachers in need of such refinement instead of the whole group. In order to reap the benefits and best meet the needs of students, the study suggested that some level of teacher control of their professional learning be incorporated to foster the greatest emotional benefit and growth. Participants in Sprott’s (2018) study reported that time and space for collaborative reflection was key to their professional learning, and each spoke about the central role students
played in their development. By learning with and from their students, participants improved
their practice by meeting students' needs in more effective ways.

Collaboration in education has become even more popular internationally in recent years
as teachers work together to plan, observe, and reflect on lessons (Rempe-Gillen, 2018).
Historically, teachers have been able to collaborate within schools and/or departments, but
opportunities have been limited for collaborating beyond those constraints; those trends continue
in the modern era as there is little evidence to corroborate that opportunities for increased
collaboration have expanded (Rempe-Gillen, 2018). The idea of primary and secondary teachers
collaborating was explored over a year-long period in this study of a cross-phase, cross-school
collaboration. Rempe-Gillen (2018) referenced Lesson Study, which originated in Japan, as a
model of collaboration. Lesson Study allows for collaboratively planning, observing, and
reviewing a lesson; this collaborative effort has been a staple of Japanese education for decades.
China and South Korea were also noted for similar collaborative opportunities amongst their
teachers. Cordingley (2015) addressed several facets of effective continuing professional
development and learning activities along with subsequent impacts. One of the key areas
Cordingley (2015) addressed was sustained professional collaboration amongst colleagues. Peer
support and observation were also noted as being key to effective implementation. In addition,
appropriate levels of scaffolding and modeling by leaders were noted as levers to success
(Cordingley, 2015).

While there may be benefits to singular courses of PD, sustained collaborative PD has
been shown to be of greater benefit than single, one-day courses (Cordingley, 2015). Confidence
increases in collaborative PD, and a greater willingness to adapt and change for the benefit of
students is prevalent (Cordingley, 2015). This aligns closely with the professional growth
demonstrated in the Rempe-Gillen (2018) study, which indicated both primary and secondary teachers grew in their understanding of their own students’ needs based on cross-phase and cross-school collaboration. Rempe-Gillen (2018) noted individual professional growth of participants as strategies used in both primary and secondary settings were found to work in both environments; the reflective capabilities of the teachers also increased over the course of the collaborative experiences.

Knowlton et al. (2015) explored a collaborative opportunity between higher education and K-12 science teachers as a form of PD. University/college science instructors were paired with middle and/or high school science teachers to collaboratively create curricular materials. These collaborative opportunities continued as they then co-taught PD workshops to teachers during the summer. Similarly, Young et al. (2018) explored a partnership between a university and a school in a collaborative partnership program. There were numerous benefits for pre-service teachers noted in the partnership: a sense of belonging, enhanced professional relationships, theory to practice linkage, and a better understanding of a continuous improvement mindset. However, it is important to note that there was also some apprehension and anxiety noted by the participants as it related to the novice-expert relationship during the collaborative opportunity (Young et al., 2018).

Understanding the potential for apprehension in a collaborative program and/or partnership warrants consideration by administrators when considering professional learning partnerships between schools and institutions of higher learning. The benefits of the learning community model far outweigh the negatives to such a partnership as participants were clearly in favor of the increased professional interactions and reinforcement of a continuous improvement mentality (Young et al, 2018). Knowlton et al. (2015) referenced new expertise stemming from
authentic faculty development efforts revolving around collegial relationships; in essence, the relationship was not one sided. The higher education instructors noted their professional growth during the process and how they learned from and with their collaborative partners in K-12 education. Knowlton et al. (2015) concluded that educational outreach programs may be mutually beneficial for teachers and students alike as the enhancements to the curriculum can be exponential from the collaborative opportunities of such endeavors.

**Teacher Perceptions**

Teachers’ perceptions play a role in the outcomes of their professional learning. Ebersold et al. (2019) conducted a study exploring psychological mechanisms of how teachers’ perceived autonomy support by the principal of the school affected positive and negative aspects of their well-being. As Gaines et al. (2019) illustrated, emotional experiences are significant to the impact of PD. Poulou (2017) investigated teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence, SEL skills, and teacher-student relationships. The purpose was to gain knowledge of how such perceptions were connected to students’ emotional/behavioral challenges. A troubling trend indicated that teacher-student conflicts were highly linked to behavior challenges, and teachers’ perceptions of emotional intelligence and SEL were not related to behavior challenges. Poulou (2017) also indicated low agreement in the perceptions of both students and teachers in this study.

Powell and Bodur (2019) conducted a qualitative, multi-case study, supported by adult learning theory and social constructivism to examine teachers' perceptions of the design and implementation of a job embedded online teacher professional development (OTPD) experience. Participants were selected from a public school district in the southeast United States that utilized PD 360. PD 360 is an online video library comprised of 2000+ videos demonstrating classroom
applications on more than 100 education-related topics (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Harris et al. (2019) examined teacher attrition and found that teachers’ perceptions of their workplace and levels of support were significant in departure rates. Teachers desire input regarding decisions that affect them, like PD opportunities, and there was disparity between the views of administrators and teachers (Harris et al., 2019).

Powell and Bodur (2019) indicated teachers generally had positive responses as the experience validated current practice and reminded teachers about student-centered learning; there were some negative responses reported about relevancy, including a perceived lack of personalization. Teacher perceptions revealed positive responses about usefulness; the experience provided instructional ideas and reminded them about effective instructional practices (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Teachers and administrators alike viewed opportunities for highly relevant, quality PD as very important, but there was again disparity in the perceptions of both (Harris et al., 2019). When polled, 79% of school administrators believed quality PD opportunities were being provided in the organization compared to 54% of teachers (Harris et al., 2019). The results of the Powell and Bodur (2019) study emphasized teachers' mixed perceptions and the complicated nature of teacher PD, in general, and OTPD, in particular. The results revealed teachers as adult learners with needs for interactive, engaging, content-specific, content-rich, and personalized PD with the ultimate goal of best meeting the needs of students (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

The field of education is evolving (Joyce & Calhoun, 2015), and educators must evolve and understand how students are changing in order to best meet their needs. Murphy (2017) suggested that programs are just programs in that success is found with the proper implementation of programs. Murphy further indicated that the staff DNA in a building is critical
to understand; a program that has been successful in one school would not necessarily have the same impact or success rate in another. Based on Murphy, knowing the DNA of one’s staff and having a clear understanding of what each teacher needs to improve may do much to improve the learning of students. Guskey (2012) indicated the importance of considering the perspectives of stakeholders and always beginning with outcomes in mind.

Much like teachers must develop relationships with their students and provide social support and care, administrators need a similar relationship with the teachers and staff in the building to maximize their output with a constant focus on doing what is best for students (Murphy, 2017). Educators and school leaders alike must work together to develop professional learning opportunities and policies that facilitate a sense of belonging for students in the school. Guskey (2012) related an experience where abundant data contradicted the desired effects of a professional learning program, yet the perspective of one stakeholder changed the minds of the committee and the program continued to be funded. Guskey (2012) continued that gathering evidence on the outcomes of any professional learning “involved consideration of a wide variety of perceptual and contextual issues, some obvious to education leaders and others not” (p. 41). School leaders must know that effectively meeting the learning needs of a diverse staff will ultimately better meet the needs of students and enhance the overall effectiveness of the school.

Social and Emotional Learning Needs

Educators and school leaders alike must work together to develop professional learning opportunities and policies that facilitate a sense of belonging for students in the school. Allen et al. (2018) conveyed a sense of belonging plays a key role in psychological functioning, and schools have opportunities to facilitate a sense of belonging for children. The passage of the
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) represented a key shift in federal policy, and ESSA requires a focus on SEL combined with academic progress; due to this SEL mandate, Corcoran et al. (2018) postulated there must be an emphasis on examining programs that can be replicated and display appropriate rigor. In similar fashion, Shelemy et al. (2019) indicated that expectations continue to climb for teachers to comprehend and understand the importance of students’ mental health needs. Shelemy et al. (2019) sought to pinpoint needed PD of secondary teachers to help them support and appropriately inform their students surrounding mental health. This research study was conducted in the United Kingdom with nine separate focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of four to eight participants, and the discussions focused on the wants and needs of secondary teachers regarding mental health training and strategies. Shelemy et al. (2019) noted that participants in the study were receptive to the training, yet they did not want to be perceived as being an alternative to a behavioral therapist. Teachers also indicated a desire for practicality in their PD to support them in their interactions with students.

The Allen et al. (2018) study used meta-analysis of individual and social level factors that influenced school belonging in an effort to present a clear picture of belonging. This study identified ten influential themes of belonging that are displayed in educational settings during adolescent years: academic motivation, emotional stability, personal characteristics, parent support, peer support, teacher support, gender, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities and environmental/school safety. The most significant effect sizes were: teacher support ($r = 0.46$); personal characteristics ($r = 0.44$); peer support ($r = 0.32$); parent support ($r = 0.33$).

Extracurricular activities and race/ethnicity were not significantly related to school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Similarly, the Corcoran et al. (2018) study was conducted to review the effects and impact of SEL on reading, mathematics, and science achievement. The authors informed the reader that the samples in this study were derived from 611 studies of SEL intervention programs and examined according to detailed criteria in order to establish a
homogenous sample of studies. Each of the studies was examined independently by two authors with inter-rater agreement in excess of 90%. Once the programs were fully vetted, forty met the criteria for inclusion in the study. The overall mean effect sizes for reading, mathematics, and science were +0.25, +0.26, and +0.19, respectively. The results of this particular study were not overwhelmingly convincing of the significant impact of SEL interventions. However, the results of the study did indicate some positive effects for reading and math, so there is a connection to SEL and academic achievement (Corcoran, et al., 2018).

A sense of belonging, as demonstrated by both Allen et al. (2018) and Corcoran et al. (2018), is key for teachers to understand as they work to effectively meet the SEL needs of students on a daily basis. School districts across the United States do not have the option of avoiding the SEL needs of students; while needed and necessary, many teachers are not properly equipped or trained to implement such interventions with fidelity. Thus, the need for differentiated teacher professional learning is key (Corcoran et al., 2018). Westling (2010) conducted a study in which a questionnaire was completed by 70 teachers who reflected about themselves and challenging students. Thirty-two general education and 38 special education teachers were represented in this study that was conducted in the southeastern United States. A lack of support was noted in the study with most teachers indicating a distinct lack of effective strategies to deal with challenging student behaviors. Special education teachers had a distinguishable trend of note: less than 60% felt they had adequate pre-service and in-service preparation to successfully address challenging students. The majority of participants in the study felt that challenging behavior was learned and was subject to improvement. Unfortunately, teachers also indicated a sense of ineffectiveness associated with their lack of preparation to appropriately address challenging behavior.
Effective teaching and learning occurring in classrooms is attributed to teachers incorporating SEL in a scaffolding manner to meet the diverse needs of students. Morcom (2014) indicated emotions and relationships are essential components of the learning process. This research study attributed much of its model to sociocultural theory and zone of proximal development (ZPD) per the work of Vygotsky (1978). Collaborative learning, collaboration in a community of practice, and scaffolding within the ZPD were all listed and described as being essential to the social and emotional connections tied to students’ cognitive learning. The research study examined two metropolitan elementary schools in Western Australia. The two schools were on opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. The findings of Morcom’s (2014) study postulated that values education facilitated a sense of classroom community and had positive student effects. The study listed several examples of students who underwent positive social changes during the course of the study. A consideration in this study was the important role the teacher plays regarding fidelity of implementation.

**Student Needs**

Significant declines in student achievement, increases in discipline referrals, and chronic absenteeism all point to students struggling to get to school and being properly engaged at school. Students struggle to come to school and adhere to the expectations at school for a variety of reasons that occur outside the confines of the school building. A study by Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) indicated that SEL programs in schools have specific benefits for students; these benefits included increased academic achievement and increased social and emotional competencies. Mantell (2013) indicated that students must feel safe and secure at school, and the classroom environment is key to fostering this safety and security. Many students enter schools in fight or flight mode daily, and little to no impactful learning can occur when one’s brain is in
this mode. Once students are regulated from whatever trauma or abuse they experience before entering school, then true learning can begin; schools must do an excellent job getting students regulated and ready to learn quickly as part of a daily process to ensure learning can occur (Mantell, 2013).

Mantell (2013) explained that educators are in unique positions to allow students to experience connections to content. Mantell (2013) discussed the “perceived instrumentality” that can be instilled within students to help them believe the content will serve as a way to achieve their personal goals; this allows for much greater buy-in to the content and then segues in to “perceived authenticity” to reinforce the value or relevance of the content beyond the classroom (p. 38). While there are benefits of SEL in schools, a gap exists in the students’ understanding of ethical competence (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). According to the researchers, schools would benefit from more attention to ethics education rather than a focus on social and emotional competencies to better meet the needs of students. Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) addressed the issue by first examining SEL in schools and the benefits to children. The researchers then critically examined the connections often associated with SEL and ethics education. A student can be socially and emotionally literate, but that same student may lack the ability to know what he/she ought to do in a given situation; incorporating ethics education in conjunction with SEL has the potential to affect students for life by giving them a critical skill set that allows for successful and ethically competent adults (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017).

In consideration of student needs, Bierman and Sanders (2021) posited that social-cognitive and emotional factors, including behavior problems, contribute to the social difficulties experienced by students with or at high risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. Bierman and Sanders (2021) continued that challenges could either be mitigated or escalated in the way(s)
students were treated by both teachers and peers. A key construct of maintaining positive social relationships with students is adjusting to the school context as simply managing behavior does not address deficits related to self-regulation (Bierman & Sanders, 2021). Furthermore, neglecting to address the school context eliminates socializing contexts to support self-regulation. This aligns with Egert et al. (2020) who discussed educational quality being rooted in high-quality interactions between teachers and children.

Bierman and Sanders (2021) addressed research on neurodevelopmental processes and contextual constraints that may impact social-emotional challenges of students who would be considered high risk. The authors addressed social competence, which refers to the capacity of students to gain acceptance from teachers and peers while having the competence to avoid rejection. Bierman and Sanders (2021) postulated that social competence of students requires an ability to behave in an appropriate manner socially and exhibit such behaviors reliably. This aligns with the work of Neumerski (2013) in that there are clear links to effective instructional leadership and quality teaching and learning. Neumerski (2013) continued that specific behaviors could be linked to instructional practices and ultimately, student learning. Both home and school affect socialization influences that impact social-emotional and self-regulatory skills; additionally, guided exploration and sensitive-responsive interactions with adults during early childhood contribute to social competence (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

Neumerski’s (2013) work consistently indicated that instructional leadership is a key enabler to quality teaching in the classroom. Similarly, Bierman and Sanders (2021) discussed how coordinating and linking Tier I and Tier II social-emotional programming requires a high level of organizational support. The authors continued that programming often lacks continuity between Tier I providers and Tier II providers; specifically, what is happening in the classroom
(Tier I) may look very different than what is happening with guidance counselors, special education teachers, and interventionists (Tier II) (Bierman & Sanders, 2021). The work of Egert et al. (2020) discussed educational quality being rooted in high-quality interactions between teachers and children, and Neumerski (2013), who linked quality teaching to support, also supported the idea of a synchronous relationship between Tier I and Tier II programming as emphasized by Bierman and Sanders (2021).

The research of Smith and Low (2013) concluded that SEL is not the answer in and of itself to undesired student behavior. However, incorporating SEL into the classroom is a key component to establishing positive social interactions amongst students. Effective social and emotional learning interventions have proven to positively impact student achievement; implementing SEL interventions with fidelity is something students deserve to have the greatest possibility for academic success. Unfortunately, poverty in rural areas is highly cyclical, as many students never break the mold and change paths. Rural students need to be given opportunities to allow for different paths than what they have been subjected to in their families. Guidance counselors need specific training to assist in navigating the multitude of issues stemming from poverty in rural areas (Bright, 2018). A high percentage of transience adds to the social and emotional issues stemming from increased trauma of rural students living in poverty. Often, funding is unavailable in rural areas to assist in much-needed training for guidance counselors to have success in connecting with rural students and their mental health needs (Bright, 2018). While mental health services may be available at little to no cost to families, the geographic location of many rural communities does not allow for students to travel to the urban or suburban areas where many services are located. This reinforces the importance of understanding educators’ experiences related to SEL to best meet the needs of all students.
More than ever, states recognize the need to address students’ SEL and are calling for the adoption of SEL program standards; social-emotional programs have increased in use due to extensive research conducted about intensive and targeted SEL programs (Eklund et al., 2018). All states in the United States have SEL standards for preschool, but only eleven states incorporate SEL standards in grades K-12 (Eklund et al., 2018). In continuing the thought about meeting the SEL needs of students, Kiemer et al. (2018) conducted a research study that indicated productive classroom discourse should produce intrinsic motivation on the part of the students. The hypothesis was that a supportive environment with less restricted control would produce a positive effect on students’ perception of competence and autonomy. The study presented conjectures from the research questions that indicated expectations of positive effects on student performance and positive student perceptions effecting intrinsic motivation from the intervention group. Kiemer et al. (2018) identified a correlation between teachers’ professional development and the resulting student impact. Teachers trained in productive classroom discourse were able to show student gains in their classrooms. Although properly funding SEL interventions at the state level can take time, the study by Kiemer et al. (2018) provided evidence to support the idea that teachers’ continuous reflection can lead to sustained, effective changes for students within classrooms. Through this information, the importance of the individual teacher and his/her specific learning path is magnified, and the importance of effective professional development for teachers is clarified.

**Teachers**

Teachers’ awareness of their own emotional intelligence (EQ) allows for greater impact when they develop personal education plans for their students (Stillman et al., 2018). Districts should remain proactive in providing effective training to teachers and staff about ACESs and
how to address students who are dealing with these types of experiences (Barnett, 2019). Schools play a significant role in preparing students for success by effectively implementing SEL with students (Stillman et al., 2018). This research study preferred to use the term emotional intelligence or EQ when referring to both adults’ and students’ social competencies. The school in this research study adopted the Six Seconds model of emotional intelligence, which aligns closely with the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Stillman et al., 2018). Teachers in this study took an assessment to measure their competencies and worked with the SEL director to monitor their EQ development. The school, via a director of parent education, also provided multiple ways for parents to get involved in understanding and reinforcing SEL with their children. This study clearly demonstrated that a commitment from leadership (administration) and teacher efficacy regarding their own EQ is a powerful combination to enhancing SEL across a school and meeting the SEL needs of students (Stillman et al., 2018). In consideration of SEL as it relates to teachers, Loughland and Ryan (2020) described the importance of collaboration; effective PD is key for motivation and ongoing support, and teachers should feel a sense of ownership in the process.

A dearth of funding, resources, training, and time were all indicated by Barnett (2019) as factors that can inhibit teachers properly incorporating SEL skills to help students achieve. Barnett (2019) also indicated there is sometimes a mindset that teaching social and emotional skills falls beyond the realm of a teacher’s responsibilities. In the same vein of thought related to teacher training and preparation, Buettner et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative research study to examine and compare early childhood teacher education programs as related to two-year and four-year degree programs in order to better understand teacher preparation programs. Instruction of quality standards from the National Association for the Education of Young
Children (NAEYC) and Child Development Associate (CDA) competencies were compared in two-year and four-year programs. Data was collected using an online questionnaire sent to 413 early childhood education program directors, and the tool measured curriculum coverage through created questionnaire items adapted from standards in the NAEYC and CDA competencies. The program directors rated the coverage of the items on a 0-4 scale based on what students would have received upon graduation from the degree program. (0 = no classes; 1 = one class session; 2 = multiple class sessions of one course; 3 = entire course; 4 = entire course plus coverage in additional courses) (Buettner et al., 2016). There were areas of concern as related to quality curriculum coverage in the pre-service teacher programs. The results indicated only 34% address professionalism in more than one required course; given the positive impact of professionalism as it relates to a teacher’s ongoing impact and quality, this was concerning. Also concerning was the relatively low mean score of 3.09 related to SEL coverage in the teacher preparation programs (Buettner et al., 2016).

Colleges and universities are beginning to feel pressure based on experiences of novice educators entering the teaching profession; teacher preparation programs (TPPs) have recently been scrutinized for producing novice educators who are seemingly entering schools across the United States ill-prepared for the current demands of teaching in the modern classroom (von Hippel & Bellows, 2018). Sixteen states have taken measures to hold TPPs accountable as related to student achievement and teachers’ value-added scores, not curriculum (von Hippel & Bellows, 2018). Buettner et al. (2016) postulated that increasing and including more SEL content in pre-service teachers’ college classes may reduce burnout and turnover rates. The Buettner et al. study confirmed that SEL is not covered as extensively as it needs to be in pre-service programs for teachers. This particular study examined early childhood education programs,
which should have SEL as a key cog in the program, and the study revealed a lack of multiple SEL classes being mandatory in most programs. von Hippel and Bellows (2018) further postulated that such scrutiny toward TPP programs is unwarranted, and that no policy action is required due to the negligible differences in TPPs as related to teachers’ value-added scores. The authors argued that similar studies in other fields have yielded similar results with little to no difference in the program preparation as compared to the success of the graduates. This is important to consider as it relates to the experiences of novice teachers entering the profession and the levels of needed support via professional learning.

Continuing the thought of improving teachers’ performance to best meet the needs of students, Shaha et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative research study using a quasi-experimental design to prove the hypothesis that improved teacher performance via adaptable, coherent, and specific online professional development would improve student achievement. Shaha et al. (2015) sought to prove that a focus on continuous teacher improvement could lead to greater student achievement. The sample size of this research study was comprised of 187,000 students from 292 schools representing 110 school districts from twenty-seven states. The study mandated a minimum of fifteen teachers per school participate in the same online professional development product (PD360 and Observation 360). The data collected was comprised of teacher observation data and subsequent online PD aligned with the needs identified in the observations. Higher teacher PD observation rates within schools indicated significant gains in both reading and math for students. Zinsser et al. (2016) discussed the common perceptions of teachers related to their levels of SEL support, and the study indicated positive indicators related to teachers. Decreased depression and increased job satisfaction were present stemming from
teachers’ improved abilities to properly address students’ emotional well-being (Zinsser et al., 2016).

The Shaha et al. (2015) study demonstrated how a well-designed teacher observation system can be partnered with effective, proven PD and have positive impacts on student achievement. It is worthy to note that this study was not limited to just one state or geographic region; this system worked in a plethora of states to improve student achievement. Much like the research of Barnett (2019) and Buettner et al. (2016), relevant professional development must be combined with quality teacher preparation programs in the effort to best meet the SEL needs of students.

**Combined Impacts**

In order to keep students from being removed from school, some districts are implementing SEL to combat suspensions and/or expulsions. In light of disparities surrounding school discipline of black, special education, and male students, Gregory and Fergus (2017) reviewed federal and state mandates to reduce punishments that removed students from the instructional environment. An interesting finding in this study was when the researchers point out that focusing solely on SEL of students is a mistake. Adults’ social and emotional competencies must be addressed as well due to their influence on the implementation of SEL interventions (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Administrators’ cognizance of teachers’ stress levels managing challenging student behavior (Friedman-Kraus et al., 2014) relates to maintaining an awareness of teachers’ well-being in addition to proper SEL interventions for students. This finding can also provide support to the notion that differentiated professional development related to the specific needs of teachers is paramount in meeting students’ diverse needs.
Ebersold et al. (2019) conducted a study exploring psychological mechanisms of how teachers’ perceived autonomy support by the principal of the school affected positive and negative aspects of their well-being. Need frustration and need satisfaction were examined separately as possible differential mediators. The 49 participants in the Ebersold et al. (2019) study examined the following in a questionnaire: perceived autonomy support, satisfaction and frustration related to needs, both positive and negative affect, satisfaction in life, and emotional exhaustion. Need frustration was a mediator for negative affect and emotional exhaustion as revealed by parallel multiple mediation analysis; additionally, need satisfaction was a mediator for autonomy support and positive affect (Ebersold et al., 2019). Conversely, administrators must be cognizant of the negative effects associated with teachers’ need frustration. Zinsser et al. (2016) reinforced that the combined impacts of properly supporting teachers with SEL leads to teacher satisfaction and positive student outcomes. In essence, teachers’ well-being is impacted by need satisfaction and need frustration; there are distinct benefits for examining these aspects in considering the autonomy support of teachers at the school level (Ebersold et al., 2019).

Much like Gregory and Fergus (2017), Smith and Low (2013) also reinforced the theme of the positive effects of SEL on student behavior and academic achievement. However, this text examined the specific topic of bullying and, more specifically, how bullying prevention is impacted by SEL. Empathy, emotion management, social problem solving, and social competence play a role in the prevention of bullying behavior by students; teachers also play a significant role in fostering SEL opportunities and maximizing teachable moments throughout the day (Smith & Low, 2013). Social problem solving and social competence play key roles in helping students be cognizant of behaviors that lead to bullying or victimization. Students with friends are less likely to be bullied, and they have social supports in place when and/or if
bullying behavior is directed toward the student. Fostering empathy and emotion management are also important as both are directly related to helping students understand the impact of either bullying someone or being victimized by a bully. Professional trainings to help teachers better understand the impact of their responses to bullying behavior and implementation of SEL interventions or programs with fidelity seem to be the catalyst to effective positive change for students (Smith & Low, 2013).

**Summary**

Teachers often leave colleges and universities unprepared for the social and emotional demands faced in contemporary classrooms. The literature supports the idea of the importance of PD to meet the needs of students; in addition to academic mandates and standardized testing tied to evaluations, teachers must balance meeting students’ social and emotional needs in order to facilitate student learning. A correlation between the professional learning opportunities of teachers and the subsequent student impact was identified by Kiemer et al. (2018). Gregory and Fergus (2017) described how ESSA and the Department of Education (DOE) have put together a resource guide to assist school districts in their implementation of SEL interventions. Given the connection of discipline, poor achievement, and the juvenile justice system, some states are putting together reforms that limit when and how students may be removed from school. Quality educators fostering healthy relationships and helping students forge pathways to better lives will improve and break the vicious cycles currently in place that are negatively impacting society. Given the importance of effective PD, along with its impact on teacher efficacy, it is important to gain an understanding of the experiences of teachers related to addressing the SEL needs of students. Understanding teachers’ experiences may lead to more focused PD programs in schools targeting SEL.
Rural students face challenges regarding academics, SEL, and career opportunities; there is scant research to address the needs of rural students compared to other demographics (Bright, 2018). Rural poverty, availability of health care services, transience, academic barriers, and perceived isolation all play a role in the success of rural students (Bright, 2018). Students face challenges that are direct results of their home lives and outside environments, and teachers must work to balance meeting academic needs through the effective establishment of relationships. Westling (2010) indicated that both general education and special education teachers felt an overall lack of support for their daily behavior challenges. Unfortunately, the ones who can most often offer needed support (district administrators, behavior specialists, community agencies) were viewed as offering the least support (Westling, 2010). There remains a gap in the knowledge surrounding teachers’ experiences in addressing the SEL needs of students in rural areas, and this study seeks to explore the experiences of teachers in a rural Tennessee school district in meeting the diverse SEL needs of students. Understanding the experiences of teachers with SEL and the training opportunities that may foster greater student success are worthy of consideration as this could address an evident gap in the literature.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in a rural Tennessee school district. Joyce and Calhoun (2015) indicated that the field of education is evolving; consequently, educators must evolve and understand how students are changing to best meet their needs. Teachers fostering relationships and equipping students with the necessary tools to control their emotions can have a direct impact on student achievement (Allen et al., 2018). This study differs from past studies in that it directly examined educators’ experiences during professional learning and the subsequent impact of addressing students’ SEL needs. Guskey (2012) indicated that purposeful planning of professional learning should occur by examining desired improvements to student learning and examining evidence to reflect improvements. The following chapter will focus on the phenomenological design of the study, the setting, the participants, procedures, the researcher’s role, data collection, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations for the study describing the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee.

Design

This study examined the experiences of educators surrounding SEL to meet the needs of students, and this qualitative study is transcendental in nature as it was oriented toward the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of participants. As such, it is more appropriate than a quantitative study utilizing pre-determined methods leading to statistical interpretation. The lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of participants can be better captured through emerging methods and open-
ended questions to examine themes and patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While quantitative research methods often rely on large samples selected randomly, qualitative research relies more on purposefully selected samples (Patton, 2002). The flexible design of qualitative research requires the rich descriptions necessary to capture and synthesize the data of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Qualitative research seeks to build patterns, themes, and categories in an inductive manner by building from the ground up, and this research study sought to build inductively from the particular to the general as opposed to a deductive quantitative examination of theories and/or variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Detailed, rich descriptions and depth provided relevance to the broader context of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) about educators’ experiences with PD to meet the SEL needs of students.

Transcendental phenomenology comprises common meaning for multiple individuals’ lived experiences surrounding a concept or phenomenon, and the purpose of a phenomenological study is to examine individual experiences to develop an essence of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Edmund Husserl emphasized “subjective openness” (p. 25) and focused on the experience and self-reflection with a definitive line between fact and essence (Moustakas, 1994). There are numerous philosophical perspectives related to this type of study: return to traditional search for wisdom, suspend judgments, incorporate intentionality of consciousness, and reality is only perceived within meaning of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought to examine the experiences of educators surrounding SEL to meet the needs of students. As such, this study is transcendental in nature as it was oriented toward lived experiences of the participants as defined by Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy and popular in social and health sciences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by van Manen (1990), is oriented toward lived experiences and impact on life; interpretations of
experiences are a key focus of this type of study. Transcendental, psychological phenomenology is less interpretive of experiences and more descriptive in documentation of participants’ experiences where researchers set aside their personal experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The appearances of things as they are seen and appear in consciousness are the root of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Consciousness, or intentionality, is a key concept of transcendental phenomenology; Husserl intently believed in an internal experience of being conscious of something, whether or not it truly existed (Moustakas, 1994). Acts, both intentional and feeling, are also key to understanding transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) related the idea of viewing the night sky as an intentional act that can result in the feeling act of wonder associated with viewing the night sky. The feeling may fade, but the night sky remains constant. Perception, or interpretive form, refers to the perception that gives life to an object. An intentional experience is comprised of a noema and noesis; the noema is the phenomenon, not the object; the “perfect self-evidence” of the phenomenon is the noesis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30). Moustakas (1994) further described how the noema and noesis function off one another in a correlative relationship.

Intuition was also noted by Moustakas (1994) as a key concept of transcendental phenomenology. This keen awareness of self is important to embrace during the process of reflecting to understand. Individuals should have an awareness of intersubjectivity; that is, one should have an awareness of one’s own “intentional consciousness” before seeking to understand another (Moustakas, 1994, p. 37). Teachers reflecting and describing their experiences in professional learning surrounding SEL aligns closely with transcendental phenomenology and the work of Moustakas (1994). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was
to describe the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee.

The nature of this phenomenological design research study takes the broad topic of educators’ lived experiences related to SEL and works to the more succinct experiences of training related to SEL and impact on students. The experiences of educators during professional development are crucial to understand as illustrated in the studies of Gaines et al. (2019) and Powell and Bodur (2019). Check and Schutt (2012) referenced John Dewey and Lawrence Stenhouse in discussing how educators are professionals who by nature are reflective and have knowledge of what they need to improve. This aligns with the idea of this study, which sought to examine, listen to reflections, and report about the common lived experiences of educators.

**Research Questions**

Teachers’ perceived self-efficacy is derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory. Understanding teachers’ experiences with meeting the SEL needs of students aligns with perceived self-efficacy; Guskey (2012) posited that purposeful planning of professional learning should occur by examining desired improvements to student learning and examining evidence to reflect improvements. Educators who understand their own capabilities can bring about greater student engagement and learning.

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee?

**Research Sub-question One**

How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change?
Research Sub-question Two

What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom?

Setting

Pseudonyms have been used for the protection of all individuals, institutions, sites, and participants in this study. Matanzas County is a rural school district in Tennessee with nine elementary schools serving grades PreK-8 and three high schools serving grades 9-12. The Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.) indicated approximately 7150 students, 488 teachers, and 27 administrators within the schools in the school system. There are 12 principals and 15 assistant principals in the district. Matanzas County students are primarily White with 91.5% identified as such in the district. Hispanic students are the next largest demographic at 5.6% followed by African American students at 1.7%. Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander students round out the remaining racial and ethnic student groups at 0.8%, 0.3%, and 0.1%, respectively. Matanzas County has 13.9% of its students who qualify for special education services and 1.6% who qualify for English language learner services. The rate of economically disadvantaged students based on the state calculation is 36.5%; however, the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch is approximately 70%. Matanzas County has a per pupil expenditure of approximately $8500.00 and a chronic absenteeism rate of 11.6%. The three high schools, Matanzas County High School, Grant Memorial High School, and Sedona High School, have a combined graduation rate of 92.5% and an average ACT score of 20.2 (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

A high poverty rate in this rural district reiterates the importance of teachers having an understanding and receptivity to social and emotional learning implications. Crouch et al. (2019)
indicated many students living in poverty are regularly exposed to adverse childhood experiences, which can affect their SEL needs. As referenced above, Matanzas County is considered a high poverty county as evidenced by its Federal Title I status for 10 of 12 schools and student poverty rate (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.); as such, this site is appropriate for a study examining educators’ experiences related to students’ SEL. Because children living in poverty in rural areas are more likely to experience divorce, trauma, or other ACEs in their households (Crouch et al., 2019), the experiences of educators in a rural setting are worthy of examination.

van Manen (2014) indicated that participants may be from a single site, such as a single school, but the key is that they must be individuals who can relay their lived experiences. Some of the schools in the district have strong leadership and strong academics while others have demonstrated academic struggles in recent years (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Regarding leadership, principals in the district must be resourceful and often utilize three district instructional coaches for the entire district for training and support. The structure, or chain of command, in the district has the Director of Schools at the top of the pyramid, followed by 11 district supervisors who work at the Central Office. There are 12 schools in the district, and each school has a principal responsible for leading the school; the number assistant principals at each school is determined by the student population of the school. Matanzas County is funded at a state basic education plan level that does not allow for significant professional development budgets at each school. While summer PD is often provided by the district, principals are tasked with providing effective PD to the teachers and staff during the school year. Given the challenges with differentiated professional development training and funding, this rural district garners consideration as it relates to the purpose of understanding the experiences of peer educators in
addressing the SEL needs of students. As stated earlier, pseudonyms have been used for the protection of all individuals, institutions, sites, and participants in this study.

**Participants**

In consideration of the challenges of phenomenological research, one must ensure participants are carefully chosen and have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research study fits the definition of phenomenological research as it sought to specify broad philosophical assumptions about the experiences of educators related to SEL, their experiences during professional learning, collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, and generate themes from the analysis of significant statements with a focus on horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Reporting on what the participants in the study experienced and the common experiences were presented as part of this phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposeful sampling leads to greater information for studying a topic in depth (Patton, 2002). Because participants’ experiences were examined in this phenomenological study, and participants should have the essence of the experience in a study, criterion sampling was utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A sample that shared the characteristics of being a certified teacher in the Matanzas County School District and having attended professional learning at either the school or district level met the inclusion criteria. Recruitment of certified teachers for inclusion in the study began upon IRB approval (see Appendix A) once permission had been obtained from the Director or Schools for Matanzas County Schools (see Appendix B).

An initial email indicating a research study being conducted surrounding educators’ experiences in professional learning surrounding SEL was sent to principals at the elementary schools in the district, and the principals were asked to forward as appropriate. This email
included a Google Form for interested educators with questions related to years of experience, content areas, and confirmation of attending professional development in the Matanzas County School District. Only certified teachers in the district received this correspondence with the Google Form link; purposeful sampling leads to greater information for studying a topic in depth (Patton, 2002), so teachers who replied through the Google Form were selected based on a variety of factors: school, grade level, content area(s), and experience.

Polkinghorne (1989) suggested interviewing 5 to 25 participants who have all experienced the phenomenon. The researcher examined responses and selected participants purposefully (Patton, 2002) in order to capture the essence of the experience from varied participants meeting the required criteria. A combination of both male and female participants was desired for this study from a variety of disciplines in order to capture the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of educators related to SEL in the Matanzas County School District. This research study ultimately needed enough participants to establish saturation and ensure valid conceptualization (Nelson, 2017). Reaching saturation can prove to be problematic as one does not want to erroneously stop too early in a study; the key is reaching a sufficient depth of understanding (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Nelson (2017) indicated that adhering to sound methodology and transparency of the process is paramount while carefully reporting how saturation was achieved.

**Procedures**

A site conducive to such a study examining teacher experiences should be identified with comparable student demographic information and comparable poverty rate. Proper permission must be obtained from the appropriate district supervisor or a director of schools in order to solicit participants for the study (see Appendix B). Participants should be selected ranging from
novice (0-4 years teaching experience), mid-experienced (5-9 years teaching experience), experienced (10-19 years teaching experience) and veteran (20+ years teaching experience). These ranges were selected as they offer a variety of potential experiences related to PD opportunities. A combination of both male and female participants should be selected for this study. IRB approval (see Appendix A) should be obtained before conducting any research data collection. After IRB approval has been obtained and a successful pilot, participants may be selected, and data collection may begin.

The researcher should select participants purposefully (Patton, 2002) in order to capture the essence of the experience from participants meeting the required criteria. All selected participants should be interviewed utilizing approved research questions. To clarify, expert educators in the field should review the survey, questionnaire, and interview questions before implementation. Upon completion of the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group, responses should be examined for horizontalization of the data where the significant statements should be given equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Lists should be generated from non-repetitive statements and avoid overlapping. Next, what and how statements should be examined derived from verbatim examples of group statements based on what was experienced with the phenomenon; a description of where the experience transpired and clear descriptions of experience with the phenomenon should be generated to create clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

**The Researcher's Role**

The researcher in this study is a 22-year veteran educator who currently serves as a principal in the Matanzas County School District. Sixteen years of my career were spent as a high school English Language Arts teacher. I spent two years as an assistant principal at an elementary school in Matanzas County before being named principal at another elementary
school in the district. Epistemological beliefs are individuals’ representations held about knowledge and knowing (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). The way(s) a person comes to know information and the beliefs held about knowing influence a person’s cognitive processes (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Having served as a teacher and administrator, I am interested in examining the experiences of teachers in this district regarding SEL and addressing the needs of students. Epistemological beliefs related to a social constructivism interpretive framework led to this choice of research; my views are aligned with social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) where knowledge is co-constructed with one’s environment.

I have a keen interest in the professional learning of teachers as related to SEL. There has been an explicit focus on SEL during my tenure as a principal. High expectations are a key component of my leadership style, and I believe helping students understand and correct undesired behaviors (behavioral and academic) is paramount to their progress. I feel that learning is an individual process spurred through effective reflection. Churcher et al. (2014) referenced a distinct difference between learning and knowledge according to social constructivist theory. Although collaborative learning certainly exists, Churcher et al. (2014) emphasized the individual nature of learning based on knowledge from one’s circumstances. I am quite familiar with the demographics of the research site, as I have lived in Matanzas County for 19 years. Reality is constructed between the researcher and the researched while shaped by individual experiences in a social constructivism framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group processes were aware of my role as the researcher in this study, and no participants were selected from the school at which I serve as a principal in the Matanzas County School District. With an emphasis on lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994),
this study allowed individual experiences and perspectives of teachers related to SEL to drive the study. As the researcher, I had no authoritative role over the participants in the study.

**Data Collection**

A critical aspect of qualitative inquiry is rigorous and varied data collection techniques. Data may be comprised of interviews (open-ended questions), questionnaires, observations, subject journaling, and document/artifact analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection strategies for this study were derived from the works of Moustakas (1994) in that the study was based on human experiences and the questions were meant to capture the experiences of the participants. Qualifying surveys were utilized before issuing questionnaires and conducting interviews to compare and gauge experiences related to social and emotional learning. The survey questions were about employment in Matanzas County Schools, years of experience, educator experiences with SEL, training opportunities regarding SEL, and were used for scholarly purposes only. Participants granted electronic consent, confirmed they were voluntarily participating, and confirmed they were over the age of 18 before completing the survey.

The steps of Moustakas (1994) played a role in the analysis of the interviews once the qualified participants were selected, completed the questionnaire, and were interviewed; the steps related to collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon via multiple interviews and generating themes from the analysis of significant statements were utilized. Finally, a focus group was conducted to support the research problem surrounding the experiences of peer educators in addressing the SEL needs of students. The data collection occurred in this order to facilitate a clear description of experiences via the interview process and to spur reflective practices. Prior to the interviews, the questionnaire was administered, and the
focus group was conducted last to elicit multiple perspectives based on teachers’ experiences in addressing SEL.

Surveys

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that surveys may be used as a criterion sampling method; the survey in this research study (see Appendix C) utilized brief selections and/or one-word answers via Google Forms to qualify participants in the study. The qualifying survey was offered to approximately 300 teachers employed at eight elementary PreK-8 schools in the school district. Purposeful sampling leads to greater information for studying a topic in depth (Patton, 2002). Because participants’ experiences were examined in this phenomenological study, and participants should have the essence of the experience in a study, criterion sampling was utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A sample that shares the characteristics of being a certified teacher in the Matanzas County School District and having attended professional learning at either the school or district level met the inclusion criteria. The survey also included a selection regarding years of experience in order to select participants with a range of experiences related to professional learning and SEL. This survey served to select approximately 10 participants based on Polkinghorne’s (1989) suggestion of interviewing five to 25 participants who have all experienced the phenomenon.

Questionnaires

Traditional questionnaires are conducted among select communities or organizations rather than among samples of individuals in isolation (Sieber, 1973). This concept aligns closely with the idea of this qualitative study that sought to capture the experiences of educators in a school district related to SEL. Permission to give the questionnaire to participants was obtained from the Matanzas County Director of Schools (see Appendix B), and experts in the field
reviewed the questionnaire questions for validity to the study. The questionnaire (see Appendix D) was given to participants using Google Forms. In addition to providing data, the questionnaire served as a form of member checking to the initial interview data that followed for selected participants. This aligns with Patton’s (2015) idea that a researcher must use the knowledge gained to analyze the data.

**Interviews**

Participants were interviewed to gain an understanding of and glean data from the lived experiences of the individuals (van Manen, 1990). Interviews with participants were conducted by phone or by an interactive platform such as Zoom or Google Meet. Participants were contacted by phone or email, and appointments were set with participants to conduct interviews. Participants who wished to interview via Zoom or Google Meet had meeting links sent via email. Interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and accurately transcribed upon completion. All research questions for this study were addressed during the course of interviews with participants.

**Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself and tell how many years you have been in the field of education.
2. Describe your experiences related to SEL that have been beneficial in your perspective.
3. Describe your experiences in professional learning opportunities related to SEL provided by the school district.
4. Describe your understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL).
5. How do you incorporate SEL into your lesson planning activities?
6. How equipped do you feel to address SEL considerations with your students?
7. What are some specific examples of SEL concerns in your classroom?

8. Do you feel your school has supported you with SEL concerns in your classroom?

9. Do you feel teacher reflection is an important part of improvement as a professional? Why or why not?

10. How would you like to be supported with SEL in your school and/or district?

The first question during the interview is an introductory and basic knowledge question (Patton, 2015), and sets the prerequisite stage for the experience and perspective questions instrumental to the study. In order to answer questions two through seven, participants need to have verified their employment as a teacher in the school district and expressed the content areas in which they have experience. The first question is direct, non-invasive, and allowed for the establishment of rapport (Patton, 2015). Patton indicated establishing this rapport is important as the participant may be more willing to be open and share more intimate details related to the experience.

Questions two and three began to address the experiences of participants in a pragmatic way (Patton, 2002) looking for straightforward answers. These questions allow for participants to explain without becoming philosophical in their responses. The responses should be generated directly from experiences of participants.

Question four allows for constructivist subjectivity (Patton, 2002) in that the participant may respond in a way that allows them to construct meaning from their own understanding of SEL. When discussing SEL, consideration must be given regarding teachers’ own emotional issues (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Questions five and six delve into the craft of teaching and connections to their learners. The studies of Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) and Barnett (2019) revealed the importance of
SEL awareness and the impact on students. These questions allow participants to respond in a way that will demonstrate their experiences and knowledge of understanding the importance of SEL.

Questions seven through ten shift to more of a solutions-oriented perspective where the participant may construct ideas and reflect on personal needs. These questions probe participants to reflect on past trainings or professional learning opportunities. An opportunity is also given for participants to discuss how reflection either contributes or does not contribute to improvement. The positive or negative perceptions during the learning impact the receptivity of the teacher to the learning (Gaines et al., 2019; Powell & Bodur, 2019). The experiences of teachers participating in professional development are crucial to understand as these experiences may drive or inhibit their implementation of SEL interventions leading to students’ success.

Focus Group

Upon permission being granted from the Matanzas County Director of Schools, a focus group was organized and conducted to support the research problem and research questions by obtaining multiple perspectives within a group of participants. The idea was to find information supporting parallel constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) with the information gathered from interviews and the questionnaire. A focus group was appropriate in this study as individual interviews were conducted with a small number of participants, and the focus group allowed for a group perspective (Fusch & Ness, 2015) related to addressing SEL.

Focus groups allow for exploring the perceptions of individuals (Wilson, 1997), and this aligns with this phenomenological study that sought to understand the experiences of teachers related to SEL. The focus group was conducted with a small group of 4-6 individuals in a non-threatening environment, and the focus group allowed participants to explore their perceptions,
ideas, and experiences (Wilson, 1997) related to SEL and any professional learning that has contributed to those experiences. The focus group was conducted via Zoom at a time agreed upon by the participants in the focus group. A topic guide with primary aims was utilized to moderate the focus group.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that credibility is the confidence of the truth in determinations. With that, the focus group questions for this study were developed upon initial data analysis. The following aims served as placeholders. The first of these aims in the focus group was to gather views on the SEL needs of students in Matanzas County Schools. Martinez (2016) discussed teacher implementation as a key factor of SEL program implementation, and Collie et al. (2015) expounded upon teachers’ varying beliefs related to SEL affecting program implementation.

Second, the group was asked to explore their professional learning needs to address students’ SEL needs. Durlak (2016) specifically addressed utilizing professional development to increase teacher effectiveness in implementing SEL within a classroom. While direct teacher training related to SEL program components is one approach mentioned by Durlak (2016), the author also emphasized a secondary approach related to teachers better understanding their own social and emotional competence.

The third aim was to task the group to reflect on their understanding of the impact of SEL in the classroom. It is key that constructivist subjectivity (Patton, 2002) be prevalent while participants construct meaning from their experiences and perceptions of SEL. The focus group questions/aims (see Appendix F) developed upon initial data analysis served to confirm consistency and reinforce neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the study.
Data Analysis

In examining the data for this study, the design procedures for transcendental phenomenology are less interpretive of experiences and more descriptive in documentation of participants’ experiences where researchers set aside their personal experiences; Moustakas (1994) referred to the setting aside of personal experiences as bracketing. Data analysis involves organizing the data, coding and organizing themes, selecting how to represent the data, and ultimately generating an interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although software programs may assist in data analysis, Patton (2015) noted that a researcher must use the knowledge gained to analyze the data. Miles et al. (2014) posited that data analysis is a customized process involving integration of multiple facets of the research study. Creswell and Poth (2018) presented these interrelated ideas as a data analysis spiral. Miles et al. (2014) discussed the importance of first processing the data through formal or expanded write-ups of the data; this included transcribing and/or rating interviews. Once the data has been processed, coding and generating themes (Miles et al., 2014) will precede the assertions and analysis.

Phenomenological analysis focuses on the experiences of participants who have lived or experienced the same phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The Greek word Epoche is important to understand when considering phenomenological methodology. Avoiding judgment, avoiding ordinary ways of perception, and considering a phenomenon in a clear, fresh way that can be described in totality comprise the Epoche (Moustakas, 1994). In consideration of the Epoche, I journaled to disclose any preconceived notions prior to data analysis. Hayman et al. (2012) indicated that journaling may be used in phenomenological research to document experiences in a natural context. The purpose of my journaling in this research study was to bring about an even greater awareness of my consciousness before analyzing the data.
Systematic procedures are used to move from the narrow to the broad in terms of analysis. Phenomenological reduction is the idea that participants describe what is seen in both an internal and external manner; in essence, phenomenological reduction examines the relationship between the phenomenon and self (Moustakas, 1994). Participants in this study reflected and examined their experiences related to SEL and subsequent impacts of PD. Individual textural descriptions serve to explain participants’ perceptions of a phenomenon; Moustakas (1994) explained how individual textural descriptions integrate non-overlapping themes of each participant using verbatim examples from interviews. It is through phenomenological reduction that individual textural descriptions may be formed (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization, or giving statements equal value, allows for a broad possibility of discovery within the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As part of the reduction process, horizontalization is utilized to give equal meaning to participants’ statements from interviews; responses are used to generate themes, and emerging themes are clustered in order to determine an overarching trend(s). From the themes, individual textural descriptions should be generated to document the experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants constructed meaning, as aligned with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), from prior learning processes and experiences. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) contended that qualitative research is rooted in “an essentially constructivist philosophical position, in the sense that it is concerned with how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time” (p. 84). According to Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation is varying the frames of reference and perspectives to induce polarity. In essence, this means there can be varying meanings and perspectives of individual experiences with the phenomenon. Imaginative variation also includes
the clustering of qualities into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions were generated by describing each research participant’s emerging themes based on individual responses; through imaginative variation, individual, unique stories are allowed to emerge (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, a descriptive passage incorporated the essence of the experience for the participants in the study based on a variety of experiences.

In consideration of the above, this phenomenological research study began by managing and organizing the data by creating and organizing data files of the questionnaires, interviews, and focus group. Next, responses to the questionnaire, interview transcripts, and focus group session were read for the purpose of noting trends, particular responses, and reflections through phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction examines the relationship between the phenomenon and self (Moustakas, 1994). Participants in this research study reflected and examined their experiences related to SEL. The essence of teachers’ experiences related to SEL was examined with a suspension of judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2018) during the process. The participants’ experiences, not the researcher’s personal views on the importance of this study, and significant statements from interviews were examined (Moustakas, 1994). As the next step, horizontalization of the data occurred where the significant statements were given equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Lists were generated from non-repetitive statements and avoid overlapping. Next, what and how statements were examined derived from verbatim examples (Moustakas, 1994) of group statements based on what was experienced with the phenomenon; a description of where the experience transpired and clear descriptions of experience with the phenomenon were generated to create clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The final step of synthesizing experiences and essences led to the overall essence of the
research (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis of this research study is ultimately represented by a rich description of what the participants experienced and how they experienced it.

**Trustworthiness**

Specific processes and procedures were implemented to validate and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings from this research study. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are examined as parallel criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to reinforce the trustworthiness of the study.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality; credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings of this study are directly from the experiences of the participants. Consequently, realistic experiences and perspectives are reported consistently. Credibility is the confidence in the truth of the determinations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In establishing credibility for this study, Lincoln and Guba’s prolonged engagement technique was implemented. Some key aspects of prolonged engagement are investing time to learn the culture and social setting while spending time developing relationships and rapport; this is all significant as it helps establish trust and co-construction of meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation establishes credibility in that it serves as a validity procedure where research findings are based on multiple sources; consistency between sources may be examined while employing triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018). Because one is a human being, personal bias may never be completely removed, but it may be mitigated through effective protocols eliciting information from multiple sources (Fusch et al., 2018). Experiences of the participants in this
study related to addressing students’ needs in alignment with SEL were triangulated to add richness (Heale & Forbes, 2013) and described accurately in detail.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability can be addressed through rich, thick descriptions of themes, member-checks of the findings and interpretations, a reflexive journal kept by the researcher, and by an inquiry audit done by a third party of the research processes used throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and confirmability are similar to reliability in quantitative studies and deal with consistency, which is addressed through the provision of rich detail about the context and setting of the study. Specifically, dependability reveals that findings of the study are consistent and could be repeated; confirmability refers to a degree of neutrality, not researcher bias, influencing the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Disclosure about the researcher’s role and position in the school district was presented; the researcher had no authority over selected participants in the study.

**Transferability**

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that should be considered; it refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context. A way to achieve transferability is through thick description, which is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as describing an experience in enough detail so that conclusions drawn may transfer to other situations, people, and times. This study sought to provide enough thick description to allow for application in other contexts related to educators’ experiences related to SE

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations and implications in this study. Ethical issues may arise in any and all phases of the research process, especially in a qualitative study where a
flexible design exists (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Ethical issues demand consideration before the study begins, in the early stages of the research study, during data collection, while conducting data analysis, reporting the data, and presenting or publishing the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality, security of data, and awareness of sensitive data are paramount. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) indicated a moral obligation to minimize any potential harm to participants.

IRB approval (see Appendix A) and site approval (see Appendix B) were obtained before any data collection procedures began. In addition, informed consent (see Appendix E) was obtained from all participants selected for the study; all participants were over the age of 18, as this study examined the experiences of licensed educators addressing the SEL needs of students. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) emphasized, there was a deliberate protection of participants from harm. All interviews were completed one-on-one masking the names of participants with pseudonyms. All data pieces are securely stored with password protection and with no identifiable information linking data to participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1994) emphasized the importance of ethical authenticity where a range of realities is demonstrated. Authenticity in a study should allow for greater sensitivity to issues as they are presented with the tone of participants’ experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). In consideration of this tone, great care should be taken to report multiple perspectives and to avoid disclosing only positive results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, a researcher should avoid any exploitation or power imbalances with participants while being open to discussing the purpose and use of the data from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasizing an overall building of trust throughout the research process, using
composite stories to avoid the identification of individuals and considering the audience of the research were also identified as key ethical considerations.

**Summary**

Understanding the experiences of educators related to SEL is important to understand as the mental health of students factors into their academic success (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Experiences of educators addressing SEL and understanding the impact of SEL interventions in classrooms may play a role in improving student success. In describing the design of this study, it is important to note that transcendental, psychological phenomenology is less interpretive of experiences and more descriptive in documentation of participants’ experiences where researchers set aside their personal experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to examine the experiences of educators surrounding SEL to meet the needs of students, so this study may be described as transcendental in nature because it was oriented toward lived experiences of the participants as defined by Moustakas (1994). All facets related to the trustworthiness of the study were examined and are rooted in the works of Lincoln and Guba (1985).
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in a rural Tennessee school district. Chapters one through three of this transcendental phenomenological study provide the purpose of the research study, a review of the literature, and the methodology implemented. Chapter four delves into the findings of the nine participants in the study about their experiences surrounding social and emotional learning (SEL) in the Matanzas County School District. Participants completed a screening survey for qualification purposes, a questionnaire, and a one-on-one interview via Zoom. Four of the research participants participated in a focus group discussion. This chapter includes an overview of the participants, a brief description of each participant’s educational experience, a detailed overview of each participant’s experiences related to SEL, and a summary of the findings. To glean from the experiences of teachers related to SEL, the central research question is: What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee? The two research sub-questions are as follows: (RSQ1) How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change? (RSQ2) What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom?

Participants

Participants in this study were selected through a qualifying survey (Appendix C) sent to all certified teachers in seven elementary (PreK-8) schools in Matanzas County. Not all elementary schools had teachers respond to the survey. Six elementary schools were represented
in the results of the qualifying survey. From the qualifying survey, nine participants from five of the elementary schools completed the consent form and chose to participate. All participants in the study are certified teachers in Matanzas County Schools and have participated in professional development (PD) related to SEL at the school or district level. There were eight females and one male who participated in the study.

Table 1

Overview of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Catherine</th>
<th>Kathy</th>
<th>Carissa</th>
<th>Erica</th>
<th>Loretta</th>
<th>Alice</th>
<th>Helena</th>
<th>Doug</th>
<th>Lana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>5-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary or Middle</td>
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<td>Elem./Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Elem.</td>
<td>Elem.</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Elem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD at School/District</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certified Teacher</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Catherine

Catherine is an elementary teacher with 10-19 years of experience in an elementary setting. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. However, Catherine indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels. She strongly agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Catherine strongly agreed.
Kathy

Kathy is an elementary teacher with 5-9 years of experience in an elementary setting. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. However, Kathy indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels. She strongly agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Kathy strongly agreed.

Carissa

Carissa is a middle school teacher with over 20 years of experience combined in both elementary and middle school settings. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. However, Carissa indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels. She agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Carissa agreed. Carissa has taught at the same school in Matanzas County for 20 years.

Erica

Erica is a middle school teacher with 10-19 years of experience. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. However, Erica indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels. She agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of
understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Erica strongly agreed.

**Loretta**

Loretta is an elementary teacher with 0-4 years of experience in an elementary setting. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. Loretta indicated moderate SEL training opportunities at the school district level and minimal SEL training opportunities at the school level. A reason for the discrepancy between the district and the school level opportunities for SEL trainings may be attributed to her novice status. She strongly agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Loretta strongly agreed.

**Alice**

Alice is an elementary teacher with 10-19 years of experience in an elementary setting. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to her students. Alice indicated moderate SEL training opportunities at the district level and minimal SEL training opportunities at the school level. She agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Alice noted agreement with that statement as well.

**Helena**
Helena is a middle school ELA teacher with one year of experience in a middle school setting and six years of experience in an elementary setting. In the past, she has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be highly beneficial to her students. However, Helena indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at the school district level and none at her current school. She strongly agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Helena strongly agreed. Although relatively early in her educational career, Helena has participated in numerous academic professional learning opportunities, at both the state and national levels, and has been recognized for her excellence in the field of education.

Doug

Doug is a middle school math teacher with 0-4 years of experience in a middle school setting. He has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be beneficial to his students. However, Doug indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels. He strongly agreed when asked to express his agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. He is adamant about the importance of relationship building in the classroom as a lever to connecting with students. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Doug strongly agreed.

Lana
Lana is an elementary teacher with 5-9 years of experience in an elementary setting. She has participated in PD related to SEL at the school or district level and found the training to be somewhat beneficial to her students. Lana received extensive training surrounding SEL while employed in another state. However, Lana indicated minimal SEL training opportunities at both the school and district levels in Matanzas County. She agreed when asked to express her agreement with the importance of understanding SEL considerations as related to the school environment and to individual classrooms. Additionally, when asked about the importance of teacher reflection as a tool to foster positive change in the school and classroom environments, Lana strongly agreed.

Results

The teaching experience ranges of participants in this study had a relatively even distribution. For example, 33.3% of participants noted an experience range of 5-9 years, and 33.3% noted an experience range of 10-19 years. The 0-4 years of experience range was represented by 22.2% of participants, and the 20+ years of teaching experience range was represented by 11.1%. When asked to express their experiences with SEL training at the school district level, 77.8% of participants noted minimal SEL training opportunities, and 22.2% noted moderate SEL training opportunities. When asked to express their experiences with SEL training opportunities at their assigned school, 88.9% of participants noted minimal opportunities and 11.1% noted none. Despite the lack of opportunities, all participants recognized the importance of SEL as it impacts the school environment and individual classrooms. When asked to identify their level of agreement with understanding SEL considerations as related to impacting the school environment, 55.6% strongly agreed and 44.4% agreed. Similarly, when asked to identify
their level of agreement with understanding SEL considerations as related to impacting individual classrooms in the school, 55.6% strongly agreed and 44.4% agreed.

Participants’ responses during this phenomenological study generated some overarching themes related to their experiences with SEL in Matanzas County Schools. When considering the experiences of teachers in addressing SEL needs of students, the notion of more specific, explicit, and required PD related to SEL permeated the responses generated by participants. Most participants were unable to identify explicit PD provided by the school district addressing SEL; consequently, they struggled to identify how positive change has been enacted based on trainings related to SEL interventions. There were a couple of participants who referenced some specific trainings at an individual school or targeting a specific group of educators in the district, but the overwhelming consensus was that most feel ill-equipped to address SEL needs with their students. While no participants were particularly in favor of adding more mandated training to already full plates, participants recognized the need for training related to SEL to best meet the needs of students.

Funding for additional in-school personnel related to counseling and behavior therapy was also prevalent in the participants’ responses. All participants noted the importance of reflection to improvement as a professional and with understanding SEL; however, the responses of some were much more explicit in the role of reflection related to SEL. A need for consistency across schools with SEL was also noted by several participants as there is no SEL assessment protocol to assess SEL with students. Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological reduction was used to analyze the data resulting in the findings presented.

Phenomenological reduction is the idea that participants describe what is seen in both an internal and external manner; in essence, phenomenological reduction examines the relationship
between the phenomenon and self (Moustakas, 1994). Participants in this study reflected and examined their experiences related to SEL. Moustakas (1994) explained how individual textural descriptions integrate non-overlapping themes of each participant using verbatim examples from interviews. It is through phenomenological reduction that individual textural descriptions may be formed (Moustakas, 1994). As part of the reduction process, horizontalization was utilized in this study to give equal meaning to participants’ statements from interviews; responses were used to generate themes, and the emerging themes were clustered to determine overarching trends. Moustakas (1994) stated that imaginative variation is varying the frames of reference and perspectives to induce polarity. In essence, this means there can be varying meanings and perspectives of individual experiences with the phenomenon. Imaginative variation also includes the clustering of qualities into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions were generated by describing each research participant’s emerging themes based on individual responses; through imaginative variation, individual, unique stories were allowed to emerge (Moustakas, 1994).

**Ill-equipped Feelings About SEL**

Regardless of experience levels, teachers in Matanzas County indicated a lack of comfort and understanding when it comes to SEL. When asked to describe her experiences related to SEL that have been beneficial, Catherine replied that most is learning on the go as it relates to dealing with children. She indicated that she has been to a few classroom management and behavior trainings, but she does not really know that many of the strategies given work – she felt that one has to examine and work with each child. When posed with the same question, Carissa said that,
We’ve been talking about it – especially with the pandemic – greater need for SEL. We used to have guidance counselors years ago come in and talk about SEL. Guidance counselors don’t really do that anymore – the need is greater than ever. The need for more education in this area is so necessary – the nuclear family – a high percentage of students don’t live with either parent and sometimes can’t control themselves.

Doug emphasized his view on the importance of relationships and needing more assistance with SEL when he said, “Developing relationships with students leads to less frequency with behaviors. Trying to connect with students. I probably could use more training on SEL.”

_Diverse SEL Perspectives_

When asked about their understanding of SEL, teachers offered a variety of responses. Lana took a moment to think about her response and replied with the following,

I think, in the best way to put it is, can these kids get going when it's tough? Do they have the strategies? Do they know how to regulate themselves? Do they have the coping skills to handle difficult situations? You know, we live in a society today where a lot of kids are just, everything's given to them and everybody's a winner. And I don't really think that that's going to serve these kids later on in life. So that's my understanding of it.

Catherine replied that SEL is about helping students learn to deal with their emotions and how to cope when having a negative emotion – to get to the other side of it. Kathy offered that SEL is students’ self-awareness, self-management, relating to others – in other words, the soft skills in the world – all of those tie into what is being successful. Carissa said,

To me, it was some kind of program to help students understand and make good decisions – they don’t know where to put their feelings. No expectations – there needs to
be teaching about expectations and boundaries. SEL can make a more well rounded student – how to interact with everyone at school.

Erica offered the following regarding her understanding of SEL: “It’s limited but I believe it’s about learning how to handle emotions in social situations and how to handle things in their peer group. I honestly don’t know that I have a clear and thorough understanding of it.” Loretta replied that SEL goes outside of the curriculum and academics. SEL has to do with students’ needs based on socio-economic levels, behavioral issues, and students dealing with ACEs. “It’s very important to have that support and knowledge so I can support students in the classroom.”

When asked about her understanding of SEL, Helena stated,

> It’s something that kids aren’t getting at home. Children need to be taught how to deal with their emotions from a very early age. Social interaction – student to student, student to teacher, and with society – they need to know how to control their emotions – I worked on this a lot in Kindergarten when I taught that level. The emotional side is that students don’t know how to deal with internal conflicts – what they are seeing, what is actually happening, and how to get to the goal.

When asked directly about how equipped they feel to address SEL considerations with students, participants from all experience levels offered overwhelming evidence to support a theme regarding ill-equipped feelings. Catherine indicated that,

> I don’t feel that I’m very equipped. When I went to school [college] that was not something that was spoken about. We had some special education classes where we were taught about inclusion students and there were some prior trainings at schools that I teach, but not nearly enough.
Kathy offered a unique perspective when asked how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations. Kathy said that she feels more equipped than average, but she has spent significant time on her own reading about SEL. Even so, she said, “Still don’t feel super equipped in the pandemic world and so many issues – SEL is so necessary. I feel equipped, but not.” Carissa said, “I don’t feel very equipped at all.” Erica directly stated, “Not very – I understand my age group and can relate to them. I have no clue when it comes to SEL standards or curriculum.” Loretta offered that she still has much to learn and is always looking to learn and tweak things as a novice teacher. She knows that she is inexperienced and hopes to get a little better each year. When asked about how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations with her students, Helena referenced her special education certification and that she feels fairly equipped. She continued that she had several classes in college dealing with student emotions, and she feels all teachers need those learning opportunities. Although she feels somewhat equipped, she stated, “I feel powerless a lot of times to be honest with you – I may feel equipped but I feel powerless. . . I’m not a counselor.” Doug expounded on these similar comments when he said,

I feel moderately equipped – need to assess students more to find out where they are.
Most of my experiences are about developing those relationships or hearing from an administrator that a student is dealing with something. I haven’t seen much in the way of support at a district or school level.

Lana offered a relatively extensive response when posed with this same question regarding her experiences of feeling equipped to address SEL considerations. She discussed how her private school experiences were very different than her current public-school experiences. She elaborated that the personnel available in a private school to address SEL concerns were much
more plentiful and she worked closely with a school psychologist in a private school setting. She continued that academics seem to trump SEL in the district, and SEL considerations are not at the forefront of decisions within the school district.

**A Sense of Professional Isolation**

The responses based on participants’ experiences indicated that teachers often feel on their own when it comes to embedding SEL within the curriculum. Helena stated,

> Our district adopted the first high-quality instructional materials this year that teachers have had in many years, if at all. Within that curriculum there is still very little social emotional learning embedded, but opportunities for it to be woven in exist. From my experience, that has been something I have had to do on my own every year.

Catherine indicated, “I feel that we are constantly working on these skills throughout the day. However, it is not formally addressed except during guidance class.” When asked about SEL concerns in classrooms, Kathy referenced the range of issues spanning the youngest to the oldest when she said,

> We have some younger children in a Kindergarten class, with almost no emotional regulation skills. When they are told no or redirected – they can’t work themselves though that. Always a blow up – we have to deescalate and then handle it. Kids have not had to work with others and take other directions into account – leading to emotional outbursts. At the older levels, the kids just don’t know how to talk with each other or disagree respectfully.

When asked about SEL concerns in the classroom, teachers offered a variety of responses based on their experiences. The following responses demonstrated the wide range of student concerns across the board and that teachers understand the struggles students face daily;
however, in spite of their understanding, they feel ill-equipped to address those SEL considerations. Lana offered,

I have never had a group of children with such high anxiety if they don't make an A, which in a way is wonderful that they're internally motivated. But the, like, the physical part of it, is like the chewing on the nails . . . the scratching their of their scalp, the messing with their eyebrows . . . And I have brought it to the attention of the correct people. It's not helping . . . But I have to be more aware of what they're feeling how they're feeling and how they're coping.

Regarding SEL concerns in the classroom, Doug stated that he sees students making poor choices, dealing with probation hearings, etc. He indicated a concern is teaching students the right ways to react in situations. Doug further expounded,

I have a student who is a brawler and I’ve tried to establish a relationship with him – we have some students who have a difficult time managing frustrations – slamming Chromebooks – I talk to them about there are better ways to handle this rather than yelling at them.

When asked about SEL concerns in her classroom, Helena referenced a lack of empathy with her middle school students. She said, “. . . our children are so self-absorbed . . . they don’t go places that I would take my kids to.” Helena went on to say that she went on mission trips when she was young and learned how to empathize; she feels our current students really lack the ability to empathize with others, and a student’s home life can be a key contributor. When asked about her SEL concerns in the classroom, Erica discussed how students seem to have a difficult time interacting with each other (polite interactions, consumed with drama). Carissa offered that SEL concerns in the classroom are just all over the place. “You look at each student – bad home life –
no expectations, no boundaries. Students have changed so much – no intrinsic desire to do well like there used to be.” Catherine indicated several SEL concerns with her students: high divorce rates (single parents), students struggling with social skills, not making friends, not wanting to come to school. Catherine is one who is very much in favor of additional school personnel to address behavioral concerns that extend beyond the scope of a school guidance counselor; during this discussion, Catherine iterated, “I’m not a therapist.”

**Dearth of Impactful SEL PD Opportunities**

When asked to describe their experiences related to the school district’s approach to SEL, there were several responses that indicated a lack of training and/or opportunities. Catherine noted that she does not possess the training or expertise to always deal with students who are having SEL issues in class. Catherine indicated that the majority of trainings deal with academics, not behaviors. “When I have students that are struggling, I may send them to talk to the guidance counselor to talk about the issues that they are having.” Catherine added a poignant point when she stated, “Most training is about managing behavior in the classroom, not dealing with the issues they may have.” Additionally, Kathy, a teacher at another school in the district, said,

> I feel that my school district is aware of the importance of SEL, however has not taken steps to fully integrate it in a universal way in the district. Various teachers and various schools have implemented SEL practices on individual levels, but with all of the other mandated things happening in education SEL has not been a primary focus of my district.

When considering training opportunities, Doug stated, “I feel that my school district has made few attempts to help provide SEL training opportunities for teachers . . . I do wish that there
were more training opportunities for SEL and connecting with students.” Carissa elaborated on SEL training opportunities when she said,

I’m sure that I have, but it must not have been enough where I thought more about it. The training was more about differentiation with students – touching on social but more about learning styles. I was talking to a guidance counselor, we need more than just a guidance counselor – we need a mental health professional to teach those classes. Academics trumps everything else, kids have been isolated with the pandemic – there’s just a greater need.

A novice teacher, Loretta, indicated few SEL training opportunities leading up to her first full year in the classroom. When asked during her interview about her experiences with such training at the district level, she replied, “No inservices at district level – my trainings were curriculum, classroom management, technology.” Loretta continued to express that information from the district office seemed to be relayed by principals. Although there appears to be deficient opportunities for SEL training, some do exist in the district; however, participating in the training is completely voluntary. Alice said,

Our school district has offered inservice on SEL, and it is optional whether you choose it or not. We sign up for the inservice that is needed for our concentration of grade levels. I felt that it was a very important inservice, and I did take it. It is very needed for our counselors, but also a growing need for the teachers as well.

Lana said that she follows the school protocols and does all the documentation for a guidance counselor referral for students, and that is all she really feels that she is allowed to do. She indicated the level of trust students have with their teachers, and Lana feels that she needs a
greater role in helping students with SEL considerations rather than just sending to the guidance counselor. Lana further stated,

   I personally have not been offered training on SEL at my school district, which is unfortunate. In saying that, our school tries very hard to remind the kids they are loved and capable of anything they want in life, which ties in a little with SEL.

*Levels of Support*

When asked to consider how they would like to be supported with SEL in their school and/or district, participants were open in their responses. Although it would mean additional training, most seemed to be in favor of training to best meet the needs of students. Doug stated, “I’d like to see more training opportunities related to SEL – ways I could incorporate into planning without getting behind in standards.” Helena said,

   Every teacher needs ACEs training – every teacher needs Bridges Out of Poverty training. We need training to be able to do more as teachers along with the counselor.

   Having support with people in the schools. People would be my number one thing although that’s likely not going to happen.

   Erica said that she was hesitant to say more training is needed, but maybe training to help define and understand SEL would be beneficial. With required professional development, Erica discussed how teachers are constantly pulled in so many directions and it is hard to add something else to the plate. She continued that teachers need the time and ability to put something together with any training. Regarding the way(s) to be supported by the district or school with SEL, Kathy believes consistency across the district is key and added that,

   I think a district recognition of what we need to do – SEL differs in every single school.

   There are going to be differences with so many schools and there needs to be consistency
across the district – we know it’s important but there aren’t structures in place to ensure consistency in schools. Structure regarding what we need to look at to help our students be successful in life and manage their emotions. I know this is easier wished for than done.

Catherine indicated the need for additional support with personnel when she stated, “We need funding for extra guidance counselors, therapists, or people who were trained with dealing with students’ emotions.” Lana teaches at a school with a part-time guidance counselor and continued that similar thought when she stated,

Give us a full-time guidance counselor. We had the most outstanding guidance counselor last year, and she was part-time and out of the goodness of her heart, she would still come in on her days off because the need was so high for her. And now we've got a super nice lady. But she's not there – she's part time – she misses a lot. And when I tell her that things that we need to be addressing, she just doesn't do it.

Carissa presented some combined thoughts related to both training and personnel when she discussed the need for more professional development opportunities related to SEL and that there needs to be some “avenue” or plan that can be implemented to assist with SEL in schools. Carissa concluded, “A full-time mental health professional would be helpful – and there needs to be a program.” In order to be supported with SEL at the district or school level, Loretta said teachers need to have the time for direct instruction on SEL techniques and strategies to use, more time allowed for counselor coming in to teach students, and time allotted each month for direct instruction to students.

*Teacher Reflection*
In consideration of professional development and growth, participants in this study discussed their experiences related to the importance of reflection to improvement as a professional. When asked about the importance of reflection to improve as a professional, Catherine said, “I definitely do. There are times I look back on situations and wish I had handled it differently – would have helped child navigate problem better – handle things better in the future.” Kathy added, “I think so – we often react in the moment – but then look at what went well and what could have gone better. We need to refine and reflect to fix things – reflect on what worked and what didn’t with students.” Lana indicated daily reflection is paramount to improvement as a professional and replied, “Did you think about what went wrong? What went right? And what are we going to do about what went wrong? And that truly is the secret to education.” Erica responded,

Absolutely – I try to be a better teacher today than yesterday and better this year than last year. You don’t have to write it down, but you have to know what went well and what didn’t. Keep working to get the students on board.

Carissa said, “I do think teacher reflection is an important part – what can I change to make better? It’s very important.” Loretta further postulated,

We are lifelong learners as teachers – I reflect at every planning, every lunch period – how I could talk to that student differently, how I could teach that differently – that’s the only way to learn – to reflect. Daily reflection is necessary as a teacher.

Helena said that reflection is probably the most important part to improvement as a professional. Receiving constructive feedback and reflecting on that feedback is key. She continued, “Look at it through the eyes of a child – kinda like a tennis player in the mirror.” Doug related a personal
note when responding about the importance of reflection. Regarding reflection to improve as a professional, he said,

> Extremely important part of improvement process – my 1\textsuperscript{st} year was such a struggle – I learned so much to help me improve as a 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year teacher. Self-reflection is a key role to becoming a more successful teacher – need to look at ways to improve.

**Inconsistent SEL Student Assessments**

Based on participants’ responses, there appears to be a lack of formal assessments with students related to SEL. When asked about her experiences with SEL and how SEL has been assessed with students, Helena replied,

> I do not believe it has been assessed; although, as a teacher it is my job to assess every student every day and be sure they have what they need to be successful in my classroom and in life. I have done my own mini-assessments using student surveys in the past, but this was mostly to identify where students were at in the "learning curve" and how they felt in my classroom and about me as the teacher so that I could reflect on changes I should make to help them grow. I do spend quite a lot of time referring students to our school counselor and talking students through behavioral issues because my view is that misbehavior always has a motive and most often students have social emotional needs that are not being addressed.

When asked the same question about SEL assessment with students, Carissa replied, “None that I’m aware of.” Erica indicated a bit more with student assessment when she said, “Students have filled out surveys, and they have done brief writing activities to go along with The Coffee Bean book as well.” Erica elaborated in her response that the school was discussing The Coffee Bean school-wide and all teachers had been given a copy, but there was no
curriculum or specific plan for assessing students. Erica continued that she does think that teachers need to address more than just the curriculum, but it has been more informal to this point. Doug offered more specific insight when he stated,

To be honest, I do not have much experience with assessing SEL with my students. My experience, so far, has been administration, guidance counselors, or former teachers relaying past traumas and specifications of current students. I learn the rest from trying to communicate with my students. I feel that I could do better in this regard. While I am able to reach out and try to help the students that have had past issues, students who have new issues or issues that have not been previously revealed could slip between the cracks.

**Consistently Absent SEL Assessments**

Kathy continued to reinforce this idea of inconsistent SEL assessments when she replied in a similar fashion to the same inquiry regarding student SEL assessments: “I am not aware of any formal assessments taking place within my district.” When posed with the same question, Loretta said, “Given my experience, SEL has been assessed with students by means for student surveys and individual meetings with the school counselor by request of the gen ed. (general education) teacher.” Similarly, Lana stated, “Last year, our guidance counselor did a survey that pinpointed certain stressors. She also would check in with the teachers about what she needs to discuss with the classes as a whole and individually.” From the responses of participants, it was derived that no consistent SEL assessments are conducted across the district or even amongst particular schools in the district at this time.

**Outlier Data and Findings**
While saturation was achieved with the research participants in this transcendental phenomenological study, any unexpected findings that do not align with the specific research questions and themes in this study are now presented.

**Outlier Finding #1**

When asked how SEL is incorporated into lesson planning activities, one participant noted a specific academic field trip that is taken by fifth grade students each year to BizTown. The participant noted that the trip is primarily academic and was trying to emphasize that she does not regularly incorporate SEL into her personal plans. She was the only participant to mention a student field trip as part of SEL activities.

**Outlier Finding #2**

When asked about some specific SEL concerns in her classroom, one participant mentioned sickness and the worry by students associated with sickness. While the pandemic was referenced by various participants, she was the only participant to express sickness as an SEL concern in her classroom.

**Research Question Responses**

When asked to express their experiences related to addressing the SEL needs of students, several participants indicated that they feel ill-equipped to do so as there has been no impactful SEL training at the district or school level to foster such understanding. While some participants indicated a school-level or district SEL training that was beneficial, most indicated a lack of depth or follow-up to trainings offered at the school or district level. In consideration of professional development and growth, participants in this study also discussed their experiences related to the importance of reflection to improvement as a professional. Teacher reflection plays
a significant role in one’s abilities to improve as a professional according to the participants in this research study.

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee? The SEL trainings that teachers have received were noted to be superficial or lacking long-lasting effects. Carissa said, “I don’t feel very equipped at all.” Erica stated, “Not very – I understand my age group and can relate to them. I have no clue when it comes to SEL standards or curriculum.” Doug emphasized his view on the importance of relationships and needing more assistance with SEL when he said, “Developing relationships with students leads to less frequency with behaviors. Trying to connect with students. I probably could use more training on SEL.” Catherine indicated that, I don’t feel that I’m very equipped. When I went to school [college] that was not something that was spoken about. We had some special education classes where we were taught about inclusion students and there were some prior trainings at schools that I teach, but not nearly enough.

Kathy said that she feels more equipped to address SEL considerations than average, but she has spent significant time on her own reading about SEL. Even so, she said, “Still don’t feel super equipped in the pandemic world and so many issues – SEL is so necessary. I feel equipped, but not.” When asked about how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations with her students, Helena referenced her special education certification and that she feels fairly equipped. She continued that she had several classes in college dealing with student emotions, and she feels all teachers need those learning opportunities. Although she feels somewhat equipped, she stated, “I
feel powerless a lot of times to be honest with you – I may feel equipped but I feel powerless. . .

I’m not a counselor.”

The focus group in this research study offered some additional insight to this research question when asked about the perceived perceptions of the school district related to SEL. One of the participants stated, “I feel like they [school district] want it to be a priority. There's just a lack of funding, training, resources, human bodies that are able to tackle it appropriately. But I do feel like it is something that they feel is important.” Stemming from that comment, another participant offered,

I would have to agree. But this being my fourth year, I've not seen very many professional developments focused specifically on social emotional learning, maybe some stuff that kind of complemented it indirectly. But nothing that specifically helps teachers learn how to incorporate social emotional learning into their own content area.

And I feel like it definitely seems like the school system doesn't prioritize it.

Another said, “I do believe [they] think it's very important. I just don't know that they [school district leaders] have what they need to, to do that for us.” Additionally, another focus group participant offered,

I think, obviously, when asked about it, they're gonna say, yes, it's a priority. It's, you know, because student emotional well-being should always be a priority. But when you look at where we put our resources, not just money, but time and energy and effort, you know, it kind of shows a different picture of how much of a priority it is.

**Research Sub-question One**

How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change? When asked to express their experiences with SEL training at the
school district level, 77.8% of participants noted minimal SEL training opportunities, and 22.2% noted moderate SEL training opportunities. When asked to express their experiences with SEL training opportunities at their assigned school, 88.9% of participants noted minimal opportunities and 11.1% noted none. The focus group reinforced this data when asked how professional development in the district has contributed to positive change with students. One of the focus group participants replied, “Well, I've only been in this district for five years. So my answer would be no, none in this county.” This same participant discussed how trainings in another school system in a different state have impacted her ability to address SEL needs with her students. Another participant, upon hearing the recounting of impactful SEL training in a different state, offered,

That's a very good point. Because the changes that were impactful for me, for my students, just changed me, and how I responded to the students, but they didn't get anything concrete for my classroom, or how to weave it into the curriculum.

Additionally, this same focus group participant offered,

While I’m speaking just on the ACEs training, I think it was impactful to me, as well as Bridges-Out-of-Poverty training. And they were both impactful on me as a teacher, because, number one, they were research-based, but they were in-depth . . . And so how did that affect my students, I think it’s still affecting my students, because I'm a different teacher now. So I still think that my students are being impacted today by those things in good ways.

Another focus group participant offered his take on his experiences related to training at the district level that has empowered positive change. He stated,
My last inservices had the students out of poverty and student mental health, and there's great, vast amounts of information for it. But there's not a whole lot of information of how to really implement that into my classroom setting. So it's, you know, definitely I feel like they're trying to get us the information, but there's not enough, I feel like there's not enough support in implementing that information. Or at least not implementing it to the highest quality.

The fourth member of the focus group postulated that,

And I think that comes back to funding and having more bodies to help these kiddos. I mean, we see it, we innately know, but I'm, I might be the only one here, but I feel like I see it and I innately know, but that I'm sometimes afraid to act on it because what if I'm wrong? And it would be nice to have someone to turn to and say this is what I'm seeing is this social emotional learning issue. How do I handle it? So from my perspective, like I see the issue of kids who are having issues, and I would love to be able to do more like preventative, or get in there before it comes up. But I feel like I spend so much time dealing with the students who are currently blowing up that I can't do the proactive stuff.

It's all completely reactionary.

**Research Sub-question Two**

What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom? When asked about the significance of teacher reflection as a powerful tool to foster positive change in both a school and classroom environment, 77.8% strongly agreed and 22.2% agreed. In essence, all participants agreed that reflection as a teacher is a powerful lever for change. When asked about the importance of reflection to improve as a professional, Catherine said, “I definitely do. There are times I look back on situations and wish I
had handled it differently – would have helped child navigate problem better – handle things better in the future.” Kathy added, “I think so – we often react in the moment – but then look at what went well and what could have gone better. We need to refine and reflect to fix things – reflect on what worked and what didn’t with students.” Erica responded,

Absolutely – I try to be a better teacher today than yesterday and better this year than last year. You don’t have to write it down, but you have to know what went well and what didn’t. Keep working to get the students on board.

Carissa said, “I do think teacher reflection is an important part – what can I change to make better? It’s very important.” Loretta further postulated,

We are lifelong learners as teachers – I reflect at every planning, every lunch period – how I could talk to that student differently, how I could teach that differently – that’s the only way to learn – to reflect. Daily reflection is necessary as a teacher.

Helena said that reflection is probably the most important part to improvement as a professional. Receiving constructive feedback and reflecting on that feedback is key. She continued, “Look at it through the eyes of a child – kinda like a tennis player in the mirror.” Doug related a personal note when responding about the importance of reflection. Regarding reflection to improve as a professional, he said,

Extremely important part of improvement process – my 1st year was such a struggle – I learned so much to help me improve as a 2nd and 3rd year teacher. Self-reflection is a key role to becoming a more successful teacher – need to look at ways to improve.

Lana related a personal story about a discussion she recently had with a college student who is hoping to become a teacher in the near future. During that discussion, Lana discussed the importance of reflection and the significance of true reflection to constant improvement.
It's funny you asked this question, because I had a student that goes to TTU; she was thanking me and wanting to come in and observe and help out in the classroom. And she asked me that, she said, “What's the secret? How do you do this?” And I said, the secret is self reflection every day on your way home. And, you know, she was like, you know, she was so curious about what that means. And I said, it's not something that you have to remind yourself to do. It's something that eventually will come innately. Did you think about what went wrong? What went right? And what are we going to do about what went wrong? Right? And that truly is the secret to education.

When asked what role reflection plays in one's abilities as a teacher and understanding the impact of social and emotional learning in the classroom, the focus group participants offered some parallel responses. One participant said,

I really believe that if you're not reflective of your own practice, then you can't see what you're doing wrong, including, if you speak to students in a way that is sarcastic, or just things that really rubbed them the wrong way, or caused him to have to see the school counselor because he’s blown up because you weren't able to defuse the situation before it got to a certain point. I just think that reflection on how you are seen by your students, and the relationships that you have with your students . . . I think that reflection for a teacher really helps her either be better at that, or the lack of reflection could possibly cause her to have a wall up that she doesn't see.

Another participant agreed and offered the following as a follow up:

It's [reflection] definitely something that I try to be more cognizant of, because I know being a young teacher, starting off my first year was just trying to survive, like I was just trying to get through the day. I was trying to get accustomed to my curriculum, learn my
curriculum, being able to learn the shortcuts and ins and outs of how to teach it . . . I definitely feel like going into my second and third year where I was more understanding of a curriculum and lesson planning, I could focus more on that . . . it definitely became very apparent to me that building those relationships was a big way to help bring down some of the little stuff in the classroom . . . I wish I had more opportunities to learn more about social emotional learning and responses that I could use to help defuse different situations.

Another participant related a personal story about a student who felt an immediate connection to her [the teacher] once she [the teacher] shared that another student had been going through a similar situation as the student who came to her having a hard time. Knowing that this teacher had helped other students going through the same or similar situations seemed to be comforting to the student. This participant said, “I connect reflecting and remembering when it comes to this topic, because students like to feel my experience, that they're not alone in situations.” She continued,

I find that in reflection is usually where I see my weaknesses, like what I could have done better or what I need to learn more about or those student relationships. If just for whatever reason, we don't have the best chemistry and perhaps I should have called somebody else in who I know has a better relationship with them. So I find that in reflection . . . I find, okay, this is what needs to happen differently, or this is what I could improve on. Or, you know, okay, that was beyond my limitations, I should have stopped and asked for help at some point along the way.
Summary

Nine teachers from five different elementary (PreK-8) schools in rural Matanzas County, Tennessee, offered insights based on their experiences related to SEL. The essence of teachers’ experiences related to SEL was examined with a suspension of judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2018) during the process. The participants’ experiences, not the researcher’s personal views on the importance of this study, and significant statements from the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group were examined (Moustakas, 1994). From a qualifying survey, a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews via Zoom, and a focus group comprised of four participants, experiences of teachers related to SEL and professional development in the school district were noted through their responses. Horizionalization of the data occurred where the significant statements were given equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim examples of group statements based on what was experienced with the phenomenon and clear descriptions of experience with the phenomenon were generated to create clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

From the data, the following themes emerged based on participants’ experiences: Ill-equipped feelings about SEL, a dearth of impactful SEL PD opportunities, and inconsistent SEL student assessments. The central research question, along with the sub-questions, were addressed from the data: (Central RQ): What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee? (RSQ1) How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change? (RSQ2) What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom? While the importance of teacher reflection was clearly identified by participants in the study, there are glaring deficiencies in the fostering of such reflection by the district or schools to promote positive change with students. There was
little to no dialogue from teachers about purposeful reflection fostered at either the school or
district levels. While most indicated the importance of understanding SEL in schools, few
offered any notable opportunities to improve as professionals in this area.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand and describe the experiences of educators related to addressing the SEL needs of students in a rural Tennessee school district. Chapters one through four of this transcendental phenomenological study provide the purpose of the research study, a review of the literature, the methodology implemented, and the findings of the research study. This chapter includes an overview of the chapter, interpretations of the findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research. This study was guided by Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, and phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was used to analyze the data in the study. The interpretations and ideas of the researcher are presented in the subsequent sections.

Discussion

The findings of this research study based on the lived experiences of teachers highlight the need for high-quality, impactful training related to SEL. Although some SEL trainings have been offered and the district does seem to believe in the importance of SEL as related to students, the experiences of participants indicated a lack of profundity that may translate to positive change with students.

In considering the central research question, What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee?, participants in this research study overwhelmingly demonstrated ill-equipped feelings related to SEL based on their experiences. When asked directly about how equipped they feel to address SEL considerations with students, participants from all experience levels
offered overwhelming evidence to support a theme regarding ill-equipped feelings. Kathy offered a unique perspective when asked how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations. Kathy said that she feels more equipped than average, but she has spent significant time on her own reading about SEL. Even so, she indicated that she does not feel “super-equipped” to address SEL considerations with her students. She concluded with, “I feel equipped, but not.”

Another participant, Catherine, stated,

I don’t feel that I’m very equipped. When I went to school [college] that was not something that was spoken about. We had some special education classes where we were taught about inclusion students and there were some prior trainings at schools that I teach, but not nearly enough.

A novice teacher, Loretta, said that she understands that she has much to learn and hopes to get better each year. Erica, a more experienced teacher, indicated a lack of preparedness or competence with SEL when she stated, “I understand my age group and can relate to them. I have no clue when it comes to SEL standards or curriculum.” Carissa directly stated that she does not feel equipped when it comes to SEL considerations with her students. When asked about how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations with her students, Helena referenced her special education certification and that she feels fairly equipped. She continued that she had several classes in college dealing with student emotions, and she feels all teachers need those learning opportunities. Although she feels somewhat equipped, she stated, “I feel powerless a lot of times to be honest with you . . . I’m not a counselor.” Lana offered a relatively extensive response when describing her experiences with SEL and her experiences of feeling equipped to address SEL considerations. She discussed how her private school experiences were very different than her current public-school experiences. She elaborated that the personnel
available in a private school to address SEL concerns were much more plentiful and she worked closely with a school psychologist in a private school setting. She continued that academics seem to trump SEL in the district, and SEL considerations are not at the forefront of decisions within the school district. Doug offered some parallels to Lana and other participants when he said,

I feel moderately equipped – need to assess students more to find out where they are. Most of my experiences are about developing those relationships or hearing from an administrator that a student is dealing with something. I haven’t seen much in the way of support at a district or school level.

Doug continued that he sees students making poor choices, dealing with probation hearings, etc. He indicated a concern is teaching students the right ways to react in situations.

In considering research sub-question one, *How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change?*, participants’ experiences with SEL training at the school district level and their assigned schools were examined. Participants in this study noted minimal SEL training opportunities. When asked how professional development in the district has contributed to positive change with students, one of the participants replied, “Well, I've only been in this district for five years. So my answer would be no, none in this county.” This same participant discussed how trainings in another school system in a different state have impacted her ability to address SEL needs with her students. Another participant offered his take on his experiences related to training at the district level that has empowered positive change. He stated,

My last inservices had the students out of poverty and student mental health, and there's great, vast amounts of information for it. But there's not a whole lot of information of how to really implement that into my classroom setting. So it's, you know, definitely I
feel like they're trying to get us the information, but there's not enough, I feel like there's not enough support in implementing that information. Or at least not implementing it to the highest quality.

Additionally, a participant reinforced the idea of being proactive with SEL rather than reactive but indicated both funding and trained personnel in the district were lacking. She continued that fostering positive change with students can come with an instilled confidence that comes from effective training and support. She reinforced this lack of confidence when she stated, “I feel like I see it [SEL need] and I innately know, but that I'm sometimes afraid to act on it because what if I'm wrong?”

In considering research sub-question two, *What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom?*, participants’ experiences with reflection were examined. The significance of teacher reflection as a powerful tool to foster positive change in both a school and classroom environment was overwhelmingly agreed upon by participants as 77.8% strongly agreed and 22.2% agreed. All participants in this research study agreed that reflection as a teacher is a powerful lever for change. Carissa said, “I do think teacher reflection is an important part – what can I change to make better? It’s very important.” Kathy offered, “I think so – we often react in the moment – but then look at what went well and what could have gone better. We need to refine and reflect to fix things – reflect on what worked and what didn’t with students.” Helena said that reflection is probably the most important part to improvement as a professional. In considering reflection to improve, Catherine stated, “I definitely do. There are times I look back on situations and wish I had handled it differently – would have helped child navigate problem better – handle things better in the
future.” Doug discussed how much of a struggle he had during his first year teaching and how reflection contributed to his improvement as an educator. Loretta stated,

We are lifelong learners as teachers – I reflect at every planning, every lunch period – how I could talk to that student differently, how I could teach that differently – that’s the only way to learn – to reflect. Daily reflection is necessary as a teacher.

When asked what role reflection plays in one's abilities as a teacher and understanding the impact of social and emotional learning in the classroom, the focus group participants offered some parallel responses. One participant said,

I really believe that if you're not reflective of your own practice, then you can't see what you're doing wrong . . . because you weren't able to defuse the situation before it got to a certain point. I think that reflection for a teacher really helps her either be better at that, or the lack of reflection could possibly cause her to have a wall up that she doesn't see.

The results of the study revealed that the fostering of purposeful reflection was noticeably absent from district practices. Almost all participants indicated that understanding SEL is valuable, yet district-provided opportunities to improve in this area of the profession were lacking.

**Interpretation of Findings**

Participants’ responses during this phenomenological study generated some overarching themes related to their experiences with SEL in Matanzas County Schools. To glean from the experiences of teachers related to SEL, the central research question of this study was: What are the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District in Rockport, Tennessee? The two research sub-questions were: (RSQ1) How have experiences in formal or informal trainings related to SEL interventions empowered positive change? (RSQ2) What role does reflection about one’s own abilities as a teacher play in
understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom? Examining these research questions led to the emergence of three themes within this study that correlated to the research questions: Ill-equipped Feelings About SEL, A Dearth of Impactful SEL PD Opportunities, and Inconsistent SEL Student Assessments. A brief summary of thematic findings follows with a series of interpretations deemed significant to this research study.

**Summary of Thematic Findings**

When considering the experiences of teachers in addressing SEL needs of students, the notion of more specific, explicit, and required PD related to SEL permeated the responses generated by participants. Additional in-school personnel related to counseling and behavior therapy was also prevalent in the participants’ responses. All participants noted the importance of reflection to improvement as a professional and with understanding SEL, and a need for consistency across schools with SEL was also noted by several participants as there is no SEL assessment protocol to assess SEL with students. Several interpretations resulted from the findings of this research study: teachers’ perceived efficacy is key, teachers feel ill-equipped to address SEL needs, professional development has learning implications, teachers’ experiences in professional development matter, collaboration matters, minimal SEL training opportunities inhibit positive change, students and teachers have SEL needs, teachers’ perceptions demand consideration, and teacher reflection is a powerful tool.

**Teachers’ Perceived Self-Efficacy Is Key.** Educators’ experiences in learning and working together to best meet the SEL needs of students entails both human and collective agency. The work of Zakeri et al. (2016) demonstrated the importance of teachers’ self-efficacy and collective efficacy as there is a significant correlation between the two. While individual efficacy and collective efficacy have often been examined separately in research, there is a clear
connection between individual efficacy and the individual’s perception of the organization for which he works (Zakeri et al., 2016). This relates closely to the idea of this study, which examined the experiences of peer educators in meeting the diverse SEL needs of students; organizations (schools) must provide PD to individual teachers that properly address the needs within the organization to successfully meet the SEL needs of students.

**Teachers Feel Ill-Equipped to Address SEL Needs.** Participants in this research study overwhelmingly demonstrated ill-equipped feelings related to SEL based on their experiences. When asked directly about how equipped they feel to address SEL considerations with students, participants from all experience levels offered overwhelming evidence to support a theme regarding ill-equipped feelings. Kathy offered a unique perspective when asked how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations. Kathy said that she feels more equipped than average, but she has spent significant time on her own reading about SEL. Even so, she indicated that she does not feel “super-equipped” to address SEL considerations with her students. She concluded with, “I feel equipped, but not.” Another participant, Catherine, stated,

> I don’t feel that I’m very equipped. When I went to school [college] that was not something that was spoken about. We had some special education classes where we were taught about inclusion students and there were some prior trainings at schools that I teach, but not nearly enough.

A novice teacher, Loretta, said that she understands that she has much to learn and hopes to get better each year. Erica, a more experienced teacher, indicated a lack of preparedness or competence with SEL when she stated, “I understand my age group and can relate to them. I have no clue when it comes to SEL standards or curriculum.” Carissa directly stated that she does not feel equipped when it comes to SEL considerations with her students. When asked
about how equipped she feels to address SEL considerations with her students, Helena referenced her special education certification and that she feels fairly equipped. She continued that she had several classes in college dealing with student emotions, and she feels all teachers need those learning opportunities. Although she feels somewhat equipped, she stated, “I feel powerless a lot of times to be honest with you . . . I’m not a counselor.” Lana offered a relatively extensive response when describing her experiences with SEL and her experiences of feeling equipped to address SEL considerations. She discussed how her private school experiences were very different than her current public-school experiences. She elaborated that the personnel available in a private school to address SEL concerns were much more plentiful and she worked closely with a school psychologist in a private school setting. She continued that academics seem to trump SEL in the district, and SEL considerations are not at the forefront of decisions within the school district. Doug offered some parallels to Lana and other participants when he said,

I feel moderately equipped – need to assess students more to find out where they are.
Most of my experiences are about developing those relationships or hearing from an administrator that a student is dealing with something. I haven’t seen much in the way of support at a district or school level.

**Professional Development Has Learning Implications.** Both Kyriakides et al. (2017) and Prast et al. (2018) presented clear findings related to effective PD implementation and implications. Teachers need sufficient time to gradually move from one stage of learning to the next. This idea of gradual learning for educators posits that their experience levels should determine the type of professional learning needed. Egert et al. (2020) discussed educational quality being rooted in high-quality interactions between teachers and children. Furthermore, Egert et al. (2020) indicated international research that suggested a relatively high level of
interactions exist that support classroom organization along with emotions. However, the same international research referenced by Egert et al. (2020) suggested the quality of instructional support leaves much to be desired.

Kyriakides et al. (2017) posited that differentiated professional development should be offered to meet teachers’ learning needs while fostering critical reflection. The study conducted by Kyriakides et al. (2017) had some important education policy implications as it supported the assumption that teachers need varying degrees of time as they progress through their professional learning experiences to best meet the diverse needs of students. Both general education and special education teachers overwhelmingly agreed that there exists an overall lack of support for their behavioral challenges with students (Westling, 2010). Teachers in both categories felt least supported by district administrators, behavior specialists, and community agencies (Westling, 2010). Kyriakides et al. (2017) and Prast et al. (2018) supported the idea that teachers’ experiences in specific, proven professional development can positively impact students as demonstrated through the results of their respective studies.

An (2018) found that teachers who had ownership in the development of the experience (background knowledge) helped improve their overall understanding of the PD assignments. This is significant as it could inform administrators about the importance of laying the foundation for learning in PD before expecting positive change. This information aligns closely with Neumerski’s (2013) work that indicated the importance of mastery and principal support in professional learning experiences. A constant from Neumerski’s (2013) work is that instructional leadership is a key enabler to quality teaching in the classroom. There are clear links to effective instructional leadership and quality teaching and learning; Neumerski (2013) postulated that specific behaviors could be linked to instructional practices and ultimately, student learning.
similar fashion, An’s (2018) study had significant PD implications in that it demonstrated that the PD experience had a positive influence on behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions could go beyond teachers’ perceptions and attitudes. Furthermore, An (2018) demonstrated that involving teachers in multiple facets of a program can lead to a broader understanding and greater fidelity with implementation of the program.

**Teachers’ Experiences in Professional Development Matter.** Emotions in PD are significant, and pleasant emotional experiences had positive consequences for teachers; unpleasant emotional experiences had, not surprisingly, negative consequences (Gaines et al., 2019). The research findings suggested that differentiated professional learning can yield positive results. For example, whole-group faculty meetings should focus on complex holistic matters, such as beliefs, vision, or mission. More focused and refined professional learning should be applied to those teachers in need of such refinement instead of the whole group. In order to reap the benefits and best meet the needs of students, Gaines et al. (2019) suggested that some level of teacher control of their professional learning be incorporated to foster the greatest emotional benefit and growth. This information aligns closely with the results of this research study as participants in this study indicated a dearth of relevance in the PD provided at both the school and district levels.

**Collaboration Matters.** According to Sprott (2018), teachers value time and space which enhanced opportunities for collaborative reflection. Participants in Sprott’s (2018) study reported that time and space for collaborative reflection was key to their professional learning, and each spoke about the central role students played in their development. By learning with and from their students, participants improved their practice by meeting students' needs in more effective ways. Cordingley (2015) addressed several facets of effective continuing PD and
learning activities along with subsequent impacts. One of the key areas Cordingley (2015) addressed was sustained professional collaboration amongst colleagues. In addition, appropriate levels of scaffolding and modeling by leaders were noted as levers to success (Cordingley, 2015). Although there may be benefits to singular courses of PD, sustained collaborative PD has been shown to be of greater benefit than single, one-day courses (Cordingley, 2015). Confidence increases in collaborative PD, and a greater willingness to adapt and change for the benefit of students is prevalent (Cordingley, 2015). This aligns closely with the professional growth demonstrated in the Rempe-Gillen (2018) study, which indicated both primary and secondary teachers grew in their understanding of their own students’ needs based on cross-phase and cross-school collaboration.

**Minimal SEL Training Opportunities Inhibit Positive Change.** Participants in this study noted minimal SEL training opportunities. When asked how professional development in the district has contributed to positive change with students, one of the participants replied, “Well, I've only been in this district for five years. So my answer would be no, none in this county.” This same participant discussed how trainings in another school system in a different state have impacted her ability to address SEL needs with her students. Another participant offered his take on his experiences related to training at the district level that has empowered positive change. He stated,

My last inservices had the students out of poverty and student mental health, and there's great, vast amounts of information for it. But there's not a whole lot of information of how to really implement that into my classroom setting. So it's, you know, definitely I feel like they're trying to get us the information, but there's not enough, I feel like there's
not enough support in implementing that information. Or at least not implementing it to the highest quality.

Additionally, a participant reinforced the idea of being proactive with SEL rather than reactive but indicated both funding and trained personnel in the district were lacking. She continued that fostering positive change with students can come with an instilled confidence that comes from effective training and support. She reinforced this lack of confidence when she stated, “I feel like I see it [SEL need] and I innately know, but that I'm sometimes afraid to act on it because what if I'm wrong?”

**Students and Teachers Have SEL Needs.** Mantell (2013) indicated that students must feel safe and secure at school, and the classroom environment is key to fostering this safety and security. Neumerski’s (2013) work consistently indicated that instructional leadership is a key enabler to quality teaching in the classroom. Similarly, Bierman and Sanders (2021) discussed how coordinating and linking Tier I and Tier II social-emotional programming requires a high level of organizational support. The research of Smith and Low (2013) concluded that SEL is not the answer in and of itself to undesired student behavior. However, incorporating SEL into the classroom is a key component to establishing positive social interactions amongst students.

Unfortunately, poverty in rural areas is highly cyclical, as many students never break the mold and change paths. Rural students need to be given opportunities to allow for different paths than what they have been subjected to in their families. Guidance counselors need specific training to assist in navigating the multitude of issues stemming from poverty in rural areas (Bright, 2018). Districts should remain proactive in providing effective training to teachers and staff about ACESs and how to address students who are dealing with these types of experiences (Barnett, 2019). Schools play a significant role in preparing students for success by effectively
implementing SEL with students (Stillman et al., 2018). A dearth of funding, resources, training, and time were all indicated by Barnett (2019) as factors that can inhibit teachers properly incorporating SEL skills to help students achieve. Administrators’ cognizance of teachers’ stress levels managing challenging student behavior (Friedman-Kraus et al., 2014) relates to maintaining an awareness of teachers’ well-being in addition to proper SEL interventions for students. Barnett (2019) also indicated there is sometimes a mindset that teaching social and emotional skills falls beyond the realm of a teacher’s responsibilities; that indication presented by Barnett (2019) was not supported in this current research study as all participants noted the importance of SEL and a willingness to address SEL with their students; participants simply desired more training and support.

Consider Teachers’ Perceptions. Teachers’ perceptions play a role in the outcomes of their professional learning. Ebersold et al. (2019) conducted a study exploring psychological mechanisms of how teachers’ perceived autonomy support by the principal of the school affected positive and negative aspects of their well-being. As Gaines et al. (2019) illustrated, emotional experiences are significant to the impact of PD. Poulou (2017) investigated teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence, SEL skills, and teacher-student relationships. The purpose was to gain knowledge of how such perceptions were connected to students’ emotional/behavioral challenges. A troubling trend indicated that teacher-student conflicts were highly linked to behavior challenges, and teachers’ perceptions of emotional intelligence and SEL were not related to behavior challenges. Poulou (2017) also indicated low agreement in the perceptions of both students and teachers in this study.

Harris et al. (2019) examined teacher attrition and found that teachers’ perceptions of their workplace and levels of support were significant in departure rates. Teachers desire input
regarding decisions that affect them, like PD opportunities, and there was disparity between the views of administrators and teachers (Harris et al., 2019). Teachers and administrators alike viewed opportunities for highly relevant, quality PD as very important, but there was disparity in the perceptions of both (Harris et al., 2019). When polled, 79% of school administrators believed quality PD opportunities were being provided in the organization compared to 54% of teachers (Harris et al., 2019). The results of the Powell and Bodur (2019) study emphasized teachers' mixed perceptions and the complicated nature of teacher PD. The results revealed teachers as adult learners with needs for interactive, engaging, content-specific, content-rich, and personalized PD with the ultimate goal of best meeting the needs of students (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

**Teacher Reflection Is a Powerful Tool.** The significance of teacher reflection as a powerful tool to foster positive change in both a school and classroom environment was overwhelmingly agreed upon by participants as 77.8% strongly agreed and 22.2% agreed. All participants in this research study agreed that reflection as a teacher is a powerful lever for change. Carissa said, “I do think teacher reflection is an important part – what can I change to make better? It’s very important.” Kathy offered, “I think so – we often react in the moment – but then look at what went well and what could have gone better. We need to refine and reflect to fix things – reflect on what worked and what didn’t with students.” Helena said that reflection is probably the most important part to improvement as a professional. In considering reflection to improve, Catherine stated, “I definitely do. There are times I look back on situations and wish I had handled it differently – would have helped child navigate problem better – handle things better in the future.” Doug discussed how much of a struggle he had during his first year teaching and how reflection contributed to his improvement as an educator. Loretta stated,
We are lifelong learners as teachers – I reflect at every planning, every lunch period – how I could talk to that student differently, how I could teach that differently – that’s the only way to learn – to reflect. Daily reflection is necessary as a teacher.

When asked what role reflection plays in one's abilities as a teacher and understanding the impact of social and emotional learning in the classroom, the focus group participants offered some parallel responses. One participant said,

I really believe that if you're not reflective of your own practice, then you can't see what you're doing wrong . . . because you weren't able to defuse the situation before it got to a certain point. I think that reflection for a teacher really helps her either be better at that, or the lack of reflection could possibly cause her to have a wall up that she doesn't see.

The results of the study revealed that the fostering of purposeful reflection was noticeably absent from district practices. Almost all participants indicated that understanding SEL is valuable, yet district-provided opportunities to improve in this area of the profession were lacking.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

This research study resulted in some potential implications for both policy and practice. Although *Implications for Policy* and *Implications for Practice* are addressed separately as subsections below, the reader will notice an interweaving of the two as it relates to this research study.

**Implications for Policy**

In considering policy implications, school districts may be well-served to consistently address SEL student assessments. The results of this study revealed a lack of consistency among schools as it related to assessing SEL with students. In addition, a consistent tool across a school district to measure teachers’ professional learning needs could serve to better allocate PD
resources and achieve desired outcomes. Administrators having clear knowledge of what educators need to improve may do much to improve the learning of students. As such, considerations must also be given to how teachers perceive professional development based on their own emotional issues. School districts could adopt specific policies and procedures related to SEL to ensure consistency while still allowing for some autonomy at the school level.

**Implications for Practice**

There remains a gap in the knowledge surrounding teachers’ experiences in addressing the SEL needs of students in rural areas, and this study explored the experiences of teachers in a rural Tennessee school district in meeting the SEL needs of students. Understanding the experiences of teachers with SEL and the training opportunities that may foster greater student success were worthy of consideration as this could address an evident gap in the literature. Teachers may gain requisite knowledge from this study, as it will reinforce the idea of two key elements for student success: rigor and pastoral care (Murphy, 2017). Without proper rigor and pastoral care, which Murphy (2017) referred to as the DNA in the building, a program that has been successful in one school would not necessarily have the same impact or success rate in another. As indicated in the results of this study, the noted absence of consistent SEL student assessments across the district would suggest the practical implication of the development of consistent SEL student assessments.

Administrators understanding the DNA of a staff and having clear knowledge of what educators need to improve may do much to improve the learning of students. As such, considerations may be given to how teachers perceive professional development based on their own emotional issues. Although students are typically the primary consideration regarding SEL in schools, Gregory and Fergus (2017) demonstrated that both adults’ and students’ social and
emotional learning competencies are significant to success. The experiences of educators in meeting the diverse needs of students are worthy of examination, because understanding the experiences of educators during professional learning opportunities and understanding the impact of SEL interventions may play a role in improving student success.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The findings in this transcendental phenomenological study have implications for teachers and administrators in the school district. The following sections discuss the theoretical and empirical implications from this research study. Understanding the experiences of educators related to SEL is important to examine as it may directly impact the achievement of students (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Experiences of educators while participating in professional development are crucial to understand, because the positive or negative perceptions during the learning impact the receptivity of the teacher to the learning (Gaines et al., 2019; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

**Theoretical**

The theoretical implications of this study are rooted in Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory. Programs in schools, whether academic or behavioral, are just programs (Murphy, 2017). Schlossberg’s (2011) transition model addressed dealing with transition events (either anticipated or non-anticipated events that transpired) and nonevents (events that never transpired) in life and employed a 4-Ss system for coping with transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies. Administrators must have an awareness of the needs of the faculty and consider Schlossberg’s (2011) idea of self, which is one of the four Ss. Self refers to one’s inner strength and resiliency during a transition; optimism is key (Schlossberg, 2011). With optimism being paramount during a transition (Schlossberg, 2011), administrators must know those educators who are more
inclined to optimism and those more inclined to pessimism. It is paramount to understand how educators describe the constructs of support, self, situation, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011) during professional learning opportunities. This research study reinforced the importance of differentiated, effective learning opportunities for teachers to meet the varying needs of students. This aligns with the work of Bandura’s (2001) self-efficacy and social cognitive theory as behavioral, personal, and environmental factors all contribute to educators’ responses during professional development. Teachers’ perceived self-efficacy rises when they feel empowered through their experiences to make positive changes for students (Bandura, 2001).

**Empirical**

Educators reflecting on their own experiences and perceptions of SEL in addressing the needs of students may lead to necessary transitions for improvement. All participants in this research study recognized the importance of reflection to improve. Transition was defined as a change in status that makes adult learning necessary (Brickell, 1982), and this definition of transition aligns closely with the idea of this study, where educators’ experiences with ever-changing SEL needs of students was examined. Brickell (1982) addressed reasons that adults learn and discussed a transition hypothesis; in this hypothesis, rapid social change and changing family patterns were listed as two of the forces requiring one to obtain new knowledge, skills, and new attitudes or values. A gap exists in current literature that explains teachers’ reflections to improve based on their experiences in professional learning to address the diverse SEL needs of students. Most applicable to this research study regarding teachers’ experiences are the ideas of supports and self-discussed by Schlossberg (2011). This study provides needed context for implementing transitions for improvement related to the desired SEL experiences of teachers. The idea of supports available during a transition is highly relevant; educators need support in
making adjustments to their instruction and implementing SEL strategies with fidelity to best meet the needs of students. The idea of self as presented by Schlossberg (2011) is closely related to the reflective practices necessary for continued improvement.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This phenomenological study was comprised of delimitations and limitations. In considering delimitations, the researcher made purposeful decisions to define the boundaries of this research study. However, there were also potential weaknesses that could not be controlled, which comprise the limitations of this research study.

In making purposeful decisions to limit or define the boundaries of the study, only certified teachers currently employed by Matanzas County Schools were included in the study. In addition, all participants selected had experienced some level of PD related to SEL at the school and/or district levels. This helped ensure that participants had experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) and allowed the researcher to examine the experiences of teachers related to SEL in this rural school district in Tennessee. Since this study was grounded in the experiences of teachers related to SEL, a phenomenological study was most appropriate (Moustakas, 1994).

Although utilizing a small, purposeful-criterion sample provided an understanding of the lived experiences of a small group of teachers in this rural Tennessee school district, the participant sample was limited to nine teachers from five different schools. Although the experience ranges of the participants were relatively equitable, participants from additional school systems could potentially offer greater diversity in responses and allow for more generalization of regional populations. Additionally, all participants were certified teachers in PreK-8 schools; high school teachers may have offered varying perspectives within the scope of the study. Another limitation included researcher bias as the researcher has been an educator in
Matanzas County for 19 years. Preconceived notions may have occurred based on the researcher’s experiences as both a teacher and administrator in the school system. Hayman et al. (2012) indicated that journaling may be used in phenomenological research to document experiences in a natural context. In consideration of the Epoche, I journaled to disclose any preconceived notions prior to data analysis to foster greater awareness of my consciousness before analyzing the data.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The intent of this study was to glean from the lived experiences of teachers surrounding SEL and their experiences in district-level or school-level PD related to SEL. This study examined the experiences of educators surrounding SEL to meet the needs of students and was oriented toward lived experiences of the participants as defined by Moustakas (1994). Although this study focused on teachers in schools with PreK-8 grade levels, future research may target the SEL experiences of teachers in high schools to gain perspectives at the secondary level. Understanding teachers’ experiences may lead to more focused PD programs in schools targeting SEL. Rural students face challenges regarding academics, SEL, and career opportunities; there is scant research to address the SEL needs of rural students compared to other demographics (Bright, 2018), so the importance of this rural study was magnified. Additional studies of this nature in rural school districts are needed to provide greater context to teachers’ experiences with SEL in rural schools.

This study could be replicated with school leaders in a larger geographic region to glean from their experiences and examine any discrepancies in perspectives between the experiences of teachers and school administrators. Research of this nature may bring to light any gaps in perceptions between teachers and school leaders as related to PD. In considering potential gaps
in perceptions between teachers and school leaders, it would be paramount to consider that reality is constructed between the researcher and the researched while shaped by individual experiences in a social constructivism framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, research studies examining the differences in SEL perspectives between female and male teachers could lead to professional learning opportunities stemming from the complexities associated with SEL gender perspectives. A study examining the variation of perspectives between female and male teachers could be conducted at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to determine the levels of variance.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study rooted in the theoretical framework of Bandura (1986) was to describe the experiences of educators addressing the SEL needs of students in the Matanzas County School District, which is a rural school district in Tennessee. The empirical literature in this study supported the idea of the importance of PD to meet the needs of students; in addition to academic mandates and standardized testing tied to evaluations, teachers must balance meeting students’ social and emotional needs in order to facilitate student learning. Given the importance of effective PD, along with its impact on teacher efficacy, it was important for this study to gain an understanding of the experiences of teachers related to addressing the SEL needs of students.

Three themes were generated from the experiences of participants: Ill-equipped feelings about SEL, a dearth of impactful SEL PD opportunities, and inconsistent SEL student assessments. An important take-away from this study is the idea that high-quality, impactful PD surrounding SEL is needed and desired. Participants in this study understood the importance of SEL to meet the varying needs of students, but they noted an absence of consistent, district-wide
implementation of practices to improve in this area. A clear-cut example was the absence of consistent SEL assessments with students across the school district. While some participants indicated some type of SEL assessment with students, often conducted by a guidance counselor, there was no consistent student SEL assessment noted. Additionally, another key take-away is that district and school leaders, in addition to providing effective and impactful SEL PD, must foster purposeful reflection. All participants in this study recognized the importance of reflection to improve as a professional, yet many noted a clear deficiency in the fostering of such reflection by school leaders. Although this research study extended prior research, the study also expounded on the SEL experiences of teachers in a rural setting. The qualitative design of the study limited the generalization of results. Continued research in additional rural areas would allow for greater geographic or regional generalizations while offering additional accounts of participants’ experiences with SEL in their school districts. Although participants in this study described SEL as a prominent part of their teaching experience, deficits with SEL skill sets remain.
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November 24, 2021

Justin Whittenbarger
Michael Patrick

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-332 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Dear Justin Whittenbarger, Michael Patrick,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

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

Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B Site Approval

Justin Whittenberger
Principal

Dear Justin Whittenberger:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled, A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study within

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☑ I grant permission for Justin Whittenberger to contact certified educators in to invite them to participate in his research study.

☑ I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ina Maxwell
Director of Schools
APPENDIX C Screening Survey

• Are you currently a certified teacher in the Matanzas County School District?
  o Yes
  o No

• Have you ever attended professional learning at the district or school level related to social and emotional learning (SEL)?
  o Yes
  o No

• If you answered yes to the above, how would you rate the professional learning experience?
  o Not beneficial at all to my students
  o Somewhat beneficial to my students
  o Beneficial to my students
  o Highly beneficial to my students

• How would you describe your current teaching assignment?
  o Elementary (K-5)
  o Middle (6-8)

• If you answered yes to the first question, please indicate your range of teaching experience as a certified teacher in Matanzas County:
  o 0-4 years
  o 5-9 years
  o 10-19 years
  o 20+ years

• Name (Last, First, and email): ________________________________
APPENDIX D Questionnaire

Google Forms utilized as data collection method; data will remain unshared and secure.

• Name:________________________________
• School:________________________________
• Range of teaching experience as a certified teacher in Matanzas County:
  o 0-4 years
  o 5-9 years
  o 10-19 years
  o 20+ years
• In consideration of social and emotional learning (SEL) training, please express your experience with the level of training in a professional capacity at the school district level.
  o None
  o Minimal SEL training opportunities
  o Moderate
  o Many SEL training opportunities
• In consideration of social and emotional learning (SEL) training, please express your experience with the level of training in a professional capacity at your school.
  o None
  o Minimal SEL training opportunities
  o Moderate
  o Many SEL training opportunities
• Based on your experiences, please describe your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Understanding social and emotional learning considerations is important as it impacts the school environment.”
  o Disagree
  o Somewhat agree
  o Agree
  o Strongly agree
• Based on your experiences, please describe your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Understanding social and emotional learning considerations is important as it impacts individual classrooms in a school.”
  o Disagree
  o Somewhat agree
  o Agree
  o Strongly agree

• Based on your experiences, please describe your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Teacher reflection is a powerful tool to foster positive change in both a school and classroom environment.”
  o Disagree
  o Somewhat agree
  o Agree
  o Strongly agree

Written Responses
• Please describe your experiences with your school district’s approach to SEL.

• Given your experiences with SEL, in which areas of the curriculum were SEL embedded?

• Given your experiences with SEL, how has SEL been assessed with students? (For example: written tests of competencies, student surveys, trauma screenings, etc.)
APPENDIX E Interview Questions/Guide

1. Please introduce yourself and tell how many years you have been in the field of education.

2. Describe your experiences related to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) that have been beneficial.

3. Describe your experiences in professional learning opportunities related to SEL provided by the school district, if applicable.

4. Describe your understanding of SEL.

5. How do you incorporate SEL into your lesson planning activities?

6. How equipped do you feel to address SEL considerations with your students?

7. What are some specific examples of SEL concerns in your classroom?

8. Do you feel your school has supported you with SEL concerns in your classroom? Why or why not?

9. Do you feel teacher reflection is an important part of improvement as a professional? Why or why not?

10. How would you like to be supported with SEL in your school and/or district?
APPENDIX F Focus Group Questions/Guide

1. What perceptions does the school district have about Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) needs?

2. How has professional development assisted in your understanding of SEL and its impact in the classroom?

3. Based on your experiences with SEL, how has professional development in the district contributed to positive change with students?

4. What role does reflection about one’s abilities as a teacher play in understanding the impact of SEL in the classroom?

5. How do teachers who have a greater understanding and experience with effective SEL strategies impact student success?

6. Based on your experiences, how would consistent SEL student assessments across the district contribute to student success? Would they? Would they not?
APPENDIX G Consent Form

Title of the Project: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS
Principal Investigator: Justin Whittenbarger, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 21 years of age and employed as a licensed teacher in the Matanzas County School District located in Rockport, Tennessee. In addition, prospective participants must have participated in professional development at the school or district level related to social and emotional learning (SEL). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the experiences of educators surrounding social and emotional learning (SEL) to meet the needs of students. This study seeks to determine the level(s) of competence teachers have with implementing SEL interventions with fidelity from prior trainings and reflections.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete a questionnaire utilizing Google Forms. This questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in a recorded in-person or virtual interview. The interview should last approximately 45 minutes, and the interview will be audio recorded. If virtual, this interview will be recorded via Zoom; if in-person, the interview will be recorded with an electronic recording device.
3. Some participants may be asked to participate in a focus group. If selected, this should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. The focus group will be video-recorded via Zoom.

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include gaining a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions and training related to SEL. This information could potentially be utilized to the benefit of educators and students as understanding often leads to betterment and adjustment.
What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?
The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses to the questionnaire, interview, and focus group (if applicable) questions will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?
The researcher serves as a principal at Pine View Elementary School in the Matanzas County School District. I previously served as the principal at Stone Elementary in the Matanzas County School District for four years. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Matanzas County Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the questionnaire and close your Internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please also contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.
Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Justin Whittenbarger. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at

You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Michael Patrick, at

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You may keep a copy of this document for your records as it was attached to the email. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign consent, you may contact the study team using the information provided above. Please forward an electronic copy of your signed consent form to Justin Whittenbarger at the following email address:

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date