LESSONS LEARNED IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER A PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Lyndsey Eksili

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2023

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lessons learned by educational leaders and teachers in the social emotional development of K-12 students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Twelve K-12 leaders and teachers in varying in age and demographics participated in interviews, a focus group, and artifact collection to explore the lived experiences and lessons learned in social-emotional learning and development after the pandemic. Themes were then developed based on those experiences using the qualitative transcendental methods of research and data analysis. The themes discovered through research were student struggles, teacher/staff struggles, and school climate. The subthemes discovered through research were the struggles with student focus and virtual learning, teacher/staff struggles of professional development and work/life balance, and school climate efforts in social-emotional skill development, student engagement, and student wellness. The continuation of changes made in response to experienced difficulties during virtual learning, and the influence of social-emotional learning in a portion of the participant schools led to a perceived positive effect on school climate, student engagement, student wellness and teacher well-being.

Keywords: social emotional development, educational leaders, teachers, social emotional learning, K-12 schools, school climate, professional development, student engagement virtual learning

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, from whom all good things flow! I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband who has stuck beside me through this most important adventure and my parents for their unending support.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my family, my dissertation committee and chair for their support in this journey. I would also like to acknowledge the participants who took time from their busy schedules and lives to partake in the venture.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified an already preeminent gap in educational leadership literature surrounding K-12 student achievement: the social-emotional development of students in K-12 schools (CASEL, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gueldner & Feurerborn, 2016; Heers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Mata et al., 2022, Oberle et al., 2017; Prothero, 2022). This chapter begins by developing and describing the background of educational research surrounding student achievement and the need for a focus on social-emotional development. Next, historical, social, and theoretical implications of the study are described regarding social emotional development of students in the K-12 setting. The problem and purpose statements follow before a summary of the topic is given and the chapter closed. The gap in the research is also addressed and the proposed research is summarized within the framework.

Background

A coordinated collection of research-based programs and practices that improve social, emotional, and cognitive development, positive conduct, interpersonal relationships, and academic success are all factors of what is known as social and emotional learning (National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018). Systemic social-emotional learning is a strategy for establishing equitable learning environments that actively engage all students in learning and applying those skills into practice. To encourage local schools and districts to improve the personal and professional capacities of adult staff members, it is necessary for state and district policies, resources, and activities to be coordinated under the umbrella of social-emotional learning (Mahoney et al., 2021). Recent initiatives within national,

state, and local educational organizations aim to enhance school climate for the benefit of student well-being (Wong et al., 2014). In all 50 states, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) has embedded state funding related to social-emotional development in K-12, and has assigned social-emotional learning standards in pre-school. As the movement has grown, eight states have now integrated social emotional learning standards into their elementary schools and an additional eight states have integrated these standards within their K-12 standard framework (CASEL, 2022). Strong support for social-emotional learning was reported in a representative nationwide poll of K–12 school leaders. Social and emotional competencies, according to these school administrators, can be taught and result in a variety of favorable student outcomes (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). However, not all programs and approaches to social-emotional learning are effective. Evidence shows that programs containing step by step training, active forms of learning, a focus on social-emotional skill development, and explicit goals have been found to produce a greater beneficial outcome for students (Taylor et al., 2017). The need for social-emotional learning and support for educators throughout the educational spectrum has increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Prothero, 2021).

Since March of 2020, there has been an increase in social-emotional related afflictions including anxiety, family separations, divorce, suicidal ideations, and addiction (Prothero, 2021). Social-emotional learning and child development experts have discovered that these developments make it difficult for students to process new information. As a result, it is essential to pair academic knowledge with social-emotional skills such as making responsible decisions, managing their emotions, and fostering relationships (American Institutes for Research, 2022). Additionally, since 1999, there has been a 24% increase in suicide rates amongst all age groups and 1 in 5 adolescents suffer from some form of mental illness (American Institutes for

Research, 2022). These data points suggest a social-emotional developmental concern in the K-12 student population.

Historical Context

The term social-emotional development refers to an individual's various interpersonal and intrapersonal growth and skills. Social emotional development includes understanding, modulating, and expressing emotions in a way that is appropriate for one's age and development (Mata et al., 2022). Social emotional development is essential for navigating hurdles in everyday social interactions and adapting readily to situational demands. Studies stretching back over a century link student well-being and academic accomplishment to school climate, arguing for a focus on social emotional development in educational accountability systems (Cohen, 2006).

Although gaining increased popularity in recent decades, social-emotional learning dates to the times of Plato. Plato proposed for a comprehensive curriculum that balanced instruction with character, moral judgment, science, math, and physical education. Lev Vygotsky's work in the 1920s and 1930s stressed the crucial role that social contact plays in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1968). Over the ensuing decades, Vygotsky’s work in sociocultural theory became fundamental to social-emotional education. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1968), people's mental capacities are influenced by their social interactions with others and the society they are a part of. Vygotsky was adamant that the process of creating meaning is fundamentally influenced by community. He was the first modern psychologist to propose that a person's upbringing has a significant impact on their lives (Kozulin et al., 2007). Specifically mentioning three key areas of sociocultural theory, Vygotsky emphasized the zone of proximal development, private speech, and make-believe play in the holistic education of students (Kozulin et al., 2007).

In 1968, The Comer School Development Program (SDP) was established by Yale Child Study Center and child psychiatrist James P. Comer (Lunenburg, 2011). The program's objective was to enhance the educational opportunities for underprivileged ethnic minority adolescents. It accomplished the objective by creating strong ties between students, parents, and teachers. Academics and social-emotional development are both included in SDP, but social-emotional learning had not yet been given a name at the time (Lunenburg, 2011). Cognitive, social, psychological, linguistic, social, and ethical growth are the six routes proposed by the SDP. The approach was piloted in two underfunded, predominately African American primary schools in Connecticut. The program was effective, and SDP schools saw notable improvements in academic performance, attendance, and overall conduct as compared to other schools that weren't participating in the program (Lunenburg, 2011). In the 1980's, the Yale Child Study Center started field testing SDP in other schools with similar success. Over the decades, hundreds of schools across the United States have successfully used the SDP (Lunenburg, 2011).

In 1989, Salovey and Mayer (1990) coined the term emotional intelligence to describe the ability to monitor theirs and others' emotions and use these emotions to guide behavior. Expanding on this topic, Goleman (1995) described the five key elements to emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Yet, it wasn't until the 1990's when the first Social Emotional Learning Framework was produced (Elias & Arnold, 2006). The emphasis was placed on acknowledging the growing challenges facing schools, families, and communities. Approximately 39 guidelines were developed for students at all socio-economic levels and for all races and cultures (Elias, 2006).

After evaluating various social-emotional learning models, concerns about their efficacy surfaced. One such concern was raised by Lynn Waterhouse who claimed in 2006 that theories

of emotional intelligence should not serve as the foundation for educational practice because they are not adequately supported by empirical research (Waterhouse, 2006). In response to her criticism, scholars stepped out to refute the veracity of these assertions, citing several studies demonstrating the link between emotional intelligence and practical achievement (Cherniss et al., 2006; Domitrovich et al., 2008; Elias, 2006). The terms social-emotional learning and CASEL also became popular around this time. The Collaborative for Academic Social & Emotional Learning is known by the initials CASEL. The goal of CASEL is to integrate evidence based social-emotional learning at all levels of education, from preschool through high school (CASEL, 2022).

Social Context

A longitudinal study of 36,000, 7th-12th graders by the CDC (2019) indicated a positive correlation between social-emotional developmental supports and prevention of mental health crises. Historically, educational leadership research has continually made strong connections between a students' well-being and school climate. Nonetheless, over the last two decades, 22 states have implemented educational policies on accountability and school reform to encourage social-emotional learning and development (CASEL, 2022). To address the social-emotional development of K-12 students, several assessment tools have been developed. Some of the most popular of these assessments utilized are the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA, 2022), the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS, 2022), and the Early Development Instrument/Middle Years Development Instrument (Mata et al., 2022). However, these tools are strengths-based assessments geared towards students and do not focus on the role of school leaders on K-12 social emotional development.

Student social emotional well-being in K-12 educational settings has been directly

connected to student achievement (Mata et al., 2022). In 2001, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services reported nearly 80% of children with emotional regulating disorders did not graduate high school. More recently in 2015, a Gallup Study of nearly one million students showed 69% of students did not identify a single adult in the school building who cares about them. Even more recently, a 2017 study showed these rates decreased by 30% from grades 5-12, with just 23% of students in grades 10 and 11 able to identify an adult in the building that they feel cares for them (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Since 1999, there has been a 24% increase in suicide rates and one in five 1 in 5 adolescents suffer from some form of mental illness (CASEL, 2022). Longitudinal studies in 1973, 2008, and 2015 found that focused improvements through the development of social-emotional development can improve student well-being (American Institutes for Research, 2017; Maiti et al., 2022). Students diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and stress-related mental health disorders are 23% more likely to face academic failure (Vinden, 1999; Wagner, 2016; Wanless, 2015) and increased incidences in anxiety and depression have been found to be predictors for declining exam scores (Asry et al., 2017; Andrews, 2004). The declining exam scores imply that external factors in student life can both increase student anxiety and depression and decrease academic achievement. Together these data points, ranging over several decades, support a social-emotional concern in the K-12 student population and a need to focus on the development of these skills.

Theoretical Context

Seminal research over the last decade in educational leadership and accountability has focused mainly on academic testing, mostly in math and reading (Tian & Huber, 2019). However, in school buildings nationwide, K-12 leaders are faced with the difficulty of balancing

academic excellence with the social-emotional needs of students after the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the assessing of math and reading are important and the data built from those studies are valid, they do limit the ability to generalize findings for use in the social-emotional development of students in the K-12 setting. It is necessary to better understand district success in developing social emotional learning initiatives and assessing what has been learned from the pandemic.

Schools are currently operating in an era of accountability where increasing test scores seems to be the main priority. Students frequently becomes lost within the confines of this narrow focus. While improving test results is vital, there should also be attention paid to two far more crucial goals: gaining a thorough grasp of what must be done to serve every child's interest and then making a concerted effort to properly meet those requirements. (Brown & Corbin, 2004). To ensure both academic and social-emotional success this, we must focus our attention on students in a holistic manner. Understanding social emotional development can assist scholars and educational leaders alike in understanding the relationship between academic achievement and social-emotional well-being. This can in turn inform strategies that address needs and challenges.

The theoretical lens used in this study will be the application of social-emotional theory as expanded upon by James P. Comer (Comer, 2004). Comer (2004) developed six holistic and interconnected pathways in which social-emotional learning and academic achievement come together for the holistic benefit of students: physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical. Promoting children's growth along the physical pathway entails giving them opportunity to enhance their potential for the proper operation of all bodily systems. The physical pathway This includes good diet, physical fitness, and ethical behavior (Comer, 2004).

The cognitive pathway means assisting students in their ability to be independent thinkers, strategic and effective planners, problem solvers, and goal setters, amongst other skills (Comer, 2004). The psychological path emphasizes on a person's ability for self-acceptance and self-confidence during the ongoing process of identity building. The psychological pathway This encompasses emotions of efficacy, adequacy, and competence (Comer, 2004). In a variety of circumstances, the language pathway described as an increase in receptive and expressive language. Fluency in both spoken and written language is becoming increasingly important for pupils to succeed in our diverse culture (Comer, 2004). The social pathway provides students the opportunity to enhance their potential for forming healthy relationships with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The social pathway This includes having the capacity to communicate with others who may be different and having empathy for other people (Comer, 2004). Students have opportunity to develop their capacity for acting in a just and equitable manner toward others and themselves through the final pathway - the ethical pathway. The ethical pathway This includes assisting students in recognizing the significance of honesty and respect for others as well as for themselves (Comer, 2004). These needs are essentially a roadmap for student success and when not met, may lead to difficulties in the student's ability to achieve in the classroom. Comer (2004) also theorizes that the contrast between a student's experiences at home and school profoundly impacts the student's development. If parents and educators want to ensure that every child develops to the fullest extent possible, then understanding how children grow, develop, and learn is essential to the strategy for ensuring full development this occurs. A common denominator in all the six pathways is that students, especially young students, benefit from adult role models.

The need to develop students' intellectual or cognitive abilities is the primary motivator

behind curriculum in most schools and classrooms. The development of learners' language abilities is also a top focus, as it is thought that language mediates cognitive growth. Unfortunately, not enough has been done to aid students in their growth in other areas. Specifically, students need to be given specialized attention to ensure growth along each of the six crucial pathways (Comer, 2004). Utilizing Comer's pathways will provide a framework for both the design and analysis of my research where I look for what has been learned about social-emotional development after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Problem Statement

The problem is evidence of a need for further insight into the development of social-emotional skills in the K-12 setting has been extensively stated (CASEL, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gueldner & Feurerborn, 2016; Heers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Mata et al., 2022; Oberle et al., 2017). The global COVID-19 pandemic has made this need grow extensively, therefore, increasing the need for further examination on how support has changed social-emotional development of students in K-12 schools in a post-pandemic society (CASEL, 2022; Mata et al., 2022; Prothero, 2021). Only a select few studies have considered students' non-academic achievements, such as social and behavioral results (Tian & Huber, 2019). These are the key factors driving my research and the need to fill this gap. What makes the study particularly unique is examining the lessons learned in social emotional development in K-12 schools after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since its inception, educational leadership has been an interdisciplinary field often merging with other fields such as psychology, sociology, economics, and even politics (Bush, 2022). Over the last five decades, scholars have examined educational leadership through its literature in an irregular manner compared to other research specialties (Brooks & Normore,

2015). Educational leadership has often been susceptible to fads as policies and politics come and go with changes in political environments (James et al., 2019). This body of work in educational research continues to be significant. However, there is abundant evidence of the additional expectations placed on school leaders in various parts of the world, as most recently demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Greenberg et al., 2017). Despite the normative preference for shared and distributed leadership, in many circumstances, principals continue to bear primary responsibility for school improvement as well as student learning and welfare (Bush, 2022). Many studies on educational leadership to date have been ranked by students' academic accomplishments in areas such as numeracy and literacy. Only a select few studies have considered students' non-academic achievements, such as social and behavioral results (Tian & Huber, 2019).

Over the past decades, new evidence revealed how practice-centric leadership functions. Coherence of a leadership team for example, has proven to be more important than the individual leader's actions (Hargreaves, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Guerra & Cunningham, 2014). However, a methodological issue with educational leadership literature is the inadequacy of much of the work to translate into broad markers of effectiveness into testable practices and behaviors. While research has been conducted in terms of broad functions and variables, (i.e., protecting instructional time, coordinating curriculum and instruction, and monitoring and evaluating student performance), more work needs to be done to uncover the social emotional needs and attributive behaviors or characteristics that accompany these broad functions (Heller, 2013; Jagers, 2016).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. At this stage in the research, K-12 leaders will be defined as school principals, assistant principals, teachers, and district superintendents. This phenomenological study will narrow a gap in educational research literature by examining the lessons learned in K-12 social emotional development in students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Social emotional development is an inevitable element of any K-12 school. As supported by research, we know that over the last decade, educational leadership has developed literature has witnessed an increase in high-stakes accountability testing in hopes to increase school quality. However, school leaders are left to face the difficult task of balancing academic excellence, equity, and the social-emotional well-being of students (Huber, 2019). While much focus has been given on the development of academic skills such as math and reading, there is not much research on the development of the social emotional skills in this setting.

Significance of the Study

The complete impact of the COVID 19 pandemic-related stressors on students' social and emotional well-being and consequent academic development is still being assessed. The mental health of children may be significantly impacted by significant disturbances in students' daily routines, decreased social engagement, and increased parental stress, according to prior research (Cirpriano et al., 2020, Dusenbery et al., 2018, Garland et al., 2019). Emerging data on declining student academic performance, mental health, and wellbeing support these concerns. Trauma risk is increased by the social isolation that some crises bring (Yoder et al., 2020). In 2013, post-traumatic stress disorder rates were compared across families who had been isolated or detained

during outbreaks of the H1N1, SARS, and avian influenza in research of pandemic disasters and the corresponding disease-containment public health interventions. In contrast to 1% and 7% of children and parents who had not been isolated or confined, the study indicated that 30% of isolated or quarantined children and 25% of quarantined parents had post-traumatic stress disorder (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Given the immediate danger that COVID-19 posed to children and families during the pandemic, the switch to distance learning and the resulting increase in isolation, it is also likely educators' stress levels dramatically increased, aggravating an already-serious issue with stress and burnout among teachers and other educators. Supporting teachers' and other educators' social emotional wellbeing, particularly in times of increased emotional demands, could improve the quality of their interactions with students as This teachers' own social emotional well-being and capacities being essential to fostering academic and social-emotional growth in students (Zieher et al., 2021).

A policy mandated emphasis on social emotional learning, however, could lead to weak prioritization with little implementation advice or support for educators, including assistance for their own social-emotional needs. Additionally, prioritizing and support for social-emotional learning at the school level, as well as social-emotional learning teaching strategies, differed significantly both before and after the pandemic (Zieher et al., 2021). Researchers have also found a positive culture for social emotional learning to be associated with higher-quality implementation by teachers with sufficient support from administrators and school leaders (Zieher et al., 2021). Similarly, programs focused on mindfulness that foster social and emotional growth in teachers have been linked to an increase in the amount of emotional support teachers give their students. There is insufficient exploratory research into the apparent link

between educators' use of social emotional skills and their implementation of social emotional learning (Bowers et al., 2017).

Accountability measures have historically focused on academic achievement, primarily through assessing math and reading in the K-12 setting (Tian & Huber, 2019). However, programs that assist students in social-emotional skills such as how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, practice empathy, manage emotions, and build their own social-emotional skills can also improve their academic outcomes (Weissberg, 2016; Wood, 2015; Yopp et al., 2017). Recent trends in youth development literature focus on how schools may promote developmental qualities and assets in youth through system reforms that focus on social-emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Given that a student’s level of academic engagement depends on how safe and secure they feel in the school setting, schools could increase the likelihood of academic achievement by addressing the social-emotional development of the K-12 student (Roeser et al., 2020). Thus, this research will contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of social-emotional development in the K-12 setting.

Studies surrounding the social-development of students in the K-12 setting focus mainly on strengths-based assessments for the individual students. Little focus has been given on the leaders’ experience of developing the social-emotional skills of the students in their care. Understanding social-emotional development can assist scholars and educational leaders understand the relationship between social-emotional development and academic achievement (Tintore et al., 2022; Mata et al., 2022). A focus on social-emotional development This could inform strategies that address the needs and challenges faced by educational leaders in the 21st century. As such, this study will add significance to the empirical research of educational leadership and the development of social-emotional skills.

Successful academic outcomes are essential in ensuring a well-established, quality educational system for K-12 students and should not be ignored. However, in the beginning of the 21st century, the K-12 setting experienced crucial changes that made K-12 leadership more challenging than ever before (Tintore et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic certainly produced an uptick in the challenges faced by K-12 leaders, but empirical research over the last two decades demonstrates the need for addressing social emotional development (Cohen, 2006; Jones, 2021; Mata et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Stillman et al., 2018, Tian & Huber, 2019, Tintore et al., 2022; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, Wong et al., 2020). Given that the needs of students in terms of social emotional development should be embedded into the daily practice of K-12 leaders, rather than an intervention for mental health, this study will be significant for the field of educational leadership.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study will focus on the lived experiences of the K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students under their care after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher will also explore the lessons learned by leaders who are supporting the social-emotional development of students. The research will then be analyzed through the lens of social-emotional development theories.

Central Research Question

What changes have K-12 leaders made in developing social-emotional skills since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Question One

How has support changed in K-12 social emotional skill development since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Question Two

What did we learn about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 in the K-12 setting?

Definitions

1. *Social Emotional Development* – An umbrella term that describes an individuals' interpersonal and intrapersonal developments. This includes understanding, regulating, and expressing emotions in a way that is appropriate for one's age and development (Mata et al., 2022).

Summary

The problem is there is a need for further examination on the lessons learned in social emotional development of students in K-12 schools, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational leadership has always been an interdisciplinary field and is often susceptible to politics and policies that come and go, making the burden placed on the shoulders of K-12 leaders that much heavier. Despite the normative preference for distributed leadership, principals continue to bear primary responsibility for school improvement as well as student learning and welfare (Bush, 2022). Yet, only a few studies have considered students' non-academic achievements such as social and behavioral results (Tian & Huber, 2019). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to learn what lessons were learned by K-12 leaders addressing social-emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. At this stage in the research, K-12 leaders will be defined as school principals, assistant principals, teachers, and district superintendents.

If we want to make effective plans to address the social-emotional needs of students holistically, we must give each student our complete attention. Knowing how children grow,

develop, and learn is essential to the methodology for ensuring that children become the best versions of themselves, which is what parents and educators aim to do. To ensure that this holistic development of children and adolescents can take place, we must also seek suggestions and examples of how to use an effective framework as a tool. Children will normally grow and mature unless their growth is hampered by biological or environmental circumstances. If the adults who are around these children are not purposeful and intentional in their efforts to encourage their growth, it could be undermined. The James Comer (2004) pathways framework organizes and regulates that support in a meaningful and efficient manner that keeps the focus on children while extending techniques to boost students' individual and collective health and self-esteem. This phenomenological study will narrow a gap in educational research literature by examining K-12 social emotional development in students and the lessons learned by school leaders and teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This section details the connection between academic outcomes, social growth, and positive behavioral growth and social-emotional development within educational leadership literature. Research review will also explore that questions these connections and benefits in educational leadership literature will also be reviewed. A balanced approach will be utilized to maintain neutrality. In the beginning of the 21st century, K-12 experienced crucial changes in the education system, making K-12 leadership more challenging than before (Tintore et al., 2022). Principals and school administrators have also faced the challenges of balancing academic excellence with holistic development of students and their social-emotional needs. This chapter is a review of the research conducted to explore the lessons learned about students' social emotional development in K-12 schools after the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this section will examine the theory of James P. Comer (2004) as a framework for interpreting social-emotional learning developments in the study will be described. Next, this section will synthesize recent literature on educational leadership research and social emotional development in K-12 schools will be detailed. Lastly, key findings will be summarized and a gap in the research identified.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) is a model that is taught in education preparation programs with the goal of assisting future teachers in comprehending the influence that a student's social and emotional experience has on their capacity to learn. According to Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943), Maslow proposes that, for people to make progress toward reaching their potential and becoming self-actualized, they must first have their fundamental physiological and safety needs met, a prerequisite for making any kind of

progress. Comer (2004) and other theorists have proposed that the interconnected environmental systems in which a human resides influence the individual's development. A person's educational setting can be thought of as a microsystem, and the experiences and interactions that one has while in this context can have an impact on the person's overall development. Many children in the United States are still at risk of not receiving a quality education, particularly those from ethnic minority groups who attend public schools in large cities. Numerous attempts at school reform have been made over the several decades, each based on a different set of assertions about the nature of the problem within our education systems, the theoretical approaches best suited to solving them, and the viability of putting those reform efforts into practice (Anson et al., 1991). Currently, school management-based reform initiatives are quite popular. entrusting each school with the responsibility of creating and implementing its own educational objectives, course offerings, and operational procedures (Tintore et al., 2022). One common thread amongst reform strategies is the inclusion of multiple stakeholders sharing the burden of responsibility of accountability, ensuring the efforts will not remain solely on the shoulders of the school's administration (Comer, 2004). Thus, it is anticipated that delegating responsibility will increase school staff members' involvement in the educational process and produce practical solutions for school improvement that are specifically tailored to the local context of the students being served. Parents, as well as other members of the community, are increasingly being asked to participate in schools. School-based management is not limited to professionals or life inside the school. James Comer is a key theorist in establishing this school-based reform (Anson et al., 1991). Based on the attainment of social skills, mental health, and educational achievement, Comer's theory describes six key pathways and three key groups of stakeholders to ensure the

proper guidance is given for complete social-emotional well-being for students in the K-12 setting (Comer, 2004).

Comer's (2004) six pathways of foundation for effective learning and healthy development form the theoretical framework of this study. This framework encourages everyone in the school community to foster a healthier environment while working toward higher academic achievement. It also enables educators and parents better understand their children. Schools are currently operating in an era of accountability wherein increasing test scores appears to be the main priority. The student can become lost in the midst in the scope of this narrow concentration. While raising test scores is vital, there should also be consideration given to two more crucial goals: gaining a thorough grasp of what must be done to serve every child's interest and then making a committed effort to meet those requirements. For students to grow into well-functioning adults, they must acquire the necessary skills, behaviors, and worldviews, which are reinforced by developmentally appropriate tasks in well-functioning schools. Comer , a child psychiatrist and the creator of the School Development Program (SDP), uses four fundamental ideas to illuminate how children's growth and development are related to their performance in school and in later life: Children are a products of their social environments and immersed in their social networks, children from dysfunctional families are more likely to enter school unprepared, children who develop normally along all six developmental pathways are better prepared to handle the challenges of life, and children and adolescents constantly interact with school.

Comer's (2004) theory teaches that assisting students in identifying the attitudes, beliefs, habits, values, and ways that will lead to a successful academic and social performance, both within the confinements of school and in life, will lead to the opportunity for success.

Mainstream education generally identifies students in two categories, winners (those who are well-behaved) and losers (those who act out) as early as kindergarten. Students placed into the "loser" category often find difficulty sustaining themselves in adulthood, as they were not provided the traits needed to self-sustain in mainstream adulthood. All children elicit feelings and behaviors from their caretakers and those within their circle while growing up. These feelings and behaviors can be positive, apathetic, or negative, but these feelings and behaviors are replicated by children, triggering their response to daily occurrences. Similarly, negative feelings and behaviors can be interrupted and enter a healthy cycle of positive feelings and behaviors if extensive training is provided.

Comer's (2004) theory also stated implicit instruction of these behaviors and skills must start in kindergarten through curriculum development and programs to reach its full potential. Additionally, as families having an increasing need of outside assistance from schools as they are substantially in less control of the information and forces that influence their children (Comer, 2004). As such, children are growing up in a culture where they need to make decisions on their own with much less influence from their parents or caretakers. Comer encouraged schools to create conditions to teach students the social-emotional skills necessary to be successful in both school and life. Given the technological and scientific advances of the 21st century, it is no longer enough for students to be high academic achievers, they must also be prepared to function well in life.

Furthermore, Comer (2004) made a thorough distinction between caring for students and smothering them with love. It is essential that students know they are cared for, but they must also be taught. Creating an environment where the student is cared for, but expected and responsible for adhering to the responsibilities of life as adults, is what will ensure they are the

winners of tomorrow. Children are not born with the ability to function in the world, so explicit instruction in how to do so is essential to their success later in life. One example Comer gave is a medical student who nearly flunks out of school due to their inability to ask for help. Successful people are those who are aware of their limitations and know how deal with said difficulties.

Comer (2004) specifically broke the essentials of a successful process for the social-emotional development of students in schools into three teams: the school planning and management team (SPMT), the student and staff support team (SSST), and the parent team (PT). All three teams are to operate under the same guiding principles: no-fault, consensus, and collaboration. No fault focuses on solutions rather than assigning blame. Consensus focuses on collaboration through open dialogue and understanding, maintaining that if something does not work, other ideas will be discussed and implemented as a response. Collaboration encourages the principal to work with and be responsive to all members of the team. Similarly, the other members of the team also agree not to roadblock the principal (Comer, 2004).

Once these ground rules have been established, the SPMT will supervise a comprehensive school plan, staff development, and assessment and modification (Comer, 2004). A comprehensive school plan should include curriculum, instruction, assessment, and social-emotional and academic goals for their students. The development of staff must be aligned with the goals of the comprehensive school plan, and recommendations for modification must be made on data from assessments. Comer found that when schools follow the steps of this theory for five years, they can become well-functioning for students in terms of both academic and social-emotional success (Comer, 2004).

Comer's School-Based Teams and Their Functions

A representation of Comer's theory includes three major components: the school-based management structures required, the functions each structure is expected to meet, and the procedural and interpersonal norms that are supposed to prevail within these structures and throughout the school (Comer, 2004). Every school is component of a district with its own history, philosophy, ideology, and theme. Even though Comer's theory explicitly downplays the role of central office in determining individual school management practices, the role of district administration in transformation is significant (Anson et al., 1991). Comer's theory for student social-emotional development does not clearly define a role for school districts, but it does require each district to publicly support the goals and methods in each individual school. There may be times when policies need to be revised; therefore, a social-emotional development coordinator at each school level is recommended to maintain constant contact with the school board or central office personnel. Within school buildings, three structures or teams are prescribed for optimum social-emotional development: a school planning and management team (SPMT), a student health and support team (SSST), and a comprehensive parent program (PP) (Comer, 2004).

The School Planning and Management Team

The SPMT is the school's governing and management body. Its membership consists of teachers' representatives (elected or nominated by teachers), parents' representatives (elected by parents), members of the school's professional support staff (such as the school psychologist, social worker, and health education teachers), a representative of the non-teaching support staff (e.g., secretaries, janitors), and the principal, who also serves as the team leader. The SPMT's primary responsibility is to create a Comprehensive School Plan, or school improvement plan, with input from the entire school community. The plan outlines the school's overall objectives, as

well as specific goals for improving the school climate, providing opportunities for staff professional development, improving academic performance, and developing a public relations and community relations program (Anson et al., 1991; Comer, 2004).

In each of these categories, the plan outlines the SPMT's recommended implementation techniques and actions for achieving the school's stated objectives. In addition, the SPMT should establish a process to ensure progress towards the Comprehensive School Plan's goals and to alter the plan as needed. The SPMT outlines the finalized plan with the entire school community and solicits support for it. Others in the school may be hesitant, indifferent, misinformed, or uninvolved, but the teachers, staff, and parents working on the teams will likely be passionate about the Comer process. The success of the program ultimately depends on the team members' ability to enlist the support and participation of other teachers, staff members, and parents (Comer, 2004). The SPMT is responsible for determining how best to implement Comer's model within the school, taking into account local needs and resources (Anson et al., 1991). To facilitate a task-centered approach in social-emotional development and school reform, each SPMT meeting must have a specific agenda that is communicated to all members in advance. This should aid the team in staying focused on issues that have been previously identified as crucial, while avoiding unproductive diversions (Comer, 2004). The SPMT is the central organizing and policy-setting body among the three Comer teams, playing a crucial role in the management of the school.

The Student and Staff Support Team

Members of the SSST consist of psychologists, social workers, special education teachers, counselors, and any other personnel providing related support services (Anson et al., 1991). The team performs the duties typically associated with these professions, but also engages

in three novel activities (Comer, 2004). First, prevention is a primary concern. The SSST is expected to recommend policy modifications to prevent behavior issues in the school and to foster an atmosphere of order, mutual respect, and success. Second, the SSST is responsible for ensuring that child development and interpersonal relationship principles are incorporated into the school's goals and for assisting the entire school staff in understanding and implementing these principles. To achieve this goal, SSST members are expected to share their skills with teachers in both informal and formal staff-development settings, so that teachers can better manage the many types of undesirable behavior that may occur in their classrooms and learn how to encourage more desirable behavior. The third responsibility of SSST members is the implementation of any aspects of the school plan that pertain to them. They are required to provide feedback on any sections of the plan that necessitates their professional competencies. The school's objectives are determined by the SPMT's Comprehensive School Plan. The SSST members make every effort to achieve these objectives (Comer, 2004).

The Comprehensive Parent Program

The PP team utilizes any existing parent teacher association as the basis of its program. To represent the interests of all parents, the SPMT relies on the participation of some of the most engaged families. Individual parents are expected to organize activities that support the overall school program and are encouraged to volunteer their time throughout the school building. Principally, the PP is responsible for conceiving and planning social events that improve school climate and attract less involved parents to the school. The plan is to increase parental participation across a broad spectrum. Although the PP can devise its own methods for increasing participation, program coordinators may initially discourage placing parents in classrooms as assistants or encouraging parents to meet with teachers to discuss pedagogical

issues. Instead, it is recommended that schools encourage the PP to organize social events to engage parents initially (Anson et al., 1991, Comer, 2004). Comer's theory assumes that eventually, most parents will be interested in learning about the pedagogic curriculum, their social and community life within the school, and productive ways they can help their children learn better. To achieve these goals, the PP may invite teachers, administrators, or other school personnel to present on learning activities, and the SPMT may attempt to ensure that the PP has the necessary resources for such activities (Comer, 2004).

Student Efficacy & Positive Emotional Relationships

Children, just like adults, have a desire to have a sense of self-efficacy and competence (Lunenburg, 2011). For a child to be successful in the process of learning, the child needs to feel that he or she *is* capable of learning (Comer, 2004). The school and the teachers foster a sense of self-efficacy in students by creating an environment that is conducive to academic achievement (Comer, 2004). Teachers need to be aware of their students' skill levels and the topics of study that excite their pupils before assigning work, and they need to be prepared to offer any additional assistance that may be required for a particular child to succeed academically. Comer (2004) suggested that children who struggle with traditional academic topics should be given opportunities to participate in artistic and social programs as prominently as possible within the curriculum, giving children the opportunity to feel competence in other domains. This type of pluralistic programming enables teachers to regard almost all their pupils as successful and competent in some activity, which assists them in recognizing both the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student. Schools assist children, as they begin to see themselves as competent and self-efficacious by providing a range of learning experiences for students, structuring work for success, and providing positive reinforcement for progress. When these characteristics

become ingrained in a student’s identity, there is an increased possibility that the student will participate in at least some aspect of the academic or social life at school.

Children require adults in their lives to serve in a variety of capacities, including those of role models, rule establishers, advocates, mentors, rule makers, supports, and educators (Comer et al., 2004). Relationships like these play a significant role in the process of socialization that a child goes through. When adults provide the social and emotional needs of children, the children form attachments to those adults, and as a result, the children begin to internalize the values and expectations of the adults (Comer et al., 2004). According to Comer's (2004) theory, most of a child's motivation to learn comes from interpersonal sources that encourage the development of trust and connection in the student. Children whose early relationships with adults failed to provide such a base of trust will find it difficult to engage themselves in school. As a result, it is vital that adults in the school try to improve or supplement underdeveloped bonding relationships. The goal of Comer's theory is to facilitate the development of these kinds of connections by catering to adults' need for order and optimism and by shifting the way people interact with one another within schools to foster an environment characterized by trust and regard (Comer et al., 2004). After this occurs, students should not feel awkward about asking for assistance with their academic, personal, or social issues. On the other hand, the likelihood that a child would internalize the same values, objectives, and expectations as part of his or her own sense of identity increases in direct proportion to the number of adults who endorse the same set of values, goals, and expectations for the child (Comer et al., 2004, Lunenburg, 2011). When a child's actions first begin to be motivated by these values, the likelihood increases that adults will provide positive feedback and praise to the child, which in turn reinforces the child's already favorable behaviors. The development of healthy emotional connections between adults and

children is the cornerstone of academic and extracurricular achievement in children (Comer et al., 2004).

Comer's Six Developmental Pathways

Most schools and teachers base their lesson plans on the requirement that students should be able to demonstrate competence in their intellectual or cognitive abilities. The enhancement of students' linguistic abilities is also a top objective due to the widespread notion that language plays a critical role in the process of cognitive development. However, not enough time has been invested in aiding students in other aspects of their growth as individuals. To be more specific, focus needs to be placed on students to ensure that they are developing along each of the six important paths described below.

The Physical Pathway

Providing children and adolescents with opportunities to strengthen their capacities for the proper functioning of all bodily systems is an important part of fostering their physical development. This Applying to both younger children and teenagers, the physical pathway. This covers a person's mental health, their eating habits, and their ability to make responsible decisions, with a particular emphasis placed on the sexual behavior and substance misuse of teens. Particularly in schools that are doing away with recess and extracurricular activities, teachers and other school workers need to think of creative and relevant ways to assist the students' physical needs to meet the requirements of their jobs. Students who are given the opportunity to release energy in a manner that is both planned and controlled are less likely to resort to physical aggressiveness, and they are better able to concentrate when they return to their classroom work (Comer et al., 2004).

The Cognitive Pathway

Helping children and adolescents increase their capacity to think independently, to plan strategically and effectively, to solve problems in a variety of contexts, to set goals for themselves, and to work with focused attention to accomplish those goals is an important part of fostering their development along the cognitive pathway, which is an important aspect of child and adolescent development. The capacity to discern when one's own resources are not sufficient to carry out a task and when it is appropriate to ask for and accept assistance is another skill that can be developed along this route of progression. An effective teacher is aware of the ways in which children learn, and who uses methods that are designed to improve students' capacity to acquire subject-specific academic knowledge (Comer et al., 2004).

For instance, Comer (2004) describes a fifth-grade teacher who, at the beginning of the school year, assessed that most of the students in the class were not familiar with their multiplication tables. Although the lesson plan for the year began with the concept of multiplying fractions, this teacher was aware that, for students to comprehend the idea of multiplying fractions, they needed to first have achieved the prerequisite cognitive task of comprehending standard multiplication. Otherwise, it would be impossible for them to multiply fractions. The instructor started by instructing the students in the multiplication tables, and after three months, she had established a solid groundwork upon which to instruct the students in the multiplication of fractions. The teacher's colleagues, on the other hand, who had simply followed the curriculum, discovered that their students who had not mastered fundamental multiplication encountered major conceptualization issues. This was the case even though they had not deviated from the curriculum in any way.

The Psychological Pathway

Helping children and adolescents enhance their capacity for self-acceptance and self-confidence while they are still going through the process of forming their identities is an important part of fostering their psychological development along the psychological pathway (Comer et al., 2004). The psychological pathway encompasses emotions, such as those of sufficiency, efficacy, and competence. When a student feels confident in their ability to carry out a task or find a solution to a problem, this confidence can motivate the student to act, which is frequently manifested as excellent academic performance.

On the other hand, if a student has feelings of inferiority or a lack of competence (Erikson, 1963), these emotions can act as demotivating forces on the learning process, which can lead to poor academic performance. Erikson (1963) found that students who felt they lacked competence were more likely to feel inferior. Educating children and adolescents how to deal with their emotions in ways that are acceptable to society is an important component of the attention placed on the psychological pathway. Children and teenagers need to be explicitly taught that anger is a normal emotion that everyone experiences at some point in their lives and that feeling angry is not the issue; rather, it is the actions that one takes when they are furious that can become a problem (Comer et al., 2004).

Therefore, children and adolescents need to be taught coping methods and problem-solving abilities (Comer et al., 2004). Sometimes, what makes students lose confidence or become agitated is not evident to people around the student, including the adults. Building a strong sense of self-assurance in students requires first and foremost the creation of a secure environment within the classroom. Students will only feel comfortable taking risks while learning in an environment that is secure in their classroom.

The Language Pathway

Supporting children and adolescents in expanding their capacity for receptive and expressive language use in a range of settings is an important part of fostering their development along the language pathway (Comer et al., 2004). Oral and written language fluency are becoming increasingly important for students to acquire as they work toward being successful and productive members of our multiethnic society. Language is integrated into all aspects of the activities that take place within the school, including the intonation of the spoken word, the phrase that appears on signs in the classrooms or halls, the loudspeaker system announcements, rules regarding talking or not talking in the cafeteria, and pleasantries at the beginning of the school day. The level of vocabulary that is utilized with students has an impact on the students' linguistic development, as does the degree to which the major language of the school and the languages spoken in the homes of the students are congruent with one another. Teachers cannot assume that all students have the same background in terms of previous language exposure or experience; instead, they need to consciously teach and model language and communication skills that are appropriate for the school environment and enhance the overall development of the language pathway. Only then can they guarantee that students will be able to master the language (Comer et al., 2004).

The Social Pathway

Providing opportunities that assist children and adolescents expand their capacity to create healthy relationships throughout the spectrum of human diversity is an essential component of fostering the development of children and adolescents along the social pathway (Comer et al., 2004). This The social pathway involves the capability to interact with individuals who may be different from themselves, as well as the capability to express empathy toward other

people. Adults have a responsibility to set an example for the right social behaviors that they hope children will exhibit. The social interactions that take place within schools convey vitally significant messages about how individuals should be treated. These social interactions reveal whether there is an acceptable environment of respect, emotional safety, and a sense of inclusion or exclusion in the community. The atmosphere may be felt across the entire campus (Comer et al., 2004).

The Ethical Pathway

Providing children and adolescents with opportunities to enhance their capacity for behaving with justice and equity toward themselves and others is an essential component of fostering the development along the ethical pathway (Comer et al., 2004). This The ethical pathway involves assisting children in recognizing the significance of maintaining their integrity and respecting themselves as well as others. Children, particularly younger students, notably benefit from having adequate adult role models, and this is true across all educational pathways (Comer et al., 2004). Students can apply a moral road map to their day-to-day lives when they are given opportunities to participate in the process of developing classroom rules of conduct for verbal and nonverbal behavior. Some students, particularly those who have not previously been exposed to this kind of responsibility, might need further direction from adults. Students who take part in the formulation of these guiding principles for the classroom develop a stronger sense of accountability and ownership for not only their own behavior but also for the health and happiness of their fellow students (Comer et al., 2004).

The School Climate

Comer (2004) aspired to influence academic performance, social behavior, and mental health through societal, educational, and individual processes. However, establishing structures

and identifying their functions does not provide a comprehensive understanding of these processes. The environment in which teams implement the program is crucial. The researcher has produced key stylistic rules for establishing the atmosphere the ideal school in terms of social-emotional development. Without mutual respect and a willingness to listen to others, problems will not be recognized or resolved as effectively as could be the case. A no-fault policy that directs the discussion of all difficulties and issues is the most crucial of these recommendations. The strategy is intended to decrease the divisive and inefficient practice of pointing fingers and to shift deliberations toward the more productive work of collaborative problem solving. A crucial aspect of Comer's (2004) approach is the addition of a coordinator to ensure that all conversations are conducted from this no-fault point of view and is accomplished in conversations with the principal and SSST members when the theory is initially implemented in a school setting.

Rather than voting, decisions regarding procedures and solutions are determined through consensus. Voting inevitably involves individuals taking sides, advocating for support of their stance, forming alliances, and disparaging the thoughts and proposals of others (Comer et al., 2004). When consensus is the criterion for making decisions, team members are compelled to collaborate to establish an accord. To achieve solutions that fulfill the needs of all students and, by extension, the requirements of all adults in the school setting, teams will be encouraged to generate numerous more ideas and, as a result, better solutions (Anson et al., 1991). Consensus decision making entails that there are no winners or losers, and in conjunction with the no-fault principle, it fosters an environment of cooperation, teamwork, and trust that promotes the social-emotional development of children (Comer et al., 2004).

Comer's (2004) theory also contains an explicit mandate that neither the school principal nor any other member of the team be immobilized (Comer et al., 2004). While the principal retains authority as chair of the SPMT, his or her authority should not clash with that of the team. The principal must be willing to share power with the SPMT, but the other SPMT members must recognize that the school requires the principal's leadership (Anson et al., 1991). As a member of the SPMT, the principal has input on all decisions regarding school goals and programs. As the team leader, they are responsible for ensuring that the agenda is adhered to, that processes are followed, that the school resources necessary to implement the team's decisions are made available, and for much of daily monitoring of the school plan's implementation. However, it is equally crucial that the leader does not dictate the team's behavior. The team must be granted the authority to set its own objectives and implementation programs (Comer et al., 2004). According to Comer's (2004) theory, another important aspect of a healthy school culture is that every issue that the team considers must ultimately result in a decision that brings closure, evoking an atmosphere that is both practical and forward moving. Teams do not just sit around and talk; they get things done. Additionally, closure prevents the team from avoiding confronting unpleasant issues, which, if allowed to fester without being resolved, could eventually result in tension and crises.

It is anticipated that a school with high levels of social-emotional development will have a normative climate characterized by trust and respect. This climate will have positive effects, not only on the relationships that exist between students, but also on the relationships that exist between students and adults (Lunenburg, 2011). Children who feel a connection to their school are more likely to want to maintain a relationship with it and perhaps even increase the amount of time they spend there (Comer et al, 2004). Participating in extracurricular activities at school,

remaining after school for extracurricular programs, and working on extra credit projects are all examples of the vital involvement that not only symbolizes connection but also helps to strengthen it. Comer's (2004) approach, on the other hand, extends outside the boundaries of the school and links students to organizations that can assist them in meeting their requirements. These can be groups that are focused with religion, scouting, athletics, volunteering in the community, the arts, or any other activity that both directly and indirectly teaches a variety of social skills to children and exposes them to possibilities that they might not otherwise experience.

Comer’s (2004) theory is the result of two analyses. The first is historical and compares the world fifty years ago to the present. Comer stresses the dissolution of the nuclear family, the severing of ties between the school and community that formerly monitored children's behavior and socialized them, and the estrangement of instructors from the community of their students, which may have once been their own. Comer (2004) desires that instructors play a more conventional role in establishing social and personal norms. Comer's (2004) approach changes the role of school leadership from disciplinarians to community-responsive individuals. The second analysis is a psychological and social description of the major urban school stakeholder groups. The needs of school administrators depend more on fundamental human motivation than on the school itself and necessitates dependability, autonomy, professional skill, institutional loyalty, daily interpersonal warmth, and communal validation. Students' requirements are mostly a result of the psychology of motivation and the reduction of social isolation they encountered during and before to the pandemic. To develop self-efficacy in multiple academic and life areas, children must first form bonds with adults and then with peers (Comer et al., 2004). Parents must know that their child is being respected and educated. They must feel socially at ease in the

school environment and contribute to the school, even if it is only participating at a social event. Comer (2004) believes, however, that there are variations in the ability of parents to receive what they want from schools and the receptivity of schools to the manner in which parents voice their concerns.

Assuming a reasonable design, Comer (2004) hypothesizes that academic performance will increase since attendance, achievement, and courteous, well-behaved conduct are the goals of all school members. The basis of the theory is the enhancement of interpersonal connections inside the school and the implementation of school-based planning, which is made possible by positive interactions. Education is about relationships with the people you see every day, whether they are students, teachers, or secretaries, and any reform that fails to acknowledge this is unlikely to be successful. Nearly everyone in modern society agrees on the practical purposes of education and has access to the same teaching resources and information on how to educate. Therefore, change is motivated by the desire to teach and to learn. It is the responsibility of schools to establish an environment that promotes orderliness, respectful relationships, and school-centered planning, which are necessary conditions for teaching and learning (Comer et al., 2004).

Related Literature

Since its inception, educational leadership has been an interdisciplinary field often merging with other fields, such as psychology, sociology, economics, and even politics (Bush, 2022). Over the last five decades, scholars have examined educational leadership through its literature in an irregular manner compared to other research specialties (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Educational leadership has often been susceptible to fads, as policies and politics come and go with changes in political environments (James et al., 2019). The body of work in

educational research continues to be significant. However, there is abundant evidence of the expectations placed on school leaders in various parts of the world, as most recently demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the normative preference for shared and distributed leadership, in many circumstances, principals continue to bear primary responsibility for school improvement, as well as student learning and welfare (Bush, 2022). Many studies on educational leadership to date have been ranked by students' academic accomplishments in areas, such as numeracy and literacy. Only a select few studies have considered students' non-academic achievements, such as social and behavioral results (Tian & Huber, 2019).

From 1965 to 2014, the research on educational leadership has dwindled down to five main categories that continue to gain popularity today: equity and social justice, female leadership, school leadership preparation and development, trust, and instructional leadership (Myran & Sutherland, 2018). Prior to 2007, research found that principals had an indirect but significant impact on student learning (Heck & Hellinger, 2005), that there was a shift from formal leader actions to interactions among leaders, followers, and situations (Gronn 2002; Spillane et al., 2004), that there was a relationship between school contexts and leadership styles (Hallinger, 2003), and that transformational leadership was effective (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Murphy, 2002). Over the past decade, new evidence revealed how practice-centric leadership functions. Coherence of a leadership team, for example, has proven to be more important than the individual leader’s actions (Hulpia et al., 2011). However, a methodological issue with educational leadership literature is the inadequacy of much of the work to translate into broad markers of effectiveness into testable practices and behaviors. While research has been conducted in terms of broad functions and variables, (i.e., protecting instructional time, coordinating curriculum and instruction, and monitoring and evaluating student performance),

more work needs to be done to uncover the social emotional needs and attributive behaviors or characteristics that accompany these broad functions (Dix et al., 2019).

There has been a growing interest in the nature of character and character education in recent years, based on the assumption that desirable characteristics can be both taught and learned (Spears, 2004, Stillman et al., 2018). Programs that help children learn how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, practice empathy, comprehend their own skills and abilities, manage their emotions, and conduct, and build other social and emotional skills can improve their academic and life results. Schools will also continue to be seen as an important arena for positive youth development, in addition to formal education of students. Youth development is an intergenerational process in which youth are responsible for seizing new possibilities and adults are responsible for providing nourishing, growth-enhancing opportunities. Specific instructional, interpersonal, and organizational components of school life have been linked to children's character development and academic growth (Roeser et al., 2000, Wong & Kong, 2020). Another critical aspect in encouraging adolescents' developmental success is the quality of opportunities provided by adults in their families, schools, and communities in cultivating both academic and social goals, skills, knowledge, and values. Due to participation in high-risk behaviors and activities, around 25% to 50% of all youth in the United States between the ages of 10 and 17 are at danger of having their educational, economic, and social chances curtailed (Maiti et., al, 2021).

Recently, there has been a growing trend in youth development literature to focus on how schools may promote developmental qualities and assets in young people through system reforms that focus on youth and social-emotional development (State & Kern, 2017; Wagner, 2016; Weisberg & Cascarino, 2013; West et al., 2017; Wood, 2015; Wyness & Lang, 2016;

Zweers et al., 2020). To understand how emotion and student learning interact, policies and programs in schools are relying more on experts, choice models, and programming. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 is a piece of legislation that mandates on a national level that state representatives for education must develop strategies to combat issues of bullying, harassment, and discipline in order to foster environments in schools that are safe and supportive of students. Furthermore, ESSA provides support for efforts made on behalf of states and school districts to implement positive behavior interventions and supports, in addition to other activities that provide support for the development of skills, such as dispute resolution, effective problem solving, and proper relationship building (ESSA, 2015). Since it is emphasized at theoretical, federal, and state levels that it is important to meet the diverse needs of students, it is necessary to further investigate the ways in which schools implement programs to meet the needs of students.

The goal of the social-emotional learning movement in education is to change instructional methods in ways that foster and maintain emotionally healthy classroom and building climates (Belfield et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2009; Oberle et al., 2014). The importance of social-emotional learning is increasing awareness among policymakers, as well as educators on the importance of emotion domains and competences for student achievement in the classroom (Hoffman, 2009). If current conditions in many schools do not afford appropriate opportunities for adolescent development, academic, social, and emotional growth then when schools do provide these opportunities, there is great room for growth in potential outcomes for social emotional development (Roeser et al., 2000; Rutledge et al., 2015; Schonert et al., 2017; Sklad et al., 2012). The challenge however of cultivating this change is a dual challenge of also understanding, designing, and then implementing schoolwide reform. Thus, much of the

educational leadership literature available focuses on academic development rather than the social emotional development of students.

When adolescents are going through challenging emotional moments without receiving the appropriate support, they are at an increased risk for having behavioral issues (Anson et al., 1991), which can lead to a loss of instructional time, an increased risk of students dropping out of school, and other negative consequences for the neighboring school community, such as an increase in the number of referrals for disciplinary action and a malfunctioning environment in the school. However, a student’s decision to engage in academic work in the classroom depends often on how safe and secure they feel in the school setting (Phan, 2016; Poulou, 2017; Roeser et al., 2000). Schools can increase the likelihood of achievement-related motivation by reinforcing scaffolded skill development, framing value and purpose of activities, and providing emotional support and encouragement during the learning process (Oberle et al., 2016; Onchwari, 2010). Students acquire both academic and social success in varying ways, but positively adjusted groups of students routinely show the highest levels of esteem and are the least likely to affiliate with negative peer groups (Roeser et al., 2000).

To understand how adolescent’s psychosocial functioning is related to their experiences in school, one must draw from contemporary theories of human motivation (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Reyes et al., 2013; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Students see school leaders and teachers not just as educators who teach curriculum, but as guides who provide them with opportunities to develop their social skills, exercise autonomy over their learning, and as people of support who have control over the social and emotional well-being of the school building (Arslan & Demirtas, 2016; Bandura, 1998; Zweers et al., 2020). Students who perceive their schools to be places of both academic rigor, support, and autonomy, as well as having caring and

respectful leaders and teachers have shown improved academic, social, and emotional functioning over time (Berg & Aber, 2015, Bierman et al., 2010). The 21st century school will need to continue to focus on both academic development and social emotional development of their students, and research is lacking on the social emotional development in K-12 schools.

There are critics of social emotional learning who question the efficacy of social emotional curriculum and programming. The phrase *social-emotional learning* is vague and imprecise but refers to a variety of initiatives that are carried out in schools to raise students' emotional intelligence (Cherniss et al, 2006; Hoffman, 2009). Programs established in schools that are influenced by public health, mental health, and justice perspectives, as well as those with a strong moral foundation, can all be classified as social-emotional learning initiatives. The theoretical foundation upon which social-emotional learning is based, emotional intelligence, is one of the main areas of debate within the scientific community (Cherniss et al., 2006; Hoffman, 2009; Zins et al., 2004). Many programs that utilize emotional intelligence as their research foundation frequently do not specify which emotional intelligence components are being used. A lack of specificity on the emotional intelligence components being used has led to a misunderstanding between the key competences of social-emotional learning and the underlying core abilities of emotional intelligence (Cherniss et al., 2006). Although social-emotional learning programs are thought to be uniform, the reality is that many of these programs target various aspects of emotional intelligence without being explicit about doing so. Because of this, some literature describes the many good effects that emphasizing social and emotional skills may have on students and schools, while others are muddled and lack rigorous scientific and evaluation methods (Hoffman, 2009). In addition to emphasizing emotional intelligence in curriculum and programs, other diverse criticisms have emerged, questioning the efficacy of

social-emotional learning. One of these criticisms is the lack of a comprehensive, systematic evaluation and the unsubstantiated claims made about the effects of social-emotional development on student achievement (Domitrovich et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2010, Reyes et al., 2012). The measurement, and evaluation of such measurements, is one area where social-emotional development and implementation have limitations. It has been challenging to establish a defined level of implementation quality, which is one cause for this challenge. Given the scarcity of longitudinal studies involving social-emotional programs, criticism of these programs and curriculum has also been taken into account (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Due to inadequate implementation, particularly when done using a programmed method rather than integrated strategies, social-emotional learning can also be rendered ineffective (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When social-emotional learning is undervalued and not viewed as being a crucial component of the district's and school's educational mission, it can also be considered ineffective (Zeidner et al., 2002).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2022) is an organization that works to encourage the implementation of research-based social and emotional learning programs in schools. These programs instruct students in the five core competencies that are outlined in CASEL's framework for systemic and social-emotional learning. Self-awareness, self-management, the ability to make responsible decisions, relationship skills, and social awareness are the competencies that make up this set. This commonly adapted core competencies of social-emotional learning are aligned with the process by which students acquire and apply the knowledge, values, and abilities required to comprehend and manage emotions, set, and achieve positive goals, experience and demonstrate empathy for others, build and maintain healthy relationships, and make ethical decisions (Durlak et al., 2011). The

Responsive Classroom approach is one type of curriculum that has been given CASEL's stamp of approval. This method emphasizes the establishment of classrooms that are responsive to the children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs by providing children in kindergarten through sixth grade with educational experiences that are suitable for their stages of development. The Responsive Classroom strategy encourages the implementation of fundamental pedagogical techniques and the maintenance of consistent lines of contact with the parents of students enrolled in the class (Durlak et al., 2011; Dymnicki et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2004).

When students struggle to have their social and emotional needs fulfilled, they face challenges that hamper their efforts and abilities to actively participate in the learning process, making it more difficult for students to graduate from high school. Students may have difficulty executing the fundamental skills that are required to perform well in the context of the school environment. It can be challenging to complete tasks that are necessary to meet behavioral expectations, such as actively participating in the lessons, concentrating, or self-regulating, and the student’s progress toward completing their academic goals may be slowed down as a result (Durlak et al., 2011). In order to effectively analyze one’s sentiments, interests, values, and strengths and to keep a solid sense of self-confidence, one must be self-aware (Dymnciki et al., 2013). One of the key characteristics of a person who is self-aware is that they have the capacity to not only describe, identify, and comprehend a specific emotion, but also has the capacity and the mental reasoning to pinpoint the emotion’s root cause (Mayer et al., 2004). The significance of establishing self-awareness is that it permits effective emotional control and enables the person to recognize when it is necessary to ask for assistance from others in difficult situations (Bandura et al., 2001; Dymnicki et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2013). Self-awareness also enables

self-evaluation, develops intrinsic motivation, and produces a strong sense of self-worth when objectives have been achieved (Deane & Rickwood, 2003).

Self-management has been defined as creating and tracking progress toward personal and academic goals, expressing emotions appropriately, and regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control urges, and persevere in overcoming obstacles (Dymnicki et al., 2013; Loveless & Griffith, 2014). One of the fundamental abilities of self-management, like self-awareness, is the capacity to control emotions using strategies that maintain a healthy emotional equilibrium. Self-management is essential to handle the stress and anxiety brought on by high-stress environments, especially in an educational system that emphasizes high stakes testing (Bradley et al., 2010, Brown et al., 2004; Durlak et al., 2016). Similarly, establishing and maintaining rewarding relationships based on collaboration, resisting unwarranted social pressure, preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict, and asking for assistance when necessary are all examples of relationship skills (Durlak et al., 2011). Regardless of the group's diversity, students and adults who possess relationship skills can establish the abilities required to function more effectively inside the group (Loveless & Griffith, 2014). The definition of responsible decision-making involves taking into account moral principles, safety considerations, suitable social norms, respect for others, and potential outcomes of various acts (Bar On et al., 1996; Cohen 2006; Stern, 2007). Making responsible decisions involves not only considering one's own preferences but also how one might positively impact their school and community (Dymnicki et al, 2013; Elias et al., 2003; Hoffman, 2009).

The ability to empathize with others, understand and value individual and group similarities and differences, and recognize and utilize family, school, and community resources are all examples of social awareness (Loveless & Griffin; Reyes et al., 2012; Yoder, 2014). It is

possible to build wholesome relationships and engage in pro-social activity when one has the capacity to recognize, appreciate, and comprehend other people's viewpoints on social interaction (Decety, 2009; Durlak, 2016). Social awareness also enables a person to recognize and comprehend the situations in which specific social supports can be used as resources and solutions for problem-solving (Dymnicki, 2013).

Even while schools can play an active part in supporting the SEL requirements of students, the role that school staff play in fulfilling the social and emotional needs of children varies depending on the type of educational setting (Decety, 2009; Durlak, 2016). The level of support that is offered to students can be affected by the educators' conceptions of the role they play in providing to the social and emotional requirements of their student body. Therefore, the perceptions that educators have about their role in addressing the social and emotional needs of children can influence the degree to which developmental supports are provided to students, as well as the effectiveness of these supports when they are put into practice (Durlak et al., 2016). It is important for school leaders to understand the role of educators in providing these supports and further understand how educators view their roles in addressing the social and emotional needs of students. As the field of social-emotional learning advances, it is also important for school leaders to understand the role of educators in providing these supports (Conley et al., 2014).

There is a positive correlation between a student's social and emotional adjustment and their academic achievement (Bandura et al., 2001). Students who are having difficulties in other aspects of their social and emotional development may also struggle with the skills required for executive functioning (Bandura, 1998). These skills are necessary for students to effectively access their education, make academic progress, and realize their full potential. Inhibition of

impulses is one of the talents that go under the umbrella of executive functioning, along with cognitive or attentional flexibility, working memory, and self-monitoring (Bandura et al., 2001). It is possible that students' levels of academic accomplishment will suffer as a direct consequence of their inability to properly apply these abilities in their coursework (Cohen, 2006). Inadequate executive functioning can have a negative impact on a student's academic development, their ability to prepare for post-secondary education, and their ability to find work possibilities, among other things (Cohen, 2006; Comer et al., 2004, Domitorvich et al., 2016).

However, when students have the opportunity to participate in social-emotional learning programs at school, they receive the assistance they need to develop the coping and pro-social skills that are necessary to help them become well-adjusted overall (Comer et al., 2004; Durlak, 2016). These abilities include an increased ability to participate in the learning process (Cohen, 2006). Teachers gain as well from the impact that students' positive behavior can have on the administration of the classroom (Heller, 2013). Schools have the ability to play an active role in assisting students in making the necessary social and emotional progress throughout their development by providing students with learning opportunities that assist them in effectively managing their emotions and developing skills that are beneficial to society (Comer et al., 2004).

Summary

This phenomenological study will narrow a gap in educational research literature by examining the lessons learning in K-12 social emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic. Social emotional development is an inevitable element of any K-12 school. As supported by the research, we know that over the last decade, educational leadership research has witnessed an increase in high-stakes accountability testing in hopes to increase school quality. However, school leaders are left to face the difficult task of balancing academic excellence,

equity, and the social-emotional well-being of students (Huber, 2019). While much focus has been given on the development of academic skills, such as math and reading, there is not much research on the development of the social emotional skills in this setting. The benefits of social-emotional learning and development on student behavior, academic performance, and long-term societal adaptability are reflected in the research. The literature, as it currently stands, also reflects the efficacy of social-emotional programs, curricula, and developmental practices, as well as sustainability, implementation, and how social-emotional learning contributes to enhancing student achievement and addressing behavioral issues.

We know that social emotional development during youth is key to enhancing academic motivation, psychological, and behavioral well-being. With the aid of the social emotional learning paradigm, children of all ages may better understand their feelings, experience them fully, and show empathy for others. Then, these acquired behaviors are used to assist students in developing decision-making skills, goal-setting frameworks, and interpersonal relationships.

The findings of previous studies have led to the conclusion that fostering social and emotional development, as well as preventing problems that can be caused by maladaptive behavior, is of utmost importance, not only for individuals but also for society as a whole (Bandura et al., 2001; Bar-On, 2006; Berg & Aber, 2015; Bierman et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2004; Durlak, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Guerra & Cunningham, 2014; Heller, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2010; Lunenburg, 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Phan, 2016; Reyes et al., 2013; Stillman et al, 2018.) The development of children's social and emotional abilities begins with the interactions they build with their parents and other caregivers, as well as with their peers and the community in which they live (Sklad et al., 2012). There is a certain amount of money and other resources available to school systems

for the purpose of providing interventions to students who may be exhibiting some behavioral or academic difficulties. As a result, it is essential for districts to ensure that they are distributing and concentrating their resources in the most effective manner possible (Comer et al., 2004; Lunenburg, 2011). When compared to the use of preventative measures, the provision of services through the use of interventions is typically associated with higher costs and a greater demand for labor. If schools are going to be able to provide more preventative services, there needs to be an improved method for identifying pupils who are at risk of having difficulties that will require more extensive interventions (Comer et al., 2004; Lunenburg, 2011). For nearly five decades, the most popular researched key topics and points being addressed by educational leadership literature has remained the same: equity and social justice, female leadership, school leadership preparation and development, trust, and instructional leadership. Yet the research also points out the need for further development on the social emotional well-being of students. Only a select few studies have considered students' non-academic achievements, such as social and behavioral results (Tian & Huber, 2019).

Comer (2004) aims to enhance the school's social and academic climates so that educators can teach, and students can learn. Teachers are better equipped to respond to the learning requirements of their students when sufficient rules, techniques, and norms are in place, and students feel better about themselves and their capacity to learn. Therefore, they should become more driven to study, particularly in an environment where staff members are adept at offering positive reinforcement. If parents support the same standards and expectations, academic achievement should improve and be strengthened further. Clearly, school conduct is influenced by the formal and informal norms of a school. Comer (2004) intends to establish new standards in schools with or without a history of learning and behavior issues. Students are more

likely to successfully adapt school-wide measures targeted at enhancing social-emotional health and well-being if they feel valued and significant at school. These are the key factors driving my research and the need to fill this gap.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter provides a description of qualitative research and provides a rationale for a qualitative research method has been chosen for this study. The definition, history, and reasoning for a transcendental phenomenology research design type was employed in this design will also be thoroughly discussed. The research questions of the study are presented with details of setting, participants, and procedures, as well as the role of the researchers. Information about data collection, analysis, and synthesis will also be discussed. Finally, methods to establish trustworthiness and a summary will be provided at the end of the chapter.

Research Design

Transcendental phenomenology was largely developed by Husserl (1973) and is a philosophical approach to qualitative research where one seeks to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Pure transcendental phenomenology is grounded and conditioned in the concept of epoché to see phenomena through an unclouded lens, allowing the meaning of the phenomena to naturally emerge within its own identity (Moustakas, 1994). This qualitative study will employ the transcendental phenomenological research method to describe K-12 leaders' experiences in the social-emotional development of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research is an appropriate design as the phenomena from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders is observed in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is a form of inquiry that seeks to explore how a phenomenon is experienced by individuals (Moustakas, 1994). As this research focuses on the perspectives of K-12 leaders, and the

meaning of their experiences, a qualitative phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study.

Research Questions

A phenomenology design will be utilized within this qualitative research study to describe what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is the science of describing the perception of experiences in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). What appears in consciousness is a phenomenon, and the phenomenon is the essence for gaining new knowledge (Husserl, 1973). The shared essence of the lived phenomenon will give meaning to the experiences of K-12 leaders in the development of social-emotional skills during COVID-19 through the research questions stated below.

Central Research Question

What changes have K-12 leaders made in developing social-emotional skills since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Question One

How has support changed in K-12 social-emotional skill development since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Question Two

What did we learn about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 in the K-12 setting?

Setting and Participants

Research will be conducted in a natural setting in order to allow the participants to be studied and observed as they are (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The selection of participants will be purposeful to enhance the understanding of the phenomena being studied

(Moustakas, 1994), allowing This alignment and to best inform the scope of research. As such, it will be essential that all participants are leaders in the K-12 setting with direct involvement in social-emotional development.

Setting

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social-emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders are defined as superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and teachers, as each of these groups of people are leaders in their own arenas. As this qualitative study focuses on K-12 leaders, participants will be located throughout several locations in the United States. As such, it will be best to hold the interviews virtually. If participants face any difficulties accessing Zoom during the interview, they will be allowed to seek outside assistance, so long as the one assisting leaves the room afterwards. The researcher will maintain password-secure files and locked thumb drives of the interviews. In this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, the participants will be allowed to choose from where they join the interview (office or home). The participants will be able to choose the date and time of the interviews, as it is essential to uphold the dignity and acknowledgement of one's right to contribute knowledge and experience (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).

Participants

Participants in this study will be drawn from K-12 superintendents, principals, assistant principals, or teachers who have been in their respective positions since before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of participants will range from 12-15 and will be of varying ages. An effort will be given to ensure a fair representation of both male and female perspectives.

Researcher Positionality

Evidence of a need for further insight into the development of social-emotional skills in the K-12 setting has been extensively stated (Greenberg et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gueldner & Feurerborn, 2016; Heers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Oberle et al., 2017). The global COVID-19 pandemic has made this need grow even more (CASEL, 2022; Mata et al., 2022; Prothero, 2021). I have seen the impact of this need firsthand and have taken part of many conversations with school leaders regarding social-emotional development and practices. As an administrator, I am charged with many daily tasks. One of these tasks is ensuring the wellness of the students under my care. I often navigate various challenges due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Based on these experiences, I will shift my focus from my own experiences to understanding how others experience social-emotional development in the K-12 setting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework for this study is social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1968). Social constructivism allows researchers to understand the world in which one lives and works. Applying the social constructivist paradigm will allow me to build understandings of the phenomena of social-emotional development as I actively engage in understanding the lived experiences of K-12 leaders. A constructivist researcher allows multiple perspectives to be considered and collects multiple forms of data, which allow new perceptions and understandings to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vygotsky, 1968).

Philosophical Assumptions

As a scholar, I bring a set of beliefs and assumptions to my research. Prior life experiences and ongoing scholarly research contribute to these assumptions (Moustakas, 1994).

The main obstacle here is being aware of these assumptions and how they are incorporated into the research. The three philosophical assumptions that will be addressed below are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. The three assumptions will be discussed followed by my role as a researcher.

Ontological Assumption

Every individual has a distinctive perception and interpretation of reality and lived experiences. Thus, every individual has their own unique reality. As such, my ontological assumption guided me to incorporate multiple perspectives within this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher for this study, I will interact with the participants to explore their beliefs, behaviors, and thoughts around the lived phenomena.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption will also be used in this study as I glean information from the participants' wide-ranging subjective experiences. Epistemology is the science of the initiation and development of human cognition, as well as its laws. Epistemology focuses on people's consciousness sources, cognitive ability, cognitive form, cognitive nature, cognition structure, the relationship between objective truth and cognition, and so on. Epistemology is becoming increasingly important in modern philosophy, particularly contemporary philosophy. Every introduction of a new important concept in the history of epistemological thought causes significant academic change (Plutchak, 2018). Understanding the participants' actual experiences will provide deeper knowledge of the phenomenon. As a result, information is gathered, and the truth is created based on individual viewpoints. As the researcher, I will minimize the separateness between myself and the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1988).

Axiological Assumption

As I bring my own values and biases into the research, I also hold the axiological assumption that beliefs and values are social constructs. Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies value judgments. Axiology is derived from Greek and means "value" or "worth." Axiology is concerned with determining the impact of the researcher's own value on all stages of the research process (Peers, 2018). The questions that will be posed, which are informed by my worldview, will clarify this point. As such, my views, biases, and personal experiences will influence how I analyze the results and identify the underlying themes. The participants' worldviews, experiences, and ideals interact with mine to enhance the analysis.

Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to serve as a human instrument to obtain detailed information from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the role of the researcher this will entail conducting questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, compiling data, and explaining the data analysis to the reader. The researcher has no authority over the participants and will act only as an interviewer for this study as is necessary in a phenomenological study (Leery & Omrod, 2019). The researcher will determine perceived experiences by listening to recordings, transcribing data, and analyzing each transcription for the results of the research. With this analysis, the researcher aims to fill a literature gap to help others learn from the perceived experiences of K-12 leaders in social-emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher's role will also include creating confidentiality by not identifying personal information about the participants or their institutions in the study.

In a qualitative transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) described four main steps or processes to conduct research as epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative

variation, and synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. Epoche requires setting aside preconceived ideas and seeing the lived phenomena for the first time. As such, while conducting this research, my role will be to set aside any presuppositions from my own experiences. I will utilize notetaking during interviews and data analysis, as well as journaling, as a way to document and set aside my presuppositions, prejudgments, biases, and values (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Procedures

Permissions

Prior to beginning this research study, I will seek approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval requires informed consent and will be obtained before the collection of data. As such, informed consent will also be collected and filed for this research. Once approval is granted, individuals who meet the criteria for this study will be approached and asked to participate. The research plan will make adequate provision for monitoring the collection of data to ensure and protect the safety of research participants. Provisions to protect the participant privacy and confidentiality of data will be provided utilizing computer file encryption, and hard copy materials will be locked in a safe.

Recruitment Plan

To prepare for the challenges of phenomenological research, one must ensure participants are skillfully chosen and that the participants have experienced the lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling leads to greater information gathering while researching a topic in depth (Patton, 2002). As such, this study will utilize a combination of purposeful sampling, criterion sampling, and snowball sampling methods to attempt to collect data from the widest range of perspectives possible (Benoot et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et

al., 2013). I will seek 12-15 participants for this study, as a minimum of 10 is needed to conduct thorough research, and a maximum of 25 is recommended for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). Purposeful sampling is a research strategy used to intentionally sample participants that can best inform them about their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, to recruit participants for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, I will select participants by first sending out an introductory email to the principals of K-12 schools in the United States Fairfax County, Virginia seeking participants who have experienced the phenomenon. The initial email will indicate the research study being conducted and will ask the principals to forward as appropriate. The email will include a Google Form for interested participants with questions related to years of experience, position, and confirmation of having lived the phenomenon of social-emotional development in the K-12 setting during COVID-19. Participants will be selected based on a variety of factors, including grade level(s) served, years of experience, and area of expertise, ensuring purposeful sampling and the ability to collect a greater variety of data (Patton, 2002) and to capture the essence of the experience from a variety of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A combination of both male and female participants from a variety of K-12 leadership disciplines is desired for the study to capture their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As reaching saturation and ensuring valid conceptualization has proven to be difficult in transcendental phenomenology, it will be key to gather this range of perceptions in order to gain a depth of understanding of the phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2017).

Data Collection Plan

Varied data sources will be used in this research to gain the best understanding of the K-12 leader's experience of social-emotional development of students during the COVID-19

pandemic. Triangulation will be used as a method to increase trustworthiness and ensure integrity of data collection methods through a demographic questionnaire, followed by individual interviews, and finally a focus group. Questionnaires to determine qualified study participants will take place first, followed by individual interviews to gain an impression from the perspective of the individual. Focus groups will then be conducted to verify any emerging themes and assist in the identification of new themes (Patton, 2015).

Prior to each interview, I will engage in the epoché process to set aside any past biases as not to taint the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews will be conducted using open-ended questions to gather a detailed perspective from the participants. Data will be gathered from each interview until a saturation point is reached and no new data will be conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and stored in a secure password protected location.

Surveys/Questionnaires

In this study, the primary data source will be in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This The choice of selecting semi-structured interviews is done with the intent that these interviews will lead to an engaging discussion. Before the initial interviews take place, an initial questionnaire will be given to participants to ensure they are a good fit for the study. The questions asked will help determine whether the participant qualifies for participation. The questions will be straight-forward and will allow me to gather the demographic information I need for the study. They will also assist in the elimination of participants that do not qualify for the study.

Survey/Questionnaire Questions

1. How would you describe your ethnicity?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your current position and where is your school located?
4. Were you a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Are you currently a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher presently?

Interviews

Interviews for this study will follow a semi-structured construct as an approach to ask several defined and definite questions, but also allow the responses to lead to others of exploration (Gill et al., 2008). The interview setting will be in a comfortable environment, allowing for rich discourse (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological interviews must start with social conversation or short introduction activities that lead to a trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). As such, the interviews will not only begin by having participants introduce themselves to me, but also allow for a level of comfort to be established. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The following questions were developed for use.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. CRQ
2. Describe your challenges when working with social emotional development in your school during the COVID-19 pandemic. SQ1

3. Describe successful practices you used when working with social emotional development in your school during the COVID-19 pandemic. SQ1
4. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to work with social emotional development during the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1
5. Please describe your pedagogical experiences with social emotional development. CRQ
6. How did you have to change your pedagogical beliefs and practices about social-emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic? CRQ
7. Please describe the social-emotional development practices in your school prior to and post the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ
8. What was your prior experience with social-emotional development? CRQ
9. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with social-emotional development that we haven't discussed? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2

This line of questioning will allow the participants to introduce themselves in their words and will assist me in the initial analysis of data, themes, and participant's experiences. As the questions are all open-ended, they will lead the participants in a conversation with me to describe their experiences in social-emotional development of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions give participants the opportunity to share their challenges, as well as the positive experiences they have had during the last few years. As such, this will give me the opportunity to have a variety of responses for analysis.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Individual interviews will enable me to identify and interpret the response to the interview questions. The data analysis plan will include epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and textural/structural descriptions. Each interview will be recorded with

Zoom's internal recording software and transcribed via Microsoft word, read several times to obtain the overall meaning utilizing the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) and shared with participants for validation. As per the transcendental reduction process, each statement in the interview transcripts will be examined for key phrases and concepts. Any significant phrases or sentences will be identified and coded. I will eliminate any vague, repetitive, or overlapping elements or statements during this process. The coded data will be kept in Microsoft Excel. After the identification of key phrases and concepts, the data will then be clustered into labeled themes.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a well-established research method in qualitative studies that allow social interaction between a predetermined small group of individuals who focus on a particular topic. A focus group will be utilized in this study to verify emerging themes from the individual interviews. The group will be arranged by email and held virtually via Zoom. Focus group interactions enhance the quality of data as they tend to counter-balance each other (Patton, 2015). Additionally, conducting a focus group will assist me in gathering a variety of perspectives and themes through the sessions and discussion.

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the other participants and share your positions during the pandemic. CRQ
2. You were given access to the core tenets of social-emotional learning via a QR code. Based on that definition of social-emotional learning and its core tenets, describe your experience with social-emotional development. CRQ
3. Provide examples or share your experience that may support your practice of social-

emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ

4. What factors have impacted your social-emotional development practices since the beginning of the pandemic? CRQ, SQ1
5. If you have been an administrator or taught at various levels of school (elementary, middle, high), what are additional factors you have seen that impacted the social-emotional development practices of your school since the pandemic? CRQ
6. How do you feel about the role that institutional readiness played in your organization's approach to social-emotional learning during and now after the pandemic? CRQ
7. What do you feel has been done well and what could use improvement with social-emotional development since the pandemic began? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
8. Describe the strategies you have used to engage in conversations with other about social-emotional development in your school since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
9. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to share that is important for me to know about social-emotional development during COVID-19? CRQ

This line of questioning was used to gain further insight into the themes that will be developed during the individual interviews. I expect these focus group questions to change as the data analysis from the interviews begin, as I would like them to be responsive to the data. However, this line of questioning provides a basis or foundation for the research to continue and grow from the previous data collection method.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan will include epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and textural/structural descriptions. The focus group will be recorded via Zoom's internal recording software and transcribed using Microsoft Word. The transcripts will be shared with participants for validation. As per the transcendental reduction process, each statement in the focus transcripts will be examined for any repeating or additional key phrases and concepts from the individual interviews. Any significant or new phrases or sentences will be identified and coded. I will eliminate any vague, repetitive, or overlapping elements or statements during this process. The coded data will be kept in Microsoft Excel. After the identification of key phrases and concepts, the data will then be clustered into labeled themes. Triangulation will now be achieved by analyzing this data with the data from the remaining sets of data. Using the codes created in Microsoft Excel, individual textural and composite textural descriptions will be constructed to describe their experiences.

Artifact and Document Collection and Analysis

As a third method of data collection, documents and artifacts from lesson plans, letters to families, newsletters, curriculum modifications, and/or school policies created after the COVID-19 pandemic in response to changes made in social-emotional learning will be collected from participants and analyzed. The documents and artifacts will be analyzed for items that suggest meaning to social-emotional development. Each statement in the documents will be examined for any repetition or additional significant ideas from the previous modes of data collection, in accordance with the transcendental reduction method. Any noteworthy or unique phrases or terms will be noted and coded. Throughout this procedure, I will remove any ambiguous, redundant, or overlapping statements or components. Microsoft Excel will be used to store the

coded data. The data will be grouped into labeled themes after key words and concepts have been identified. This data will then be examined in conjunction with the data from the other sets of data to achieve triangulation. Individual and composite textural descriptions of their experiences will be built using the codes generated in Microsoft Excel.

Data Synthesis

I will analyze the data for this transcendental phenomenological study using epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, textual/structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Through this analysis, the phenomenon will be recorded and analyzed concurrently (Moustakas, 1994). The first step of analysis is the process of epoche. This is crucial as the goal of transcendental phenomenology is to see things as they are, refraining from bias (Moustakas, 1994). The challenge of epoche is to allow our biases to disclose themselves so we can see things through a clear lens (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche will continue throughout the entire process of this research as I will actively and continuously set aside prior experiences to allow the experiences of the participants to be the focus of the research (Moustakas, 1994). To main this, I will keep a journal to recognize my own thoughts and biases.

The second step in the data analysis is phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, it will be crucial that each experience be considered on its own and analyzed in the light of its own evidence (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure this process, the recorded and transcribed questionnaires, interviews, focus groups will be analyzed any synthesized beginning with horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The horizons that will develop from this process will range from statements, sentences, or quotes that will develop into themes (Moustakas, 1994). All transcripts will be read several times to obtain the overall meaning. As per the transcendental reduction process, each statement in the transcripts will be examined for new or existing key

phrases or concepts. Any significant phrases or sentences will be identified and coded. I will look for nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping elements and will eliminate vague or unrelated statements.

After the identification of key phrases and concepts, I will cluster them into labeled themes, which is the third step in the process titled imaginative variation. Codes will be used to describe and identify key themes. Triangulation will be achieved by analyzing all sets of data. Using the codes created to identify key themes, individual textural descriptions and composite textural descriptions will be constructed to describe the K-12 leaders experience with social-emotional development during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moustakas, 1994). I will then construct individual structural descriptions in looking from different perspectives for additional possible interpretations. Finally, I will create textural/structural descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon of the shared lessons learned of K-12 leaders with the social-emotional development of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceived of the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a study, specifically credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study upholds these elements of trustworthiness through the methods and practices described throughout the paper and in detail below. The quality of a qualitative study is dependent upon these concepts as it displays the accountability of the researcher to those who read and participate in the study. This section outlines the steps used to ensure a robust study using the Lincoln and Guba (1985) lens.

Credibility

Credibility is confidence in the truth of a study's findings or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checks will be employed to ensure credibility. Prolonged engagement will be achieved through the individual interviews and focus groups. Triangulation will be achieved through the use of different data sources and methods of data collection. Member checks will also be utilized to strengthen the credibility of the study and include the availability to share the data, interpretations, and conclusions with participants for their review and feedback (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved using thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 2008). Transferability in this study through thick descriptions of experiences. Specifically, details surrounding the setting, sample size, sample strategy, demographics, interview and focus group procedures will ensure the transferability of this study for other researchers. Additionally, given that methods of sampling used, it ensures a wide variety of participants, which will only increase the usability of the results of this study for future purposes.

Dependability

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which can be demonstrated through an effective description of the procedures undertaken for the study. Dependability in this study will be achieved through the record keeping processes and transparency in description of research steps and actions taken. Additionally, the

recording and transcription of interviews and focus groups will ensure the participant's views were included completely and incorporated into the data collection and analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Techniques used for confirmability in this research will be ensuring the findings are clearly derived from the data and do not simply mirror my beliefs, opinions, or viewpoints. To ensure this process, I will keep notes from the interviews, focus groups, and will keep a reflective journal. In the reflective journal, I will be sure to include my thoughts during the interview and focus group processes.

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, ethical considerations must be taken into account considered before the study starts and must continue throughout data collection, during data processing, during reporting results, and when publishing research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are many intricate ethical issues that must be addressed because this study will include people. At all stages of the process, research involving people should adhere to well-defined ethical standards, including autonomy, beneficence, and fairness. To ensure these measures will be addressed for this study, I will ensure participants and their data are not put in harm's way in any way, shape, or form. I will begin by obtaining IRB approval and consent from the participants. The goals of my research will be clearly described to the participants and their confidentiality and anonymity will be assured. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms will be utilized, and all data will be stored on a password protected files on a password protected computer and USB drive. Additionally, participants will be made aware that participation in this study is completely voluntary and

transcripts and findings of the study will be available for participants to access should they request to do so.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter provided a description of qualitative research and the rationale for qualitative research. Participants will take part in a demographic questionnaire to determine eligibility for the study, followed by an individual interview, and then a focus group. The following research questions and sub questions guided this study: What changes have K-12 leaders made in developing social-emotional skills since the COVID-19 pandemic? How has support changed in K-12 social emotional skill development since the COVID-19 pandemic? What did we learn about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 in the K-12 setting? These questions will assist in guiding the interview and focus group questions. This chapter provided a description of qualitative research, why this method was chosen for this research, and the design type to be utilized for this study. The researcher's role was described in detail as well as the methods for data collection and establishing the validity of the study. Results from this study may provide valuable information in understanding the lessons learned in social-emotional development of K-12 students since the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to beginning the study, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and inform consent was collected and filed. Provisions to protect the participant privacy and confidentiality of data was be provided utilizing computer file encryption, and hard copy materials were locked in a safe. A combination of purposeful sampling, criterion sampling, and snowball sampling methods to attempt to collect data from the widest range of perspectives possible was utilized (Benoot et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2013). Varied data sources were used to gain the best understanding of the K-12 leader's experience of social-emotional development of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Triangulation was used as a method to increase trustworthiness and ensure integrity of data collection methods through a demographic questionnaire, followed by individual interviews, and finally a focus group with artifact collection. Prior to each interview and the focus group, I engaged in the epoché process to set aside any past biases as not to taint the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews and focus group were conducted using open-ended questions to gather a detailed perspective from the participants. Data was gathered from each interview until a saturation point is reached and no new data will be conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and stored in a secure password protected location.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced K-12 education, and as a result, social-emotional learning and development has become an important focus for schools. Data analysis of social-emotional development in K-12 schools since the pandemic revealed several key lessons and

themes. These findings can be used to inform the development and implementation of social-emotional programs in the future, to better support the social and emotional well-being of students. This chapter includes participant descriptions, that data presented by theme, outlier data, and research question responses.

Participants

After successful recruiting, 12 diverse participants were found and interviewed for the study. The chart below holds the information for each participant (pseudonyms) and their area of expertise. Each participant was successfully vetted prior to the commencing the study. The participants included six males and six females from the several different grades in the K-12 setting. Amongst the participants were four Heads of School, two Assistant Principals, and six teachers.

Table 1

K-12 Participants

Participant	Years of Experiences	Highest Degree Earned	Focus Area	Grade Level
Kevin	25	Doctorate	Head of School	K-12
Samantha	17	Master’s Degree	Assistant Principal	9-12
Brittney	13	Bachelor	Biology	9-12
Thomas	5	Bachelor	Elementary	5
Jasmine	30	Master’s Degree	Math and Science	4-5
Anthony	14	Doctorate	English Language Arts	6-8

Bethany	10	Master's Degree	Social Emotional Learning	6-12
Nathan	24	Master's Degree	Head of School	K-12
Paulina	12	Doctorate	Assistant Principal	K-5
Evan	20	Master's Degree	Head of School	K-5
Samuel	27	Doctorate	Head of School	6-12
Sheila	21	Bachelor's Degree	Math	9-12

Results

The themes discovered during research on lessons learned after the COVID-19 pandemic were student struggles, with the subthemes of student focus and the influence of virtual learning, teacher/staff struggles with the subthemes of professional development and work/life balance, and the theme of school climate with the subthemes of daily social-emotional skill lesson, student engagement, student wellness, and teacher well-being. These themes were developed using the data from individual interviews, a focus group, and artifact collection. Each theme and subtheme were shared with the participants, and each participant had an opportunity to provide feedback via member checking. The themes and subthemes are directly related to the central and secondary research questions related to lessons learned in social-emotional learning and development in the K-12 setting.

Theme Development

Table 2
Themes, Subthemes, and in Vivo Evidence

Themes	Subthemes	in Vivo Evidence
Student Challenges	Student Focus and Virtual Learning	Delay in response, repeated reminders, students are distracted, incomplete work, distracting home environment, siblings, no camera usage, they are not as engaged, missed out, concentration difficulties, challenging, frequent breaks, curriculum adjustments, standard pacing, lesson adjustments, behavioral challenges, great for some, focus of the future, lack luster work completion, anxiety, health concerns, balance, technology access, internet access, laptop access, attendance concerns, academic achievement gap, social anxiety seems worse, classes were not as engaging, learning loss, mental health challenges, inequity, reduced physical activity, health concerns when returning to in-person, challenges in teaching styles, pace of in-person learning after remote learning
Teacher/Staff Challenges	Professional Development	Virtual learning without proper training, lack of needed technology at home, school internet not working properly, I felt blamed, I was trying my best, difficult to manage, unprepared, feedback, support, need more planning, district wide development, school-based assistance
	Work/Life Balance	Worked longer hours, lost control of balance, family health concerns, spouse and children felt frustrated, I often felt alone, privacy invasion, crying, it was extremely difficult, no office, no classroom, I never turned off, I lost sleep, a focus for the future, more support for teachers, scheduled work hours, paid time off, fewer meetings

School Climate	Social-Emotional Skills	Brief, every day, skill related, not just character education, students and adults need help, skill development, fifteen minutes, preparing for the future generation, curriculum
	Student Engagement	Increase, learned how to work together, connection, focus on growth, teamwork, missed opportunities, home/school connection, student-led clubs and trips, academic enrichment, the pandemic gap, engaging the community
	Student Wellness	Students appear happy, appear less stressed, fewer discipline issues, field trips, seminars, exercise, mentors, check-ins, systems of support, counselors, stress management, open door policies

Student Challenges

The participants frequently highlighted aspects of student struggles when describing their lived experiences during and after the pandemic. Participant Paulina described how the pandemic made it “difficult for students to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.” Participants described several reasons for why student struggles may have occurred based on their lived experiences. Bethany stated that students "missed out” on crucial learning “opportunities and instructional time,” which “may have decreased their academic performance and widened achievement gaps.” Similarly, Evan added that students also appeared to find it challenging to “adapt to a new routine and schedule” when schools were closed, and classes were moved online. Students had to adjust to remote learning, which required them to “learn how to use new technology” and alternative learning methods, which may have caused tension and “anxiety.” All

teacher participants stressed the differences between traditional and remote learning. Sheila shared, “Remote learning allowed my students to work at their own pace, but in-person learning requires students to follow a set schedule.” Paulina, an Assistant Principal, reported students having an increased difficulty in the ability to work independently upon return to the classrooms after remote learning.

Data collection also uncovered the various levels of student needs observed in the classroom after returning from virtual learning to the classroom. The participants discussed the balance needed between keeping academic standards high while also maintaining “academic integrity” was hard to achieve. Paulina stated, “I expected a drop in academic achievement, but I was not prepared for the difficulties our students’ exhibited in reduction of social skills and their difficulty regulating.”

Student Focus and Virtual Learning

Participants began to describe specific focus-related challenges and what those challenges were like for them during their experiences. The pandemic had an influence on students’ ability to focus on their academics. Participants agreed with Samuel’s statement that “delays in response” to both in class questions and emails and messages sent from both teachers and administration made communication difficult and at times “nearly impossible” According to Thomas. A delay in response, or no response at all, was particularly true for students who had ill family members. For example, Brittney shared 15% of her student body did not respond to virtual classroom notifications or assignments at all for the first three months of the pandemic. When Brittney called to inquire about her students not attending, all families shared with her that they were struggling with severely ill family members and could not focus on schoolwork. The number of students not attending classes decreased after three months in Brittney’s classroom,

but she reported that nine students did not complete any work at all from March to June 2020. Anthony also detailed a smaller portion of his students, around 7%, had similar struggles in attending virtual classes due to illness in the family, but Anthony's students were able to catch up on their work when he provided flexibility with due dates.

Kevin noted that during live virtual classes, he observed students being distracted by siblings in the home, television in the background, parents working from home, and from being a bit "bored with sitting in front of a computer all day." Kevin also shared that in response his school adjusted their schedules to provide for more independent and self-paced work for students who were struggling to follow along with the virtual lessons. Nathan, however, stated that for his campus, when students were given more independent time, they saw productivity rates drop, and so they followed the same schedule as they would during in-person learning virtually, except for an extended break for lunch. Kevin described keeping the same schedule as helpful for his students; he shared a note from a family that thanked the school for keeping the routine from in-person learning in the virtual setting because the familiarity was helpful for their children. Kevin also shared parent satisfaction survey results where one of the questions specifically asked about the schedule of students during virtual learning. Ninety-five percent of parents gave Kevin's school a "better than expected" rating on the survey. Five percent of parents gave Kevin's school a rating of "worse than expected" on the same survey, which was evidence of the schedule not working for everyone, but it worked for many of his students and their families.

Sheila stated many of her students did not have laptops or proper internet activity at home. Thus, many of her students were attending classes without a camera or "on mom's phone" which may have made focusing a challenge. In response, Sheila's campus set up a time for families to come to campus and borrow a student laptop for the remainder of the year, a best

practice that continues at her school. "Assisting our students in ensuring they had the academic and technological support they needed went a long way in increasing our engagement," she stated. Samuel, Jasmine, Evan, Paulina, Anthony, and Brittney's schools also addressed the issue of technology by setting times for students to come to each campus and sign-out a laptop for the year. Anthony's campus also set up technology assistance "waiting rooms" on their Google Classroom platform. Anthony described a staff member being assigned to the waiting room for a specific time each day, usually first thing in the morning, after lunch, and after any extended breaks from live classes. Anthony said if there were any students or families who were having difficulty hearing, seeing, or accessing their classroom links, the staff member in the waiting room would assist them. Anthony stated at the beginning of virtual learning that the waiting room was helpful, but it became less needed as students and families became accustomed to using Google Classroom. Paulina shared a clickable PDF that walked families through setting up and using Zoom for the classroom, which she also found was helpful for students and families.

Despite having the tools needed for a successful virtual learning environment in 11 out of the 12 interviews conducted, all participants agreed that they lacked the training and development needed to successfully teach in a virtual program. Jasmine mentioned, "Not all teachers and students were equipped with the necessary skills to have an effective online learning experience." The lack of preparedness led to many perceived difficulties for students and teachers. Paulina stated, "Given the advances technology is making in the K-12 sphere, we must do a better job at equipping our schools with proper technological resources. There is no guarantee another pandemic won't hit us again and we must be better prepared." Thomas, an elementary school teacher, described feeling inadequate to handle a virtual classroom of more

than 20 eight-year-olds in his care. Thomas reported, “Attendance and test scores were the worst I’d seen in years. I began to question my efficacy as a teacher.” When asked to expand upon his feelings regarding his efficacy, Thomas explained that attendance was never an issue in his classroom prior to the pandemic. He described how he was comparing his virtual classroom to his in-person classroom by means of what he explained to be “a lack of hands-on activities and interaction” in the virtual classroom. He then explained it took him several months to adapt to keeping engagement high in a virtual classroom by utilizing live polls, videos, and games as much as possible. However, Thomas also stated that by the time he felt efficient in his virtual classroom, the end of the school year arrived, and, in the fall, students returned to in-person learning in his campus. Thomas then described feeling as though his students may not have learned as much as they should have in the virtual environment. strategy.

However, student focus continued to be an issue after the pandemic ended and students returned to the classroom environment. Bethany described students having difficulty sitting in their desks for more than 10 minutes at a time, walking around the classroom in the middle of a lesson, bringing food to the classroom, and refusing to participate verbally in lessons. Bethany stated these above-mentioned behaviors may have been learned during virtual learning. “In the virtual classroom, students could easily turn off their cameras and grab a bite to eat, go to the restroom, or talk to their parents. “It was normal and acceptable during the pandemic,” added Anthony. When the participants were asked if they also agreed that these behaviors were normal during the pandemic, eight out of 12 participants agreed, while four participants explained they did not allow such behaviors during their live lessons. Jasmine explained that in her virtual classes, if a student needed to use the restroom, they were told to ask just as they would in an in-person class. Thomas explained that his school was more relaxed when it came to the above-

mentioned behaviors due to students being at home and they did not see it possible to enforce. Jasmine, however, stated that enforcement was not an issue for them regarding these rules. However, all 12 participants noted difficulty in students remaining seated for long periods of time and responding when called on during a lesson.

Brittney stated, “post-COVID student needs, especially behavioral needs, were far more than I anticipated.” Brittney told of students refusing to work together, insisting they complete their work independently. When students did work together, Brittney described “constant arguing” and inability to problem solve in a group. When asked if other participants experienced similar behaviors, all of the focus group participants agreed they had witnessed similar behaviors. Evan mentioned that reintegration into a classroom where students were once again face-to-face after a minimum of six months, some up to 18 months, may have produced new challenges. Evan, a Head of School, described this experience as an “awakening” into student needs he had not realized were not being met. Evan related he was not aware how quickly social skills could be lost while not being used. For example, Evan said, “I never imagined a student would forget it was appropriate to raise your hand before speaking in a classroom. This is something we are taught in kindergarten.” After the pandemic, Evan added, he realized it was important to routinely and continuously practice social skills that may seem trivial, like raising your hand, because students he said, “can easily forget what is and is not appropriate.” Samantha described students who would “refuse to answer questions and refuse to participate in small group or partner work. Kevin added his observation of students who appeared “more prone to disagreements” and who were not able to concentrate for more than “a few minutes” without getting up from their seats. As a result, Samuel described a “complete reset” of behaviors and expectations that occurred so often, he struggled to keep up with academic demands.

Several other participants agreed that in response, their campuses began planning for ways to incorporate explicit teaching of social skills into their daily curriculum. Kevin's school began a program called "Caring School Community" which included 26 minutes of social-emotional learning every day. "At our school, we have daily 26 minutes social emotional learning time. We use the second edition of Caring School Community (CSC) during this time. CSC is a scripted program. Teacher's role is mostly facilitating the discussions among students based on the scripts for each day," Kevin added. With the daily use of this program, Kevin noted a positive change in the behaviors and behavior-related distractions occurring in the classroom. For example, Kevin witnessed an increase in positive student peer-to-peer interactions and positive student-to-teacher interactions in his campus. Kevin's school also began their process for applying to become a National School of Character, which was achieved in 2022. Nathan's school began a program called "ReThink" which also has scripted lessons for teachers to use in the classroom, but stated the program usage in school was not as high as they had hoped. As such, the program did not continue in the 2021-2022 school year, and they currently rely on the school counselor to teach social-emotional lessons utilizing ReThink's digital platform.

Jasmine described her school arranging role-play seminars that were planned and led by students. She said each week the school assigned a theme of a social-emotional skill, such as kindness, and students were assigned the responsibility of being kind that week. When a staff member noticed a student being kind, they would reward the student with a merit. For each merit they received, the merit translated into fake money that the students could use to purchase something from the school store. At the end of each topic, homeroom teachers would assist their students in preparing a short role-play or skit with that skill as a subject. Jasmine said the skit or

role-play was a fun activity for students, and she noticed "many" students go out of their way to exhibit the positive social-emotional skills being taught.

Teacher/Staff Challenges

Participants of the study described several obstacles faced during and post-pandemic. The pandemic demonstrated the necessity for school leaders, teachers, and staff to be responsive to unknown and changing conditions. When schools closed, administrators had to quickly transition to remote learning. Kevin also described the need to "revise programs when schools reopened with additional health and safety regulations." School administrator Samuel described a focus on increased communication while collaborating to find answers to "difficult challenges" the pandemic presented, such as staff catching COVID and not being able to work for more than 10 days at times, trial and error when it came to best practices in the virtual classroom for teachers, the increase in workload and witnessed stress in staff, and concerns over safety when returning to the building. To address these challenges, Samuel's school focused on multiple means of communication. For example, when Samuel's school rolled out their plan for a return to in-person learning, they sent an email, held a virtual town hall, and recorded a YouTube video. While preparing for their plans, Samuel stated participating in meetings and health department sessions with guidance for schools to ensure he had the needed steps in place. However, Samuel, Paulina, Kevin, and Thomas all stated that no matter the amount of communication offered, staff members may have felt overwhelmed with all the changes.

Professional Development

The participants described numerous obstacles regarding their professional growth during and post-pandemic. Evan reported the integration of technology and professional development as one of the biggest challenges in his campus. Paulina stated, "providing access

mental health supports and services was difficult," and Nathan added, "the lack of peer-to-peer interaction and support appeared difficult for many of our students and teachers alike." The participants agreed that a need for a focus on professional development became a goal for the upcoming school year.

Teachers and administrative panelists described, "quickly needing to acclimate to teaching online because schools were closed," and "feeling forced to acquire new novel abilities in technology, generate new solutions to student engagement, and develop strategies for maintaining a community-like atmosphere in an online classroom." Participants described having "limited access to resources" which may have assisted in learning new techniques and skills because "with the closure of school, came the cancellation of our professional development." The limited access to resources included technical resources, such as lack of high-speed internet, lack of high-quality laptops, headphones, and microphones on teacher laptops. Academically, the limited resources were in terms of a digitalized curriculum was easily accessible for students from their homes. Kevin recounted his school purchasing new licenses to an online curriculum platform, but the school was not able to provide training on how to use the platform. Kevin also noted due to the lack of training, many teachers began using websites that had not been vetted by administration to print PDF worksheets and send to students to complete. "Without a printer at home, printing worksheets was not an option for many of our students," added Kevin. Which may have negatively affected students.

Participants also described the influx of new tasks because of the pandemic, such as "maintaining online platforms, generating digital resources, and offering additional assistance to students struggling with the change" to feel overwhelming at times. For instance, Samantha disclosed switching student information systems to one that was able to integrate with Google

Classroom and other online platforms the students would be using. Thomas demonstrated how he learned to use PowerPoint to create editable worksheets, games, and interactive lessons to be used in a digital platform. “While these changes were necessary, adapting to the needs of the virtual environment was inundating,” clarified Samantha. Participants agreed that the pandemic influenced their professional development choices now. A focus on technology, flexibility, adaptability, collaboration, self-care, and equity and inclusion became the forefront of professional development efforts in Kevin’s school. Samantha, Thomas, Evan, and Sheila described similar sentiments in their campuses, but explained a stricter focus on technology, adaptability, and self-care. The focus group was asked to describe any specific efforts on their campuses for these professional development efforts as a response to the pandemic, and eight out of 12 participants stated it was a focus mostly during teacher training at the beginning of the year, while the remaining four described ongoing professional development throughout the year.

Work/Life Balance

Jasmine also described the difficulty she had while balancing work and home life while working remotely. “I felt like I was always on. While in the classroom, I was able to close and lock my door at the end of the day. But, while working remotely, I couldn’t do that. I was always accessible. Yeah, it was definitely a challenge.” All the participants agreed with Jasmine, Samantha stating, “it was extremely difficult,” and “my family felt frustrated that I wasn’t able to be with them.” Paulina added, “several of my family members became very ill at the beginning of the pandemic, but I was unable to be with them.” With the swift adjustment to remote learning, the participants described an increased need to focus on planning, preparation, and new modes of grading. As a result, they were spending “more hours each day to complete the same amount of work” they were doing prior to working in the virtual setting, as described by Jasmine.

Several participants, including Bethany found it difficult to separate their work from their personal life. Bethany stated she felt this way because she "worked from home and didn't have a designated workstation."

Additionally, all participants noted increased stress and worry about their own health, the health of their students, and "the influence the pandemic would have on learning" as noted by Sheila. Anthony stated, "I was used to my administrators regularly visiting my classroom and giving feedback. When we moved to virtual learning, that stopped completely. I felt alone." "To achieve a healthy work-life balance, I had to set boundaries between work and home" added Paulina, "I added relaxation techniques and meditation to my daily schedule." Samantha noted, "I lost my support network when we switched to online learning. I was not comfortable asking for help. I wound up working very long hours and getting very little sleep."

However, when the pandemic ended and teachers and school staff returned to in-person learning, participants described balancing their work and personal lives did not become easier. Anthony described, "a new normal of long hours" and "nonstop work" when returning to campus, due to the "safety and health restrictions of pandemic era in-person learning." Sheila noted that a balance for her life was found when she "almost burned out" and believed she needed to "figure this out now or things would only get worse." When I asked Sheila to describe in more detail her thoughts on that statement, she explained, "My work was never done. I don't think it ever will be done. But rather than following a schedule, I was trying to finish every piece of work every day. Until I found myself on the brink of burning out. Then, I decided I needed to make a change." Sheila then went on to describe a method of planning her day to ensure she felt productive but was not working constantly.

School Climate

The participants described many changes in school climate during and post-pandemic. Fear and health concerns amongst students, staff, faculty, and families may have, according to Anthony, “contributed to a tense and stressful atmosphere.” The pandemic caused changes in routines and structures, including class times, schedules, social isolation, and a switch to virtual learning which may have disrupted the sense of “regularity and stability” amongst staff and students alike, Evan added. Upon return to in-person learning, Brittney described “ensuring all students felt supported and included” in the efforts and plans of the school. Participants described efforts to alleviate academic deficits after the pandemic through “targeted interventions” such as “small group work,” “tutoring,” and “after-school homework assistance” as described by Kevin. However, the participants discussed a focus on the social and emotional well-being of their students and co-workers after the pandemic. Anthony described students as “suffering” and having a need for “enhanced mental health care” such as counseling services, supporting self-care habits, and providing tools for stress and anxiety management. Upon return to in-person learning, the Nathan noted students struggling to “utilize coping skills” and “develop positive relationships.” Samantha described students needing to be “self-directed and self-motivated” during the pandemic and when they returned to campus, they witnessed these students struggle with “self-awareness and self-management.” While discussing possible reasons why this changed happened, Kevin said, “being self-motivating can be difficult for some, so when they found a place where they no longer needed to motivate themselves, it’s almost as if they gave up and lost all motivation completely.” Seven other participants also noted a struggle with coping and social-emotional skills, which is further described below.

Social-Emotional Skills

Anthony stated, “I noticed that the issue of loneliness and not having friends was a big problem for students. We were happy to see that our daily social-emotional learning program was a venue for students to create more meaningful friendships during classroom discussions through weekly rotation buddies.” In Anthony’s school, middle school students were assigned a buddy each week that they were to meet with and hold discussions within the classroom. Each week had a different topic or game. For example, one week, students were assigned to describe what it meant to be a leader. Each pair of students were given pieces of a pinwheel on which they were to write descriptions of a good leader. After the descriptions were written, the pinwheels were assembled and placed in the lawn of the school for all to see. “Leadership is just the example that comes to mind now, but we had a range of topics and activities each week,” Anthony added. By having the students rotate buddies each week, Anthony’s purpose was to have students “get to know someone new every week.”

Brittney described school-wide assemblies where students “by practice and application reinforced and improved their own social-emotional skills” through roleplaying and problem-solving activities. Evan explained his campus had a focus on “positive reinforcement from teachers who role-modeled, provided feedback, and recognized positive behaviors.” In one instance, Pauline described social-emotional skills as “taught explicitly, actively teaching skills and methods” which included “self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and motivation.” Kevin reiterated here once again that his school’s idea of inclusion of social-emotional learning post-pandemic focused on curriculum integration so lessons could be completed in groups to “focus on collaboration.” Jasmine added that a focus on positive recognition for positive behavior “fostered a healthy environment where a sense of community began to return.” Jasmine

described the return of a sense of community to mean a reduction in behavior issues to pre-pandemic times. She also described a healthy environment as one where students are focused, actively engaged in lessons, avoiding conflict, and working with their peers in a safe and calm classroom.

The participants then went on to describe how their schools' engaged students and families through initiatives ranging from workshops to conferences and tools for parents to use at home. Kevin's school participated in home visits, wellness webinars, virtual and in-person engagement nights for students and families, and virtual field trips. Jasmine's school held "Wellness Wednesday" each week during the pandemic where they invited a speaker to discuss important topics such as anxiety and stress relief, coping with loss, meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, and mindfulness for students and families. Other keywords that arose during triangulation were, "active participation," "daily practice," and "social skill increase" amongst students. These keywords are significant because they align with the testimonies of the participants and their goals for addressing the issues and challenges that arose during the pandemic in terms of social-emotional development. They also align with the challenges described for students both during and post pandemic learning. Specifically, participants noted a lack of lack of participation, daily skill practice, and difficulties with social skills during and after the immediate return from virtual learning. Noting an improvement after the efforts may have been significant for their campuses.

Student Engagement and Wellness

Most participants stated that a lack of knowledge on how to properly address the social emotional needs arose in both student and teachers during the pandemic, but a focus on these skills during and after the pandemic had an influence on both student and teacher wellness.

Bethany stated, “We had character education and social-emotional lessons prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic exemplified the issue more than I could have imagined.” She described students exhibiting behaviors that she did not witness prior to the pandemic including, a lack of motivation, refusing to follow directions, refusing to complete work, and an increase in what she described as “students isolating and not wanting to engage with peers or teachers.” As a response, Bethany stated a focus on “virtual field trips,” “online game nights,” “virtual tours of museums, historical sites, and landmarks,” as well “online clubs,” “online activities,” and “virtual writing workshops.” Participants described a range of techniques used to enhance student participation outside of the classroom. Providing virtual platforms for students and families to remain engaged with the school community may have led to an “uptick in student wellness” described by Kevin. Furthermore, Paulina shared her school arranged virtual guest speakers during the pandemic and continued with in-person post-pandemic that focused on well-being and mindfulness for students and staff alike. Paulina described this positively affected well-being by supplying students and staff with real-world solutions to issues with well-being including stress, anxiety, and overwhelm.

Engaging student’s post-pandemic was described as “critical” by all of the participants upon student return to school. In addition to the social-emotional focus described above, Jasmine also noted a focus on “project-based learning” where students were involved in solving real-world problems through tasks that “necessitate critical thinking and cooperation.” For example, in Jasmine’s campus, a classroom was tasked with finding a solution for an issue that was raised during the pandemic. The students were told to choose their own problem to solve, explain why it is important, and how they would address the problem. One group of students in this activity chose to build a day facility for people who lost their jobs during the pandemic. This facility

would feed up to 250 people per day, provide spaces for bathing, clothing, and job-seeking assistance. Jasmine described these efforts as effective because it encouraged engagement and gave students a goal that focused on the wellness of others.

Community service initiatives were also employed to "help students develop a sense of social responsibility and make a positive contribution to society." For example, a group of high school students in Kevin's school opened a small non-profit organization that focused on stopping child trafficking. Kevin described the students taking sole responsibility for the needs of the organization and only offered his assistance when they asked, or he saw they needed help, such as filing bylaws, for example. Kevin explained that by encouraging his students to help others, he believed his students may become happier themselves. Kevin described this endeavor as a success because the organization is still open, and they have even opened a second chapter now that the opening committee has graduated from their school.

Outlier Data and Findings

Students Striving in Virtual Learning

Two out of 12 of the participants described a set of students who "thrived during virtual learning" and chose to remain virtual rather than returning to the school when the schools reopened. While other participants reported a mostly negative experience for remote learning, Samantha and Kevin described a total of six students in their campuses that thrived in the remote environment. Kevin's shared his set of students did well in the "flexible environment of remote learning" and they were able to progress much further when allowed to "self-direct the pace of learning" in their classrooms. He also explained that remote learning may have allowed his students to learn in an environment without the distractions of the physical classroom,

particularly for students who struggled with anxiety, which was surprising because most participants described the pandemic as a negative influence on anxiety.

Samantha's students thrived for different reasons, according to her description. Samantha stated her students thrived because through virtual learning, they were able to provide the students with a more personalized experience through several different educational websites. "Two of my students finished a year's worth of work in a matter of months," she shared. Samantha described this set of students feeling "comfortable" with the use of advanced technology. The comfortability described was surprising because most participants described the use of advanced technology as a hindrance on learning.

Research Question Responses

This section describes the answers to the central and sub-research questions in lessons learned in social-emotional development post pandemic in K-12 schools. A triangulation of data sources was reviewed and analyzed. There is a narrative explanation of the central research question and the following sub-questions. Evidence from several data sources submitted by participants is offered to support each of the research questions that explain the lived experiences of the participants.

Central Research Question

What changes have K-12 leaders made in developing social-emotional skills since the COVID-19 pandemic?

The changes made in the development of social-emotional skills since the pandemic revealed through the themes of student challenges, virtual learning, teacher, and staff struggles, work/life balance, school climate and school engagement varied. The participants in this study each had a personal approach to the development of social-emotional skills that, while similar to

many of the other participants, also had unique characteristics of their own. Several participants had a focus on the daily inclusion of social-emotional skills, not just character education, in their schools through role-playing, assemblies, and teacher modeling. Other participants incorporated social-emotional learning into an existing curriculum where skills could be accessed readily. Kevin referred to a focus his school had on social-emotional learning prior to the beginning of the pandemic, but after the pandemic, they increased activities for engagement amongst students. Similarly, schools also took a focus to support teachers in their own social-emotional skill development.

Sheila described training that her teachers take monthly designed specifically for the purpose of teaching social-emotional skills to adults. She described it as “short and sweet” training that did not appear to overwhelm teachers but gave them the skills they could use to be role-models for their students. Samuel, Brittney, Thomas, Nathan, and Paulina also described a focus on professional development for teachers, but explained the training they received was mostly given at the beginning of the school year during teacher orientation weeks prior to the start of the school year. The phrase “support our students” was mentioned by participants 67 times and became central to the discussion of the changes in social-emotional skill development in our focus group. As such, the data also showed that the change in the level of support was also one of the biggest changes in social-emotional skill development since the pandemic in the K-12 setting. Jasmine, Anthony, and Evan stated a “need to start from within” for support to continue for students. All participants felt that if a change is going to occur in a systematic way for social-emotional skill development, it needs to start with the adults. They also stated that although this can be a “heavy burden to bear” that they generally view these changes as positive.

Sub-Question One

How has support changed in K-12 social emotional skill development since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Descriptions of how support has changed in K-12 social-emotional skill development since the pandemic varied by participants. All participants mentioned increasing student engagement and increasing professional development for staff as areas of support change. The principal and assistant principal participants described supporting their faculty through "regularly coordinated wellness activities" and for students through "engagement and curriculum development." One principal described a conscious choice for his campus to continue all the pre-pandemic activities and supports they had for students during and then post-pandemic time. He described keeping these supports in place as important for the climate in his school.

The phrase "based on feedback" appeared 30 times and became a central part to the changes that took place during this conversation in the focus group. Noting this phrase was important for the study, as it showed a progression in changes each participant's campus made in response to the pandemic in relation to social-emotional learning and development. All participants regularly surveyed students, families, and staff, and made changes in their programs based on those surveys. Three participants switched social-emotional learning curriculum based on these surveys to one that was more tech-friendly. Four participants adapted a system of mentoring for new teachers who are not familiar with the instruction or assessment of social-emotional skills, and six participants formed a committee that worked on curriculum integration of social-emotional skills.

Nathan, whose campus had a committee, described the key to success of their committee may have been the inclusion of students who were able to share feedback on their experiences.

As an artifact, Nathan shared the social-emotional learning committee roster for his campus, which included a student from each grade in middle and high school, all administrators, five parents, and fifteen teachers. Nathan described the committee meeting biweekly for 60 minutes for six or seven months. After six or seven months, the committee reduced their meeting frequency to once a month and currently meet every other month. Nathan shared that the frequency changed when the committee agreed the steps being taken were “working for the school” and further meetings then focused on data. When asked to describe what data and how the data was being used, Nathan explained they tracked discipline referrals, number of referrals to the school counselors, and absences. I was intrigued specifically about the inclusion of absences in the data collection, so I asked Nathan to elaborate. He said that he believed if students were happy, they would want to come to school. “The better the culture, the more students want to be here,” he said. As such, inclusion of absences was important for Nathan in this effort. Additionally, Nathan explained the number of referrals for both discipline and counselor visits was tracked to see the reasons for the referrals, and the committee made changes to the key topics in the social-emotional skill assignments, accordingly, focusing on skills that appeared to be areas of concerns in referrals.

Jasmine, a participant with a tech-friendly curriculum, explained the remote availability of the curriculum allowed her campus to assign social-emotional skills for homework, which may have been beneficial for her students. For example, Jasmine shared an artifact of a lesson on leadership that students completed. This lesson described a scenario where the student and a group of their friends were stranded on an island and the student oversaw devising a plan to survive on the island. The artifact had prompts that guided the students in their lesson. Jasmine described students having access to their social-emotional skill lessons at home appeared to

increase lesson completion and parent involvement. As such, Jasmine's campus deemed their strategy to be successful. However, Jasmine also stated her campus did not track discipline data as Nathan described. As such, she said her observations of students in the building led her to deem her campuses efforts as successful.

Brittney, Thomas, Paulina, Anthony, Sheila, and Samantha's campuses developed a mentoring program for new teachers after the pandemic. Sheila explained, "like many other schools, our campus was also suffering from a teacher shortage. The mentoring program started as a system to train new teachers in all aspects of the school but grew to focus on classroom management more than anything else." When asked to elaborate on how the training focused on social-emotional skill development, Sheila explained the students appeared to struggle with social-emotional skills, and "some of our teachers appeared to have a better handle on addressing the needs of their students, so we asked them to be mentors." I asked if they tracked data with their mentoring system, and Sheila explained they did not, but she anecdotally observed a "change in student behavior for the better." Thomas then shared how the strategy for his campus was "always" just to focus on social-emotional skill development. "We noticed students unable to hold what we considered to be simple conversations with one another without arguing," he said. Thomas' campus focused on assigning a school counselor to a set of 4-5 teachers who held routine mentoring meeting with the new teachers to help them with their social-emotional skill development efforts in the classroom. Like Sheila and Jasmine, Thomas' campus did not collect data for discipline purposes, but Thomas and the rest of the participants did conduct routine surveys, which is how they measured success of their programs.

Sub-Question Two

What did we learn about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 in the K-12

setting?

The lessons learned about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 were many and varied amongst interviews and focus group participants. Student need for social-emotional learning was described by participant Evan as “important in navigating the challenges of life.” Kevin stated the ability for students to acquire social-emotional skills may have been “hampered by remote learning.” Participants described students’ ability to develop communication and teamwork skills was hindered by a lack of face-to-face connection with peers and teachers. Furthermore, participants described an increase in anxiety during the pandemic amongst students and teachers alike, making it increasingly difficult to develop these skills in the school setting.

Participant Sheila also described when social-emotional learning is incorporated into the curriculum, rather than treated as a distinct subject, it can be easier to “weave into the daily activities” of the school. We also learned that teachers and school staff need support in incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Teachers and staff should be given professional development opportunities to help gain the information and skills they need to incorporate social-emotional learning into their curriculum. Additionally, the data indicated that many adults also lacked some social-emotional skills, making it increasingly difficult to assist students in their own skill development.

Lastly, to best prepare schools for a possible future pandemic, up-to-date professional development on the use of technology for successful virtual learning is necessary for social-emotional well-being amongst students and adults. Bethany stated, for example,

> A simple disruption in a routine can cause an influx in stress and anxiety in anyone, especially a child. If schools and district leaders can focus more on proactively teaching coping skills to students, and providing proper training to teachers, I believe it will

greatly reduce the amount of disruption the pandemic caused our students.

Most participants shared similar thoughts through keywords such as “reduction in loneliness,” “proper virtual learning routines,” “parental involvement,” “parental engagement,” and “effective professional development” regarding what was learned.

Summary

The data gathered from the interviews, focus group, and artifacts, including lesson plans, role-play activities, and protocol changes from participants, led to a plethora of information with the key themes of student challenges, teacher/staff challenges, and school climate. The participants described challenges in the interruption of daily routines from sudden school closures, technological difficulties that arose with virtual learning, and a variety of struggles with engagement and work/life balance. The social isolation experienced by students may have resulted in feelings of loneliness and detachment and may have made motivation and excitement for learning decrease. . The pandemic’s unpredictability, along with the difficulties that came with remote learning, brought social-emotional skill and development to the forefront in the post-pandemic K-12 setting. The triangulation of this study revealed three main themes and six subthemes. The changes made in social-emotional development since the pandemic in the K-12 setting, as described in this study, is a more personalized approach to social-emotional learning and development that is incorporated into schoolwide curriculum and professional development strategies with plenty of opportunity for role-play and skill practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lessons learned of K-12 leaders in the social emotional development of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. K-12 leaders were defined as school principals, assistant principals, teachers, and district superintendents. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize my research and provide the reader with my interpretations of the findings. This section will address the findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section includes the findings of this study in relation to theoretical and empirical literature considering the established themes of lessons learned in student challenges, teacher/staff challenges, and school climate in social-emotional skill development post-pandemic in the K-12 setting. Incorporating the research completed in Chapter Two and combining the newly found information, this section will be a discussion of my interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The participants, although ranging in age, years of experience, geographic location, and public, charter, and private schools, had many common areas of concern when it came to the lessons learned about the COVID-19 pandemic and social-emotional learning and development. The challenges that arose in students, teachers, staff, and school climate were discussed in detail throughout the interviews, focus groups, and artifact collection during research. The themes that

arose from the research are implications on student challenges, teacher/staff challenges, and school climate. This section begins with the summary of thematic findings, followed by my interpretations from the interviews, focus group, and collected artifacts.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The participants shared their lived experiences with the challenges experienced in student learning during and post the pandemic. The themes of student challenges, teacher/staff challenges, and school climate resulted from the research. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an increase in social-emotional related afflictions, including anxiety, family separations, divorce, suicidal ideations, and addiction (Prothero, 2021). Research in child development and social-emotional learning has found that these developments make it challenging for students to process new information (American Institutes for Research, 2022; Comer, 2004). Consequently, it is crucial to combine academic knowledge with social-emotional connections like making informed judgments, regulating emotions, and developing healthy relationships (American Institutes for Research, 2022).

Maslow's theory (1943) stated that everyone is created with a specific collection of needs that must be fulfilled for them to have a healthy, fulfilling, and productive life. These criteria are arranged in a hierarchical manner to demonstrate the progression of each person's demands. Most crucially, Maslow held that addressing lower-level requirements on the pyramid must come before addressing higher-level needs. Maslow argued that self-actualizing people were healthier and had richer lives than non-self-actualizing persons. Humans have basic needs for survival including air, food, shelter, and water. However, Maslow also explicitly stated the importance of safety in terms of stability and predictability in the self-actualization process. Student fundamental needs have been affected by the pandemic, and many are now struggling with

routine interruption and social isolation, as stated by participant Bethany. For this reason, it is important that schools consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs while addressing student social-emotional skills and development.

Similarly, Comer (2004) viewed a student's educational setting as a microsystem where the experiences and interactions they have impact their overall development. When the basic needs of students are met, and students are assisted in finding the attitudes, beliefs, habits, values, and practices that lead to high academic and social performance, students will have the potential for great achievements. To make the goal of high achievements a possibility, a system of collaboration between school administration, staff, and parents should exist to create a system of social-emotional development and growth that is sustainable. Therefore, the two thematic findings in this research are the deficiencies in students' basic needs and the need for systemic and sustainable social-emotional development programs.

Student Struggles. Throughout the study, participants mentioned several characteristics and behavior patterns that suggest a basic need not being met in the classroom. For example, Bethany described an inability to focus during lessons; Kevin described students being distracted; Paulina described students refusing to participate and having emotional outbursts; and all participants described academic difficulties. Maslow's hierarchy of needs stated that when a student's basic needs are not being met, the result may be a range of challenges and behaviors, such as the ones described above (Maslow, 1943). As expressed by Evan, "I never imagined a student would forget it was appropriate to raise your hand before speaking in the classroom. This is a skill we are taught in kindergarten." Similarly, Samantha noted students who refused to participate in small group work, and Kevin described his students being more "prone to arguments." Maslow did not specifically match one behavior with one need unmet. Rather, he

contended that when basic needs are not met, students may exhibit a variety of unfavorable actions and behaviors, which impact their social-emotional growth and well-being.

For example, Nathan and Anthony mentioned their students struggling with anxiety upon return to in-person learning. Anthony described students to be "suffering," and Nathan described a need for counseling services to support self-care habits. Maslow's theory (1943) described an increase in anxiety, fear, or agitation to be a consequence of the student's basic need for safety not being met. Furthermore, loneliness, withdrawal, and isolation were also brought up multiple times throughout the research. For instance, Anthony noticed, "loneliness and not having friends was a problem for students." Bethany described students isolating themselves from their peers during lunch and recess. Jasmine and Thomas described students no longer wanting to work together. Pauline and Samuel stated students refusing to sit together at lunch and an increase in students who spent large portions of their day alone. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if a student exhibits isolation, withdrawal, or begins spending an increased amount of time alone, this may indicate their basic need for love and belonging is not being met. Educators and school staff can contribute to the development of a supportive learning environment that fosters the success and well-being of students by identifying these behaviors and addressing their underlying needs.

Teacher/Staff Challenges. The participants in this study described a variety of challenges they faced during and after the pandemic. An outcome of the pandemic demonstrated the importance of school leaders, teachers, and staff being prepared to respond to unknown and changing conditions. Administrators had to quickly transition entire schools to remote learning. Consequently, teachers also had to quickly transition their classrooms to a remote environment. With this sudden change, several of Maslow's basic human needs appeared to be unmet for

teachers and staff. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, a transition from in-person to remote learning may be difficult for teachers and staff for several reasons. Teachers may have felt less safe due to the shift to virtual learning because they were no longer in their physical classrooms, which were controlled and familiar environments. Teachers and staff may have also experienced a decrease in social interaction because of virtual learning, which could have led to a reduced sense of belonging. An indicator of this is Nathan's comment, "The lack of peer-to-peer interaction and support appeared difficult for many of our students and teachers alike." Teacher and staff self-esteem and both professional and personal value may have suffered as well because their roles in the physical classroom may have been different than their roles in the virtual classroom. Thomas described his feelings of inadequacy at times by sharing, "attendance and test scores were the worst I'd seen in years. I began to question my efficacy as a teacher."

School Climate and Student Well-Being. It is more challenging for students to thrive academically when they experience difficulties meeting their social and emotional needs (Comer, 2004). These difficulties impede their efforts and ability to actively participate in the learning process (Durlak et al., 2011). Students may struggle to execute the fundamental skills needed to perform well in the context of the school environment. Completing tasks required to meet behavioral expectations, such as actively participating in lessons, concentrating, or self-regulating, can be difficult, and the student's progress toward completing their academic goals may slow as a result. Consequently, children rely on adults to serve in a variety of roles, including those of role models, mentors, advocates, supporters, and educators (Comer, 2004).

According to Comer's (2004) theory, the majority of a child's motivation to learn stems from interpersonal sources that encourage the student's development of trust and connection. Children, whose early relationships with adults did not provide such a foundation of trust, will

struggle to engage in school. As a result, it is critical for adults in the school to attempt to improve or supplement underdeveloped bonding relationships. Comer's theory seeks to facilitate the formation of these kinds of connections by catering to the adult's need for order and optimism, as well as by changing how people interact with one another within schools to foster an environment of trust and regard. The likelihood that a student will internalize the same values, objectives, and expectations as part of his or her own sense of identity increases in direct proportion to the number of adults who endorse the same set of values, goals, and expectations for the child (Comer et al., 2004; Lununberg, 2011).

The participants with the reported levels of success in their social-emotional development after the pandemic also had a high level of adult involvement, with strategic follow-through in developing the underdeveloped relationships. For example, Anthony's school witnessed students struggling to create meaningful friendships and, in response, set up a buddy system where students had a new buddy every week. Brittney's school held assemblies where students worked together to put on skits or role-plays of the social-emotional skill focus of that week or unit. Jasmine noted the adults in her building focused on improving relationships between adults and students in the building through positive behavioral support and interventions. Kevin shared how his campus encouraged students to contribute to the local community by opening a student-led non-profit organization. "Creating a non-profit helped students develop a sense of social responsibility and make a positive contribution to society," Kevin said. Relationships like these are important in the socialization process that children go through. When adults meet children's social and emotional needs, the children form attachments to those adults, and as a result, the children begin to internalize the adults' values and expectations (Comer, 2004).

Implications for Policy or Practice

Educators are better equipped to respond to their students' learning needs when adequate rules, techniques, and norms are in place (Comer, 2004). When adequate norms are in place, students feel better about their own capacity and ability to learn. As a result, students become more motivated to study, particularly in environments where staff members are skilled at providing positive reinforcement. Academic achievement should improve and be strengthened if parents are also supporting the same standards and expectations (Bandura et al., 2001; Bar-On, 2006; Berg & Aber, 2015; Bierman et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2004; Durlak, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Guerra & Cunningham, 2014; Heller, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2010; Lunenburg, 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Phan, 2016; Reyes et al., 2013; Stillman et al, 2018.). Social-emotional development in childhood is critical for improving academic motivation, psychological and behavioral well-being. Children of all ages can benefit from the social-emotional learning paradigm to better understand their feelings, experience them fully, and show empathy for others. These learned behaviors are then applied to help students develop problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, goal-setting frameworks, and interpersonal relationships (Comer et al., 2004; Lunenburg, 2011). This section will detail ways that schools can put systemic and sustainable policies into place for long-term social-emotional skill development.

Implications for Policy

The participants in this study detailed the efforts taken to address the social-emotional and academic reforms that appeared after the pandemic. Kevin and Jasmine noted a focus on community service as an important addition to his campuses' social-emotional skill development, while Bethany detailed the importance of family-oriented events, including game

nights for her campus. Both policies were perceived as important for the success of their programs. However, the policies were built based on the specific needs of their respective campuses. Other campuses, such as Bethany's, focused their reform efforts on positive behavior interventions and support. Mandating Bethany's campus to focus on community service or game nights may not have been as beneficial for the students in her school. The participants with the most perceived success in the changes made in social-emotional development were the schools that made campus-based changes, specific to the needs of their student and parent body. School-based reform initiatives are popular, with each school responsible for developing and implementing its own educational objectives, offerings, and operational procedures (Tintore et al., 2022).

Over the past several decades, numerous attempts at school reform have been made, each based on a different set of assertions about the nature of the problem within our education systems, the theoretical approaches best suited to solving them, and the viability of putting those reform efforts into practice (Anson et al., 1991). Anthony's campus, based on their own objectives and operational procedures, created a weekly buddy system for their students. Through this system, students were given the opportunity to make new friends, discover commonalities, and develop new social skills each week. One common thread among reform strategies is the inclusion of multiple stakeholders who share the burden of accountability, ensuring that the efforts are not solely on the shoulders of school administrators (Comer, 2004). Delegating responsibility may increase both involvement and produce practical solutions. Kevin's campus, for example, created a committee where many stakeholders were involved in their social-emotional reform efforts. Members of Kevin's committee included administrators, staff, parents, and students. Rather than mandating policies from the district down, it may be

much more beneficial for local school campuses to create teams of school administrators, support staff, and parents to collaborate for the betterment of their campus. Each school, as seen by the variety of responses from the participants of this study, has its own unique challenges and strengths.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) has embedded state funding for social-emotional development in K-12 in all fifty states and has assigned social-emotional learning standards starting in preschool. Eight states have now integrated social-emotional learning standards into their elementary schools, and an additional eight states have integrated these standards into a standard framework (CASEL, 2022). However, simply having the standards does not guarantee the program will be effective. Past studies have suggested that programs with step-by-step training, active forms of learning, a focus on social-emotional development, and explicit goals are most beneficial for students (Taylor et al., 2017). When deciding on policy implications for schools and districts in social-emotional learning and development, standards and frameworks are important, but what would be more meaningful is tracking the growth of the individual needs of the school via means of an analysis that is ongoing through collaboration between school administrators, school staff, and parents. Each school has its own unique strengths and challenges, and a one-size-fits-all approach may not work best for all. Also, without a system of collaboration between these three groups of stakeholders, if a school has an administration turnover, the chances of the program continuing will drop. However, if the school has a policy of continual collaboration between three groups on a routine basis, then staff turnover would not impact the sustainability of the program.

Implications for Practice

To better address the student struggles identified in this study, teachers and school staff must be given the professional development necessary to effectively teach social-emotional skills, along with academic and technological content. Student academic success relies on their basic needs being met in the classroom. As noted in this study, the participants struggled with appropriate professional development. Nathan chronicled a lack of professional development being one of the challenges of his campus. Similarly, Paulina noted the difficulty of providing the mental health supports needed for students due to the lack of professional development. Frequent mention of delays in response and other focus-related problems occurred often throughout the interviews and focus group discussion. Professional development on how to properly address these types of concerns may have been helpful for these teachers during the pandemic.

The participants also noted an increase in negative behavior patterns amongst students upon their return to the classroom after virtual learning. Professional development and training may have assisted educators in modeling positive behaviors and cultivating healthy relationships, which contribute to a healthy school culture. Understanding how children grow, develop, and learn is essential to the strategy for ensuring proper social-emotional development, if educators and parents alike want to ensure that every child develops to the greatest extent possible (Comer, 2004). Teachers who receive social-emotional professional development are better equipped to support their students' emotional needs because they can create a safe, supportive environment where students feel valued and respected. Kevin described a perceived increase in student and teacher satisfaction after a school-wide focus on consistent professional development in social-emotional skill development, as well as student-to-teacher relationship building in his interview.

A classroom environment that fosters a positive student-teacher relationship may contribute to stronger relationships with peers and adults (Comer, 2004). With this knowledge, teachers can create engaging and relevant curricula and learning experiences by understanding the social-emotional needs of their students. Such an environment may increase academic achievement and student motivation (CASEL, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gueldner & Feurerborn, 2016; Heers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Mata et al., 2022; Oberle et al., 2017).

Professional development for teachers in the development of social-emotional skills in the classroom could include recognizing and addressing signs of trauma, understanding child development, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and positive relationship building. Educators need to understand how children develop physically, emotionally, and cognitively (Comer, 2004). Educators should also learn coping strategies for student self-regulation and awareness, as well as conflict resolution and teamwork. Educators may effectively support social-emotional development in their students by studying these and other social-emotional professional development topics.

Additionally, school leaders should adapt utilizing school data to inform decision-making surrounding social-emotional skill development. Only one of the participants interviewed for this study had a system of tracking data for social-emotional skill development. Utilization of data will hold administrators accountable for the success of the program, but more importantly, it will demonstrate to stakeholders that decisions being made are evidence-based and focused on improving student outcomes. This will also impact the structural changes needed, if any, in a particular school. For example, administrators are responsible for the allocation of resources, such as staffing, curriculum, and other instructional materials, including budgeting funds for professional development. By using data to inform their decisions, administrators can ensure

funds are being allocated to the social-emotional areas of greatest need. Administrators are also responsible for identifying areas for improvement and creating strategies to address them. Accountability measures in the K-12 setting have traditionally focused on academic achievement, primarily through assessing math and reading (Tian & Huber, 2019). However, programs that also focus on social-emotional development have been shown to improve academic outcomes (Weissberg, 2016; Wood, 2015; Yopp et al., 2017).

Theoretical Implications

In this section the social-emotional needs and challenges of students and staff in the K-12 setting after the pandemic and how this influenced the school climate are discussed. The lived experiences of teachers and school leaders in the K-12 environment and the lessons learned in social-emotional development after the pandemic were the subject of this transcendental phenomenology. The social-emotional theory of Comer (2004) emphasizes the importance of addressing students' social-emotional needs to promote academic success. Through collaboration, the utilization of developmentally appropriate practices, providing comprehensive mental-health services, and using data to direct decision making, it is possible to create a framework for schools to track the success of their social-emotional development effectively and systematically for their students.

Using Comer's (2004) theoretical framework to support schools addressing social-emotional skill development by collaborating with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and administrators, this study adds to the field of research by addressing specific needs and challenges after a pandemic. Students are members of a complex social system that includes the family, the school, and the community. As a result, multiple environmental factors influence their social-emotional development. Schools play an important role in furthering children's

social-emotional skill advancement. Schools can provide a positive and encouraging environment for the progression of social-emotional skills. As a result, schools must be designed in ways that encourage positive relationships, provide plenty of opportunity for social-emotional learning, and offer mental health services that aid in social-emotional development.

The importance of developmental appropriateness, through the lens of Comer's (2004) theory, is another theoretical implication of this study. Social-emotional development and academic success can be supported by developmentally appropriate instructional strategies that promote social-emotional learning. Role-playing mentioned by Jasmine, community service learning as mentioned by Kevin, and classroom meetings as described by Anthony are all examples of developmentally appropriate social-emotional skill development. The lived experiences of the participants uncovered challenges specific to individual campuses and the steps that were taken to address the issues. This study adds to the research by presenting how these initiatives specifically influence social-emotional development after a pandemic.

Finally, using Comer's (2004) framework for understanding the role of parents and families in promoting children's social-emotional development after a pandemic, this study adds to the research on social-emotional learning and development. By creating a supportive home environment, promoting positive relationships, and participating in their children's education, parents and families also contribute to the social-emotional development of their children. As a result, schools and families should work together to promote social-emotional development in their students. For example, the social-emotional development committee mentioned by Kevin, and Brittney's inclusion of families in tutoring efforts are both examples of strategies that could be utilized in any school. Additionally, Kevin's schools held several collaboration and family nights with their parents during and after the pandemic. When these needs are met by the school,

the students may form a sense of belonging, which in turn may increase social-emotional and academic success.

Empirical Implications

The empirical implication of this study adds to phenomenological research by corroborating previous research in social-emotional development with a specific focus of lessons learned after a pandemic. A transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized to collect the lived experiences of a diverse group of participants through interviews, focus groups, and artifact collection to investigate the phenomenon. This study differs from previous research by incorporating the challenges and lessons learned in social-emotional development, utilizing participants that taught or led a school during and after the pandemic.

By centering on school needs and not district mandated policy, this study further adds to phenomenological research. A policy-mandated emphasis on social-emotional learning may result in poor prioritization and little implementation guidance or support for teachers. Furthermore, school-level prioritization and support for social-emotional learning differed significantly before and after the pandemic (Zieher et al., 2021). A link between social-emotional learning and higher-quality implementation by teachers with adequate support from administrators and school leaders is well-developed in research. However, this study furthered research by showing an apparent link between educator's use of social emotional skills in the classroom and the positive implementation of social-emotional learning.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study are the requirements of having been a K-12 leader during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the nature of the study and questions asked, the requirement was an essential component, but there is a possibility that anyone entering the K-12

leadership sphere even just six months ago could still provide feedback on the social-emotional development of students and the lessons learned since the pandemic.

Another limitation of this research is the small sample size. The sample size of 12 individuals may not be representative of the larger population. Additionally, the participants who volunteered to take part in the study, may have had an investment in the development of social-emotional skills and thus not representative of the general population. Lastly, the participants may have provided answers to the interview and focus group questions that they believed were socially acceptable, rather than reflecting their own views or past experiences.

The delimitation of this study is the choice of a phenomenology and the inclusion of several types of leaders in the K-12. There was a variety of school-based leaders included in the research. This offered a wide variety of opinions, which assisted in collection of proper data. Additionally, the participants came from a variety of backgrounds, age, race, and gender, but they were all in the field of education and were employees of their schools. The inclusion of parents and/or guardians, students, and other non-teaching staff alike may increase the generalizability of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on age-group specific changes made in social-emotional development should be conducted in both urban and suburban districts across the nation. This study included teachers and school leaders who were in their profession for at least three years, during and post the pandemic. Additional studies could be done to examine the experiences of teachers or leaders who entered the workforce after the pandemic, which would allow for different perspectives to be explored. Furthermore, future research could also focus on the systemic and sustained fidelity of the initiatives put in place after the pandemic to track fidelity of use after one or two years.

Given the importance of professional development in the ability to teach and assess social-emotional skills and development, further research should also be conducted on targeted professional development initiatives. Viewing and tracking growth, quality, and additional data points surrounding social-emotional skill improvement and assessments might better demonstrate goals and support needed in professional development. Overall, data on professional development influence in the realm of social-emotional learning is underrepresented in literature.

Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lessons learned in social-emotional development in the K-12 setting since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The study included individual interviews, a focus group, and artifact collection of school leaders and teachers in the K-12 setting. This data was then analyzed through the lens of Comer's (2004) social-emotional development theory. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenology allowed me to examine the phenomenon through the descriptions of those who experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this research was to answer the following research questions and subquestions: What changes have K-12 leaders made in developing social-emotional skills after the COVID-19 pandemic? How has support changed in K-12 social-emotional skill development since the COVID-19 pandemic? What did we learn about social-emotional skill development post COVID-19 in the K-12 setting? Data were collected, analyzed, and triangulated. From data coding, three themes and seven subthemes emerged. Student challenges of focus and difficulties with virtual learning, teacher/staff challenges of professional development needs and work/life balance were themes of challenges and lessons learned after the pandemic. School climate and an increased focus on social-emotional skill development, increasing student engagement, and student well-being was a theme of changes made.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

January 30, 2023

Lyndsey Eksili Susan Stanley

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-715 LESSONS LEARNED IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER A PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Lyndsey Eksili, Susan Stanley,

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

Screening and Demographics Survey

Survey/Questionnaire Questions

1. What is your current position and where is your school located?
2. Were you a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

   Yes__ No__
3. Are you currently a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher?

   Yes__ No__
4. How would you describe your ethnicity?
5. What is your gender?
6. Please provide an email address that can be used for contact purposes for this study

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Dear Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to research lessons learned in social-emotional learning and development in the K-12 setting since the COVID-19 pandemic, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be employed as a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher currently and were likewise employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a one-on-one, recorded interview (45 minutes – 1 hour), a recorded focus group (45 minutes – 1 hour), and to provide any applicable artifacts such as policy changes or lesson plans implemented in response to lessons learned in social-emotional learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. Transcripts will be shared with participants in order to confirm that the data is interpreted correctly and so that any necessary changes can be made. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here and complete the screening survey. Contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or [redacted] for more information.

A consent document will be sent to you prior to the interview. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me. The consent document contains more information about my research.

Sincerely,

Lyndsey Eksili, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
[redacted]

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: Lessons Learned in Social-Emotional Development After a Pandemic: A Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenology

Principal Investigator: Lyndsey Eksili, M.Ed., Liberty University Doctoral Candidate, School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or teacher now and likewise were during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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.

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

The purpose of the study is to research lessons learned in social-emotional development since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in an audio and video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Participate in an audio and video-recorded focus group that will take no more than 1 hour.
3. Submit any applicable artifacts/documents pertaining to social-emotional learning changes in your school since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Artifacts may be used in part of the publication or as part of future presentations. If this is needed, participants will first be asked to sign a release form.
4. Transcripts will be shared with you for verification and accuracy purposes. Any changes requested to the transcript must be made in writing within 5 days of receiving it.

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 addressing a gap in educational leadership literature and enabling the future generation of educational leaders to better adapt to the social-emotional needs of our students.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating 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 will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a password-protected file. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then erased. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

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. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number 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 Lyndsey Eksili. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or . You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Susan Stanley 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 IRB. Our physical address is

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

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

Your Consent

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

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

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

____

Printed Subject Name

____

Signature & Date

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. CRQ
2. Describe your challenges when working with social emotional development in your school during the COVID-19 pandemic. SQ1
3. Describe successful practices you used when working with social emotional development in your school during the COVID-19 pandemic. SQ1
4. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to work with social emotional development during the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1
5. Please describe your pedagogical experiences with social emotional development. CRQ
6. How did you have to change your pedagogical beliefs and practices about social-emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic? CRQ
7. Please describe the social-emotional development practices in your school prior to and post the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ
8. What was your prior experience with social-emotional development? CRQ
9. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with social-emotional development that we haven't discussed? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the other participants and share your positions during the pandemic. CRQ
2. You were given access to the core tenets of social-emotional learning via a QR code. Based on that definition of social-emotional learning and its core tenets, describe your experience with social-emotional development. CRQ
3. Provide examples or share your experience that may support your practice of social-emotional development since the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ
4. What factors have impacted your social-emotional development practices since the beginning of the pandemic? CRQ, SQ1
5. If you have been an administrator or taught at various levels of school (elementary, middle, high), what are additional factors you have seen that impacted the social-emotional development practices of your school since the pandemic? CRQ
6. How do you feel about the role that institutional readiness played in your organization's approach to social-emotional learning during and now after the pandemic? CRQ
7. What do you feel has been done well and what could use improvement with social-emotional development since the pandemic began? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
8. Describe the strategies you have used to engage in conversations with other about social-emotional development in your school since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ, SQ1, SQ2

9. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to share that is important for me to know about social-emotional development during COVID-19? CRQ

Appendix G

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceived of the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a study, specifically credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study upholds these elements of trustworthiness through the methods and practices described throughout the paper and in detail below. The quality of a qualitative study is dependent upon these concepts as it displays the accountability of the researcher to those who read and participate in the study. This section outlines the steps used to ensure a robust study using the Lincoln and Guba (1985) lens.

Credibility

Credibility is confidence in the truth of a study's findings or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checks will be employed to ensure credibility. Prolonged engagement will be achieved through the individual interviews and focus groups. Triangulation will be achieved through the use of different data sources and methods of data collection. Member checks will also be utilized to strengthen the credibility of the study and include the availability to share the data, interpretations, and conclusions with participants for their review and feedback (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Triangulation

In this study, I undertook triangulation of qualitative methods, data collection methods, sources, and theories to explore the stories told by student veterans Bout their success. The methods included aspects of life history (Polkinghorne, 1995) narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) a hybrid method created for this study in which I did not seek the entire life history of student

veterans, but their influences from their military service on their experiences in college and I took up the role of narrator for the veterans' stories as they may not be prepared to tell their own stories (Chase, 2005). Data collection methods triangulation was achieved through using individual interviews, their success influencers, and focus groups of veterans. Source triangulation was achieved through using the veterans and their staff or faculty success influencer's perspectives on the phenomenon of student veteran success. Theory triangulation was achieved through the use of Astin's (1980) I-E-O theory and Vacchi's conceptual model of student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) as both organizing frameworks and analysis frameworks.

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved using thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 2008). Transferability in this study through thick descriptions of experiences. Specifically, details surrounding the setting, sample size, sample strategy, demographics, interview and focus group procedures will ensure the transferability of this study for other researchers. Additionally, given that methods of sampling used, it ensures a wide variety of participants, which will only increase the usability of the results of this study for future purposes.

Dependability

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which can be demonstrated through an effective description of the procedures undertaken for the study. Dependability in this study will be achieved through the record keeping processes and transparency in description of research steps and actions taken. Additionally, the

recording and transcription of interviews and focus groups will ensure the participant's views were included completely and incorporated into the data collection and analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Techniques used for confirmability in this research will be ensuring the findings are clearly derived from the data and do not simply mirror my beliefs, opinions, or viewpoints. To ensure this process, I will keep notes from the interviews, focus groups, and will keep a reflective journal. In the reflective journal, I will be sure to include my thoughts during the interview and focus group processes.