PREPARING EARLY EDUCATORS TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Elizabeth Lane Burany

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Vonda Beavers, EdD, Committee Chair

Dr. Melissa Wells, EdD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. The conceptual framework used to guide this study was the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children. Using a transcendental approach, experiences of faculty were examined to learn more about the instructional methods used to equip pre-service educators with the knowledge and practices needed to effectively teach social and emotional concepts in an early childhood classroom. Criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit faculty with experience teaching early childhood education courses at community colleges and universities in North Carolina. Data was collected using individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions. Phenomenological analyses were conducted using the Moustakas approach along with Saldaña's in vivo coding method with each dataset. Findings revealed the need for access to more quality practicum classrooms, skilled mentor teachers, mental health supports for students pursuing early childhood education degrees, and consideration of the cultural context and background of students when teaching social and emotional course content. Trustworthiness was addressed with triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and an audit trail.

Keywords: early childhood education, early childhood workforce preparation, social and emotional development, early childhood faculty

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the early childhood professionals in North Carolina who work diligently each day to provide young children with nurturing relationships, quality classroom environments, social and emotional learning experiences, and individualized intervention that build a foundation for academic success. The work you do every day is not easy, but you keep showing up and supporting our youngest learners in the state. Thank you for helping each child develop the essential skills needed for success in school and life!

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I would also like to acknowledge my coworkers and project manager of the NC Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative. Thank you for your support and encouragement as I balanced work and school responsibilities during this doctoral program. Your passion and commitment to helping young children and early educators in our state is to be commended!

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Caring for Our Children (CFOC)

Child Care Development Grant (CCDG)

Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R)

Child Care Services Association (CCSA)

Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)

Department of Education (DOE)

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)

Division of Early Childhood (DEC)

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R)

Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale Revised (FCCERS-R)

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)

Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative (HSB)

Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale Revised (ITERS-R)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Inventory of Practices (IOP)

Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports (PBIS)

Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)

School Age Environment Rating Scale Updated (SACERS-U)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Interest and excitement about social and emotional learning (SEL) have exploded within the past decade (Hemmeter & Conroy, 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). The field of early childhood education has identified the need for more intentional focus on SEL for young children (Blewitt et al., 2021; Clayback & Hemmeter, 2020; Luo et al., 2020; Obee et al., 2022). When children acquire social and emotional skills in preschool, they experience more academic success and fewer behavior issues in kindergarten and later grades (Blewitt et al., 2020; Hammer et al., 2018; Salim et al., 2020; Steed et al., 2022). Early childhood educators have a primary role in supporting young children's social and emotional development but often lack the knowledge and strategies to do so successfully (Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020; Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Hemmeter et al., 2022). Professional development and resources are available to support the early childhood workforce; however, there is little known about the pre-service training on social and emotional learning received in teacher preparation programs (Boyd et al., 2020; Steed et al., 2022). This chapter introduces the need to examine early childhood degree programs using a social and emotional lens to understand how teachers are prepared to support the social and emotional domain of development in a classroom. The first section provides a conceptual background for SEL and unveils the historical, social, and theoretical impact of early childhood education. Next, the research problem and purpose statement, as well as the significance and contribution to the field of early childhood education are discussed. Finally, definitions of pertinent terms are explained.

Background

Social and emotional development is defined as the process through which people

recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions, empathize with others, maintain prosocial relationships, set and achieve goals, and make responsible decisions (Blewitt et al., 2020; Gimbert et al., 2021; Main, 2018; Synder & Connelly, 2022). The social and emotional domain of learning is a foundation from which other domains of learning and skill development are built and should be a focus of every child's education (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Mart et al., 2017; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Children need SEL experiences to acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to enhance their personal development, establish reciprocal relationships, and become ethical and contributing members of society (Blewitt et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2015; Gimbert et al., 2021; Halle & Darling Churchill, 2016; Hammer et al., 2018; Humpries et al., 2018; Turner et al, 2022). When children are socially competent, they are able to understand and manage emotions, achieve goals, show empathy to others, maintain positive relationships, and make good decisions on their own (Blewitt et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2015; Gimbert et al., 2021; Halle & Darling Churchill, 2016). Researchers have shown that adequate development of social and emotional skills is linked to better grades, consistent attendance, college degrees, successful employment, higher wages, and reduced crime (Snyder & Connelly, 2022; Trach et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2022).

Development of social and emotional competencies occurs within the context of a child's family, culture, and community (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). A child's family dynamics and home environment set the stage for social and emotional functioning later in life (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Fagan & Wildfeur, 2022; Hammer et al., 2018). Variables of the home environment that influence a child's social and emotional development include parenting styles, family relationships, and stress within the home (Fagan & Wildfeur, 2022; Knauer et al., 2019). Poverty, instability, violence, and substance

abuse are also important factors that hinder a child's successful development. Children from low-income households are at a higher risk than those from higher-income homes to be exposed to these risk factors and experience lower social and emotional functioning (Fagan & Wildfeur, 2022; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). For that reason, children in homes lacking a stable and consistent environment need more SEL experiences for adequate skill development (Knauer et al., 2019; Trach et al., 2018).

Cultural beliefs and norms within a child's family and home environment also impact the way a child learns to express emotions and exhibit behavioral responses (Chen et al., 2022; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Watras, 2012; Yang & Wang, 2019). Culture is the system where a community's values, norms, and beliefs are acquired through customs, rituals, and practices (Yang & Wang, 2019). How a child manifests their emotions is directly associated with cultural expectations and experiences (Chen et al., 2022; Yang & Wang, 2019). Different cultures tend to hold different views about expressing emotions and prosocial behavior (Yang & Wang, 2019). Parents from different cultures develop behavioral and emotional expectations from their own families, which are modeled for each generation. A child's temperament, emotional knowledge, recognition, and regulation are all factors influenced by a child's early cultural experiences (Chen et al., 2022; Vygotsky, 1978; Yang & Wang, 2019). Children initially learn what behaviors are socially acceptable from the reactions of peers and adults within their own culture (Bandura, 1977; Chen et al., 2022; Vygotsky, 1978). Scholars have expressed the necessity of understanding the impact of culture on a child's development and concluded all children benefit from SEL opportunities, regardless of which culture is present in their home (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Advocates of the SEL movement have argued that a lack of focus on social and emotional needs of children from diverse cultures have contributed to academic and policy

failures in public education (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Trach et al., 2018).

In addition to a child's home and culture, the community in which a child grows up impacts their social and emotional development (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Petrokubi & Pierce, 2021; Trach et al., 2018). Community settings are one of the most important microsystems in a child's overall development (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Trach et al., 2018). Resources, activities, and services outside of the child's home environment provide experiential learning opportunities for children (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Petrokubi & Pierce, 2021; Trach et al., 2018). As children navigate different settings outside of their homes, their skill development accelerates as they have opportunities to observe and interact with people other than family (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Watras, 2012). Children commence learning about behavioral expectations, social skills, and relationships through teachable moments (Brofenbrenner, 1978).

Although parents are a child's first and most influential teacher, early educators within a child's community play a significant role in their development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Murano et al., 2020). The first five years of a child's life is when rapid development of social and emotional skills occur (Blewitt et al., 2020; McClelland et al., 2017; Wolf et al., 2021). During this time of critical development, early educators help young children develop the social and emotional skills needed for academic and social success (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Blewitt et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2019; Kallitsoglou, 2020). Early childhood classrooms are ideal environments for young children to learn how to establish relationships with adults and peers, communicate feelings, regulate emotions, and develop the confidence to explore and learn (Blewitt et al., 2020; Murano et al., 2020). Early educators who implement curriculum-based SEL in their classrooms help children significantly improve their social and emotional competence, self-regulation, early learning

skills, and behavior challenges (Blewitt et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2021).

The lifelong benefits of SEL for young children are becoming more understood by families, communities, and schools (Blewitt et al., 2020; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Wolf et al., 2021). The importance of building a foundation of social and emotional skills early in life is evident; however, less is known about how higher education prepares the ECE workforce for effective instruction of SEL in early childhood classrooms. Scholars in the field have been studying the social and emotional domain for decades, and findings reflect historical, social, and theoretical impacts in early childhood education (Bandura, 1977; Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam 2005; Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Vygotsky, 1978; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020) . Before examining the preparation of pre-service early educators for SEL, the progression of this domain of development in early childhood education was reviewed.

Historical Context

The roots of SEL can be traced back around 2000 years ago to the days of Plato in ancient Greece, derived from his holistic approach to education (Fowler et al., 1977). Plato's teachings incorporated morals, character, and judgment within the scope of academics. Theorists, such as Lev Vygotsky and Albert Bandura, built upon Plato's ideas and emphasized the impact of social interaction on the development of skills and learning (Bandura, 1977; Vadeconbeauer & Collie, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Bandura and Vygotsky argued that learning occurs in the context of interacting with others and observing in social settings. Specifically, perceiving the attitudes, emotions, and interactions modeled by those around them influence a child's social and emotional development (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). Social and emotional learning is directly related to the quality of those shared and observed experiences with adults, caregivers, and early educators in their life.

In the late 1960s, James Comer from Yale University began to research school success through the lens of relationships between teachers, students, and families (Finn-Stevenson & Stern, 1997). He emphasized the importance of including social, ethical, and mental health support for students within the scope of academics. Social and emotional learning was more specifically defined in 1994 by Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization that started a movement to implement more support for the social and emotion domain in schools and educational programs (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). The CASEL organization has prioritized collaboration efforts to educate others on the importance of SEL, as well as its impact on academic success. Not only have they focused on support for children's social and emotional development, but they also emphasized the need for more educators and adults to develop their own social and emotional competence (Gimbert et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017).

In the early 2000s, the prevalence of challenging behavior in young children continued to increase, which prompted the need for more positive behavior intervention and social and emotional support in ECE programs (Dougherty et al., 2015; Gilliam, 2005; Hemmeter et al., 2016). Concerns continued to grow that children would have learning challenges throughout school if their social and emotional needs were not addressed early in life (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016). Lack of foundational knowledge about social and emotional learning, as well as developmentally appropriate strategies for preventing and addressing challenging behavior, are common challenges for early educators (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Hemmeter et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2017). Due to insufficient training for early educators on addressing the social and emotional needs of young children, there has been a steady increase in preschool suspensions and expulsions in the United States (Hemmeter et al.,

2021c). Preschoolers are three times more likely to be expelled than children in K-12 settings (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). Data collected from state funded pre-k programs reported that seven out of 1,000 preschoolers were expelled from their classrooms (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). In addition, suspensions and expulsions occur more frequently with children of color, indicating disproportionate disciplinary practices that prevent children from receiving services needed for academic success (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). Specifically, young African American boys in preschool classrooms were reported as being suspended and expelled more than other children (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005). Research has shown where exclusionary practices are used to discipline a child, they often experience a myriad of issues, such as low engagement in the classroom, dropping out of school, and decision-making that involves the juvenile justice system (Edge et al., 2022).

Young children often exhibit challenging behavior due to an unmet need or lack of social and emotional skill development (Edge et al., 2022). When children are excluded from a classroom environment that supports their development, they are less likely to gain the skills needed to replace their challenging behavior (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). National concerns about exclusionary practices with young children prompted policy changes that required states to build their early childhood workforce's capacity to address challenging behavior and support social and emotional skill development (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; US DHHS & DOE, 2014). The United States Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education (2014) issued a policy statement on preschool suspension and expulsion, requiring states to address the use of inappropriate practices and implement changes that promote social and emotional competence. Recommendations in the national policy statement on suspension and expulsion in early childhood programs included using a Positive

Behavior and Intervention Supports (PBIS) framework to equip early educators with skills to meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of young children (Fox et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). States receiving federal funding provided by the Child Care Development Grant (CCDG) were responsible for adhering to the policy recommendation (US DHHS & DOE, 2014). As a result, the state of North Carolina developed its own policy statement on suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings. The plan of action included classroom support, in-service training, and free resources for the ECE workforce. Recommendations for professional development included specialized training on implementing social and emotional teaching practices, on-site coaching, as well as reinforcement of classroom strategies learned in training (Hemmeter et al., 2021a; Lang et al., 2017; Rakap et al., 2018).

Although more focus has been placed on SEL for young children in recent decades, the ECE workforce continues to experience professional challenges (Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017). Early educators currently working in the field identified SEL as an area where more guidance is still needed (Blewitt et al., 2021; McCllelland et al., 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). The early educators felt inadequate in their knowledge of social and emotional pedagogy and quality teaching practices (Blewitt et al., 2021; Zinnser et al., 2016). Conversely, Murano et al. (2019) argued that faculty in higher education have the opportunity to equip future educators with the skills needed to support children's SEL. In recent years, findings have shown that preparation of early educators in higher education is pivotal in avoiding social and emotional delays and challenges for children (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Murano et al., 2019). Higher education is an option to help early educators build a solid foundation of knowledge as they enter the ECE workforce. The role of higher education faculty has evolved greatly since the twentieth century; however, their instructional methods can vary significantly at each college and

university (Menter, 2023). Although the role of faculty's guidance is influential in professional development of beginning educators, the practices used in various colleges and universities remain ambiguous (Menter, 2023).

Opportunities for faculty to partake in SEL professional development in recent years have been limited (Murano et al., 2019). Little is known about how higher education faculty are trained to prepare early educators for this type of instruction in an ECE classroom. Historically, research on teacher education programs in higher education has focused largely on assessing students' knowledge of curriculum, with less time spent reviewing teaching practices used by faculty to prepare student teachers for classroom management (Menter, 2023). Furthermore, the experiences of higher education students have been explored in greater depth than instructional methods used in the faculty's instruction. As such, inquiry into higher education faculty's experiences may help address some of the current challenges faced by the ECE workforce.

A major challenge for the early childhood field is workforce retention (CCSA, 2020). According to a 2019 ECE workforce study, 20% of early educators in North Carolina reported they will most likely leave the field within three years. When asked about factors that would entice them to stay, 39% of early educators in NC shared that more support with SEL is needed to help them address challenging behaviors in their classroom. Research suggested that challenging behavior and children's lack of social and emotional skills contribute to teacher stress and burnout (Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). Early educators share a desire for embedding more SEL opportunities into their classroom routines and activities, but need guidance to do so effectively (Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016).

Social Context

Currently, there are 37,400 professionals in North Carolina's ECE workforce serving 734,550 young children in early childhood programs (CCSA, 2020). Preparing the ECE workforce in North Carolina (NC) with professional competencies to support young children's SEL through institutions of higher education is beneficial for everyone in the state. The rapid development of social and emotional skills in young children occurs before children begin elementary school (Blewitt et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2021). Early educators have the opportunity to equip young children with a strong foundation of social and emotional competence as well as identify developmental delays early in life (Beisly & Lake, 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020). When young children are provided with SEL experiences in ECE programs, they are able to develop essential skills needed to become ethical and contributing members of society (Blewitt et al., 2021; Gimbert et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022). Adults who attended ECE programs early in life have shown better outcomes in their relationships, employment, income, education level, and mental health (Turner et al., 2022). When there are well-trained early educators to provide SEL experiences in ECE classrooms, the community at large experiences long-term benefits of healthy and successful adults.

Beginning teachers have shared the need for more guidance on managing challenging behaviors and embedding SEL opportunities in their classroom curriculum and routines (Blewitt et al, 2021; Clayback & Williford, 2021; Garrity et al., 2019; Obee et al., 2023). The literature reveals a specific need for early educators to receive more comprehensive training on SEL (Boyd et al., 2020; Garrity et al., 2019). More focus needs to be placed on pre-service training of early educators, and the role of higher education is essential for equipping the ECE workforce with the professional competencies and skills needed for success (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Ciucci et al., 2018; Weatherby-Fell et al., 2019). Examining the instructional experiences of early childhood

faculty in higher education will add to the literature by providing insight into how early educators entering the ECE workforce are prepared to support SEL.

The state of North Carolina has made an intentional effort to prioritize SEL in ECE programs. In the summer of 2018, Governor Roy Cooper signed Executive Order 49 that challenged North Carolina's DHHS and Early Childhood Advisory Council to develop a statewide action plan to improve young children's developmental outcomes and learning (NC DHHS, 2019). The action plan is being used as a blueprint for statewide improvements, services, and resources for young children, families, and early childhood professionals (NC DHHS, 2019). Social and emotional learning for young children in NC was included in the commitment and goals of the North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan. The seventh goal listed in the action plan states that ECE leaders in the state will focus on prioritizing young children's social and emotional health and resilience (NC DHHS, 2019). In goal nine, the state commits to helping all young children begin kindergarten prepared and developmentally ready for academic success. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) mandated that all young children entering kindergarten be assessed using the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) tool, which includes screening for social and emotional skill development. In addition, the Governor committed to improving training for ECE professionals in the state on best practices for young children's social and emotional development, mental health, and resilience.

With more of a focus on training early educators to support young children's social and emotional development, the impact of higher education should be considered. A sub-target of goal eight in Governor Cooper's Early Childhood Action Plan was developed to increase the percentage of early educators in NC with higher education degrees (NC DHHS, 2019). Higher education and teaching credentials earned in teacher preparation programs often correlate with

higher-quality classrooms (Manning et al., 2019). More early educators in the field are being encouraged to attend college courses and obtain higher-level degrees in early childhood education by state leaders. As such, North Carolina is focused on equipping the ECE workforce with higher education degrees, as well as more professional development on SEL. It seems plausible to explore how colleges and universities are preparing pre-service teachers for social and emotional instruction in this state.

Theoretical Context

Higher education settings are ideal for building foundational knowledge for supporting young children's social and emotional development (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Colleges and universities provide an opportunity to learn about the importance of social and emotional skills, accumulate strategies, participate in practicum experiences, and receive feedback (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Hemmeter et al., 2008). When surveying early childhood departments in higher education, Buettner et al. (2016) found that only half of the colleges reported teaching social and emotional content in more than one course. (Prior research also suggested the social and emotional domain of learning is one of the least covered topics in early childhood degree programs (Buettner et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2008). A majority of early childhood programs in higher education cover standards that promote high-quality classrooms; however, the amount of exposure to social and emotional content is minimal (Buettner et al., 2016).

Early childhood theorists affirmed that adult caregivers and early educators play an important role in SEL. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory (1991) suggested that relationships with adults early in life greatly influence a child's behavior later in life. Constructivist theorists, such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasized that children learn

from interactions with their environment, peers, and adults (Piaget, 1932; Piaget 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Much of the learning occurs through children's exploration and play in social settings. Similarly, Albert Bandura's social development theory (1977) stated that children learn by observing the behaviors modeled by those around them. Like Bandura, Urie Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) stated that children learn through the social context of their environment and surroundings. Theories about SEL for young children are abundant in the field of ECE; however, for this study, more focus was placed on examining preparation of the ECE workforce for social and emotional instruction in an early childhood classroom.

Early educators need to know how to implement teaching practices based on child development theories in their classrooms (Boyd & Newman, 2019). The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Competence for Young Children is a conceptual framework that guides early educators with evidence-based practices that support SEL in ECE classrooms (Giordana et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). In the early 2000s, the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) were tasked with helping address the increasing behavior and SEL challenges observed in early childhood classrooms (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Early childhood education programs and schools began receiving professional development and classroom support focusing on building positive and nurturing relationships, creating high-quality classroom environments, using targeted social and emotional strategies in their teaching, and providing intensive intervention for children with persistent behavior challenges (Green et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021a). Classrooms that implement teaching practices outlined in the Pyramid Model framework with fidelity report less challenging behavior issues, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and more successful outcomes for children's social and emotional

development (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2020; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The framework shares necessary components for effective social and emotional teaching in ECE classrooms and provides a lens through which teacher preparation programs can be studied. Findings from the study contributed insight on if and how components of the Pyramid Model are used by early childhood faculty in higher education courses.

Problem Statement

The problem is that many early educators enter the ECE workforce without the professional competencies needed to meet the diverse social and emotional needs of young children (Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016; Ciucci et al., 2018; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Zinnser et al., 2016). Early educators have an essential role in children's social and emotional development (Beisly & Lake, 2020; Boyd et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2019; Kallitsoglou, 2020). The social and emotional domain is a foundation from which other domains of learning and skill development are built and should be a focus of every child's education (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Mart et al., 2017). In order for children to succeed academically, they need strong social and emotional skills to participate effectively in a classroom environment (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Hammer et al., 2018; Humphries et al., 2018). Early childhood classrooms are ideal environments for young children to learn how to establish relationships with adults and peers, communicate feelings, regulate emotions, and develop the confidence to explore and learn (Blewitt et al., 2020; Murano et al., 2020.)-When children begin elementary school having acquired social and emotional skills, it is much easier for them to excel academically and socially (Hammer et al., 2018).

The importance of SEL is well-known; however, the preparedness of those entering the ECE workforce is a challenge (Boyd et al., 2020; Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017). Early

childhood program administrators report their employees are less knowledgeable in teaching social and emotional skills than other domains of learning (Boyd et al., 2020; Boyd et al., 2022). A deficit of professional knowledge to address challenging behavior and provide meaningful SEL experiences contributes to more behavior issues with children and is a major source of stress and burnout for early educators (Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). On the contrary, classrooms that consistently implement appropriate SEL supports report higher levels of teacher job satisfaction (Zinnser et al., 2016). Both children and the ECE workforce benefit from having an early educator that is equipped with the knowledge and skills to adequately support SEL in early childhood classrooms (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Buettner et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The literature reveals a shared concern about the quality of pre-service training provided for individuals enrolled in ECE courses in higher education (Braund, 2015; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Ping et al., 2018).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. At this stage in the research, teacher preparation will generally be defined as the required courses, curricula, and learning experiences provided in early childhood degree programs in higher education. The ECE workforce is comprised of teachers and administrators working in early childhood programs serving preschoolers up to five years old. The research objective was for higher education faculty to describe their instructional experiences that focus on preparing college students with the professional competencies needed to support SEL in an early childhood classroom. More SEL training for early educators has been identified as a need

in the field of early childhood education (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Blewitt et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021a). It was worthwhile to investigate the role of higher education in preparing future teachers for social and emotional instruction.

Significance of the Study

The study has empirical significance in that preparation of the ECE workforce in higher education to support young children's social and emotional development is vague. What is known is that higher education plays a significant role in preparing early childhood professionals for employment in ECE programs and schools (Boyd et al., 2020; Falunchuk et al., 2017; Lang et al., 2017). Much of the research has identified qualifications needed by early educators, disregarding the concepts taught in early childhood courses (Boyd et al., 2020). Researchers have shown that early educators entering the field were somewhat prepared to support children's development of social and emotional skills; however, they were less prepared to address challenging behaviors in a classroom (Hemmeter et al., 2008). In addition, early educators in the field reported their exposure to social and emotional concepts in higher education was minimal, contributing to them feeling unprepared for their current job (Boyd et al., 2020). More research was needed on instructional methods and content used in higher education to address social and emotional content and challenging behavior (Boyd et al., 2020; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Specific inquiry was needed on how SEL is addressed in required coursework, assignments, and practicum experiences in the field (Boyd et al., 2020; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Exploring both two- and four-year degree programs was encouraged (Hemmeter et al., 2008). The study addressed those research recommendations by providing a snapshot of instructional practices used by early childhood faculty at community colleges and universities in North Carolina.

The study explored underpinnings of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework used by higher education faculty in early childhood courses. While the Pyramid Model is widely present in the literature, there has been minimal inquiry into using these instructional practices in teacher preparation programs for the ECE workforce. Using the Pyramid Model in early childhood teacher education provides college students with exposure to evidence-based teaching practices that have been found effective for early educators and children (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Instructional experiences shared by early childhood faculty were interpreted through the lens of the Pyramid Model, revealing the practices used to prepare the ECE workforce for SEL. Exploring the Pyramid Model components used in teacher preparation courses can be used by higher education to plan more impactful courses and curricula (Mitsch et al., 2022).

Practically, the study provided information about the role of higher education in preparing the ECE workforce for social and emotional instruction. In North Carolina, there are an estimated 37,400 early educators working with 734,550 young children in ECE programs (CCSA, 2020). Regardless of their degree level or completion, 97% of directors, 95% of teachers, 82% of assistants, and 92% of family child care home providers have taken at least one ECE course in higher education. With higher education becoming more of a requirement in the field of ECE, faculty in early childhood departments provided us with meaningful information on pre-service training provided to the workforce. Participating faculty had an opportunity to reflect on their instructional experiences using a SEL lens, as well as discuss those experiences with peers in focus groups. Findings will assist ECE leaders, as well as institutions of higher education in examining the depth of SEL exposure in required early childhood courses and curricula.

Research Questions

One central research question and two sub-questions were developed for this phenomenological study. Inviting faculty in higher education to share their instructional experiences in early childhood courses provides a better understanding of the preparation of pre-service teachers for SEL in an early childhood classroom. Responses from faculty provided insight into the currently vague understanding of SEL in teacher preparation programs.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of higher education faculty in preparing the early childhood education workforce for social and emotional instruction in an early childhood classroom?

Sub-Question One

How do higher education faculty describe social and emotional competencies needed by early educators entering the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How do higher education faculty describe their experiences with embedding essential components of social and emotional learning in their early childhood courses and curricula?

Definitions

1. *Early childhood education*- The education of children from birth to age eight (Blewitt et al., 2020).
2. *Early educators*- Professionals who care for and teach young children in early childhood classrooms (Blewitt et al., 2020).
3. *Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children*- A framework for implementing evidence-based practices in early childhood

classrooms that promote social and emotional competence as well as addressing challenging behavior (Hemmeter et al., 2016).

4. *Social competence*- The ability to understand and manage emotions, achieve goals, show empathy for others, maintain positive relationships, and make good decisions on their own (Blewitt et al., 2021).
5. *Social and emotional development*- The emerging ability of young children to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn all in the context of family, community, and culture (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016).
6. *Social and emotional learning*- Experiences provided to help children acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enhance their personal development, establish reciprocal relationships, and become ethical and contributing members of society (Blewitt et al., 2021).

Summary

The problem was that many early educators enter the early childhood education workforce without the professional competencies needed to meet the diverse social and emotional needs of young children (Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016; Ciucci et al., 2018; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Zinnser et al., 2016). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. Although more attention has been placed on SEL for young children in recent decades, the ECE workforce continues to experience professional challenges due to a lack of knowledge and training on quality teaching practices (Blewitt et al.,

2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Rakap et al., 2018). In-service training and on-site coaching are available once early educators begin working in the field; however, more insight was needed into the foundational knowledge provided to pre-service teachers in higher education (Ciucci et al., 2018; Falunchuk et al., 2017; Hemmeter et al., 2021). Beginning teachers have expressed a need for more guidance on addressing challenging behaviors in an ECE classroom, as well as embedding SEL into their curricula and routines (Blewitt et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Zinnser et al., 2016). By examining the lived experiences of early childhood faculty, the study provided insight into the ambiguous understanding we have of higher education's role in preparing the ECE workforce for social and emotional instruction.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the significance of social and emotional skills for young children, as well as how early educators are prepared to support this domain of development in higher education. This chapter presents a review of current literature pertaining to the preparation of the early childhood workforce for social and emotional instruction when entering the field. In the first section, the Pyramid Model conceptual framework and its relevance are discussed. Next, a synthesis of recent literature about social and emotional development, an early educator's role, as well as teacher preparation programs in higher education are addressed. In the end, a gap in the literature is identified to present a viable need for the current study.

Conceptual Framework

The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence for Young Children is an evidence-based framework that provides a blueprint for supporting social and emotional development in early childhood classrooms (See Figure 1) (Fox et al., 2003; Giordano et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). In 2001, two federally funded grants were awarded to the Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) with the goal of developing materials, strategies, and processes for promoting young children's social and emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Initially, the Pyramid Model focused on supporting children from ages two to five years old; however, it was later revised to include infants and toddlers (Giordano et al., 2021). Developers of the Pyramid Model strived to identify and promote evidence-based practices, support programs and systems in implementing those

practices, and make materials available to the early childhood field at little or no cost (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The framework is not a curriculum, but more of a guide that shares how to embed social and emotional learning into classroom routines, materials, activities, and interactions.

Similar to public health models, teaching practices in the framework include universal support for all children in an early childhood classroom, targeted strategies for those who require extra support, and individualized intervention for children with significant skill deficits and persistent challenging behavior (Giordano et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2006; Hemmeter et al., 2021a). The Pyramid Model is comprised of four distinct levels and three tiers of recommended teaching practices (Green et al., 2021). In the first tier, two sets of teaching practices are included that promote responsive and nurturing relationships, as well as high-quality supportive environments (Giordana et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). These practices are universal supports and considered best practices for all children in an early childhood classroom (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The second tier, or the prevention level, consists of targeted social and emotional supports that address what, when, and how to teach social and emotional skills (Green et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021b). The tertiary level of the Pyramid Model is comprised of intensive intervention for children who require individualized support for persistent challenging behavior (Hemmeter et al., 2006; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). At the base of the Pyramid Model is an effective workforce which includes the systems, policies, and early childhood professionals needed to support practices in the framework (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Mincic et al., 2022). Implementation of the framework is done by using a hierarchy approach, starting at the bottom of the pyramid with more preventative measures and progressing upward to intensive intervention (See Figure 1) (Green et al., 2021).

Figure 1

The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children

Note. From the *National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations.* (2022). Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from https://challengingbehavior.org/pyramid-model/overview/basics/. Created by and available from NCPMI at challengingbehavior.org. In the public domain (see Appendix L).

The Pyramid Model framework has been utilized nationally to guide early childhood programs in prevention and intervention. Currently, there are 32 states receiving state-level guidance to implement the Pyramid Model into their early childhood education systems and programs (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2022). Research found that early childhood classrooms using the Pyramid Model at high levels of fidelity report better social and emotional outcomes for young children, less behavior issues, and fewer incidents of suspension and expulsion (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2020). The conceptual framework outlines the necessary components and teaching practices needed for early educators to support young children's social and emotional development. The Pyramid Model provided an organized lens through which to explore the professional knowledge and competencies needed by new teachers entering the ECE

workforce. Each tier of the Pyramid Model framework was referenced during the development of research questions and data collection tools. The tiers were used when classifying themes during the data analysis process. Instructional experiences and learning opportunities shared by faculty were aligned with the constructs within the conceptual framework. Feedback and data collected from early childhood faculty were compared to core principles and practices within the Pyramid Model. With increasing implementation and evidence of the positive impact for children and programs using this model, it provided a sensible context for exploring the social and emotional component of early childhood teacher preparation programs in higher education.

Related Literature

Social and emotional development is defined as the process through which people recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions, empathize with others, maintain prosocial relationships, set and achieve goals, and make responsible decisions (Blewitt et al., 2020; Gimbert et al., 2021; Main, 2018; Snyder & Connolly, 2022). The social and emotional domain of development is foundational for all aspects of learning (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Mart et al., 2017; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). More interest has evolved in recent years for studying the impact of social and emotional skill development, especially within the field of early childhood education.

Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood Education

The first five years of a child's life is when rapid development of social and emotional skills occurs (Blewitt et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2021). Prioritizing social and emotional learning early in life results in more successful academic outcomes in the primary grades and beyond (Hammer et al., 2018; Humphries et al., 2018). Social competence is considered to be an agent of change for children's outcomes in other domains of development (Darling-Churchill & Lippman,

2016; Hunter et al., 2018). When young children are socially competent, they establish a foundation for mastering a range of other skills. Aspects of social and emotional development in the early years, such as issues with hyperactivity, self-regulation, emotional problems, and peer issues, have been found to influence outcomes and achievement for students as they transition to higher grades (Hammer et al., 2018). Although this is known, far less attention has been placed on this type of noncognitive development over the years compared to the cognitive skills of children, and it is rarely studied in conjunction with the academic focus (Hammer et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2021).

Early childhood classrooms are ideal environments for young children to learn how to establish relationships with adults and peers, communicate feelings, regulate emotions, and develop the confidence to explore and learn (Blewitt et al., 2020; Murano et al., 2020). Social and emotional learning in early childhood education should be developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and encourage relationship building (Hemmeter al., 2016; Mahoney et al., 2020; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Programs and schools that work on improving teacher-child interactions, classroom environments, peer interactions, and opportunities for social and emotional learning have an intentional focus on this domain of development (Blewitt et al., 2020). Studies have shown that children who participate in curriculum-based social and emotional learning have significant improvements in their social and emotional competence, self-regulation, early learning skills, and reduced behavioral challenges (Blewitt et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2021). Social and emotional experiences in early childhood classrooms set the stage for how children approach teachers and peers in future school settings (Blewitt et al., 2020; Oztemir & Asi, 2020).

Essential Social and Emotional Skills

The Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) organization developed an evidence-based framework to guide educators in providing essential social and emotional support for learning (Lawson et al., 2018; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Many schools and early childhood programs utilize components in the CASEL framework in curriculum planning for social-emotional learning (SEL) (Lawson et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2021). There are five essential competencies children need for healthy social and emotional development in the early years (Blewitt et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013; Main, 2018; Snyder & Connolly, 2022; Taylor et al., 2017). Those competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Blewitt et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2020; Main, 2018; Snyder & Connolly, 2022; Taylor et al., 2017).

Self-awareness. One of the first skills needed by young children is the ability to recognize their own thoughts and emotions and understand how those feelings influence their behavior (CASEL, 2013; Denham & Brown, 2010; Engler et al., 2023; Jagers et al., 2019). As young children develop self-awareness skills, they begin to identify their interests, strengths, limitations, and they demonstrate more independence (Denham & Brown, 2010; Engler et al., 2023; Snyder & Connolly, 2022). Children begin to see how their identities, thoughts, emotions, and actions are connected (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). Successful development of self-awareness can be seen through a child's confidence, positive mindset, and self-efficacy (Gimbert et al., 2021).

Self-management. Self-management is an essential skill needed by young children so they can control impulses, manage stressful situations, and regulate their behavior (Denham & Brown, 2010; Engler et al., 2023; Jager et al., 2019). The ability to regulate emotions and process them appropriately in different scenarios impacts an individual's ability to solve problems, pay

attention, and build relationships (Engler et al., 2023; Gimbert et al., 2021). Children need behavioral coping skills and relaxation strategies to process challenging situations (Lawson et al., 2018). This skill includes the ability to delay gratification, persevere through challenges, and successfully attain personal goals (Gimbert et al., 2021). In addition, the ability to focus mindfully helps them pay attention (Lawson et al., 2018).

Social awareness. The third essential skill needed by young children is social awareness. Social awareness is the ability to understand social and cultural norms (CASEL, 2013; Denham & Brown, 2010; Engler et al., 2023). Building emotional literacy and recognizing the feelings of others with facial expressions, body language, and behavior helps children navigate social situations (Lawson et al., 2018). Development of empathy, respecting the opinions of others, and learning how to compromise is necessary for social relationships (Brant & Studebaker, 2021; Engler et al., 2023; Gimbert et al., 2021). Competence in social awareness enables an individual to be open to different perspectives and show empathy and compassion (Brant & Studebaker, 2021; Gimbert et al., 2021).

Relationship skills. The capability to establish and build relationships is foundational for healthy social and emotional development (Brant & Studebaker, 2021; CASEL, 2013; Engler et al., 2023). Communicating clearly, engaging with others, cooperating, negotiating conflict, seeking help, and offering assistance to others are needed (Brant & Studebaker, 2021; CASEL, 2017; Durlak et al., 2015). Peer relationships begin to form between the ages of three and five years (Brant & Studebaker, 2021). The ability to establish and maintain positive relationships during the preschool years is connected to better academic achievement, cooperation, and classroom engagement.

Responsible decision-making. Young children need to learn how to make responsible decisions based on social and ethical norms, as well as the safety of themselves and others (Denham & Brown, 2010; Engler et al., 2023). Learning about rules, cause and effect, and problem-solving skills contribute to responsible decision-making (Engler et al., 2023; Lawson et al., 2018). Feelings, potential outcomes, and possible obstacles are considered (Durlak et al., 2015). Children learn to use coping skills when a problem occurs, work towards solutions, and seek the help of others when needed (Brant & Studebaker, 2021; Lawson et al., 2018).

When early educators provide daily opportunities that address these competencies, children are likely to develop the social and emotional skills needed (Blewitt et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2020). These essential skills can be fostered with intentional social and emotional instruction, child-centered practices, positive guidance, and appropriate classroom management strategies (Blewitt et al., 2020; Hemmeter et al., 2016). When children lack these essential social and emotional skills, they often exhibit challenging behavior and other issues that interfere in their overall development and learning.

Challenging Behavior and Exclusionary Practices

Young children often exhibit challenging behavior due to an unmet need or lack of social and emotional skill development (Edge et al., 2022). The prevalence of challenging behavior in classrooms serving young children has prompted a national concern in recent decades (Dougherty et al., 2015; Gilliam, 2005; Hemmeter et al., 2016). Many early educators feel inadequate in their abilities to address challenging behavior and teach children essential social and emotional skills (Blewitt et al., 2021; Zinnser et al., 2016). A nationwide study on exclusionary practices revealed that preschoolers are three times more likely to be expelled than children in K-12 classrooms (Gilliam, 2005). Data collected from state-funded pre-k programs

reported that seven out of 1,000 preschoolers were expelled from their classrooms (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). Specifically, young African American boys in preschool classrooms were reported as being suspended and expelled more than other children (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005).

When children are excluded from a classroom environment that supports their development, they are less likely to gain the skills needed to replace their challenging behavior (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018).-Children who are disciplined with exclusionary practices often experience a myriad of issues, such as low engagement in the classroom, dropping out of school, and decision-making that involves the juvenile justice system (Edge et al., 2022). A lack of knowledge and training in the social and emotional domain of learning has driven a steady increase in preschool suspensions and expulsions (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The increase in nationwide use of exclusionary practices, particularly the disproportionate impact on children of color, has forced new policies and supports to be put in place (Edge et al., 2022; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018).

In 2014, the Obama administration released a national policy on exclusionary practices in early childhood education (Hemmeter et al., 2021; US DHHS & DOE, 2014). Each state developed its own policy statement on exclusionary practices and was tasked with developing a plan to equip early educators with resources and behavior support to help reduce and prevent suspensions and expulsions in ECE programs (Fox et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). States were encouraged to provide specialized training for early educators that focus on using social and emotional strategies and effective teaching practices to prevent and address challenging behavior (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Rakap et al., 2018). On-site coaching in early childhood classrooms is also recommended to reinforce information and strategies learned in training. Using both training and on-site coaching in ECE classrooms has proven to be an effective

approach for improving social and emotional outcomes for children (Hemmeter et al., 2021a; Lang et al., 2017). Supports for preventing exclusionary practices have been implemented by early educators who are already working in the field, but less is known about the foundational practices taught in higher education programs.

Role of Early Educators in Social and Emotional Learning

Although parents are a child's first and most influential teacher, early educators have an essential part in their development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Murano et al., 2020). Early educators play a crucial role in children's social and emotional development (Beisly & Lake, 2020; Blewitt et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2019; Kallitsoglou, 2020). A teacher's sensitivity, responsiveness, interactions, emotional support, and intentional instruction are needed to support children's development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2019). The main responsibility is to create a positive classroom climate that provides opportunities for learning and nurturing. Interactions and experiences with early educators in ECE classrooms influence young children's attitudes about future academic experiences in school (Blewitt et al., 2020; Oztemir & Asi, 2020).

Professional Competencies and Standards for the Early Childhood Education Workforce

The field of early childhood education has been working to enhance the credentials of the ECE workforce as they promote higher quality practices in classrooms (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Neitzel et al., 2019). Teacher preparation programs that align their courses with professional standards and evidence-based practices produce higher-quality educators for the field that lead to better outcomes for children (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). There are three main categories of standards in ECE used to define high-quality practices, including program standards, early learning standards, and professional standards (Park et al., 2022).

Together these standards provide a common set of goals for the ECE workforce when serving young children and families.

Early Childhood Education Program Standards

Program standards describe the processes used to deliver a quality early learning experience for young children, staff, and families (Park et al., 2022). Both national and state-level standards are established to guide early childhood professionals in the quality improvement and maintenance of their programs (Bassok et al., 2019; Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Neitzel et al., 2019). Early childhood programs are assessed locally through the state-administered Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) and can opt for national accreditation with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bassok et al., 2019; Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Brown et al., 2019). The QRIS and NAEYC program standards provide the ECE workforce with quality benchmarks needed for implementing best practices in early childhood programs (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Brown et al., 2019).

In North Carolina, the Division of Child Development and Early Education agency has been regulating early childhood programs since 1999 (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Yaya-Bryson et al., 2020). Early childhood programs are assessed using a QRIS process called the star-rated license system, in which they receive a quality rating of one to five stars on their license after a comprehensive review of program standards and staff education (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Herbst, 2023; Yaya-Bryson et al., 2020). The QRIS system in North Carolina is one of the first used in the United States, has been operating in its current form since 2005, and receives a 16-million-dollar budget annually, which is more than any other state (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Herbst, 2023).

The star-rated license system in North Carolina uses a 15-point integer scale to determine an early childhood program's level of quality in two areas, education standards, and program standards (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020). Programs can earn up to seven points each for the education and program standards subscales and one quality point while earning their star-rated program license (Bassok et al., 2019; NCDHHS, 2023; Phillips et al., 2020). An education standard's score is determined by the level of experience, higher education degrees, and training received by the program's administration and staff (Bassok et al., 2019; Coleman et al., 2021; NCDHHS, 2023; Phillips et al., 2020). Program standards involve the review of items, such as child and staff ratios, the building's physical space, learning materials, equipment, teaching practices used in classrooms, and compliance history (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Herbst, 2023).

To receive a higher star rating, early childhood programs participate in ongoing environment rating scale assessments in classrooms serving infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children (Brown et al., 2019; Coleman et al., 2021; NCDHHS, 2023; North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, 2023; Neitzel et al., 2019). An environment rating scale is also used with family child care home providers whose program is located in their residences (NCDHHS, 2023). A three-to-five-hour observation is conducted in classrooms using the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), School Age Classroom Environment Rating Scale- Updated (SACERS-U), or Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R) assessment tools, as well as staff interviews (Coleman et al., 2021; North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, 2023; NCDHHS, 2023; Neitzel et al., 2019; Yaya-Bryson et al., 2020). Observing young children's experiences and interactions with learning materials, teachers, and

peers is an appropriate way to assess the quality of classroom and program practices (Neitzel et al., 2019). Scores are calculated using a scale of one to seven, with one representing inadequate quality and seven being excellent (Neitzel et al., 2019; Yaya-Bryson et al., 2020). The environment rating scales component of North Carolina's QRIS offers a broad measure of program quality, reflecting the structural features of a program, as well as process quality, which involves staff-child interactions and learning activities (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020).

In addition to earning points for education and program standards, early childhood programs can earn an extra quality point for their star-rated license by meeting additional requirements, such as using an approved high-quality curriculum, showing a history of low staff turnover, or having a staff that reflects many years of professional experience in the field (Bassok et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; NCDHHS, 2023.). Families use the state's QRIS to distinguish the varying levels of quality when choosing an early childhood program for their child (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Herbst, 2023). Early childhood programs that receive higher star ratings on their license also receive incentives, such as an increase in child care subsidy reimbursement rates, merit awards, and local grants (Bassok et al., 2019).

Early Learning Standards

Early learning standards explain what skills and knowledge children should learn while attending an ECE program (Flores et al., 2016; Little & Gragson, 2023; Park et al., 2022). The goal is for early educators to align their instructional practices with developmentally appropriate early learning standards and enhance young children's learning experiences (Flores et al., 2016; Merrill et al., 2020). As a result of funding from the federal government's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge in 2011, states were tasked with developing early learning standards to

improve the quality of early childhood education programs for young children (Little & Gragson, 2023; Merrill et al., 2020). The Division of Child Development and Early Education, the Office of Early Learning in the Department of Public Instruction, and statewide leaders in ECE collaborated to develop early learning standards (North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). In North Carolina, early childhood programs utilize the North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development (NCFELD) (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). The NCFELD document describes children's developmental skills and learning standards from birth to five years of age (North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). The standards include developmental goals, indicators, and strategies for five developmental domains including Approaches to Play and Learning, Emotional and Social Development, Health and Physical Development, Language Development and Communication, and Cognitive Development (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; Merrill et al., 2020).

Early educators in North Carolina use NCFELD to enhance their knowledge of child development, reference during lesson planning, establish developmental goals for children, and teach parents about age-appropriate expectations (North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). These early learning standards are not a curriculum, but a guide for understanding developmental milestones and skills needed by young children. Similar to the standard course of study used in K-12 public school classrooms, NCFELD is used in conjunction with an evidence-based curriculum. In North Carolina, the Division of Child Development and Early Education provides early childhood programs with a list of approved curricula to guide early educators in their classroom planning and instruction (Little & Gragson, 2023). Popular curricula used in North Carolina's early childhood programs from the approved list include Creative Curriculum,

High Scope Preschool Curriculum, and Tools of the Mind (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; Little & Gragson, 2023).

Professional Standards for Early Educators

A key component of any profession is the recognized body of skills, knowledge, and standards that represent quality (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Park et al., 2022). Professional standards for the ECE workforce define the skills, qualifications, and education needed to promote the well-being and learning of young children (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Mickelson et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022). To support the preparation of a qualified ECE workforce, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed professional standards that outline competencies and skills needed by early educators (Mickelson et al., 2022; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). In addition to NAEYC, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) (2020) and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) developed another set of national standards to provide guidance for early educators supporting young children, ages birth through five years old, who are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; Mickelson et al., 2023). In 2020, the DEC and CEC released the Initial Practice Based Professional Standards for Early Interventionists and Early Childhood Special Educators (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; Mickelson et al., 2023; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). Early childhood programs also utilize Caring for our Children, another nationally recognized set of health and safety standards, to ensure high-quality and evidence-based best practices are being implemented in their classrooms (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; National Resource Center, 2023). These three sets of standards are used nationally in higher education and

the early childhood field to guide preparation and training of the ECE workforce (Mickelson et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023).

Professional Competencies for Social and Emotional Instruction in Early Childhood Education

When reviewing program standards, early learning standards, and professional standards for early educators used nationally and in North Carolina, several competencies pertaining to the social and emotional development of young children were identified (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Prior to examining the instructional experiences of faculty in teacher preparation courses, it was imperative to understand the professional competencies and skills needed by the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional learning (Blanton et al., 2018; Mickelson et al., 2022). Reviewing the nationally recognized standards revealed social and emotional themes that are similar to the study's conceptual framework (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Just as the Pyramid Model framework illustrates, national and state-level standards for early educators include themes pertaining to nurturing and responsive relationships, high-quality environments, targeted social-emotional supports, and intensive intervention.

Nurturing and Responsive Relationships

An essential competency for all early childhood professionals is the ability to communicate and collaborate with families (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for

the Education of Young Children, 2020). Early educators should talk with families daily and plan intentional time for discussing each child's interests, progress, and development. Information about classroom rules, expectations for behavior, and daily routines should be shared during enrollment and revisited throughout the year (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020 National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Early educators should also show cultural competence and be respectful of each family's culture, language, and beliefs as they relate to each child's development and learning (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

The Council for Exceptional Children and Division of Early Childhood (2020) as well as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), emphasized the importance of connecting with families, and building positive and nurturing relationships with children. Early educators should use a variety of strategies to greet each child, share positive interactions during routines and play, provide positive feedback, give praise and encouragement, and create a feeling of warmth and comfort in the classroom. Relationships should be intentionally nurtured with attention throughout the day, not only when children exhibit challenging behavior. Relationships with children should be consistent and predictable when caring for young children's physical and emotional needs (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Daily interactions with children should reflect the early educators' knowledge and respect of each family's culture, language, and beliefs (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; American Academy of Pediatrics et al. 2019).

High-Quality Environments

Early educators need to understand how to create a classroom space with materials that promote play, engagement, interaction, and learning based on children's interests and developmental needs (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). The classroom arrangement should be set up with defined spaces and an adequate amount of learning materials and toys that children find interesting. Visual cues should be in place to help children learn predictable routines and encourage independence while navigating the classroom. Early educators need competence in the environmental design of the classroom space and materials, predictable and consistent schedules that meet children's needs, effective transitions, and engaging activities to prevent and address challenging behaviors.

In addition to developmentally appropriate learning materials and classroom design, young children need early educators who are intentional about teaching social and emotional skills and concepts. Early educators should provide instruction and activities that help children learn classroom rules, understand behavior expectations, follow directions, and develop social skills (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Positive attention and feedback must be used frequently that reinforces appropriate behavior, acknowledges children's efforts, and encourages their continued learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020). Early educators need competence in planning small and large group activities that promote engagement and address specific goals for children's individual development (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Cultural competence should also be demonstrated during classroom activities and interactions (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; National

Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). When challenging behavior occurs, early educators need to be equipped with appropriate strategies to provide consistent and individualized responses (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Developing a sense of community in the classroom is an important component for young children's social and emotional learning. Children should be offered choices to increase levels of autonomy and responsibility in the group setting (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Early educators should provide a variety of opportunities for children to learn empathy and how to consider the perspectives of others (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Each child should feel accepted and a sense of belonging, including those with special needs and disabilities (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013).

Targeted Social and Emotional Supports

Early educators should provide intentional opportunities for children to explore a wide range of feelings and develop a rich emotional vocabulary (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Children need help identifying and discussing their own emotions, as well as how to express those feelings. In order for children to learn how to regulate their behavior, they first need to develop a strong foundation of emotional literacy and awareness.

Early educators also need an understanding of how to model pro-social behaviors through respectful interactions with children and coworkers. Modeling turn-taking, sharing, and care for materials helps children learn how to respect their classroom and peers (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Early educators must give children a variety of opportunities to develop friendships, learn to help others, and navigate social cues within group settings (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Children need early educators to mediate conflict resolution and problem-solving when issues arise, helping them identify feelings, discuss the problem, and think of possible solutions (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Early educators also need competence in helping children manage their behavior by encouraging them to persist when frustrated, play cooperatively, use language to communicate needs, use problem-solving techniques, and show empathy for others (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013).

Intensive Interventions

For children with persistent and serious challenging behavior, early educators collaborate with families and other early intervention professionals to develop and implement individualized support plans to address their developmental needs (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Early educators serve on the intervention team and help assess the child's behavior, identify its function, and develop a behavior support plan that outlines specific strategies and

modifications for addressing the behavior. A functional behavior analysis (FBA) is conducted to determine factors associated with the child's challenging behavior (Hemmeter et al., 2021). Observations, interviews, and checklists are utilized with early educators and families to document the child's behavior in the classroom and at home (Hemmeter et al., 2021). Focus needs to be placed on teaching missing social and emotional skills needed to replace the challenging behaviors and monitoring the child's progress (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Once a child's needs are identified, a behavior support plan is developed that includes prevention strategies, teaching replacement skills, and the use of reinforcement practices to strengthen the social and emotional skills learned (Hemmeter et al., 2021).

Effective Teaching Practices for Social and Emotional Learning

Hemmeter et al. (2016; 2021c) provided evidence that child and teacher outcomes are more successful in classrooms that use the Pyramid Model framework as a guide for teaching practices. The Pyramid Model offers research-based practices that prevent and address challenging behavior in early childhood classrooms, as well as promote social and emotional development (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Rakap et al., 2018). The Pyramid Model is built upon the foundation of an effective workforce that has the training, policies, and systems in place for early educators to be successful (Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). The first tier provides universal practices for building and nurturing positive relationships, as well as providing high-quality supportive classroom environments (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Rakap et al., 2018). Teachers are encouraged to invest in relationships daily to provide a positive climate where children feel welcome, safe, and cared for by adults and peers

(Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021). A well-planned room arrangement, age-appropriate learning materials, and classroom management strategies are considered when planning a high-quality environment (Rakap et al., 2018). The table below shares examples of effective social and emotional teaching practices from Tier 1 of the Pyramid Model framework.

Table 1

Pyramid Model: Tier 1 Effective Teaching Practices	
Building Positive and Nurturing Relationships	**Creating a High-Quality Supportive Environment**
• Promotes responsive and supportive interactions with children, families, and coworkers • Supporting and joining children in play • Ongoing and extended conversations • Positive and descriptive feedback and encouragement • Praising appropriate behavior • Communication and collaboration with families	• Engaging children in developmentally appropriate learning materials • Adequate amount of interesting learning materials available in centers • Balance of child directed and teacher directed learning activities for large and small groups • Structured transitions • Clear directions and individualized supports for those children who need help understanding directions and expectations • Teaching a small and appropriate number of classroom rules • Actively promoting the engagement of children

Note: This table was created based on information found in the literature (Hemmeter et al., 2017) on April 2, 2022.

The second tier is a prevention level that encourages targeted social and emotional support for children who need more guidance (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Rakap et al., 2018). This level of the framework provides intentional practices that address specific behaviors or social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation, emotional literacy, problem-solving, and establishing friendships (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Rakap et al., 2018). The table below shares examples of effective social and emotional teaching practices from Tier 2 of the Pyramid Model framework.

Table 2

Pyramid Model: Tier 2 Effective Teaching Practices Targeted Social and Emotional Supports
• Systematic instruction of social and emotional skills for all children, as well as individualized supports for children with challenging behavior, emotional or behavioral disorders, and social and emotional skill deficits • Teaching children to identify and express emotions • Supporting self-regulation and strategies for managing emotions like anger and disappointment • Teaching and supporting problem solving skills • Teaching and supporting friendship skills with collaboration with peers • Providing individualized instruction for children needing additional support

Note: This table was created based on information found in the literature (Hemmeter et al., 2017) on April 2, 2022.

The third tier involves individualized intensive intervention and is the level where behavior analysis, an intervention team, and support plans are involved (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Rakap et al., 2018). The table below shares examples of effective social and emotional teaching practices from Tier 3 of the Pyramid Model framework.

Table 3

Pyramid Model: Tier 3 Effective Teaching Practices Individualized Intensive Intervention
• A team is developed to include the staff, family, specialists, and others who provide behavior support within the classroom, program, or school • Functional behavior and other formal assessments are conducted • An individualized behavior support plan is created that provides strategies to support the specific child • Prevention practices, targeted instructional goals, and evaluations are used • Intensive monitoring of the child's progress, behavioral changes, and use of replacement skills is documented

Note: This table was created based on information found in the literature (Hemmeter et al., 2017) on April 2, 2022.

Implementation of social and emotional teaching practices recommended in the Pyramid Model framework can be assessed using the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) or the Inventory of Practices (IOP) (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2017). The TPOT tool assesses the practices used within an early childhood environment, teacher and child interactions, as well as instructional practices that support children's social and emotional skill development (Golden et al., 2021). The subscales include an assessment of key teaching practices, red flags observed in the classroom, and effective strategies used when responding to challenging behavior. The IOP is a tool used by early educators and coaches to identify areas of need for professional development and training (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Early childhood classrooms that use the Pyramid Model framework are encouraged to achieve fidelity or become proficient in evidence-based teaching practices (Hemmeter et al., 2017). Using a person-centered approach when helping teachers implement effective teaching practices has been found more effective in the field (Fettig et al., 2021).

Researchers suggested that early educators receive specialized training and guidance when implementing social and emotional teaching practices in their classrooms (Hemmeter et al., 2021; Rakap et al., 2018). Coaching in the classroom is recommended to reinforce the information and strategies learned from professional development workshops. Using both training and on-site coaching in the classroom has proven to be an effective approach to improving child outcomes (Hemmeter et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2017). Even if early educators have higher-level teaching degrees, on-going professional development is recommended (Buettner et al., 2016; Lang et al., 2017). Social and emotional teaching practices are an area where many early educators need additional support (Lang et al., 2017; Rakap et al., 2018; Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017). The literature identified the need for more professional development that focuses specifically on the social and emotional domain of learning (Buettner et al., 2016; Lang et al., 2017; Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017). When early childhood programs successfully implement social and emotional support, teachers feel more satisfied with their job and remain in the workforce (Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016).

Early Childhood Education Workforce Challenges with Social and Emotional Learning

Although more focus has been placed on SEL for young children in recent decades, the ECE workforce continues to experience professional challenges (Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017). Early educators currently working in the field identified SEL as an area where more guidance is still needed (Blewitt et al., 2021; McCllelland et al., 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). They felt inadequate in their knowledge of social and emotional pedagogy and quality teaching practices (Blewitt et al., 2021; Zinnser et al., 2016). Early educators need an understanding of developmental milestones, strategies for supporting skill development, and a developmentally appropriate way to assess children's learning (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Buettner et

al., 2016). When early educators have a foundational knowledge of child development, they are able to make appropriate decisions about teaching strategies and addressing behavior issues (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Buettner et al., 2016).

A major challenge for the early childhood field is workforce retention (CCSA, 2020). According to a 2019 ECE workforce study, 20% of early educators in NC reported they plan to leave the field within three years. When asked about factors that would entice them to stay, 39% of early educators in NC shared that more support with SEL is needed to help them address challenging behaviors in their classroom. Research suggests that challenging behavior and children's lack of social and emotional skills contribute to teacher stress and burnout (Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). Early educators share a desire for embedding more SEL opportunities into their classroom routines and activities, but need guidance to do so effectively (Blewitt et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). It was noted that early educators feel professional development on SEL is valuable and a good use of their time; however, training on social and emotional concepts is limited in the field (McClelland et al., 2017; Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017).

Role of Higher Education

Higher education plays an important role in the quality of teachers in early childhood classrooms. Colleges and universities are tasked with preparing teachers for the early childhood workforce and equipping them with the skills needed to educate young children. The literature shared mixed messages regarding the impact of teacher education and quality in early childhood classrooms (Falunchuk et al., 2017; Lang et al., 2017; Nocita et al., 2020). Buettner et al. (2016) found that a majority of early childhood programs in higher education covered standards that promote high-quality classrooms; however, the amount of exposure to social and emotional

content was minimal. In addition, Manning et al. (2019) found that higher teacher education and credentials correlated with higher-quality classrooms. In contrast, Nocita et al. (2020) discovered a weak association between higher teaching credentials and better child outcomes, specifically in social skills. Although current studies have been unable to come to a consensus on the true impact of higher education in early childhood classrooms, faculty in higher education make significant contributions and are essential for preparing the workforce (Falunchuk et al., 2017; Lang et al., 2017).

Foundational Knowledge of Child Development

Researchers suggested early educators who pursue early childhood degrees at colleges and universities gain a stronger foundation of child development knowledge (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Buettner et al., 2016; Falunchuk et al., 2017). Participating in higher education courses provides opportunities for teachers to form their own beliefs and philosophies about teaching young children (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Lang et al., 2017). Early educators need an understanding of developmental milestones, strategies for supporting skill development, and a developmentally appropriate way to assess children's learning (Beisly & Lake, 2021; Buettner et al., 2016). When teachers have a foundational knowledge of child development, they are able to make appropriate decisions about teaching strategies and addressing behavior issues.

Preparing the Workforce

Many early educators enter the workforce without the knowledge and skills needed for successfully teaching young children (Boyd et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016). Employers and supervisors of early educators shared that many of their staff were hired with some knowledge of child development theories; however, they lack the ability to put theory into practice (Boyd et al., 2020). Not only have employers identified the lack of preparation, early educators also shared

they struggle with putting the knowledge learned into practice (Boyd et al., 2020; Oosteroff et al., 2020). There is a specific need for early educators to receive more training on the social and emotional domain of learning (Boyd et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016; Ciucci et al., 2018). It was also suggested that more focus needs to be placed on pre-service training of early educators that helps them reflect on their own social competence and support for transitioning into a professional role (Ciucci et al., 2018).

Teacher Educators

Teacher educators are a key element in helping pre-service early educators develop the professional competencies needed for supporting SEL in classrooms (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Many individuals transition from teaching in a school classroom to preparing future educators in higher education (Braund, 2015; Ping et al., 2018). Analyzing the literature about teacher educators revealed a shared concern from some researchers about the quality of teaching and training provided to student teachers (Braund, 2015; Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Ping et al., 2018). One reason could be that minimal attention and effort have been placed on developing a curriculum or training procedures for teacher educators (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ping et al., 2018). Much of the knowledge teacher educators bring to their new role has been learned from their own teaching experiences, rather than current research or their continued studies (Ping et al., 2018). Some teacher educators obtain the role in higher education without teaching children in a school setting (White, 2019). They enter the role after obtaining a high-level degree or publishing research, which gives them knowledge but minimal experience. At this time, there is no formal credential or training is required to become a teacher educator (White, 2019). Although a doctoral degree is often required to teach at a university, many teacher educators hold degrees in subjects that differ from the courses they are teaching (White, 2019).

Researchers suggested that more professional development opportunities and structured guidance are needed for teacher educators (Braund, 2015; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Ping et al., 2018). Goodwin & Kosnik (2013) recommended more training that focuses on helping student teachers put theory into practice and strategies for applying knowledge. Much of the coursework focuses on reading best practice, without seeing them in action. Aside from gaining and applying new knowledge, attention is needed to the relationship aspect of higher education experiences (Douglass, 2019). Student teachers in ECE degree programs shared they are more successful in courses where there is mutual respect, care, confidence in the students, flexibility, responsiveness, mentoring, and role modeling from teacher educators (Douglass, 2019). An argument could be made that a teacher educator's soft skills are as important as their knowledge of content when teaching ECE students in higher education.

Improvements in preparing those who teach future teachers will result in better outcomes for those entering the field (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Ping et al., 2018). Nenonene et al. (2019) shared that some colleges and universities are already improving the way teacher educators are teaching students about SEL. Using a professional learning community format, one university spent two years exploring the use of SEL concepts in teacher education programs (Nenonene, et.al., 2019). Findings showed that teacher educators were open to learning more about SEL, needed instructional support, and helped generate a plan for embedding the domain into more courses in teacher preparation programs. Similarly, other colleges have begun to pilot SEL-focused consortiums within education departments in an effort to improve how they prepare educators for the workforce (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate that although much improvement is suggested for higher education, some colleges and universities are beginning to make SEL a priority for teacher educators.

Social and Emotional Content in Higher Education

Many early educators do not feel prepared to address challenging behaviors and meet the social and emotional needs of young children (Blewitt et al., 2021; Stormant & Young-Walker, 2017; Zinnser et al., 2016). Colleges and universities provide an opportunity to learn about social and emotional development, accumulate strategies, participate in practicum experiences, and receive feedback (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Williford et al. (2017) found that professional development provided in a course format resulted in higher teacher performance and knowledge. Although in-service training is important for teachers already in the field, higher education settings are ideal for building foundational knowledge for supporting social and emotional development (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Hemmeter et al., 2008).

Courses and Curricula

When surveying early childhood departments in higher education, researchers found that only half of the colleges reported teaching social and emotional content in more than one course (Buettner et al., 2016). It was also noted that students in four-year degree programs received less instruction on social and emotional development than those who completed a two-year degree. The social and emotional domain is one of the least covered topics in early childhood degree programs (Buettner et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Early educators are seeking more practical content within courses that give them strategies they can apply in the classroom (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Labrot et al., 2022; Temiz & Haser, 2022; Zinnser et al., 2016). The literature suggested that students in early childhood degree programs need more engaging courses and curricula that focus more on teaching practices than theory (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Gao et al., 2023; Mantegu et al., 2021; Williford et al., 2017). Beginning teachers have shared the need for more emphasis on managing challenging behaviors in

preschool classrooms (Blewitt et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Temiz & Haser, 2022). Challenging behavior is a frequently requested training topic; however, little is shared with pre-service teachers on strategies for addressing behavior issues (Hemmeter et al., 2008; Labrot et al., 2022). Some researchers suggest that social and emotional content needs to be embedded throughout other courses, while others advocate for new courses that comprehensively discuss the domain (Hemmeter et al., 2008; Labrot et al., 2022; Williford et al., 2017). Regardless of how the information is provided to students, the consensus is that colleges need to prioritize adding more social and emotional curricula.

Practicum Experience

Practicum experiences are embedded in a majority of four-year degree programs and several two-year programs (Buettner et al., 2016; Sumrall et al., 2017). Practicum assignments and student teaching are considered one of the most meaningful experiences in teacher preparation programs (Johnson et al., 2016; Mantegu et al., 2021; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023; Salim et al., 2023; Sumrall et al., 2017). Mantegu et al. (2021) shared that practicums are needed so student teachers can begin to apply theories and practices learned in courses. Student teachers have the opportunity to gain classroom experience, observe an experienced educator, apply knowledge learned from courses, and receive feedback on their teaching practices (Gao et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2016; Mantegu et al., 2021; Sumrall et al., 2017). From these experiences, student teachers begin to develop the professional competencies needed to be successful in the workforce (Salim et al., 2023). Many graduates of early childhood programs consider it to be the most influential learning experience in their program (Sumrall et al., 2017).

New early educators can feel unprepared and beset when beginning their career (Gao et al., 2023). Specifically, early educators often feel ill-equipped in using evidence-based practices

to address challenging behavior and support SEL (Labrot et al., 2022). Practicum experiences during teacher preparation programs can help address this issue; however, research suggested that more data is needed on social and emotional teaching in practicum assignments (Hemmeter et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2016; Labrot et al., 2022). Beginning teachers in the field would like more opportunities to observe strategies for addressing challenging behavior during this experience (Labrot et al., 2022; Hemmeter et al., 2008). Labrot et al. (2022) emphasized that a proactive approach to training those entering the ECE workforce for SEL could set them up for success, rather than waiting until they are already in the field to provide support. Using PBIS models such as the Pyramid Model framework during field experiences offers early educators a blueprint of evidence-based teaching practices to implement in practicums. Although this is suggested, more research was needed on how implementation support for PBIS is provided during practicum experiences (Labrot et al., 2022; LaParo & Siskind, 2022).

Summary

Both early educators and institutions of higher education have an essential role in supporting young children's social and emotional development. If the ECE field would like early educators to prioritize social and emotional learning in preschool classrooms, the same must occur in their teacher preparation programs. The literature supports and encourages more focus on SEL in ECE; however, it does not provide enough specifics on how future early educators are being prepared for this task. Early childhood degree programs are where students can acquire knowledge about child development, learn teaching strategies, and apply their learning in practicum experiences.

Social and emotional development is foundational for all other domains of learning; therefore, more inquiry was needed into how we are teaching this content to future educators in

ECE. Collectively, the research revealed that many early educators lack the professional competencies needed to successfully facilitate social and emotional learning in an early childhood classroom (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Boyd et al., 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021). A gap in the literature exists regarding social and emotional content in courses and curricula provided in early childhood degree programs; however, this study contributed new insight from a higher education perspective to help narrow the gap in literature. Early childhood faculty participating in the study shared their experiences with social and emotional concepts being taught in early childhood courses. Faculty also shared their training and experience with SEL and how that impacted their instructional methods. Describing the experiences of higher education faculty with the social and emotional domain of development provided insight into current challenges faced in the field. Using the Pyramid Model conceptual framework to guide the research revealed how best practices for teaching social and emotional skills are being applied in early childhood courses in higher education. Findings benefited the field of early childhood education by providing data that encouraged more attention on social and emotional content in early childhood courses. This could strengthen the quality of early childhood courses in higher education as well as address the issue of early educators' lacking professional competencies needed to teach this domain of development in ECE. This would ultimately benefit young children by having an early childhood workforce with a strong foundation of knowledge to support social and emotional learning. Social and emotional competence in young children leads to adults equipped with skills for successfully contributing to our society.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education (ECE) workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. In this chapter, the first section provides an overview of the research design and questions that are central to the study. Next, the setting and participant information are shared. Third, the researcher's positionality and motivation for completing this study are explained. In addition, the interpretative framework and philosophical assumptions, as well as the researcher's role are discussed. The fourth section covers the procedures, permissions, and recruitment plan used to implement the study. A data collection plan is described that includes individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups. Data analysis steps, including Moustakas's (1994) recommendations for transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological reduction are discussed. The chapter concludes with a description of ethical considerations and a reflective summary.

Research Design

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a human or social problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of research begins with questions, and the ultimate purpose is to find information that improves the human condition (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Researchers build a complex picture, analyze participants' words, and report detailed views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative inquiry is based upon empiricism, which is a philosophy that suggests knowledge is obtained through direct experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). The goal is to gather information about the natural

world or experiences that generate understanding that can be used. The qualitative approach worked well for this study because higher education faculty shared their experiences using social and emotional curricula when teaching early childhood courses. Exploring faculty experiences helped individuals in the field of early childhood education better understand higher education's role in preparing the ECE workforce for social and emotional instruction.

A phenomenological design was used to describe the experiences of early childhood faculty who are currently teaching at colleges and universities in North Carolina. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as the science of describing what one perceives and senses from their own experiences. Phenomenological studies seek to explore the meaning of those lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it provided an opportunity for early childhood faculty to share their personal experiences with educators. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on objectivity, and setting aside bias while describing the phenomena of others (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher sets aside their interpretation and focuses solely on describing the experience. For this study, a transcendental approach was used to analyze the instructional experiences of early childhood education faculty in higher education. Moustakas (1994) shared that transcendental phenomenology consists of identifying the phenomenon to study, relating one's experiences, and collecting data from several people who have had the same experience. The researcher develops textural and structural descriptions to convey the overall essence of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomena examined were the social and emotional instructional experiences of early childhood faculty in higher education. Their perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences provided a snapshot of how early childhood departments are preparing students to support this domain of development when entering the field.

Research Questions

This section will share research questions used to guide the study and data collection with early childhood faculty. There was one central research question along with two sub-questions. Answers to these questions revealed the lived experiences and perspectives of higher education faculty teaching early childhood courses.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of higher education faculty in preparing the early childhood education workforce for social and emotional instruction in an early childhood classroom?

Sub-Question One

How do higher education faculty describe the social and emotional competencies needed by early educators entering the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How do higher education faculty describe their experiences with embedding essential components of social and emotional learning in their early childhood courses and curricula?

Setting and Participants

During this study, information was collected from higher education faculty to learn more about their lived experiences with social and emotional instruction in early childhood degree programs. In this section, the study's setting and participants will be explained. An overview of the location where participants were recruited is provided. Next, details about the participation criteria for the sample are discussed.

Setting

The setting for this study took place virtually using social media platforms, where higher

education faculty in North Carolina are network members. I chose this specific state in the Southeastern region of the United States because of my employment experiences that have provided opportunities for statewide travel and work in each region. The first social media platform used for recruitment included a Mighty Network community called Social Emotional Connections. The second social media platform was the NC Healthy Social Behaviors Project's Twitter page, and Facebook. All three social media platforms provided access to a diverse group of early childhood professionals in North Carolina, including many working in higher education. Participants' geographic location and institutional demographics were varied and determined after receiving the recruitment survey responses. Details about the colleges and universities where faculty have instructional experience were shared upon receiving demographic information from interested participants.

Participants

In-phenomenology, the average sample size in a study is 10 participants (Frechette et al., 2020). The richness of the data collected takes precedence over the sample size; however, variation and saturation should be considered. Participants in this study included 10 early childhood education faculty in higher education. Individuals were recruited online using social media platforms with communities of early childhood professionals in North Carolina. Saturation was reached when new data from participants did not contribute significantly to understanding the phenomena (Freschette et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data saturation provided closure for the sample size and avoided the continued collection of redundant information (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Participants in this study included higher education faculty in early childhood departments in North Carolina who have recently taught or are currently teaching courses required for students pursuing an early childhood education degree. Full-time, part-time,

and adjunct instructors and professors were invited to participate in the study. Teaching experience included both online and campus courses. Participants needed to have experience teaching early childhood courses that include SEL concepts. Extensive experience in teaching multiple courses was encouraged; however, new faculty also provided variation and meaningful insight into teacher preparation programs. Permission to recruit participants on the social media platforms was obtained by e-mail from statewide project manager of the NC Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative, who is the gatekeeper of these online networks.

Researcher Positionality

In my current job as a Statewide Education Specialist, I train early educators across the state of North Carolina on how to prevent and manage challenging behavior, as well as support children's social and emotional development. Many of the early educators I work with have shared that behavior is their biggest challenge. Most of these early educators have college degrees from community colleges or universities in North Carolina. Several early educators have also obtained their birth-kindergarten teacher licensure, especially those working in North Carolina pre-kindergarten classrooms. I was curious about what institutions of higher education include in their early childhood courses and how faculty perceived their role in preparing students to support this domain of development in a classroom. In this section, the interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions guiding the study are discussed.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework that helped shape this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism guides individuals to seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Fushimi, 2021). This framework relies on a participant's view of a situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019).

Vygotsky (1978) stated that cognitive growth occurs first on a social level and then as an individual. Learners relate to other people and circumstances to make sense of new information. To understand human thinking and knowledge, I must first understand the social setting where that learning occurs (Vygotsky, 1978). Omarova et al. (2021) described constructivism as a dialogue between a teacher and student, where both consciously assume responsibility for the result of learning and cognition. Constant reflection and reinterpretation of the reality for subjects in education occurs (Omarova et al., 2021). Higher education is moving away from teacher-directed lecture-only courses and opting for more student-centered, or constructivist, approaches (O'Connor, 2022). Learning for adults is no longer seen as a transfer of knowledge from instructor to student, but rather an experience where the instructor facilitates learning that involves students in constructing their own knowledge and understanding.

I chose the social constructivism interpretive framework because data collected in my study came from higher education faculty who shared about their instructional experiences with SEL content in early childhood courses. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. My guiding research questions were used to discover how early childhood faculty conceptualize the SEL experiences in their courses and make sense of them, rather than asking questions solely about the learning content.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are stances taken by a researcher guiding the direction of methodological strategies for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Urcia, 2021). These assumptions may be deeply ingrained views about the topic of study and influence

the development of research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Urcia, 2021). Based on philosophical origins of Husserl, transcendental phenomenology suggests there are multiple realities that are described in a subjective manner (Cuthbertson et al., 2019). There are three philosophical assumptions discussed in this section which include ontological, epistemological, and axiological. When a researcher discloses their beliefs and views, it allows the reader to better understand their position on the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

Ontology refers to the worldview on the nature of reality, existence, and truth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Urcia, 2021). The ontological assumption of social constructivism suggests that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontological assumptions concentrate on the nature of being and ask questions that explore reality (Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My view of reality is based on a Christian worldview, interpreting the work done by early childhood faculty in the study as an act of service. I feel faculty who teach early educators are serving God by caring for his children. The individuals working in higher education are doing selfless work to support others and the greater good of our society. Reality is guided by God's plan for our lives and each experience we have in life is influenced by Him. In qualitative research, reality is subjective, and there can be multiple viewpoints expressed by participants. Although my perspectives of reality are based on faith in God, I do not conduct research based only on my personal beliefs. I respect the beliefs and thoughts of others, even if they do not align with my own. If participants believe that multiple realities exist, I integrated all perspectives into the analysis. Multiple and sometimes conflicting realities are found in research; however, those may change as participants construct

more knowledge and intellect (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I respected how others feel about reality and included all viewpoints in my research.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology focuses on how people acquire and communicate information (Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Urcia, 2021). Epistemological assumptions are the reality constructed between the researcher and participants shaped by individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research data may reflect a person's knowledge learned by many others, not solely experts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019). In this study, feedback given by participants was based on their personal experiences with teaching early childhood courses and not an assessment of their knowledge of specific information. Although participants shared their perspectives on SEL, they may or may not be well-versed on the subject. The goal was to look more at faculty's lived experiences, beliefs, and instructional practices in higher education rather than their proficiency in SEL. Even if faculty shared all that they know about social and emotional learning with students, that does not necessarily ensure the learners will absorb that knowledge and apply it to their work and classroom. I feel that knowledge about course content is important; however, learning about the instructional experiences and practices of faculty provided a unique viewpoint that was lacking in the field. I greatly value the knowledge gained from the experiences of others, which can teach us more than simply subject matter. Knowledge gained from this study's findings will be used along with my instructional design degree to develop new higher education courses, professional development opportunities, and instructional support for those preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional learning.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption is based on a researcher's values and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2019). Values are the branch of philosophy pertaining to ethical beliefs, aesthetics, and religion (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). I am passionate about sharing the importance of social and emotional skills for young children. Social and emotional development is foundational for all other areas of learning and should be a priority for early educators (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2018). I believe higher education settings are essential in preparing the ECE workforce for employment (Boyd & Newman, 2019). Colleges and universities have the unique ability to equip early educators with the professional competencies needed to manage and teach in an early childhood classroom (Falunchuk et al., 2017; Lang et al., 2017). As a Statewide Education Specialist with the NC Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative, I provide professional development for early educators about social and emotional development and challenging behavior. The topic of study is important in both my professional and personal life; however, I remained mindful of my beliefs and utilized reflexivity throughout to avoid bias during the research process.

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered a human instrument and has a unique role in the inquiry process (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013; Rivera, 2018). Unlike physical instruments that are used to collect particular factors, human instruments are able to explore a variety of factors through interviews and discussion (Peredarenoko & Krauss, 2013; Rivera, 2018). This type of inquiry allows participants to share additional information that would not have been revealed otherwise. Qualitative researchers can respond, reflect, and affirm that participants' data is accurate during the process (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). My role as the human instrument for data collection was to present questions in a way that unveils a

participant's experiences about the phenomena (Roberts, 2020). The goal was to gain understanding of the participant's experience as they communicated the story in their own words (Roberts, 2020). The intent was to capture each participant's point of view and document it in a subjective way (Roberts, 2020; Rivera, 2018).

Qualitative researchers must be mindful of their own biases when developing data collection methods in order to ensure trustworthiness of the study (Rivera, 2018). In order to address my biases, I used the process of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a critical analysis of one's self and position on the topic of study (Lincoln et al., 2017; Rivera, 2018). The process of reflexivity is important because it forces a researcher to examine their beliefs on methodology, theory, participants, and self (Lincoln et al., 2017). Reflexivity requires a researcher to reflect on their own motivation for doing the study, identify underlying assumptions, examine theoretical and experiential connections, and consider how all of these factors affect the approaches used in research (Rivera, 2018).

As the researcher, I do have extensive knowledge about social and emotional development in early childhood education. I have been in the ECE field since 2002 and had various positions ranging from teacher, coach, and trainer. My prior experiences and knowledge in the field contributed to the motivation for this study. Although I do provide professional development to early educators, I do not teach in higher education. I do not have any authority over the early childhood faculty participating in the study. As the data collector, I had knowledge about the social and emotional topics being covered in courses but no connection to creating their curricula or teaching it in higher education. Continuous reflexivity is needed throughout the entire research process, from design to completion (Rivera et al., 2018). I was intentional about

self-reflection during each step of the study to ensure my biases did not cause me to miss important data and information.

Procedures

In this section, the procedures used to conduct the study are outlined. Steps taken to obtain permission from participants and Liberty University are discussed. The plan used to recruit participants is also shared. A choice of sampling method is included that discusses steps for selecting participants. Data collection and details about the methods used with participants conclude the section.

Permissions

Prior to conducting the study, I began to informally discuss the upcoming research opportunity with the NC Healthy Social Behaviors statewide project manager, who is a gatekeeper of the online network, Social Emotional Connections. Early childhood professionals from all around North Carolina make up the online community, including ECE faculty who teach in colleges and universities. The statewide project manager's permission was obtained by e-mail to utilize the network.

Before starting the recruitment process, I applied and received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University (see Appendix A). Following the IRB application checklist, I submitted the required documentation to ensure all participants were informed and protected in an ethical manner. Copies of the permission request and IRB approval letter can be found in the appendix (see Appendix A). Once receiving IRB approval, I began the recruitment process for participants.

Recruitment Plan

The focus of recruitment should be finding information rich cases, rather than empirical

generalizations (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Staller, 2021). A combination of convenience, criterion, and snowball sampling methods was used to recruit higher education faculty in North Carolina. The first attempt to recruit participants was a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling occurs when the researcher selects participants who are easily accessible and available (Moser & Kortsjens, 2018; Staller, 2021). My statewide project manager is the gatekeeper of large online networks of ECE professionals in North Carolina. Social media platforms that were used include a Mighty Network group called *Social Emotional Connections*, the *NC Healthy Social Behaviors Project* on Twitter and Facebook. A marketing flyer and recruitment survey was posted on statewide social media platforms. Connecting with leaders such as statewide project managers and ECE agency staff who worked as adjunct instructors in higher education resulted in additional faculty members for participation. The social media platforms utilized are open forums where individuals can freely post without requesting formal permission.

Criterion sampling was used next during the recruitment process of early childhood faculty in North Carolina. This type of sampling involves the intentional selection of participants based on specific criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moser & Kortsjens, 2018). Phenomenology uses criterion sampling to find participants who have experienced the same phenomena but vary in characteristics (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Moser & Kortsjens, 2018). To be eligible to participate in the study, higher education faculty needed experience teaching early childhood education courses at a college or university in North Carolina. A marketing flyer (See Appendix B), along with a recruitment screener survey (see Appendix C), was shared via the online communities Social Emotional Connections, Twitter, and Facebook (see Appendix D). Included in the marketing flyer was information about an incentive for participating. Faculty who

participated in the study were mailed a $50 Amazon gift card. Interested faculty completed the survey that asked for their contact and demographic information. Once faculty members expressed an interest in participating in the study, I e-mailed (see Appendix E) them to discuss the next steps and obtained their informed consent (see Appendix F).

Lastly, snowball sampling was also used. Snowball sampling involves the interested participants in recruiting their peers in similar roles who meet the criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moser & Kortsjens, 2018; Staller, 2021). Faculty that agreed to participate were asked to refer their peers or colleagues for participation in the study. The snowball sampling approach is a way to utilize networks of interested participants in relation to the topic of study (Moser & Kortsjens, 2018; Staller, 2021). The marketing flyer and recruitment screener survey was forwarded in an e-mail by participants to colleagues they felt would be interested in participating. Once the referred participants completed the survey, I contacted them via e-mail as well to proceed with getting their informed consent.

The sample pool included ECE faculty from 56 community colleges and 20 universities in North Carolina that offer early childhood education degree programs. These schools partner with Teacher Education and Compensation Help (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood NC scholarships are listed in their college directory (Child Care Services Association, 2020a). The sample size consisted of 10 early childhood faculty members. In terms of variation, participants came from a variety of locations, institution types, backgrounds, and levels of experience. A minimum of 10 participants was required per Liberty University's guidelines for qualitative research. Researchers must consider saturation when deciding on the total number of participants in their sample (Hennink et al., 2017; Moser & Kortsjens, 2018). Saturation can occur when responses and codes become repetitive in the data analysis. When no additional data can be found, the

researcher can stop sampling (Moser & Kortsjens, 2018; Saunders et al., 2018). Once saturation occurs, it is suggested that enough participants have been included in the sample (Hennink et al., 2017; Moser & Kortsjens, 2018).

Informed consent discloses risks associated with the study, how the study will be conducted, participants' rights to withdraw, benefits for participation, and contact information for the researcher (Nusbaum et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2020). Each participant who volunteered to participate completed a consent form that outlined their rights to ethical treatment during the study. The consent form was e-mailed to participants when selected for participation in the study (see Appendix F). In addition to an e-mailed explanation, a follow-up phone call occurred to ensure participants fully understood their role and rights. Building rapport and verbally explaining the process promoted understanding and provided an avenue for questions (Xu et al., 2020). Effective communication is essential for participants to clearly comprehend the study before signing in agreement (Nusbaum et al., 2017). Obtaining informed consent is required for conducting ethical research and ensures all participants are protected and have clarity when joining the study (Nusbaum et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2020).

Data Collection Plan

Data were collected from participants through individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups. The sequence of data collection was chosen to maximize the amount of information gathered from participants during our limited time together. Individual interviews occurred first to establish a connection with each participant and hear about their experiences through conversation with the researcher. Qualitative surveys were sent to participants after their interviews and invited participants to self-reflect and expand on their thoughts in print. The final method of data collection was online focus groups, where participants joined peers in sharing

final thoughts about their experiences in a group setting. Questions in the interviews, surveys, and focus groups were open-ended and allowed participants to share their experiences with teaching social and emotional content in higher education. Details about each method of data collection are discussed in this section.

Individual Interviews

Qualitative interviewing is a process where knowledge about an experience or phenomenon is constructed through interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015). Interviews with individuals are used in research to understand the world from a subject's point of view and share their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Roberts, 2020). Using open-ended questions encourages participants to talk about their personal experiences, perceptions, feelings, and opinions (Patton, 2015; Roberts, 2020). A responsive interviewing method was used, meaning participants were asked to share their stories through conversation-based questions (Roberts, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Logistically, interviews with all participants were conducted within a four-week span of time. Once participants were selected for the study, they were e-mailed a scheduling link to choose a date and time based on their availability. Once the participants responded with their availability, a Zoom meeting link was e-mailed to each individual. Reminder e-mails were sent to each participant in the days leading up to their scheduled date and time. The length of each interview was approximately one hour, and meetings occurred online with Zoom videoconferencing. Only the individual participant and researcher were in the meeting room. As participants joined the Zoom meeting for their interview, they were thanked for participating and reminded the interview will be recorded for transcription. They were also asked to participate alone in a quiet room, where distractions and noise will not interfere with the conversation.

The interview process started with a grand tour question, which helped participants feel comfortable and set the tone for an open conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Roberts, 2020). A total of fifteen open-ended questions were asked during the interview. Interview questions were broad, so they provided an opportunity for a rich and substantive description of the participant's experience and allows for storytelling (Moustakas, 1994; Roberts, 2020). The interview questions also aligned with the purpose of the study, as well as guiding research questions (Roberts, 2020). Verbal probes were used to maintain a conversational tone, clarify responses, and ensure understanding. The Zoom recording was transcribed and analyzed after each interview using the platform's videoconferencing transcription tool. Questions for participant interviews are listed below and can also be found in the appendices (see Appendix G).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please briefly describe your background and professional journey in early childhood education. CRQ
2. What motivated you to pursue this role as an ECE faculty member or instructor in higher education? CRQ
3. How would you describe your experience in preparing the ECE workforce to enter the field of early childhood education? CRQ
4. Reflecting on your prior teaching experiences, how would you define social and emotional learning for young children? SQ1
5. How have your professional experiences shaped your philosophy for teaching pre-service early educators about SEL? SQ1

6. Based on your own experiences in the field, what professional competencies do you feel early educators need to successfully support social and emotional learning in an early childhood classroom? SQ1
7. What professional development or prior work experiences have you participated in that prepared you to teach early educators about social and emotional development? CRQ
8. What SEL frameworks, curricula, or standards for learning have you taught about in your courses? (Ex: Pyramid Model framework, Second Step curriculum, NCFELD standards) SQ2
9. What instructional experiences have you had with teaching college students about the topic of challenging behavior? SQ2
10. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing the foundational component of relationships in SEL? SQ2
11. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing the topic of high-quality classroom environments in SEL? SQ2
12. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing social and emotional teaching strategies for children's SEL? SQ2
13. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing individualized and intensive intervention for children with persistent challenging behavior? SQ2
14. What challenges have you experienced with teaching college students about SEL in early childhood education? CRQ
15. What else would you like to share about your instructional experiences that would help others in higher education prepare the ECE workforce for teaching SEL? CRQ

The interview questions were developed to guide the conversation with early childhood faculty, providing opportunities to share about their instructional experiences in higher education. The sequence of questions was devised to first gather background information about faculty's lived experiences, and then discuss their feelings and perceptions associated from those experiences (Patton, 2015). The types of questions used for interviews included demographics/background, behaviors/experiences, opinions/values, feelings, knowledge, and sensory. The first two questions asked about the participant's background in ECE, allowing the participants to share what led them to this instructor role in higher education. Questions three, six, fourteen, and fifteen gathered information on their opinions and thoughts on the role of higher education in preparing the ECE. The fourth question asked the participants to share their knowledge about the social and emotional domain of learning for young children. Questions five, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen focused on their experiences and behaviors they have exhibited as an instructor.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After each individual interview was completed, the Zoom recording was used to transcribe verbal responses from participants verbatim. Once transcribed, member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of each participant's responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A copy of the transcribed interview responses was e-mailed to participants immediately after transcription. Participants had the opportunity to review their interview responses to ensure the data was correct before the analysis began. Participants were asked to review the transcript and confirm the accuracy of the data within two days of receiving the e-mail.

The data analysis process followed the steps recommended for transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological reduction by Moustakas (1994). The first step in data

analysis was the process of epoché, which requires a researcher to set aside their preconceived ideas, judgments, and biases pertaining to the phenomena being studied (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). A reflexivity journal was used for bracketing my own experiences and opinions throughout the research process (Chan et al., 2013). Identifying potential biases prior to data collection and analysis prevented subjectivity when interpreting interview responses (Chan et al., 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). Previous knowledge of the phenomena were set aside, and analysis began with a cleared mind that is free of assumption (Moustakas, 1994).

The next steps in analyzing data involve the process of phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction is the task of examining each participant's experience to develop descriptions of the phenomena's meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). After the initial step of epoché, the task of horizonalization occurred. When a researcher begins to horizonalize, each response shared by participants is considered to have equal value (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish the task of horizonalization, I printed a copy of each individual interview transcript. While reading the participants' responses, I identified and highlighted significant statements. Next, I used the highlighted statements to test each expression and determine the invariant constituents using Moustakas's reduction and elimination criteria. When testing each highlighted statement, two requirements were considered. The first was to determine if the highlighted statement contained a moment of the experience that is necessary for understanding the phenomena. The second requirement was to determine if the statement could be labeled. If the highlighted statement met these two requirements, then it was considered a horizon of the experience. Horizons are the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Statements that were vague, repetitive, and

overlapping were eliminated, as well as expressions not meeting the reduction and elimination criteria.

The next step consisted of clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). These clusters revealed the core themes found in the interviews. To complete this step, I utilized Saldana's (2021) in vivo coding technique. In vivo coding is a process that uses short phrases or words from participants' responses in the data as codes. This inductive coding method is also known as verbatim coding and identifies codes based on the actual language found in participant data. To begin the first cycle of coding, I copied and pasted the highlighted significant statements from each interview into a Microsoft Word document. Next, I used the bold and text color feature in Microsoft Word to identify important words that stood out. Then, I compiled a list of codes in the order they occurred. I analyzed the list and identified words that were repeated and determined which phrases stood out in the data. During this time, I wrote these codes beside the statements in capital letters and quotation marks. After putting the list of codes in alphabetical order, I began to cluster codes into groups that looked and sounded alike. The codes were analyzed for patterns and themes, as well as condensed into major categories.

The next cycle of analysis involved checking the identified constituents and themes against each participant's complete transcript to ensure they were compatible and relevant (Moustakas, 1994). Using the relevant themes, I constructed an individual textural and structural description of the meaning and essence of the experience for each participant. An individual's textural description included the feelings, thoughts, and verbatim examples from the transcribed interview. An individual's structural description was developed using the process of imaginative variation. Imaginative variation allows the researcher to write structural themes from an

individual's textural description created during phenomenological reduction. I pondered structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationships to one's self and others. The imaginative variation process revealed possible connections with the essence of a participant's experience. Each participant's textural and structural descriptions were analyzed, and a composite description was written to represent the meanings and essences of the experience for the group. To describe faculty's experiences with the phenomena, research questions and supporting literature were linked to participants' responses.

Qualitative Surveys

Qualitative surveys provide participants with the opportunity to answer a series of open-ended questions crafted by the researcher on a specific topic (Braun et al., 2021; Terry & Braun, 2017). This type of data collection method can provide rich accounts of participants' experiences, narratives, and practices using their own words (Braun et al., 2021). Qualitative surveys offer a unique perspective using a wide-angle lens approach to data collection. The surveys can be used to capture data that reflects sense-making of participants' experiences and views. Using qualitative surveys help expand participant information that may have been missed during the individual interviews (Braun et al., 2021; Patra, 2019). Surveys can also provide a more comfortable space for participants to share information they did not think about or want to share during the interview process (Braun et al., 2021).

For this study, a qualitative survey was used as the second method for data collection. Using an online format allowed participants to conveniently and efficiently complete surveys and return them to the researcher (Patra, 2019). I created an online survey using Google Forms and invited participants to complete the survey through e-mail. Each participant was asked to complete the online survey within one week of receiving the e-mail (Braun et al., 2021). There

was a total of fifteen qualitative survey questions that aligned with the study's research questions (Patra, 2019). These open-ended survey questions can be found below as well in the appendices (See Appendix H).

Qualitative Survey Questions

1. What is your understanding of how the topic of SEL for young children is embedded in your school's requirements for ECE teaching degrees? For example, are there specific courses that focus solely on SEL or is the topic embedded into other required courses? SQ2
2. How has research about social and emotional learning in ECE influenced courses you have taught in recent years? CRQ
3. How do you perceive the amount of social and emotional content provided in required courses for ECE degrees? SQ2
4. What is your experience with course planning at your school? For example, how do you develop the syllabus, create assignments, and choose course materials for students? CRQ
5. What do you consider the top five professional competencies that new teachers in the ECE workforce need to know about SEL? SQ1
6. What personal experiences have led you to believe these are the most important professional competencies needed by new teachers? SQ1
7. How have you addressed these professional competencies for SEL in your courses? SQ1
8. How have social and emotional theories/theorists influenced your instruction in ECE courses? SQ2

9. How do you teach students evidence-based practices in your courses? (Ex: observation videos, modeling, role-play) SQ2
10. What kind of practicum experiences have you assigned in your ECE courses? SQ2
11. What do you perceive as the most meaningful assignment or project you have assigned students that focuses on SEL? SQ2
12. What experience do you have with using SEL organizations, websites, or professional resources when planning instruction? (Ex: NCPMI, CASEL) SQ2

Qualitative surveys generally have either demographic or topic related questions (Braun et al., 2021). Patton's (2015) guidance for developing open-ended interview questions was also recommended when developing qualitative survey questions (Braun et al., 2021). The types of questions used for survey questions include demographics/background, behaviors/experiences, opinions/values, feelings, knowledge, and sensory (Patton, 2015). The first four survey questions sought background information about participants' perspectives and experiences with institutional practices at their college or university. Questions five, six, and seven allowed participants to share their feelings on professional competencies needed by early educators entering the workforce to support SEL in ECE classrooms. More insight into the participants' behaviors and instructional experiences were gathered by asking questions eight, nine, and ten, which explored how social and emotional theory and teaching practices were addressed in courses. In question eleven, faculty was asked to reflect on past assignments in their courses and write about an SEL project they felt was most impactful for students' learning. The final question in the survey encouraged participants to share their experiences using outside resources, organizations, and SEL supports that have positively impacted their instruction. Completing

qualitative surveys as a second step in the study helped participants elaborate on their experiences that may not have been captured in the interview.

Qualitative Survey Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for the qualitative surveys involved the same plan used for individual interviews. Following Moustakas's (1994) steps for transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological reduction, the first task was the process of epoché. Bracketing of my own experiences and opinions was done using a reflexivity journal (Chan et al., 2013). Writing down preconceived ideas, judgments, and biases prevented subjectivity when analyzing survey responses (Chan et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). Next, phenomenological reduction was used to create descriptions of each participant's experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). Using a printed copy of each participant's survey, I began the task of horizontalization. While reading the participants' responses, I identified and highlighted significant statements. Next, I used the highlighted statements to determine the invariant constituents using Moustakas's reduction and elimination criteria (Moustakas, 1994). Highlighted statements were analyzed to see if they contained a moment of the experience and if the statement could be labeled. Vague and repetitive statements were eliminated if they did not meet the reduction and elimination criteria.

Next, I utilized Saldana's (2021) in vivo coding technique to cluster the remaining statements into themes. I coped and pasted the highlighted statements from each interview into a Microsoft Word document. I used the bold and text color feature in Microsoft Word to identify important words that stood out. A list of codes was created and analyzed for words that were repeated or stood out in the data. I wrote those codes beside the statements in capital letters and quotation marks. After putting the list of codes in alphabetical order, I began to cluster similar

codes into groups. The codes were analyzed for patterns and themes, and sorted into major categories.

Using the relevant themes, I constructed an individual textural and structural description of the meaning and essence of the experience for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Each individual's textural description described their feelings, thoughts, and verbatim examples from the survey responses. Using the process of imaginative variation, I wrote each individual's structural description to describe connections within participants' experiences. Composite descriptions were written to represent the essence of the group's experiences using research questions and supporting literature.

Focus Groups

The third method of data collection was two focus group discussions with participating faculty. Focus groups are a research method where a small group of participants interact with one another and answer questions that differ from the interview questions (Lauri, 2019; Morgan, 2018; Moser & Kortjens, 2018). Typically, a group of six to 12 participants meet to discuss issues related to the research questions (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Moser & Kortjens, 2018). A benefit of using focus groups is that participants provide additional insight about their experiences when talking with others in the sample (Lauri, 2019; Morgan, 2018; Moser & Kortjens, 2018).

For this study, there were two focus groups facilitated, each consisting of three to six participants. Using smaller groups allowed participants time to share more detailed information about their experiences and perspectives (Moser & Kortjens, 2018). The first focus group was comprised of participants with experience teaching in community colleges as well as the two participants working in universities. The second focus group included participants with

experience teaching in community colleges. Both focus group meetings were hosted online via Zoom video conferencing and were approximately one hour in length. I began the focus group meeting by providing a brief overview of the purpose and procedures being used to collect their information (Luri, 2019). Ground rules for the discussion were covered, as well as confidentiality. Participants were invited to introduce themselves to the group if they felt comfortable sharing with their peers. Next, I discussed the Pyramid Model framework and how it is used statewide with early educators in North Carolina. I shared that our focus group questions were developed using the conceptual framework as a guide. We then discussed the following questions that were provided on PowerPoint slides (See Appendix I).

Focus Group Questions

1. How have your professional experiences in higher education shaped your views on teaching the ECE workforce about universal supports needed to promote social and emotional competence for all children in ECE classrooms? SQ1
2. How have your professional experiences in higher education impacted your ability to equip the ECE workforce with targeted social and emotional strategies needed to prevent developmental challenges for children who may require extra support in ECE classrooms? SQ2
3. How have your professional experiences in higher education guided your philosophy on competencies needed by the ECE workforce to collaborate in intensive intervention services for children requiring an individualized support plan? SQ1

Using the conceptual framework of the Pyramid Model as a guide, these focus group questions were developed to examine faculty's professional experiences with social and emotional competencies needed by early educators in more detail. Participants had an

opportunity to share if and how social and emotional competencies in the Pyramid Model have influenced their instructional practices used with pre-service early educators. Even if participants did not use the Pyramid Model in their courses, the framework tiers provided a blueprint for discussing professional competencies needed by the ECE workforce. The focus group questions aligned with each tier of the conceptual framework. The first question examined the universal supports of relationships and quality classroom environments that are foundational for SEL in ECE programs. The second question asked about the preventative and targeted social and emotional teaching supports used by early educators to address challenging behavior in young children and promote social and emotional competence. Question three asked faculty to share intervention practices covered in their instruction that prepare early educators to provide individualized and intensive support to children. A copy of the focus group questions can be found in the appendices (See Appendix I).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for focus group discussions followed the same process for Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction used with the individual interviews and qualitative surveys. First, I completed the task of epoché by bracketing my own opinions, judgments, and biases using a reflexivity journal (Chan et al., 2013). Next, I used phenomenological reduction to develop descriptions for each participant's experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). To accomplish this task, I transcribed the recorded focus group meetings verbatim and printed a copy for review. Using a printed copy of each transcription, I began the task of horizontalization. While reading focus group responses, I identified and highlighted significant statements. Next, I used the highlighted statements to determine the invariant constituents using

Moustakas's reduction and elimination criteria (Moustakas, 1994). Highlighted statements were studied to see if the statement could be labeled, while vague statements were eliminated.

To begin clustering highlighted statements into themes, I followed Saldana's (2021) process for in vivo coding. I copied and pasted the highlighted statements from each focus group meeting into a Microsoft Word document. Important words were identified using bold and colorful text features. A list of codes was created and analyzed for words that were repeated or stood out in the data. I wrote those codes beside the statements in capital letters and quotation marks. After putting the list of codes in alphabetical order, I began to cluster similar codes into groups. The codes were analyzed for patterns and themes and sorted into major categories.

Using the relevant themes, I constructed an individual textural and structural description of the meaning and essence of the experiences for each focus group (Moustakas, 1994). Each focus group's textural description described their feelings, thoughts, and verbatim examples from the discussion. Using the process of imaginative variation, I wrote each group's structural description to describe connections within participants' experiences. Composite descriptions were written to represent the essence of the group's experiences using research questions and supporting literature.

Data Synthesis

Using phenomenological reduction again, each method of data collection was analyzed individually, and textural and structural descriptions were written to describe the essence of participants' lived experiences. The final step in phenomenological data analysis is the intuitive integration of fundamental textural and structural descriptions into composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). These unified statements describe the essence of the phenomena as a whole. The composite descriptions were written from significant statements and themes identified in

each of the three individual data analyses. Findings from data analysis of individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions were sorted and grouped by textural and structural descriptions. Using research questions, composite descriptions were written that reflect the group's experiences as a whole. The participants experiences were revealed, including how the experience happened and an integrated synthesis of the essence of the phenomena.

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized the importance of ethical and valid research where measures are taken by researchers to ensure the findings are accurate, honest, and trustworthy. In qualitative research, reliability is seen more as trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized four general categories in their criteria for trustworthiness in research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this section, strategies to address all four categories while conducting research are discussed. The section concludes with a review of ethical considerations and a reflective summary of the chapter.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described credibility in research as the truth value, or degree to which it is accurate. The credibility of a study is necessary because literature is used for policy recommendations or justifying reasons for change. This component of trustworthiness compares the research with reality (Stahl & King, 2020). Research is reviewed for credibility by examining the purpose of the study and whether decisions were made by the researcher that supported that purpose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is determined by both the researcher and the reader (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility can be achieved through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Holley & Harris, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All three methods were used in this study to ensure credibility.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves cross-checking multiple sources and methods to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 1999; Stahl & King, 2020). This study used individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups to triangulate data collection from participants. Responses from the qualitative surveys and focus group discussions authenticated data collected during individual interviews. Source triangulation occurred by using a sample of participants who have worked in different types of higher education settings in North Carolina (Stahl & King, 2020). Theory triangulation transpired by using the concept of social constructivism and the conceptual framework to guide questions for the study. In addition, the Pyramid Model conceptual framework was used to interpret social and emotional instructional experiences shared by participants. Using multiple theoretical and conceptual perspectives to interpret findings helped triangulate data and establish credibility (Patton, 1999).

Member Checking

Member checking is a qualitative technique used to establish the validity of an account and ensure accurate data is collected from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This task can be done formally or informally during the interview process, afterwards, or when the study is completed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviewer should restate or summarize the information at the end of an interview and then question participants to determine accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allows participants to critically analyze the findings and comment on them prior to beginning the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2010; Holley & Harris, 2019). Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for each participant. Once each individual interview was transcribed, member checking was used to ensure the

accuracy of each participant's responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A copy of the transcribed interview responses were e-mailed to participants immediately after transcription (Busetto et al., 2020). Participants had the opportunity to review their interview responses to ensure the data was correct before the analysis began (Busetto et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were asked to review the transcript and confirm the accuracy of the data within two days of receiving the e-mail. Member checking provided the opportunity to understand and assess what the participant intended to do or say during the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also gave participants the opportunity to correct and address any errors that were present in the data. Using the member checking method with participants is considered a productive way to verify accurate responses and data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020).

Peer Debriefing

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define a peer debriefer as an individual who keeps the researcher honest by asking difficult questions when examining methods and interpretations in their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holley & Harris, 2019). Peer debriefing involves sharing questions about the research process and findings with individuals who can provide additional perspectives on the study methods and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Throughout the research process, my dissertation committee provided comprehensive feedback and guidance throughout each step of the research process. Utilizing peer debriefing with trusted professionals helped ensure the conclusion and findings were reasonable and consistent with norms in the ECE field (Holley & Harris, 2019).

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe transferability as the degree to which findings in a particular inquiry may apply to other contexts or subjects. Research methods and results should be written in enough detail that others can extrapolate the study with confidence to a wider audience or sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using detailed descriptions throughout the research process provides a way to share contextual information (Stahl & King, 2020). Thick descriptions are used to describe a phenomenon sufficiently with ample details that establish conditions for readers to transfer conclusions to other settings, times, situations, and people (Holley & Harris, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). External validation of qualitative research includes thick descriptions with maximum variation, meaning a wide range of data collection (Holley & Harris, 2019). To develop these thick descriptions of data and findings, memos were kept with field notes.

Memoing is the act of recording reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memos accumulate written ideas about concepts and their relationships. Bracketing of thoughts during data collection, writing ideas in a reflexivity journal during data analysis, and field notes during data collection were compiled into memos. Memoing is important because researchers cannot possibly remember or memorize every detail of their study. Being this was a long and tedious process, keeping detailed notes prevented the researcher from forgetting important ideas and details. Those memos and detailed notes were included to guide others who may try to replicate the study in their own research. Transferability will ultimately be determined by the reader as they explore the context of the study's findings (Holley & Harris, 2019).

Dependability

Dependability establishes trust that findings in research are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015; Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability in qualitative work is seen through data collection methods and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morse, 2015). The dependability of research is important so that others outside of the study are able to replicate, audit, and critique methods and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was accomplished through an inquiry audit completed by my dissertation committee and the qualitative research director at Liberty University. An audit trail in qualitative research is described as a record of how a study was conducted and in what manner researchers arrived at the findings (Carcary, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Detailed descriptions of the study's design, methodology, data analysis, synthesis, theoretical context, and interpretations are provided in a comprehensive audit trail (Carcary, 2020; See Appendix J). In addition to methods outlined in chapter three, memos and a reflexivity journal are provided to document thinking processes and clarify understanding of decisions made during the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability

Confirmability shows the extent to which the findings of a study are determined without bias or influence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings should be solely based on the participants' input and not influenced by the researcher's interests, motivation, or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, I employed three techniques during the study. First, I shared my philosophical, ontological, and epistemological positions in the first chapter. These positions were shared so readers are aware of the researcher's beliefs and viewpoints. Second, triangulation of data was done by using three different data collection methods (Morse, 2015; Stahl & King, 2020). These three methods included individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups. Reflexivity was used when assessing the data,

debating reasons for selecting courses of action, and challenging assumptions (Carcary, 2020). Using a reflexivity journal, memos were created that bracketed my reflective thoughts throughout the research process. The third technique used was an audit trail that provided a record describing how the study was conducted and how I determined the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 2015). A comprehensive audit trail was conducted and included in the appendices (See Appendix J). Providing detailed documentation of all three techniques provides transparency and ensures the confirmability of the research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations that guide qualitative research should assure human freedom, dignity, and protection for participants (Taquette & Borges da Matte Souza, 2022). Protecting human subjects in qualitative research occurs through intentional planning of ethical considerations (Arifin, 2018). To prevent potential ethical issues, I protected participants before, during, and after the study was conducted using intentional methods. Prior to conducting the study, I submitted it for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval following the IRB requirements checklist provided by Liberty University (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Documentation of IRB approval is provided in the appendices section (see Appendix A). Participants were recruited and participated electronically using an online environment; therefore, I obtained consent from each individual rather than a site permission. Permission to utilize the social media platforms for recruitment was obtained from the HSB statewide project manager, who is a gatekeeper of the online communities.

Participants need to have a clear understanding of the requirements, expectations, risks, and benefits involved in joining the study (Taquette & Borges da Matte Souza, 2022). A marketing flyer with details about the study and a participation letter was used during the

recruitment process (See Appendix B). Every participant in a study is required to obtain informed consent (Arifin, 2018). Once interested participants were selected, they received an informed consent letter that outlined the purpose, data collection procedures, requirements, expectations, risks, and benefits of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; See Appendix F). The letter emphasized that participation was voluntary, and at no time would they be pressured to continue in the study if they chose to stop (Creswell & Poth, 2018). No risks that may harm the participant were identified. Participants benefited from the study by contributing meaningful data that can enact positive changes for the ECE workforce, as well as higher education in North Carolina. Their lived experiences and perspectives helped fill a gap in the literature about instructional practices used in higher education to prepare the ECE workforce SEL with young children. Participants each received a $50 Amazon gift card after their data collection was complete to show appreciation for their time and contribution to the research.

Confidentiality is a core component of ethical research practices (Bos, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality was preserved by not revealing participants' names or identifiable information in the study (Arifin, 2018). Pseudonyms were used when analyzing and reporting data for each participant to respect their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The region of their college or university was used to describe their employing institution. Interviews conducted online using Zoom were completed one-on-one with only the participant and researcher present in the rooms. When conducting focus groups, participants kept their cameras off and used a pseudonym during the online meeting. No identifiable information about participants or their institutions was shared.

Information shared between a researcher and human subjects should be handled responsibly and with the utmost care (Bos, 2020). Electronic data is password protected on one

laptop computer and secured in a locked file cabinet. Backed-up files on a USB drive is stored in a locked safe. All physical copies of participant information and data is stored in a safe inside the locked file cabinet. Per Liberty University's Institutional Review Board, electronic and physical data will be destroyed three years after the publication of the study.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. The study explored the essence of faculty's instructional experiences with individual interviews, open-ended qualitative surveys, and focus groups. The processes of phenomenological reduction, inductive coding, and imaginative variation were used for data analysis. Findings from each data set were synthesized into textural, structural, and composite descriptions to share the overall essence of the group's lived experiences. Measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the research included triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity, and an audit trail. Detailed notes with reflective thoughts were shared to support the transferability of the research. All these methods were conducted in an ethical and confidential manner to protect the participants and the integrity of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. The study examined the social and emotional component of instructional practices used in early childhood teacher preparation programs. Experiences and perspectives from early childhood faculty were shared using individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups. This chapter presents findings from the data analysis. Descriptions of participants, themes, subthemes, responses to research questions, and a summary are provided.

Participants

The participants in this study were higher education faculty and instructors with experience teaching early childhood education courses in community colleges and universities in North Carolina. Participants were recruited online using social media platforms comprised of a diverse group of early childhood education professionals in North Carolina. A combination of convenience, criterion, and snowball sampling was used during the recruitment process. A total of 275 people expressed interest in the study by submitting the online recruitment screener survey. Upon reviewing the screener surveys, a total of 14 individuals who met the criteria to participate were notified by e-mail. Informed consent was obtained by 11 participants, but one could not participate due to unexpected illness. A total of 10 participants were invited to schedule their preferred interview and focus group date using Calendly and e-mail.

All 10 participants contributed to the data by participating in individual interviews online using Zoom videoconferencing. Individual interviews were scheduled and conducted within a

one-month period. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour in length. All 10 participants completed an open-ended qualitative survey using Google Form. Qualitative surveys were completed independently by participants within one week of their individual interview and submitted to the researcher via Google Form. All 10 participants were invited to participate in one of the two focus group dates. A total of seven participants joined their selected focus group discussion using Zoom videoconferencing. Pseudonyms for each participant were used during online interviews and focus group meetings. In addition, participants' cameras were kept off during the focus group discussion. Demographic information for participants was collected using an online screener survey during the recruitment process. The below table shares demographic data collected for each participant.

Table 4

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years in ECE Field	Years Taught in Higher Education Settings	Higher Education Institution Type	College Pseudonym	Region	Role in Higher Education
P001	23	6	Community College	CCEast1	Eastern NC	Adjunct Instructor
P002	20	7	Community College	CCCentral1	Central NC	Part-Time Faculty; Adjunct Instructor
P003	25	15	Community College	CCEast2	Eastern NC	Adjunct Instructor
P005	27	26	Community College	CCWest2	Western NC	Full-Time Faculty
P006	25	20	Community College	CCWest3	Western NC	Full-Time Faculty

P007	15	13	University (2)	UNCentral1 UNEast1	Central & Eastern NC	Full-Time Faculty
P008	22	7	Community College	CCCentral2	Central NC	Full-Time Faculty
P009	21	8	Community College	CCWest4	Western NC	Full-Time Faculty
P013	24	14	University	UNWest4	Western NC	Full-Time Faculty
P014	30	26	Community College	CCEast3	Eastern NC	Full-Time Faculty

Participant P001

Participant P001 has worked in the early childhood field for 23 years, spending six of those teaching as an adjunct instructor in higher education. Her instructional experiences include teaching online, face-to-face, and hybrid early childhood classes in a community college setting. Having worked with adults experiencing mental health challenges in the past, she saw the need for intervention services and felt she could prevent many challenges earlier in the lives of young children. In her interview, P001 said “When I was younger, I used to say that I wanted to work with children who had behavior issues, and so I went to school for child development.” When the opportunity to work with early childhood programs presented itself, P001 felt she could help early educators establish a strong foundation of social and emotional skills for young children.

Her personal experiences with diverse learning needs made her compassionate to adult learners so transitioning to higher education was a natural fit. She shared in her interview that “ I was open to differences in learning styles and empathetic because of myself and others I have been around.” As she began teaching early childhood courses, she found there was a lack of

empathy and understanding regarding learning styles and skill levels for students. Participant P001 believes her job is to help people, no matter where they are in their learning journey; so that has been a major focus of her practice. Teaching content in her early childhood courses should be relevant to students' current needs and that has helped P001 connect with early educators in a more meaningful way. Many of the students enrolled in her previous courses were already working in an early childhood program, but she also had some younger students who were new to the field. One of the most difficult challenges she has encountered in higher education is closed minded students. Some adult learners are not as receptive to new information or open to trying new ideas in their teaching practice. Having spent several years providing technical assistance and training to early educators in her region, P001 supplements her course content with practical and evidence-based strategies.

When discussing social and emotional development, P001 shared that coverage of this topic varies greatly depending on the instructor and course. Her instructional experiences are enhanced by her strong background and training in social and emotional learning for young children. On her qualitative survey, P001 wrote "As an adjunct instructor, I am typically encouraged to use content from previous classes; however, it is my goal though in any class that I instruct to embed social and emotional learning." Having attended a variety of conferences and trainings throughout her career in early childhood education, P001 accentuates the importance of positive relationships, high quality classroom environments, targeted social and emotional supports, and individualized intervention for young children. Many of her students receive a basic overview of what a career in early childhood education truly looks like during their initial credentials course; however, a more comprehensive course that covers essential components

such as social and emotional learning, behavior, diversity, culture, and inclusive practices would greatly benefit students entering the workforce.

Participant P002

With 20 years of experience in the field of early childhood education, P002 has spent the last seven years teaching early educators in higher education. She is currently serving as a part-time faculty member and adjunct instructor at three different community colleges in North Carolina. Her experiences include teaching online, face-to-face, hybrid, and practicum courses in early childhood education degree programs. Being raised by a preschool teacher herself, she had the opportunity as a teenager to volunteer in her mother's classroom and Head Start center. As an undergraduate student, she began working with older children on cultural and academic pursuits which led to her employment in a school age setting. During her interview, P002 shared "At one point I decided I wanted to work in a child care center, because I wanted to know what quality looked like." She continued and said "So, I went to a five star NAEYC accredited center and started working in some of the younger classrooms, and was just in awe at what those teachers could do." In addition to teaching, she also gained administrative experience working as a program director. Her experiences in early childhood education prompted her to pursue multiple higher education degrees and transition out of the classroom into support roles for early educators.

Upon finishing her master's degree, P002 began teaching in higher education settings and pursuing her doctoral degree in early childhood education. Teaching early childhood students in higher education came naturally to her, as she had previously worked as a trainer and classroom coach for early educators. Her philosophy for teaching is to approach adult learning in the same way she would children's learning. She expressed the need to meet students where they

are and chooses to focus on building from a student teacher's strengths versus deficits. Sharing in her interview, P002 said "I like to do a lot of parallel processing, thinking about what I want them to be able to do." Two frequent terms used when describing her instructional experiences were "practical" and "reflective." In her classes, she strives to provide information that is practical and can be used to address their current needs. Opportunities for students to participate in self-reflection activities in class is important to P002, as she wants early educators to understand how their actions and behaviors can be changed to solve challenges in a classroom.

When describing social and emotional learning on the qualitative survey, P002 wrote "I believe that social and emotional skills are the most important for kindergarten readiness and planning for social and emotional development overlaps all other domains of development." She shared the necessity for children to develop a sense of self, sense of self with others, and understand how to manage their emotions. Social and emotional concepts are currently embedded in several early childhood courses at her college, but she wishes it was formally included in all classes. One of the most impactful projects she assigns in her courses is the Pyramid Model project, where students create a teaching toolbox with a variety of instructional resources for young children's social and emotional learning. Former students have shared that they still use their toolbox of resources and continue to add to it.

Participant P003

Twenty five years ago, Participant P003 entered the early childhood education field after serving in the United States military. Having spent several years deployed during the early years of his own children's lives, he decided to pursue a career in education to give back to a new generation of children during a critical time in their development. In his interview, P003 said "Because of my long service in the military, I missed a lot of time with my kids; so, I said how

about if I go into the education field and pay it forward." As he launched a second career in early childhood education, he was able to help his grandchildren by teaching them skills learned during his professional development and studies. His passion for supporting young children and early educators led him to teaching early childhood education courses at a local community college. In the interview, he shared "I found it quite amazing, I always wanted to teach early childhood education at the collegiate level." Participant P003 has spent 15 years teaching online, face-to-face, and practicum courses as an adjunct in the early childhood education department.

His enthusiasm for helping early educators and administrators was evident in his description of the prior training, mentoring, and technical assistance he has provided to early childhood programs. Utilizing those experiences in his instructional practices, he is intentional about providing tools and strategies that improve the lives of both staff and children. A strength based approach has been useful in his work as he shared that our early childhood workforce is truly struggling at this moment in time. There have been increasingly difficult challenges faced by the early childhood community since the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff turnover, lack of training opportunities, and lower enrollments in early childhood education degree programs have all increased greatly in the past few years. In addition, his students in higher education have shared issues such as challenging behavior and classroom management have left them feeling defeated and wanting to leave the field. For that reason, the social and emotional domain of learning has been a pivotal component of his instruction in higher education. Helping the early childhood workforce prevent and address challenging behaviors is a focal point of interest as he considers pursuing a doctoral degree in early childhood education. He said, "I have an EdS but I want to go for an EdD, and try to focus on challenging behaviors so maybe I can convince a

national panel somewhere that we need a course dedicated to challenging behaviors at the associate degree level."

When describing social and emotional concepts taught in early childhood education courses, P003 emphasized the need for early educators to understand the importance of relationships, room arrangement, using visual supports, behavior strategies, and collaborating with others to meet the needs of all children. He frequently provides opportunities for students to observe him modeling evidence based strategies in practicum classrooms. In addition, P003 was fortunate to have a large space at his community college where a model preschool classroom was set up for students to utilize in early childhood courses. Understanding the foundational component of social and emotional development, P003 is intentional about sharing tools and resources for this domain of learning into his early childhood education courses.

Participant P005

With 26 years of experience in higher education, P005 is currently teaching full-time as faculty in a community college setting in North Carolina. She has experience teaching online, face-to-face, hybrid, and practicum courses with early childhood education students. The participant has previously worked on a variety of statewide projects focusing on quality improvement in early childhood programs. In addition, she accentuated her passion for early intervention grew when she provided play therapy and case coordination for young children. During the interview, P005 discussed her experiences as a student in higher education and said, "While I was there, I had some of the best mentors, really truly I was just blessed with really good mentors." Peer and faculty mentors encouraged her to teach courses and that led to full-time work as faculty in the early childhood department.

Having had strong mentors throughout her career, participant P005 expressed the need for more practicum experiences in quality classrooms with skilled early educators. Practicum experiences have reduced over the years and she feels they are important for developing professional competencies in the ECE workforce. On her qualitative survey, P005 wrote "unfortunately, our program only has one required capstone practicum, and students need more practical experiences earlier in the program." Continuing, she wrote "I have observations that are required in all of my courses." Since the COVID-19 era began, the opportunities for human connection have lessened. In addition to less practicum experiences, early childhood students have also taken more online courses than face-to-face. Although online courses can be effective, she felt that a sense of community is created better when students are learning in-person. She also shared that early childhood students in her courses are stressed and experiencing unprecedented challenges in their personal lives. These challenges have impacted their interest and participation in higher education.

Participant P005 described social and emotional learning using a tree analogy. In the interview, she said "the roots of the tree establish a strong foundation to flourish and grow, just as the tree will not grow with weak roots, a child will not thrive without a strong foundation built in the early childhood years." She stated that "social and emotional learning is what early childhood is all about, understanding how to interact with your world and how to manage yourself in any space that you are in, is the crux of this domain of development." At her community college, social and emotional learning concepts are embedded in multiple required courses for early childhood education degrees; however, some are not offered consistently. She is intentional about incorporating infant mental health standards as well as social and emotional resources for early educators into her courses and instruction.

Participant P006

Participant P006 has taught in the early childhood department at a community college for the past 20 years. Employed as full-time faculty, she teaches online, face-to-face, hybrid, practicums, and blended courses to students pursuing early childhood teaching degrees. Born into a family of educators, she was exposed to the importance of early learning and became involved in her own children's preschool programs as an adult. In the interview, P006 shared "I have been very involved in environments for young children; you know, as a parent, as a student, and a graduate student since my early twenties." The learning experiences provided to family members at Montessori schools influenced her pursuits of higher education as she wanted to help other children benefit from a similar teaching philosophy. She decided that helping other young children could be done by enhancing the development of professional skills of their teachers in early childhood classrooms. During the interview, she mentioned "I have been at the same college in that early childhood program for twenty years."

Throughout the years in higher education, P006 shared that she has experienced many changes and challenges; however, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted students and colleagues. Many unexpected issues were faced by faculty and students as most early childhood courses had to be converted for online delivery. Sharing in her interview, "COVID was enormously challenging, having to put all of our courses online, basically overnight." Although online learning can be effective for some, P006 shared that some of their early childhood courses are best taught in face-to-face settings. Modeling strategies and best practices turned out to be extremely difficult for several early childhood courses and practicums. In addition, her students have experienced digital literacy challenges with online learning while faculty has encountered

their own technological problems. The morale for both faculty and students has been impacted by the dramatic changes brought on by COVID-19 and staff turnover.

Despite the abundance of challenges, P006 has been pivotal in helping early childhood students develop essential skills needed at her college. When asked about social and emotional development, she shared it is important for early educators to understand a sense of self, as well as how that self is similar and different from others. Likewise, social competence is needed for prosocial behaviors, cooperating, and collaborating with others. Content about social and emotional learning is embedded in multiple courses required for early childhood education degrees; however, she feels more material about this domain should be embedded in all courses. On her qualitative survey, she shared "unless adults can effectively support children's social and emotional development, learning and optimal development is hindered at best." She strives to incorporate as many social and emotional concepts, resources, and learning opportunities for students into her instruction as possible.

Participant P007

With 13 years in higher education, participant P007 currently works full-time hours split between two universities in North Carolina. She has experience with teaching online, face-to-face, hybrid, and practicum courses in the schools' early childhood departments. As a graduate student, she had the opportunity to assist in a kindergarten classroom, which led to her interest in researching early childhood education. In her interview, P007 shared "as I was doing research, I realized that if you wait until they are adolescents, it is kind of late." The trajectory of her research and career pivoted to early childhood education. Continuing, she said "I decided to focus on the early years, because that is when you really need to lay a good foundation and not wait until they are teenagers to try to help them."

Participant P007 shared that she loves working with early educators in higher education; however, she feels her students' lives are difficult due to red tape challenges. In her interview, P007 shared "I am finding more and more that even though we need educators in this field to work with children, that the powers that be are making life more difficult for them." Continuing, she said "I guess you might say, moving the goal posts, of what they require them to do." Low pay and increasing regulations make the practices learned in classes out of reach for many students. Several of her students feel disappointed when entering the field, despite implementing the strategies and ideas learned in higher education. Students have expressed that what they expected when joining the field was not reality once they began teaching in their classroom. In the interview, she shared "They have hopes, they have dreams, they have plans, they are excited; and then they find out it is not that simple." Understanding the many challenges that students who are already working in a classroom experience, P007 is intentional about providing opportunities to discuss these real life issues in her classes. Providing a safe space for students to express their concerns is one way she supports early educators in the field.

Regarding social and emotional learning, P007 feels that early educators need to provide children with the tools to recognize and manage emotions, as well as validate how they are feeling. Home life and expectations also greatly impact young children's behavior and can contradict what is being taught in the classroom. When teaching social and emotional concepts to students, she has found that once early educators gain employment, they are required to follow protocol at their school or center. Strategies she teaches do not always work in every situation and early educators are guided by administrators, whose philosophy can be very different. She feels that much of what is taught in her classes goes out the window when early educators enter the classroom. Expressing her concern in the interview, she said "in the end, many times I would

have to say you have to follow the protocol of what the school says." Students are given the tools and information; however, barriers in the field interfere with them implementing much of what they learn in courses.

Participant P008

Having spent 22 years serving children and families in early childhood education, participant P008 transitioned to higher education five years ago. Her vast experience in the field includes working as a classroom teacher, licensed family childcare home provider, community resource teacher, and licensing consultant in North Carolina. With a goal of helping children, she felt that a greater impact could be made by supporting the early educators who are working in the early childhood education workforce. In her interview, P008 shared "the passion would be burning so much within that I had to keep going to impact more children." She currently works full time at a community college, teaching online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses in the early childhood department. Continuing in her interview, P008 said "Everything has worked out perfectly for me to be able to keep extending and stretching, just to have an impact and to get the knowledge of how we treat children, educate children, and work with families." The participant expressed how important it is for early educators to receive a strong foundation of knowledge as they enter the field. She strives to continually grow and learn as an educator of adults and is constantly reflecting on her instructional practices.

Like others have expressed, the preparation of early educators in higher education has been impacted by COVID-19. Participant P008 provides hands-on learning experiences for her students and shared that practicum courses have been changed due to the pandemic. What used to be in-person practicum experiences are often replaced with observing videos. In addition, she shared that shorter terms and class schedules have made it challenging to cover all the content

she would normally discuss in depth. There is not enough time to cover all she would like to in her courses. Another concern she shared in her focus group discussion is the collaboration piece for early educators entering the field. From her experience working with students, she shared "I have found that the early childhood workforce often struggles working with co-teachers, therapists, social workers, and other service providers who visit their classrooms." She continued, "children receiving intensive intervention often have specialized services provided on-site in their classroom and many early educators are unsure about collaborating as a team." She concluded with "understanding how to navigate that component of being a professional is an area I feel needs more attention to successfully support children's needs."

When discussing social and emotional development, she discussed her own challenges with the domain when entering the field as a teacher. Her college experiences did not involve much content on behavior or supporting social and emotional skills. As so many early educators have expressed, she shared in her interview "honestly, I did not feel prepared." Having learned from those challenges, P008 uses her personal experiences to discuss the need with students. Aside from teaching students how to support skill development, she also emphasizes the concepts of resiliency, trauma-informed care, cultural competence, and mental health for young children. A foundational component in all her classes is helping early educators nurture relationships and enhance their soft skills when working with children and families.

Participant P009

With 21 years of experience in the early childhood field, participant P009 has been a leader in higher education for eight years. In addition to previously serving as an early childhood education department chair, she has taught online, face-to-face, hybrid, and practicum courses in a community college setting. Starting out as a preschool teacher in her college's lab school and a

child care center, she became interested in the varied level of knowledge and education of staff in similar settings. Her experiences led her to pursue a master's degree and attend graduate school while working full-time as a toddler teacher. During this time, P009 worked with a group of highly-educated early educators who still shared similar challenges with social and emotional learning as others with less experience and training. She realized that education was a component of being a strong early educator; however, there was much more needed by early childhood professionals. In her interview, P009 shared "It is not just about education, it is about what you learn in education; because nobody taught me what I do when the child behaves in an X, Y, or Z manner, or what you do when the parent behaves like X, Y, or Z; nobody taught me that."

Realizing the need for additional support for early educators, P009 began working as a technical assistance specialist and started helping early childhood programs with on-site support. As her family grew, she decided to transition to higher education so she could reconnect with early educators and follow in her father's footsteps who was a professor himself. When asked about challenges in higher education, she shared that "a major issue is that early educators try to implement what is learned in class but do not receive support from colleagues." Continuing, she stated "louder voices that can be negative often outweigh the voice of those who try to do the right thing." Many of her students begin working or return to programs that do not support best practices shared in college courses. Another issue observed over the years is that many courses do not take into consideration the cultural context of their instruction. Students are being taught practices that may not necessarily align with their cultural experiences, causing some content to not make sense. Based on her experiences with students, she feels that faculty needs to make an intentional effort to help all students utilize the learning material in a way that works for them.

When describing social and emotional development in her interview, P009 shared “this domain involves people understanding themselves and learning to manage themselves in spaces with others.” Everyone’s social and emotional development will look different, and requires individualized support. What each person is learning about themselves is different so trying to make sense of those differences while being together is an essential component. Participant P009 also discussed how personal beliefs and values impact how early educators learn social and emotional concepts. The prior experiences and preconceptions that students have may or may not align with what is considered best practices for children. Much of her instruction in higher education provides opportunities for students to reflect on their past experiences and realize that believing something does not make it correct. Teaching early educators how to support children’s social and emotional learning often requires them to unlearn or reframe their thinking and be open to receive new ideas and information.

Participant P013

Participant P013 has been in the early childhood field for 24 years, and spent the last 14 years teaching in higher education. She is currently employed as full-time faculty at a university in North Carolina, teaching online, face-to-face, and hybrid classes in the early childhood education department. Having worked with adolescents in group homes and foster care early in her career, participant P013 realized that she wanted to work on the prevention side in a child development center. She began working at the child development center, serving children from birth to pre-k catering to families in need as well as children with special needs. During this time of employment, she shared in the interview “I actually ended up working with the same group of children over several years, so that was really nice building those relationships.” As she gained

more experience in the field, she developed a special interest in literacy and how it impacted children's social and emotional development.

Having a passion for professional development, she decided to go back to school to obtain a master's degree in child and family studies. An employment opportunity became available at a child care resource and referral agency where she began providing early educators and administrators with training and technical assistance. During this time, she fell in love with professional development but realized the disconnect between training and implementation in classrooms. In her interview, P013 shared "you know, I continued to see the same people in the same trainings and the same problems in their classrooms." Continuing, she said "so, I wanted to look at what I could do on a bigger level and maybe be more impactful in that space." The pursuit of making a greater impact for early educators led her to enroll in a doctorate program for special education, focusing on early childhood children. Her transition to higher education began in a community college setting and led her to teaching full time at the university level. One specific challenge P013 has experienced at the university level is finding practicum placements for students to observe in high quality early childhood classrooms, particularly those serving infants, toddlers, and children with special needs. She emphasized the need for more accessible lab schools and model classrooms for early educators to gain practical experience in their teaching preparation programs.

When describing social and emotional development with her students, P013 emphasized the triangle of relationships needed for success in an early childhood classroom. Early educators need to build relationships with the children, families, and caregivers to establish a strong foundation for learning. An essential part of building relationships with young children is understanding attachment early in life with caregivers. One of the most important aspects of

relationships within classrooms is the early educators' own mental health. She said that many early educators in her classrooms are struggling with their own trauma and mental health challenges, which makes it difficult to navigate social and emotional instruction when they have their own personal triggers. Participant P013 discusses self-awareness and reflection with her students so they can learn how their own experiences impact their reaction and relationships with children.

Participant P014

Having spent 30 years in early childhood education, participant P014 has taught for 26 years in higher education. A love for children led her to pursue a teaching degree, where she had the opportunity to spend time with younger children in a child development lab during her undergraduate studies. She began working at a child care center early in her career and later transitioned into a teacher educator supporting other early educators in her region. In addition to teaching in higher education, she also has experience providing technical assistance to early childhood programs in her region. For the past 25 years, participant P014 has taught full-time at the same community college offering online, face-to-face, hybrid, and practicum courses in early childhood education. In her interview, she shared "I have always loved being what I call a teacher educator."

Her experiences in higher education have been very positive; however, a few challenges have evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020. Early childhood programs, families, early educators, and colleges are still trying to recover from the financial, social, and emotional impact on society. In addition to overcoming learning challenges, the pandemic has forced both adults and children to embrace technology. Although technology has helped students connect like never before, she also feels the expanded screen time for children has greatly

impacted their social and emotional development. In the interview, P014 shared “my philosophy has shifted with the impact of technology; you know, because our children are coming in from environments at home where they are in front of a screen all the time.” Continuing, “technology has become the parent’s helper and babysitter, and I think it has impacted how children interact with each other in the classroom.” The increased use of screen time has limited interactions with others that provide opportunities for building emotional intelligence and social competence. The more connected students become with technology, the more disconnected they can become from other important aspects of learning.

Participant P014’s philosophy for teaching early educators about social and emotional development emphasizes the practical side of working with young children. One of the hardest components for her students to understand is the behavior aspect and social and emotional of learning. Using the Pyramid Model as a blueprint, she implements teaching practices pertaining to building positive relationships, designing high-quality classroom environments, and utilizing social and emotional teaching tools in courses. A benefit for P014’s early childhood students is that a child care resource and referral agency is located on the college campus, which provides additional training and support for early educators. Having behavior specialists available to provide training for early childhood students has been beneficial and allows them to incorporate practical strategies and classroom tools within her courses.

Results

Results for this transcendental phenomenological study were derived from analysis of data collected through individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed using Zoom videoconferencing. Member checking was completed by e-mailing participants transcribed

conversations to ensure accuracy of their responses and contribution of data. Responses from the open-ended qualitative surveys, transcribed interviews, and focus group transcriptions were printed and analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) procedure for phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. In addition, Saldana's (2021) method for in-vivo coding was conducted during analysis and theme development. Three major themes and nine subthemes were identified during the synthesis of all three data sets (see Table 5). The following section highlights thematic findings from the analysis.

Table 5

Theme Development

Theme 1: Practicum Field Experiences	
Subthemes	Keywords and Phrases
More Practicum Experiences Needed in Early Childhood Education Classrooms	practicums, field experiences, observation, practical experience, professional support, labs
Experienced Mentor Teachers	strong mentor teachers, mentorship, quality mentor teachers, interactions
Knowing Students' Needs When Selecting Practicum Site	intentionality, intentional placement, practicum placement
Theme 2: Mental Health, Trauma, and Behavioral Considerations	
Subthemes	Keywords and Phrases
Mental Health for Early Educators Working with Children	mental health, stressed, connection, self-care, struggling
Embedding Trauma Informed Practices into Early Childhood Education Courses	trauma informed, resources, supported, own experiences, ACE's, challenging lives, basic needs met

Understanding Age Appropriate Behavioral Expectations	behavior, foundational knowledge, milestones, developmentally appropriate, guidance, support, behavior awareness

Theme 3: Cultural Context of Preparing Early Educators for SEL

Subthemes	Keywords and Phrases
Consideration of Cultural Background for Early Childhood Education Students	culturally competent, diversity, equity, cultural context, background, lens, differences
Paradigm Shift in Thinking About Guidance, Behavior, and SEL	paradigm shift, change, unlearn, beliefs, values, thinking differently, own life experiences
Self-Awareness and Reflection	awareness of own experiences, reflective practice, bias, expectations, feelings, hard to change behavior

Practicum Field Experiences

The first predominant theme revealed during data analysis was practicum field experiences. All 10 participants emphasized the importance of their students having an opportunity to observe and apply information learned in early childhood education courses. The participants indicated that practicum experience is a pivotal piece of preparing early educators for the workforce. Feedback shared during interviews, focus groups, and qualitative surveys revealed changes in their students' exposure to practicum assignments as well as concerns for overall preparedness. In the first focus group, P005, P013, P009, and P007 agreed that "statewide collaboration between the early childhood initiatives in North Carolina could help address the challenge of identifying high quality classrooms for students' practicum experiences." Not only are more practicum experiences needed with experienced mentor teachers, but the emphasis of intentionality regarding placement emerged during data collection.

More Practicum Experiences Needed in Early Childhood Education

Participants collectively expressed changes in access to quality practicum experiences for students in early childhood education programs. During the interview, P005 said “Practicum experience is a must and over the years, our program has shifted from having three practicums, to having two practicums, to having one practicum experience.” She also stated in a focus group “the ability to teach students about universal supports such as relationships and high-quality classroom environments brings me back to the need for lab schools and high quality environments where students can observe and interact, which is lacking in my area.” Working at a community college that currently has a child development lab available on campus, P014 said their program is an accredited, high-quality facility; however, there are no observation windows, so it is not very conducive for several students to enter and observe. Also having experience in community college settings, P008 shared in her interview that “COVID-19 kind of messed us up with allowing students to have access to those kinds of experiences.” A lack of availability as well as access to quality classroom environments in early childhood settings has been an issue. Funding for child development labs located on campus has changed for some of the community colleges, which causes faculty to rely on access to early childhood classrooms in public schools, Head Start centers, and licensed childcare facilities. An interview with P003 revealed that his community college was fortunate to “have a really large, physical classroom and I actually set up a small classroom inside it.” He was able to model and provide observation opportunities with students and provide some hands-on support for those with minimal exposure in the field.

In the first focus group, P013 discussed her experience as faculty in a university setting. She agreed that “More so since COVID-19, the whole concept of “quality” has been under the microscope and really taken a dip specifically around the social and emotional supports.” Not only is access to practicum classrooms an issue, but ensuring those classrooms provide quality

learning experiences for children is a concern. Furthermore, P013 said “Yes, I would have to agree that being out in the field looking at early childhood facilities, it is definitely obvious that we need to provide more professional support at the very primary level, which is something that needs to be enforced more in how we are teaching future professionals.” The early childhood field as a whole has been impacted greatly by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing a ripple effect in regard to early educator preparation, in-service training, and quantity of programs in North Carolina.

Experienced Mentor Teachers

Relying on limited space in public schools and other state funded pre-kindergarten programs where early educators are required to have higher education degrees and licensure, has created a shortage of practicum sites for students to visit, observe, and receive mentorship from experienced educators. In an interview with P006, she stated that “you have to place students with excellent mentor teachers who know how to appropriately interact with children.” She continued by sharing “we used to rely on prior faculty members who were connected with the community and built those relationships over the years with excellent mentor teachers, and then we lost all of those people.” Likewise, P005 concurred “we used to have a core group of mentor teachers in the field that worked with our students who went through a cohort course at the college level on mentorship and were a really special group to; however, they all have retired and since COVID-19, we do not have that community connection.” She concluded that “I would like to know in my community who are the teachers that are really good with social and emotional learning and nail it in their classroom, with materials and interactions.”

Similarly, P013 shared in interview that “it’s a lot harder to make those connections in your community to provide students with those experience because of all the legalities behind

things and needing background checks and all that kind of stuff, even though that goes pretty quickly, having access to infants and toddlers is probably the hardest." Many of the early educators with higher education degrees and birth-kindergarten teacher licensure, move on to teach in pre-kindergarten classrooms in public schools and other state and federally funded preschool programs. One idea discussed in the first focus group was the possibility of collaborating with statewide early childhood initiatives, such as the North Carolina Healthy Social Behaviors Project to identify quality classrooms with strong early educators that have obtained higher education degrees as well as received in-service technical assistance and training on social and emotional supports. The Healthy Social Behavior specialists carry an on-going caseload of early childhood classrooms across the state of NC, and help early educators implement evidence based practices for social and emotional learning with fidelity. The conversation concluded with P005 sharing that "I think suggestions for practicum and observation sites would be a win win."

Knowing Students' Needs When Selecting Practicum Sites

The third subtheme identified around the topic of practicum experiences was intentionality in helping students find early childhood classrooms for field experiences. Having worked at multiple community colleges, P002 shared that building a relationship with her students and truly getting to know their professional goals and interests creates more meaningful practicum experiences. During the second focus group, P002 shared "when students are looking for a practicum placement, I really kind of get a feel for what their experiences are and what they are actually looking for to avoid putting them in a classroom that may not have the right supports; however, faculty does not know what is going on in every classroom from semester to semester." She told us about a student who recently requested a specific type of experience she

was looking for in her practicum. The participant said, “I have had in fact a student who wanted to work with high needs children and I just happened to know a center in her area that she could go to but I would not want to place someone who was completely out of that scope or had not had that experience into a classroom like that because it could be overwhelming.” She continued by saying “from that kind of intentional placement, they are deciding if they can do that job or if it feels like something they want to do.” Continuing, P002 shared “what I generally do is try to refer them to a Head Start center or programs where there are some children with generally intensive developmental, social, or emotional needs.” Although this scenario shared was not the usual request, P002 concluded “the student is really enjoying the practicum experience and stays in touch with me every week.”

During her interview, P006 stated “our program’s philosophy used to be very selective about who our students were placed with, so if we knew a student was struggling with those principles, we would be sure to place that student in a classroom with a very strong mentor teacher.” Despite the hard work and effort on behalf of faculty, it has been more difficult to establish those connections due to the faculty turnover and fewer practicum sites. Both P006 and P005 felt that “COVID-19 impacted our connection with students and the community.” Despite recent challenges, participants emphasized their desire for more mentorship opportunities for students and early educators supporting those in practicum experiences. The term “mentorship pipeline” was mentioned by P005 as a means for providing more intentional connection and collaboration when selecting classrooms for field experience.

Mental Health, Trauma, and Behavioral Considerations

A second theme identified during data analysis included concepts pertaining to mental health, trauma, and behavior in early childhood education. Participants P001, P002, P005, P006,

P008, P009, and P013 asserted that for early educators to support young children's social and emotional competence, they need to encompass these skills themselves when entering the workforce. Interviews with P003, P005, P006, P007, and P009 revealed concerns for their students' well-being and challenges faced by those already teaching in early childhood classrooms. Although many students have experienced trauma in their own lives, P005 felt these challenges often create more compassionate and supportive educators for young children. Feedback from qualitative surveys and interviews suggested that all 10 participants' instructional experiences include trauma informed practices and behavioral support within their courses. Discussions with faculty highlight the connection between early educators' life experiences and how they view behavior and social and emotional needs in early childhood classrooms.

Mental Health for Early Educators Working with Children

When discussing their instructional practices that focus on social and emotional learning, several participants shared the need for awareness regarding mental health for early educators. During an interview, P005 shared that her "students tend to be stretched and stressed more than ever before, and often lack that human connection." She stated, "another barrier is that so many students that are in early childhood education have such fragile and broken lives; they're struggling and looking for their basic needs to be met." Continuing, P005 said "I am afraid that those individuals do not get to really receive the information in the same capacity; however, we can flip it around and say you are more compassionate towards those children that are going through that." Similarly, P006 stated in her interview "those social and emotional concepts we are teaching are so different from what students experienced in their own lives." She continued by sharing "many students were not taught by parents to be problem solvers, they were disciplined and punished." In addition, P013 reflected on the mental health of adults working

with young children. She shared “If you do not have a good mental health space and you are struggling with your own attachments and things you grew up with, sometimes it can be really hard to help others understand themselves, especially if you have triggers.” Children may trigger something in an early educator that could cause a response they were not expecting. All participants displayed empathy for their students, and realized that supporting early educators’ social and emotional health is important for children they will teach in classrooms.

Some participants shared specific ways in which they address this topic with students in their early childhood courses. Participant P005 shared that “students need an awareness of their own self care and social and emotional growth.” Providing opportunities for students to explore these concepts is easier for P005 in face-to-face classes, versus the online format. Likewise, P006 felt that “face-to-face courses allow for more organic conversations regarding trauma and mental health with students.” In one of P008’s courses, students complete a research assignment where they tell her about experiences they have had regarding mental health issues or concerns. She stated, “they reflect and share how they use that information going forward working with children.” All participants expressed empathy and understanding that early educators in the field and those pursuing employment often experience challenges throughout their life.

Embedding Trauma Informed Practices into Early Childhood Education Courses

In an interview with P003, he said early educators “do not know what children are going home to or come from, and preschool may be the only place they get a hot meal.” He continued that early educators are often the “closest thing to love and someone consistently caring for them that some young children feel.” Many young children in early childhood programs have experienced trauma and early educators need to be mindful of that in their practice. One of the most important competencies that P006 feels that early educators need is “to understand the

impact of stressors and trauma on children's development." Part of preparing students to join the early childhood education workforce is embedding information and trauma informed practices into courses.

Having received little exposure to this topic in her own college experiences, P008 said "what I give my students is a lot of information from trainings I have acquired." She continued "I just did a trauma informed care training for infant and toddler mental health; so, I take those experiences and build those into my courses and online teaching, and provide resources, because I now know this what you need to be aware of." During the interview, P008 said "I had a student who received the trauma informed information when I presented and she was able to use the resources to seek out help for herself, because she did not feel supported with helping a child who was really struggling adjusting at a facility." Likewise, P006 is intentional about embedding trauma informed content in her early childhood courses. She shared on her qualitative survey that recent research on "the influence of trauma and development" is used to guide her instruction. The assignment P006 finds the most meaningful assignment in her courses to be the one that focuses on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's), which discusses types of traumatic experiences that impact healthy development and mental health. Students are required to share their assignment findings with a parent or colleague, which provides opportunity for organic conversation about trauma. Collectively, participants shared conversations regarding trauma and its impact on young children's development and behavior that are becoming more prevalent in early childhood courses.

Understanding Age-Appropriate Behavioral Expectations

The topic of challenging behavior appeared across data sets 49 times, suggesting that faculty and students discuss the subject frequently in early childhood education courses. There

were notable differences in perspectives of faculty working in community colleges versus university settings. Overall, participants felt that understanding age-appropriate behavioral expectations is essential in providing developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children. In her qualitative survey, P009 said "I have found that often students can identify and understand social and emotional milestones, but struggle with the connection between those milestones and observed behavior, then additionally, between that behavior and connecting to specific strategies." Students may have a solid understanding of what to expect regarding young children's social and emotional development; however, they lack the knowledge and strategies needed to support children exhibiting challenging behaviors in a classroom setting.

At the university level, P013 shared in her interview that behavioral expectations is "probably an area that students and those that are in the classroom need more support around is understanding the difference between what is developmentally appropriate versus when something is really wrong." Many of her university students are traditional students, who are going to college full time after high school and perhaps have not gained classroom experience yet in the field. Several students at the community college level are non-traditional students, working in an early childhood program while they are attending courses online or in the evenings. Those students already working in early childhood education often have more general knowledge about developmental expectations due to exposure in their work experience. Similarly, P007 who is also teaching at the university level shared that "one of the challenges I would say is understanding how children develop; in other words, you cannot expect a three year old to be functioning like a five year old, so you have to understand that so you know how to approach it." When it comes to discussing behavior and social and emotional learning, faculty

emphasized that early educators need a foundation of age appropriate expectations in order to successfully implement strategies learned in courses.

Participants P001, P003, and P014 shared that students need intentional guidance to support and address challenging behavior in early childhood classrooms. Faculty uses a variety of instructional practices to equip students with strategies to support social and emotional skill development. Both P007 and P009 discussed using real life scenarios and "tales from the field" to help students learn why a child may exhibit a specific behavior and brainstorm strategies to address it in their classroom. During interviews and focus group discussions, three participants emphasized the need for sharing "practical" content with students in early childhood education courses. While discussing instructional experiences with P002, she said "one of my favorite tenants of adult education is that it has to be practical." She continued "adults want things that are practical and generally related to something about work or something they are interested in." A goal for her instruction is to teach students "best practices at a practical level," meaning the content she presents about behavior and social and emotional learning is what she knows early educators need as they enter the profession. Although theories and general subject matter is covered, a majority of course discussions and assignments focus on "how those ideas look" when implemented with young children. Likewise, P005 shared that she feels there needs to be more "practical" experience for students to observe social and emotional teaching in action. Discussion with P013 revealed that "it is really hard to provide practical experiences that can give students a holistic view of what it is that we do." Agreeing with P002 and P005, P013 feels students need to see the content shared in early childhood courses being implemented successfully by a seasoned early childhood educator. Responses from P007's interview aligns with their thoughts as she feels many students begin working in the early childhood field without

understanding the "reality" of teaching young children. She tries to help students understand the challenges they may encounter, as well as how they can practically solve potential problems as a professional.

Cultural Context of Preparing Early Educators for Social and Emotional Learning

A third theme revealed in the data was that cultural context is an important component of preparing early educators for teaching social and emotional concepts to children. The concept of cultural competence was mentioned 22 times in interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions. Although cultural competence is a frequent topic in early childhood education, much of the information shared with early educators tends to focus on the cultures of children and families. Participants P001, P002, P005, P006, P007, P008, P009 and P013 emphasized the importance of looking at culture through the lens of an early educator's personal life as well. Past experiences, beliefs, and values greatly influence how they view social and emotional learning for young children. Findings revealed that eight participants are intentionally focused on helping students reflect on themselves and how their upbringing and culture influences their expectations, interactions, and reactions in an early childhood classroom.

Consideration of Cultural Background for Early Childhood Students

An interview with P008 emphasized that "not all cultures respond socially and emotionally the same way." When teaching students in early childhood courses, faculty tries to instill this concept into discussions about children and families they serve. Participants also realize the necessity for helping early educators think about their own culture and how they interpret instructional practices through the lens of prior experiences. Additionally, P009 shared "one of the things I think is really important is to consider the differences in both the background of the student as well as the cultural background of the children they are educating in their ECE

classrooms." She continued "thinking about how those cultural contexts play into and should inform both the way that the supportive environment and relationships are built as well as the way those targeted supports are employed." In a similar manner, P001 shared "some people are just able to pick up the knowledge and be open to the social, emotional, or whatever is being taught and then there are others where it is like a culture thing, where they think there is only one way." She described her experiences in higher education as "eye opening," because people's beliefs in the teaching profession are all very different. The social and emotional learning content taught by faculty is interpreted through each student's own personal set of beliefs. These beliefs may or may not align with the lens through which the faculty, textbook authors, or mentor teachers share information.

It was revealed in the first focus group discussion that a variety of cultural backgrounds are represented within the student population pursuing early childhood education degrees. Participant P009 mentioned "there is a huge number of cultural contexts walking into the college classroom; it is my job to say to them let's view what I am telling you through your lens, and see how we can make sense of it, because it all ends up making sense at some point." She added "but if you do not stop and look at what your expectation is or what your history is, then you cannot realistically move forward in any sort of way." Our personal experiences as a child and adult, particularly with our own family and community, help mold the ways in which we view children and families in early childhood programs. Participants expressed the need for helping students build an awareness about their beliefs, and be open to ideas and social and emotional concepts that may be different than their own.

Paradigm Shift in Thinking About Guidance, Behavior, and Social Emotional Learning

Individual interviews with participants revealed perspectives and instructional experiences that focus on changing the way early educators think about guidance, behavior, and social and emotional learning. Participant P009 said “so many people have to unlearn a lot before they can learn, regardless of whether they have worked with a child before.” She continued “Social and emotional learning is one of those topics that everybody walks into the door, whether they think they do or not, with a very firmly set number of beliefs and values.” Faculty emphasized that changing their mindset is not about telling students they are wrong in thinking the way they do. There are strategies or classroom practices that students feel will not work, or do not necessarily align with their teaching philosophy. Their goal is to help students enter the field with an open mind and be receptive to trying new ideas that have been proven to benefit young children’s social and emotional development.

In a similar manner, P005 shared “students struggle with guidance and changing their behavior, reaction, or response to something to get a more desirable result; but change takes time.” Continuing, she said “the big challenge is it is a paradigm shift to get them thinking differently, and that is why I always do an activity where they start thinking about how they were raised.” Early educators often live what they have learned in life. They may address a child’s behavior in a way that reflects how they were disciplined by their own parents. Many early educators who are already parents use the same discipline practices at school as they would with their own children. Sharing an example, P009 mentioned that she uses “gentle parenting” techniques with her own children. Students in her class often respond as though that approach means not setting limits or having structure for children. Using this approach with children is more about changing the “adult’s behavior,” in order to change the child’s behavior. Participant P009 said that “how she talks to her own children is not the same as how she talks with children

in a classroom." The same is true for professionals in early childhood education programs. Guiding children in group settings differs from parenting done at home. Early educators tend to struggle with changing their own behavior to appropriately support children's social and emotional learning. To do that, early educators must look at themselves as part of the potential problem in the classroom. That realization can be uncomfortable for many people.

Self-Awareness and Reflection

Changing a student's mindset to be open to new information starts with opportunities for self-reflection. Five participants in the study shared specifically about self-reflection and helping students build an awareness of their own experiences. In her qualitative survey, P007 wrote "I guide students to understand that there will always be something or someone that is not in your power to change." She continued, "for this reason you need to look inwardly and learn how to manage you in order to deal with the world you are in." Guiding young children's social and emotional development involves many aspects that are out of an early educator's control. Participant P007 also shared in her interview that many students have shared the lack of administrative support from principals or directors leading early childhood education programs. Many of the professional challenges experienced around implementing social and emotional teaching practices in classrooms comes from a lack of educator and administrator awareness.

As mentioned by P002, "the hard part too about the topics we teach is that sometimes it is hard for them to do that self-reflection; our actions and our behaviors are the ones that we can change to fix the situation." She continued, "children do not understand the rules, but you are the one who sets the rules." To change behavior of children, early educators must first reflect on their own behavior. Likewise, P009 stated "one of the hardest parts is just our own self-reflection and understanding the way we are." She followed with "it is hard to change; it is not the

children's behavior; it is our behavior." Participants P002, P005, and P009 emphasized that reflective practice is used with students in their early childhood education courses. During an interview, P009 said she tells her students that "we have to be able to look back at our past experiences and reflect on those, and understand that just because we experience something does not mean it was the right way to experience it; it does not mean it was the most healthy thing, and does not mean that we have to perpetuate that onto other children."

To introduce this concept to students, P005 shared "we start with an activity where students self-reflect on how they were raised and the feelings behind that, you know?" She continued "we talk about that is who you are; that is okay, but now you are going to be presented with new ideas this semester and you are going to be held accountable to practicing these ideas." This approach has worked well for her, and gives students space and time to connect past experiences to their current or future role as an early educator. Helping students process these thoughts and feelings at the beginning of a semester encourages more meaningful and deep learning and discussion throughout the term.

Outlier Data and Findings

After analysis of each data set, there was one outlier identified in the findings that did not align with specific research questions and themes. All 10 participants felt the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 impacted their instructional effectiveness due to factors outside of their control. Participant P003 stated "we are still in a recovery process from COVID and I think it is going to take a long time for us to get back on track from it." Continuing he said, "it has really made a pivot there where we were making really good progress, and it changed a lot."

Outlier #1: Instructional Challenges Due to COVID-19

The first instructional challenge due to COVID-19 was the disruption of course delivery and format. Speaking about her experiences, P006 shared “COVID was largely challenging, having to put all of our courses online basically overnight.” She continued “Our labs and methods courses are not usually offered online because the whole point of those courses is to bring students on campus so they can participate in hands on learning that we want them to provide for young children.” Concluding, she shared “that was extremely stressful without necessary technology support for faculty as we redeveloped lab courses that had not been developed for online instruction.” Not only did P006 feel that technology for her was a challenge, but shared students in her early childhood education courses also struggled with digital literacy in an online course format. The pandemic pushed both faculty and students to embrace online versions of courses that had been face-to-face for several years.

Although online learning is a popular option for some, being forced to convert all courses into virtual offerings was difficult. Participant P005 shared “since COVID, we do not have the community connection and opportunities for human connection.” Feeling the same, P008 said “we do not reach as many students in person anymore.” Higher education has returned to offering both face-to-face and online courses for students; however, the connection with students is still a challenge. Feeling the after effects of COVID-19 learning challenges, faculty shared that courses have returned to normal delivery but enrollment is lower and faculty turnover is higher. Face-to-face courses do not have as many students, as many adapted to online courses and prefer not to return to campus.

Reflecting on the post COVID-19 era, P014 said “I still like face-to-face classes because I feel like early childhood people are such social people to begin with; so many of our students are already working in programs.” She continued that face-to-face classes provide an opportunity

for students to share about their classroom challenges as the class provides peer support. Not only has course delivery been impacted, but also faculty's ability to observe and support students learning in practicum classrooms. As mentioned previously in findings pertaining to practicum experiences, availability of high quality practicum classrooms for students is minimal. In addition, funding for faculty to travel to various practicum sites has been cut since the pandemic began. Participants at both the community colleges and university level have been negatively impacted in some way due to the pandemic and are still trying to adjust years later. Not only have faculty been impacted logistically and financially, but also mentally. The last three years were described by P006 as "creating a crisis of confidence" in how faculty feel about the effectiveness of their higher education institution.

Research Question Responses

Experiences and perspectives shared by participants provided insight into the role of higher education faculty in preparing early educators to support young children's social and emotional development in an early childhood education classroom. Themes and subthemes collated during data analysis provided answers to the guiding research questions. This section offers an overview of all three research questions and participant responses that support each inquiry.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of higher education faculty in preparing the early childhood education workforce for social and emotional instruction in an early childhood classroom? All 10 participants had several years of experience working in higher education as well as teaching social and emotional concepts to students in early childhood education courses. The participants concurred that social and emotional learning is a topic that is vital for their

students to comprehensively understand. Overall, the faculty's perspective is that while students are exposed to social and emotional learning content in their early childhood education degree programs, there are challenges that need to be addressed. Many of the challenges shared by faculty are issues that are out of their control; however, some felt that participating in the study helps shed light on current needs for faculty, students, and children in North Carolina.

Faculty had different perspectives on their college's approach to preparing students for social and emotional instruction in early childhood classrooms. Qualitative surveys revealed three out of the 10 participants felt their employing colleges provide students with an adequate amount of exposure to social and emotional concepts in early childhood education degree programs. Out of these three participants, one faculty member works at the university level and the other two are employed at community colleges. Four participants perceived their college's approach to social and emotional instruction as somewhat adequate, but felt there is room for improvement. One participant worked at a community college and the other is employed by a university. On her qualitative survey, P009 stated "I think that while students understand some about the trajectory of social and emotional development, sometimes there is a disconnect between the development and the actions that children take in classrooms and how teachers can really think through how behaviors relate back to the children's social and emotional development." Although some students have foundational knowledge about social and emotional development, faculty expressed they often struggle with supporting young children with best practices in a classroom setting.

Participants who felt there is room for improvement in higher education emphasized that students need more opportunity to transfer new knowledge into practical experience. On her qualitative survey, P013 wrote "I think social and emotional instruction is reviewed and

discussed but it is hard to teach something that has to be experienced and experimented with." All 10 participants highlighted the need for more quality practicum experiences for students where they can observe, apply, and practice concepts taught in courses. In her interview, P002 shared "I am focused on teaching them best practices at the practical level, and I am going to teach them what they can use."

Based on their lived experiences, three participants expressed the need for more attention in higher education on social and emotional learning in early childhood education degree programs. When asked on the qualitative survey about their perception of social and emotional content provided to students in early childhood education courses, P001 replied "the amount is very little." Likewise, P006 shared on her qualitative survey "there is far too little," and the social and emotional domain "needs to be more intentionally infused in all courses." Also teaching in multiple community colleges, P002 wrote "I wish it was formally embedded in all classes so that all students received the same lessons." They shared that more focus should be placed on preparing early educators for social and emotional instruction because it is foundational for all other domains of learning. Likewise in the second focus group discussion, participants P002 and P008 discussed the need to introduce social and emotional learning and teaching practices in the first early childhood education course completed by students, which is often referred to as the "credentials" course. Participant P002 shared "It would prevent a lot of teachers from getting burned out in the first year, or also ones that really get into it and find out, you know, a degree later this maybe is not the right field for me; it would kind of prevent some of those situations and some of the turnover as well."

Sub-Question One

How do higher education faculty describe social and emotional competencies needed by early educators entering the classroom? On the qualitative surveys, participants were asked to list the top social and emotional competencies they felt were needed by early educators to successfully support young children's development. All 10 participants expressed that early educators need to know how to foster positive "relationships" in their classroom. Seven participants felt that "foundational knowledge of child development" was important. Understanding "culture" and its impact on social and emotional development was listed by five participants. Knowledge of "behavioral expectations" and strategies to prevent and "address challenging behavior in the classroom" was essential for five participants. Four participants wrote that early educators need to know about "trauma" and how it impacts learning for young children. The ability to support development of skills such as "self-regulation," "problem solving," and "emotional literacy" were suggested by three participants. Soft skills such as "compassion," "being respectful," and the ability to "collaborate with others" were also recommended by four participants.

Conversations in individual interviews and focus groups also touched on soft skills needed by early educators that students may not initially consider as they prepare for the profession. Participants P002, P005, P006, P009 emphasized the need for students to understand "respect" as they become early educators working with children and families. During her interview, P005 shared "that is my biggest thing; is it respectful to children, why is it respectful to children, why it would not be respectful to children?" Also in an interview, P009 shared that her students "need to understand the importance, the value, and being able to demonstrate, like truly demonstrate what it means to have respect for children, and to show children how to have respect for each other and their teachers."

Professionalism was also a recurring factor discussed by participants. In the second focus group, P008 emphasized “I think it is important for our students to know and understand what collaboration likes looks like and how it is initiated.” She has observed many students transitioning to the workforce without truly understanding how to work as a team and support children’s developmental needs. Along with collaborating with colleagues, participants also expressed the need for understanding collaboration with families. In her interview, P013 shared “a missing piece is the understanding of the collaboration with families.” Participants P005 and P013 also emphasized the importance of being familiar with available resources within the community for children who need early intervention support. In her interview, P013 said “I think really coming out of school and just being prepared to serve as a resource for families is important; knowing what your community offers, and knowing how you can link the family to those.”

Sub-Question Two

How do higher education faculty describe their experiences with embedding essential components of social and emotional learning in their early childhood courses and curricula? Nine out of 10 participants shared on their qualitative survey that social and emotional learning content is embedded in multiple early childhood education courses at their college. Participant P009 wrote “social, emotional, and behavior was discussed in all child development coursework, and in infant and toddler coursework as well, so it was embedded in at least four to five courses, and touched on often in others as well.” Sharing her perspective, P008 said “it varies, in the foundational courses, the content of social and emotional development may consist of a chapter in the text; in other courses, there may be a brief mention of it as one of the domains.” Whereas faculty teaching at the university level had different perspectives. One participant, teaching in a

university setting, said that social and emotional learning content is not embedded throughout different courses, but covered in one specific course that is required for students majoring in early childhood education. On her qualitative survey, P007 wrote "considering that students need to take a three credit hour course for a semester, I would say it is a good amount." The perspectives of faculty in community colleges overwhelmingly shared that social and emotional content was incorporated into multiple courses for students pursuing an early childhood education degree. Overall, participants in community college settings felt that it was embedded quite a bit into courses but there could be more offered to students. Also working in a university setting, P013 wrote that many foundational courses at her college discuss social and emotional learning; however, her perspective is that it is hard to teach concepts that really must be experienced by the students.

During both focus groups, faculty were asked questions pertaining to essential components that included building positive and nurturing relationships, providing high-quality classroom environments, targeted social and emotional teaching practices, and intensive intervention. Participants in both groups spend more time discussing relationships and environments with students in early childhood courses. Regarding targeted social and emotional teaching practices, faculty in the second focus group felt more time could be spent on prevention methods. Participant P008 shared with the second focus group that "We spend more time on intervention, high quality supportive environments, and relationships more than we talk about the middle piece, the prevention." During our discussion, P008 reflected by sharing "you know, we are going to start paying attention to the prevention piece more."

When discussing intensive intervention practices, faculty in both community colleges and university settings discuss the component in specific courses; however, it can be challenging to

offer students practicum experiences in classrooms where young children are receiving intensive support for their developmental needs. In the first focus group, P013 shared “As a pro in higher ed., we do not necessarily have access to places where we can support those children.” Continuing, “and those children typically are in spaces that may not necessarily want pre-education individuals coming in to help, to watch, to observe, or to support.” Participant P013 concluded, “I think you see this more in graduate type programs, not necessarily undergraduate programs.” The first focus group agreed that it is unfortunate because the birth-kindergarten teaching licensure in North Carolina is blended, and some colleges are not necessarily equipped with access to practicum classrooms that have children requiring specialized support and services. In individual interviews, faculty shared how they help students understand the intervention component in their courses. Participant P002 shared that “I try to help them work through some semi real scenarios with some of those challenges.” Faculty tries to utilize online resources to provide opportunities for observation and discussion, as well as to share resources and contact information for local supports within their community.

Summary

This chapter provided descriptions of the lived experiences and perspectives of early childhood faculty who participated in the study. Analysis of data collected through individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups revealed three major themes and nine subthemes. The major themes revealed were practicum field experiences, mental health, trauma, and behavioral considerations, and cultural context of preparing early educators for social and emotional learning. Subthemes found in analysis included more practicum experiences needed in early childhood education classrooms, experienced mentor teachers, knowing students’ needs when selecting practicum sites, mental health for early educators working with children,

embedding trauma informed practices into early childhood education courses, understanding age appropriate behavioral expectations, considerations of cultural background for early childhood education students, paradigm shift in thinking about guidance, behavior, and social and emotional learning, and self-awareness and reflection.

While reviewing analysis results, answers to the guiding research questions were also addressed. Participant responses indicated that faculty shares different perspectives regarding the effectiveness of preparation for early educators in higher education. Only three participants felt that students receive an adequate amount of exposure to social and emotional concepts while pursuing an early childhood education degree. Nine participants concurred their college does give attention to social and emotional learning in multiple courses, but feel there is room for improvement. One participant felt their college did an adequate job of preparing early educators. Overall, the social and emotional competencies that faculty think early educators need include but are not limited to the ability to build positive relationships, have a foundational knowledge of child development, be culturally competent, understand how to address behavior, understand trauma informed practices, support social and emotional skill development, be compassionate, show respect, and collaborate with others on behalf of children's wellbeing. Participants teaching in community colleges revealed their students are exposed to social and emotional concepts in multiple courses, and students at universities may be exposed to the domain in fewer, more concentrated courses. Further examination of these findings will be interpreted through the lens of supporting literature in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. A refined interpretation of themes found during analysis of data collected with individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups is provided. Findings are supported with empirical and theoretical evidence found in the literature. In this culminating chapter, the discussion will include (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the lived experiences of 10 higher education faculty sharing the same phenomenon of preparing students in early childhood education degree programs to support young children's social and emotional development. In this section, the study's thematic findings are discussed through the lens of the conceptual framework. First, interpretations of the findings will be reviewed. Implications for policy and practice will be discussed, followed by theoretical and empirical implications. Limitations and delimitations of the study will be covered, concluding with recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The study conducted involved the participation of higher education faculty who have experience teaching early childhood education courses at community colleges and universities in North Carolina. One central research question and two sub questions were used to guide the research. Data were collected from 10 participants using individual interviews, qualitative

surveys, and two focus groups. Using Moustaka's (1994) process of phenomenological reduction and Saldana's (2021) in-vivo coding method, a total of three themes and nine subthemes were identified. The three major themes found during analysis were (a) practicum field experiences, (b) mental health, trauma, and behavioral considerations, and (c) cultural context of preparing early educators for social and emotional learning.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Ten participants shared their experiences and perspectives on preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in courses at their community college or university. The first major theme that was identified was practicum field experiences. Three subthemes were identified for the first major theme that include (a) more practicum experiences are needed in early childhood education classrooms, (b) experienced mentor teachers, and (c) knowing students' needs when selecting practicum sites. Collectively, all 10 participants shared that students in early childhood education degree programs need more practicum experiences in higher quality classrooms. Six participants emphasized their students can only learn so much in courses about social and emotional development, and need the opportunity to transfer their learning into practice. A shared challenge for faculty is the lack of experienced mentor teachers available for students to observe and receive guidance from in early childhood classrooms. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, students have received fewer practicum opportunities than ever before. Three participants also expressed the need to establish meaningful relationships with their students so they can make informed decisions about practicum placement.

The second major theme identified was mental health, trauma, and behavioral considerations. The three subthemes identified include (a) mental health for early educators

working with children, (b) embedding trauma informed practices into early childhood education courses, and (c) understanding age appropriate behavioral expectations. Participants shared that many early educators in North Carolina are experiencing their own mental health challenges due to past and current trauma, stress, and adversity. When early educators are struggling with their own social and emotional health, they often find it difficult to implement what is being taught in courses. Faculty shared that trauma informed practices are embedded into early childhood education courses to address the increasing challenges faced by young children in the state. They also emphasized a focus on helping students understand behavioral expectations for young children due to the prevalence of challenging behaviors in many early childhood programs. Not only do early educators entering the workforce need competence in child development, faculty also focuses on teaching students practical strategies used to support social and emotional skill development.

The third major theme found during data analysis was the cultural context of preparing early educators for social and emotional learning. The three subthemes identified were (a) consideration of cultural background for early childhood education students, (b) paradigm shift in thinking about guidance, behavior, and social and emotional learning, and (c) self-awareness and reflection. Many participants emphasized the importance for faculty to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds represented by students in their early childhood education courses. Just as faculty teach students to be culturally competent in the classroom, participants were clear the same is true in their own instruction with adults. Social and emotional development looks very different in some cultures, so understanding the lens through which students are processing information taught in courses is essential. In addition to being mindful about students' cultural contexts, faculty teach to prompt a change in thinking about social and emotional learning for

young children. Past experiences of students who are pursuing a career in early childhood education influence their thinking and teaching philosophy. Being open to different perspectives and practices requires faculty to help students build a self-awareness by reflecting on their own life, beliefs, and values. Incorporating reflective activities in their courses has been a focus for faculty in recent years.

Practical Content and Experience. Early educators often do not feel equipped with strategies to address challenging behavior and support social and emotional learning in an early childhood education classroom (Labrot et al., 2022). Opportunities for practicum assignments as a student in higher education is one of the most meaningful experiences for beginning educators (Mantegu et al., 2021; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023; Salem et al., 2023). Furthermore, students can begin to apply theories and practices learned in courses to a real-world setting (Mantegu et al., 2021). All 10 participants in the study emphasized the need for practicum experiences for students, and three individuals specifically noted that learning content presented in early childhood education courses needs to be "practical." Although participants provided a theoretical overview and background on social and emotional learning, much of the instruction provided by faculty focuses on practical content and implementation of evidence-based practices in classrooms. For example, participant P002 shared "I am focused on best practices at a practical level, so I am always going to teach them things they can use." She continued, "we talk about theorists, but I like to align theorists to the practical nature of the work they are doing." Having taught in early childhood programs themselves, faculty understand the many challenges of early educators and are intentional about providing practical tools that can be used immediately to manage their classrooms.

Nine participants shared that best practices found in the Pyramid Model conceptual framework are utilized in their early childhood education courses. At the universal tier of the conceptual framework, faculty mentioned "relationships" and "environment" a combined total of 63 times in their interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions. On her qualitative survey, P006 wrote "the number one priority is to build a relationship with every child; it is the foundation upon which our work much be based." During his interview, P003 shared that "if early educators could provide the nurturing, responsive relationships and high-quality supportive environments, issues are often handled and you may not need the higher tiers of support." Collectively, all 10 participants in the study were familiar with the conceptual framework and use concepts found in the universal supports tier in their early childhood education courses.

Targeted social and emotional supports include teaching children how to identify and express emotions, self-regulation, problem solving, and friendship skills (Hemmeter et al., 2017; 2021c). Best practices found in the prevention tier of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework were discussed less than universal supports (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). However, five participants discuss the concept of providing "direct" and "indirect" guidance in classrooms and teaching practices. In her interview, P005 shared "children with exceptionalities coursework does that most; now we talk about it in child guidance and after we go through all the different strategies." Moreover, P014 shared in her interview "we kind of talk about some of the things you use from the Pyramid Model, like some targeted social and emotional strategies." Her students utilize strategies such as Tucker Turtle, which is used to help children develop self-regulation skills and manage anger (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). During the first focus group, P009 said "If you have that nurturing and responsive relationship with students in the classroom and have time to get to know them as individuals, then it is easier to support." The group concurred that students need to

be competent in the universal supports prior to implementing strategies at the prevention and intensive intervention tiers of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework. For that reason, more of the practical information and experiences provided to students in early childhood education courses focuses on universal supports, rather than the top two tiers of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework.

Social and Emotional Competence. Early educators have a primary role in helping young children develop social and emotional skills needed for academic success (Blewitt et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2020). To support young children's social and emotional development, early educators need their own social and emotional competence (Ciucci et al., 2018). Seven participants in the study shared that many students in early childhood education courses have experienced their own mental health challenges due to trauma or stressors in life. In her interview, P005 said "students need an awareness of their own self care and social and emotional growth." Without having strong mental health, themselves, it is difficult for students to process information and strategies taught about social and emotional learning. The social and emotional competence of early educators particularly impacts their ability to build positive and nurturing relationships, which is the foundational component of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework (Arace et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). In her interview, P008 said she tells students "if you can build that relationship with children to where there is a bond there, they know they can trust you; they know they can talk to you, then you are going to meet their social and emotional needs." To build that trust with young children, students need to look at their own social and emotional development and often work on themselves. Similarly, in her interview, P009 said "that is one of the hardest parts is just our own self-reflection and understanding the way we are."

Faculty expressed that competence to teach social and emotional concepts requires students to understand developmental milestones and have age appropriate expectations for children. When early educators have a solid foundation of child development knowledge, they are better able to make appropriate teaching decisions and address challenges with children's learning and behavior (Beisly & Lake, 2021). Eight participants revealed their courses provide foundational knowledge as well as strategies that help support skill development and encourage social and emotional competence. When discussing strategies, six participants revealed in their interviews and qualitative surveys that they specifically use the Pyramid Model conceptual framework to teach students in early childhood education courses. Participants P005 and P009 shared in their interviews that students are encouraged to create teaching props and tools at their community college so they have a tangible resource to use when implementing strategies learned in courses. Sharing in her interview, P009 said "You know, we had huge labs so we could go in, and they could make the materials to take with them; it was nice to be able to incorporate that as part of the small group efforts, because they could actually physically make it." Faculty provides opportunities for students to access community resources and social and emotional training while enrolled in early childhood education courses as well.

Inclusive Instruction. Just as children's social and emotional competence develops within the context of their environment, so does that of students pursuing higher education degrees (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Participants P001, P008 and P009 emphasized that students' cultural backgrounds influence their perception of social and emotional concepts taught in early childhood education courses. As P008 mentioned in her interview, "not all cultures respond socially and emotionally the same way." Participant P009 discussed in her interview the "firmly held set of beliefs and values" that each student brings into

their classes. With a diverse number of cultures represented in North Carolina's higher education institutions, participants emphasized the need to consider different perspectives as they teach social and emotional content to students. In the first focus group, P009 shared "one of the things that I think is really important to consider is the difference in both the background of the student, as well as the cultural background of the children that they're educating in their classrooms." Continuing, P009 said to the focus group "and how those cultural contexts play into and should inform both the way that the supportive environments and the relationships are built as well as the way that those targeted supports are employed, and so really supporting students through considering all of those pieces through that lens of what they know about themselves, as well as what they know about the children and families in their classrooms." A consensus was made by participants that for students to be receptive to new information presented, faculty must provide opportunities for students to reflect on their life experiences and discuss the impact those have on teaching philosophies. Participants are intentional about showing respect for all cultures while also prompting a paradigm shift in how students think about social and emotional learning. Aligning with the Pyramid Model conceptual framework, consideration of cultures is an important factor for implementing all tiers of support and social and emotional teaching practices (Hemmeter et al., 2021c).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study shared higher education faculty's experiences with preparing early educators to support young children's social and emotional development in an early childhood education classroom. Higher education institutions as well as other early childhood stakeholders in North Carolina may use this research to modify

program delivery or provide professional development opportunities. This section highlights implications for policy and practice.

Implications for Policy

Analysis of data collected from all 10 participants revealed instructional practices being implemented with students in early childhood education courses, as well as a few challenges that participants felt could be improved upon. Many of the challenges expressed by faculty occurred from factors that were out of their immediate control. Challenges included limited access to quality practicum classrooms, fewer mentor teachers, mental health of students, trauma and stressors in students' lives, lack of cultural understanding in higher education, and instructional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To help faculty address these challenges, there could be a more collaborative effort from leaders in higher education and the early childhood community in North Carolina. All 10 participants at both community colleges and universities agreed that more practicum experiences for students are needed in early childhood education programs (Mantegu et al., 2021; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). Access to higher quality early childhood classrooms is necessary for students to observe, implement strategies learned in courses, and receive mentorship from experienced educators who model teaching practices with fidelity (Gao et al., 2023; Mantegu et al., 2021).

As mentioned during all 10 interviews and two focus group discussions, faculty and students struggle to find available classrooms as well as quality mentor teachers in programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Because of the lack of availability, the number of practicum experiences for students have dwindled in recent years. Having a mentorship policy or statewide liaison to help connect faculty and students with excellent mentor teachers working in early childhood programs may help address this issue (Mantegu et al., 2021). During her

interview, P005 shared “we need to, in my personal opinion, to have like a mentorship pipeline, you know, like this hub for the profession.” Continuing, P005 said “I would like to know in my community, who are the teachers that are really good with you know, have social and emotional nailed in their classroom, like their interactions, the way the classroom is set up, and the materials they offer.” Participant P005 concluded, “I would love to know who those teachers are.” Early childhood departments in higher education could partner with statewide early childhood education initiatives providing in-service training and classroom coaching for early educators. Having already been through extensive assessments and onsite support, early childhood programs working with statewide initiatives often reflect a higher level of knowledge and experience (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2020). Collaboration between faculty and statewide partners could help identify potential classrooms and early educators who would be ideal mentors for students seeking practicum experience (Mantegu et al., 2021).

Other factors that impact students’ learning in early childhood education courses are their own traumatic experiences, life stressors, and mental health issues (Arace et al., 2021; Jeon et al., 2019). In her interview, P006 shared “we believe as faculty, that those concepts we are teaching are so different from what students experienced in their own lives growing up.” Support and resources provided to students in higher education could help address mental health needs before they enter the early childhood education workforce (Hadar et al., 2020). Although many colleges and universities provide mental health services on campus, there are many nontraditional students who attend online education programs. Perhaps a policy that offers all students pursuing early childhood education degrees free counseling or online resources about trauma and mental health would be an additional support for students. Faculty would have a main hub of resources to refer students seeking mental health and trauma support. Addressing these issues prior to

working with children could help early educators build an awareness of their own needs as well as strengthen their ability to support the social and emotional health of young children (Hadar et al., 2020).

Discussions with faculty also revealed that higher education institutions need to be mindful of the cultural context and background of students in early childhood education courses (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021). With cultural competence being a recurring theme in early childhood education, it could be beneficial for colleges and universities to provide professional development for faculty to examine courses and curricula through a cultural lens (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021). Some colleges in North Carolina are already providing training and resources to discuss the cultural context and inclusive practices in early childhood education. Participant P002 shared in her interview, "we incorporated a lot of exceptionalities in there, and we did a little diversity, equity because that was a faculty interest." Helping students understand the influence of culture on instructional practices as well as expectations for young children is important (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Perhaps having a task force within early childhood departments to investigate methods being used to teach various cultures in courses would be beneficial for faculty and students alike.

Implications for Practice

Colleges and universities seeking to locate quality practicum classrooms in North Carolina could use this study to develop a diverse group of professionals from statewide initiatives working with early childhood education programs (Mantegu et al., 2021). Members could include specialists from the Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative, Division of Child Development and Early Education, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program, Birth-to-Three Quality Initiative, Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, Smart Start, Head Start, and other

non-profit agencies who provide training and technical assistance to early childhood education programs in the state. Each of these agencies and projects work with early educators to improve classroom environments and the quality of learning experiences provided for young children in early childhood education programs. As discussed with P005, a "mentorship pipeline" could be established to identify excellent mentor teachers and classrooms throughout the state that would be ideal classrooms for students in higher education to observe best teaching practices in action (Briscoe, 2019). Perhaps a stipend or recognition could be available for early educators who agree to mentor students and provide onsite observation and student teaching practice. Early childhood programs that agree to host student teachers pursuing early childhood education degrees may be able to receive a special recognition on their star rated license or quality points for providing a much needed service that is helping prepare the workforce.

Faculty in the study expressed the diverse cultures represented in North Carolina's colleges and universities, particularly in early childhood education degree programs. The same is true for early educators employed in programs statewide. Corroborating with previous literature, participants in the present study revealed many cultures enrolled in early childhood programs differ in the way they perceive learning for young children, particularly social and emotional development (Romijn et al., 2021). It may be beneficial for faculty and students to participate in cultural competence training that allows them to explore early childhood education through the lens of different cultures (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021). For students in early childhood courses to be open to new ideas and information, faculty must first understand how those students are thinking and what inspires their philosophy (Romijn et al, 2021).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children was the conceptual framework used to guide this study. The Pyramid Model has been used as a blueprint for supporting young children's social and emotional development in early childhood education classrooms (Fox et al., 2003; Giordana et at., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). All 10 participants in the study collectively discussed teaching multiple concepts of the Pyramid Model framework in their early childhood courses and curricula. Although four participants did not specifically teach the Pyramid Model itself, they did address several practices found within the conceptual framework tiers.

Early educators entering the workforce need knowledge and strategies for building positive and nurturing relationships with children, families, and colleagues (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Rakap et al., 2018). Analysis of all 10 participants' individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions revealed the topic of relationships as one of the most frequently mentioned concepts from faculty in the study. All 10 participants concurred that relationships are a foundational component of all learning and should be intentionally nurtured to support young children's social and emotional needs (Council for Exceptional Children & Division of Early Childhood, 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). At the foundational tier of the Pyramid Model, nurturing and responsive relationships is the component in which all other tiers of support are built upon (Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Ten participants shared the concept of relationships was embedded in multiple early childhood education courses; however, thematic findings revealed that relationships with students, faculty, and mentor teachers were just as imperative in teacher preparation programs. Many of the experiences shared by faculty emphasized parallel processing used with students in higher

education that mimic strategies to establish positive relationships when entering the early childhood education workforce.

Also listed as a universal support in the first tier of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework was the need for high quality supportive environments for young children. Early educators need to understand how to provide high quality and supportive classroom environments (Hemmeter et al., 2021c; Rakap et al., 2018). Seven out of 10 participants in the study shared instructional experiences that focused on setting up the physical classroom environment to promote opportunities for social and emotional skill development. In his interview, P003 shared "we have a really large, physical classroom and I actually set up a small classroom inside it." Participants P003 and P005 emphasized in their interviews the need for selecting age appropriate learning materials in classrooms to encourage play based learning of social and emotional concepts (Rakap et al., 2018; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Specifically, developing a sense of community where all children feel accepted and belong to the group is essential (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013). Because practicum site availability is limited, this aspect of early childhood education degree programs has been particularly challenging for all 10 participants in recent years. Due to recent COVID-19 pandemic challenges, students in higher education had fewer opportunities to explore and observe high quality classroom environments serving young children. Thematic findings in the study revealed fewer quality classrooms are available for practicum assignments, as well as less experienced mentor teachers at this time.

In the second tier of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework, targeted social and emotional supports are utilized to address specific social and emotional needs of children as preventative methods (Fox et al., 2003; Giordana et at., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Early

educators need to learn about using targeted social and emotional supports in their teaching that encourage self-regulation, emotional literacy, problem solving, and establishing friendships (Rakap et al., 2018; Hemmeter et al. 2021c). Participants P001, P003, P005, P009, and P014 shared they focus on providing tangible examples of targeted social and emotional supports in their early childhood education courses. Whereas four other participants discuss targeted social and emotional supports in conjunction with the classroom environment. During the second focus group, P008 said "we spend that much time on intervention and the high quality, supportive environments and relationships more so than we talk about the middle piece, intervention." Continuing, P008 told the focus group "I think we are mashing the prevention in with the first, the foundation tier." Overall, nine participants in the study touch on this component of the conceptual framework in their early childhood education courses.

The tertiary tier of the Pyramid Model conceptual framework is the intensive intervention component for young children with persistent challenges with behavior and developmental concerns (Fox et al., 2003; Giordana et at., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Faculty at both the community colleges and universities offer courses on children with exceptionalities and special education. Collectively, most of the intensive intervention discussions occur in those specific classes. In the first focus group, P013 said "As a pro in higher ed., we do not necessarily have access to places where we can support those children; and those children typically are in spaces that may not necessarily want pre education individuals coming in to help, to watch, to observe, or to support." Participant P013 concluded, "I think you see this more in graduate type programs, not necessarily undergraduate programs." Although faculty may not always be able to provide the hands on experiences with this tier of support in practicum classrooms, half of the

participants shared in their interviews and focus groups that they are intentional about sharing early intervention resources that students can explore for additional information.

Previous research findings on the preparation of early educators in higher education for social and emotional instruction revealed a major similarity with the current study. A quantitative study was conducted using surveys with two and four year colleges in the United States (Hemmeter et al., 2008). The survey asked higher education faculty teaching early childhood education courses to rate their perspectives on the preparedness of students to implement Pyramid Model concepts in their classrooms. Like the current study, findings revealed that students lacked opportunities to implement teaching practices in field placements, or practicum classrooms (Hemmeter et al., 2008). Likewise, a more recent quantitative study showed that early educators new to the workforce continue to encounter challenges with observing mentor teachers in quality practicum classrooms (Labrot et al., 2022). It could be argued that accessing quality practicum classrooms has continued to be a major challenge for students and faculty within the last fifteen years. Using a qualitative design in the current study versus a quantitative approach found in previous studies allowed faculty to respond to open-ended questions, providing more in-depth details about their experiences and perspectives.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations in research are defined by Creswell and Poth (2018) as potential problems or challenges that may arise from the chosen research design or methods that can impact outcomes in the study. Upon reflection of this study, two main limitations were identified. The first limitation was the representation of higher education institution type of participating faculty. Ideally, half of the sample would have represented community college settings while the other half of participants would have experience teaching at the university level. Although an attempt

was made to have an equal number of both institution types represented, more community college faculty were available for participation. Although fewer university faculty participated, there were some participants who had taught at multiple universities within North Carolina so perspectives from different experiences were still represented from more schools. There was initial interest from three additional university faculty during recruitment, but due to time and scheduling conflicts they were not able to participate.

The second limitation was that a majority of the faculty participating in the study were female. Although a variety of regions in the state were represented, only one male community college instructor participated. As the field of early childhood education works to increase males in the workforce, their experiences and perspectives would have been a valued addition to the research. The male participant in the study did not participate in the focus group discussion which was an unfortunate missed opportunity for his perspective to be shared with colleagues in higher education.

Delimitations are intentional parameters the researcher uses to define boundaries within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first delimitation for the study was the geographical location. All participants taught at community colleges or universities located in the state of North Carolina. This geographic location was chosen because the researcher was interested in examining experiences and perspectives of faculty in the state that she resides and works. Moreover, limited literature was found that narrowed the focus of study to this specific state. Additionally, the faculty selected during recruitment represented a diverse sampling of participants from multiple regions of the state. Faculty worked in both rural and urban areas of North Carolina. While reviewing online recruitment surveys, participants representing diverse backgrounds and years of experience were selected to provide multiple perspectives. The

transcendental approach for phenomenology was used to provide an unbiased description of the sample's lived experiences and viewpoints (Moustakas, 1994).

Recommendations for Future Research

Consideration of the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations prompted three recommendations for future research. First, this study focused on the experiences of higher education faculty in preparing early educators to support young children's social and emotional development. A similarly designed phenomenological study focusing on former students who graduated from early childhood degree programs could provide comparable data about their lived experiences and perspectives. Using prior students who now have a few years of experience teaching in an early childhood classroom would be insightful. Likewise, their experiences as a new teacher in the classroom could reveal their feeling of preparation for supporting social and emotional development as well as professional needs.

Additionally, this study concurred that practicum experiences for students pursuing early childhood education degrees is an essential component of teacher preparation programs. As all 10 participants shared, it has been very difficult to find quality practicum classrooms for students as well as experienced mentor teachers. Perhaps a phenomenological or case study that explores the experiences of mentor teachers in high quality early childhood programs could provide details about the practicum process. Identifying what has worked well for mentor teachers in successful practicum classrooms may provide a blueprint for addressing current practicum challenges. Likewise, the recommended research may include students in practicum classrooms as part of the sample. Studying student and mentor teacher experiences throughout the duration of a semester could illustrate skills learned and practices used.

The final recommendation for future research is a case study that explores mental health needs of the early childhood education workforce. Faculty in this study disclosed that many students pursuing a degree in early childhood education have experienced trauma and mental health challenges. These experiences impact an early educator's interactions with young children, families, and colleagues. A case study method could provide more detailed insight about the workforce's past experiences as well as if their teaching practices have been impacted by trauma. Information regarding the mental health challenges faced by early educators as well as available supports could share pertinent information for all stakeholders in the early childhood education community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the early childhood education workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. Ten participants with several years of experience teaching early childhood education courses in a higher education setting contributed to the study. Analysis of data collected using individual interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus groups revealed three major themes, which include (a) practicum field experiences, (b) mental health, trauma, and behavioral considerations, and (c) cultural context of preparing early educators for social and emotional learning.

All 10 participants identified the need for more quality practicum experiences and mentor teachers in the state. Additionally, the mental health challenges of students pursuing early childhood education degrees influence their ability to support young children's social and emotional development. The cultural background and past experiences of students have also impacted how they are learning social and emotional content in early childhood education

courses. Faculty has been working to address these challenges in their courses; however, many of these issues are out of their control. Therefore, they focus on what is in their control, which is how they support students with practical information, meaningful learning experiences, and supplemental resources.

The Pyramid Model conceptual framework provided a social and emotional lens through which instructional experiences of faculty were explored (Fox et al., 2003; Giordano et al., 2023; Hemmeter et al., 2021c). Participants in the study represented a diverse sample of faculty teaching in the eastern, central, and western regions of North Carolina. Each participant provided insight into the social and emotional component of early childhood education degree programs. Although instructional challenges have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty shared recommendations to better prepare students for social and emotional instruction. Preparation of early educators in higher education should include easier access to high quality practicum classrooms, more experienced mentor teachers, mental health supports for students pursuing early childhood education degrees, and practical content and experiences that consider the cultural background of students in early childhood education courses. Partnership between higher education institutions and early childhood initiatives around the state could provide a collaborative approach to addressing the challenges shared by faculty.

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Appendix A
IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 15, 2023

Elizabeth Tuttle
Vonda Beavers

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-137 Preparing Early Educators to Support Young Children's Social and Emotional Development: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education

Dear Elizabeth Tuttle, Vonda Beavers,

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).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

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, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B
Marketing Flyer for Social Media

Research Participants Needed

Preparing Early Educators to Support Young Children's Social and Emotional Development: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education

- Do have experience teaching early childhood courses at a community college or university in North Carolina within the last five years?
- Are you full a time early childhood faculty member, part-time instructor, adjunct instructor, online instructor, or department chair?
- Are you interested in helping our field learn more about the social and emotional component of teacher preparation programs in early childhood education?

If you answered **yes** to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina.

Participants will be asked to…

- Participate in an individual interview (via Zoom) that will not exceed one hour.
- Complete an online survey (via Google Form) that will take about 15 minutes.
- Participate in a focus group discussion (via Zoom) that will last about 45 minutes.

Participants who complete the study will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for their time and contribution.

If you would like to participate, please click here and complete the recruitment survey. You will be contacted within a few days to confirm your eligibility and receive scheduling details for your interview and focus group discussion.

A consent document will be e-mailed to participants when they are notified of selection.

Elizabeth Burany, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Elizabeth at [redacted] for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix C
Recruitment Screener Survey

1. Name:
2. E-mail:
3. Phone number:
4. How many years have you been in the early childhood education field?
5. How many years have you taught in higher education?
6. Have you taught early childhood courses at a community college or university within the last five years?
7. What community colleges or universities have you taught at within the last five years?
8. Are you currently teaching early childhood courses at a community college or university in North Carolina?
9. What is your current role in higher education? (Full-time faculty, part-time instructor, adjunct instructor, ECE department chair)
10. What type of early childhood courses have you taught within the last five years? (online, face-to-face, hybrid, practicum/internships)
11. Have you had experience teaching courses pertaining to social and emotional development in early childhood?
12. Do you have any colleagues in higher education that may also be interested in participating in this study? Please share their name and e-mail address so they can receive a marketing flyer and invitation to join.

The online survey can be accessed by clicking the following link:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScbciu1hDRncUJg3IE-dTgMwyBz-pkxNa3eA8C5oe0jfXNFBg/viewform?usp=sf_link

Appendix D
Social Media Post to Share with Marketing Flyer

ATTENTION HIGHER EDUCATION FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE (Early Childhood Education) workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. To participate, you must have experience teaching early childhood education courses at a community college or university in North Carolina. I am seeking participants who are full-time early childhood faculty members, part-time instructors, adjunct instructors, online instructors, lecturers, or ECE department chairs. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview (online), complete an online survey, and attend a focus group discussion (online) with colleagues teaching in similar higher education settings. One focus group will be scheduled for those with experience teaching in community college settings. The other focus group will be comprised of faculty with experience teaching in university settings. If you would like to participate, please review the attached flyer and complete the online recruitment survey. The link for the online recruitment survey is provided on the flyer. A consent document will be emailed to you with confirmation of your eligibility to participate. Participants will each receive a $50 Amazon gift card for their time and contribution. I look forward to listening and learning from your experiences!

With appreciation,

Elizabeth Burany

Appendix E
Participant Selection E-mail

Dear _____,

Thank you for expressing an interest in joining the study *Preparing Early Educators to Support Young Children's Social and Emotional Development: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education.* Your submitted survey has been received and you have been selected to participate in the study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. To participate, please complete and return the attached consent form. Information about scheduling interview and focus group dates will follow. I look forward to listening to and learning from your experiences!

With Appreciation,

Elizabeth Burany

Appendix F
Informed Consent

Consent

Title of the Project: Preparing Early Educators to Support Young Children's Social and Emotional Development: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Burany, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have experience teaching early childhood education courses at a community college or university in North Carolina within the last five years. Participants may be employed as full-time faculty, part-time instructor, adjunct instructor, or an early childhood education department chair. 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 describe the lived experiences of higher education faculty regarding their role in preparing the ECE workforce to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina.

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 a recorded individual interview (online via Zoom) that will take no more than one hour to complete.
2. Complete a qualitative survey (online via Google Form) that will take 15-20 minutes to complete.
3. Participate in a focus group meeting (online via Zoom) with other ECE faculty that will take 45-60 minutes to complete.
4. Review e-mailed transcripts of your individual interview to check for accuracy. This should take about 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include receiving a $50 Amazon gift card for their time and contribution.

Benefits to society include creating a deeper understanding of the instructional experiences of higher education faculty in preparing early educators to support young children's social and emotional development in North Carolina. Your contribution will help fill a gap in the literature

by providing unique insight into preparation of early childhood educators using a social and emotional lens.

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. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be confidential. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted online in a quiet room without others around.
- Focus group meetings will be conducted online and participants will be allowed to use pseudonyms and keep their cameras off. 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 will be stored on a password-locked computer in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three and then deleted after three years.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Each participant will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for their time and contribution to the research.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There will be no costs incurred by participants during the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Elizabeth Burany. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ([redacted] and/or [redacted] You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Vonda Beavers, at [redacted]

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

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

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher 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 video-record me via Zoom as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix G
Interview Questions

1. Please briefly describe your background and professional journey in early childhood education. CRQ
2. What motivated you to pursue this role as an ECE faculty member or instructor in higher education? CRQ
3. How would you describe your experience in preparing the ECE workforce to enter the field of early childhood education? CRQ
4. Reflecting on your prior teaching experiences, how would you define social and emotional learning for young children? SQ1
5. How have your professional experiences shaped your philosophy for teaching pre-service early educators about SEL? SQ1
6. Based on your own experiences in the field, what professional competencies do you feel early educators need to successfully support social and emotional learning in an early childhood classroom? SQ1
7. What professional development or prior work experiences have you participated in that prepared you to teach early educators about social and emotional development? CRQ
8. What SEL frameworks, curricula, or standards for learning have you taught about in your courses? (Ex: Pyramid Model framework, Second Step curriculum, NCFELD standards) SQ2
9. What instructional experiences have you had with teaching college students about the topic of challenging behavior? SQ2
10. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing the foundational component of relationships in SEL? SQ2

11. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing the topic of high-quality classroom environments in SEL? SQ2
12. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing social and emotional teaching strategies for children's SEL? SQ2
13. What instructional experiences have you had with discussing individualized and intensive intervention for children with persistent challenging behavior? SQ2
14. What challenges have you experienced with teaching college students about SEL in early childhood education? CRQ
15. What else would you like to share about your instructional experiences that would help others in higher education prepare the ECE workforce for teaching SEL? CRQ

Appendix H
Qualitative Survey Questions

1. What is your understanding of how the topic of SEL for young children is embedded in your school's requirements for ECE teaching degrees? For example, are there specific courses that focus solely on SEL or is the topic embedded into other required courses? SQ2
2. How has research about social and emotional learning in ECE influenced courses you have taught in recent years? CRQ
3. How do you perceive the amount of social and emotional content provided in required courses for ECE degrees? SQ2
4. What is your experience with course planning at your school? For example, how do you develop the syllabus, create assignments, and choose course materials for students? CRQ
5. What do you consider the top five professional competencies that new teachers in the ECE workforce need to know about SEL? SQ1
6. What personal experiences have led you to believe these are the most important professional competencies needed by new teachers? SQ1
7. How have you addressed these professional competencies for SEL in your courses? SQ1
8. How have social and emotional theories/theorists influenced your instruction in ECE courses? SQ2
9. How do you teach students evidence-based practices in your courses? (Ex: observation videos, modeling, role-play) SQ2
10. What kind of practicum experiences have you assigned in your ECE courses? SQ2

11. What do you perceive as the most meaningful assignment or project you have assigned students that focuses on SEL? SQ2
12. What experience do you have with using SEL organizations, websites, or professional resources when planning instruction? (Ex: NCPMI, CASEL) SQ2

Appendix I
Focus Group Questions

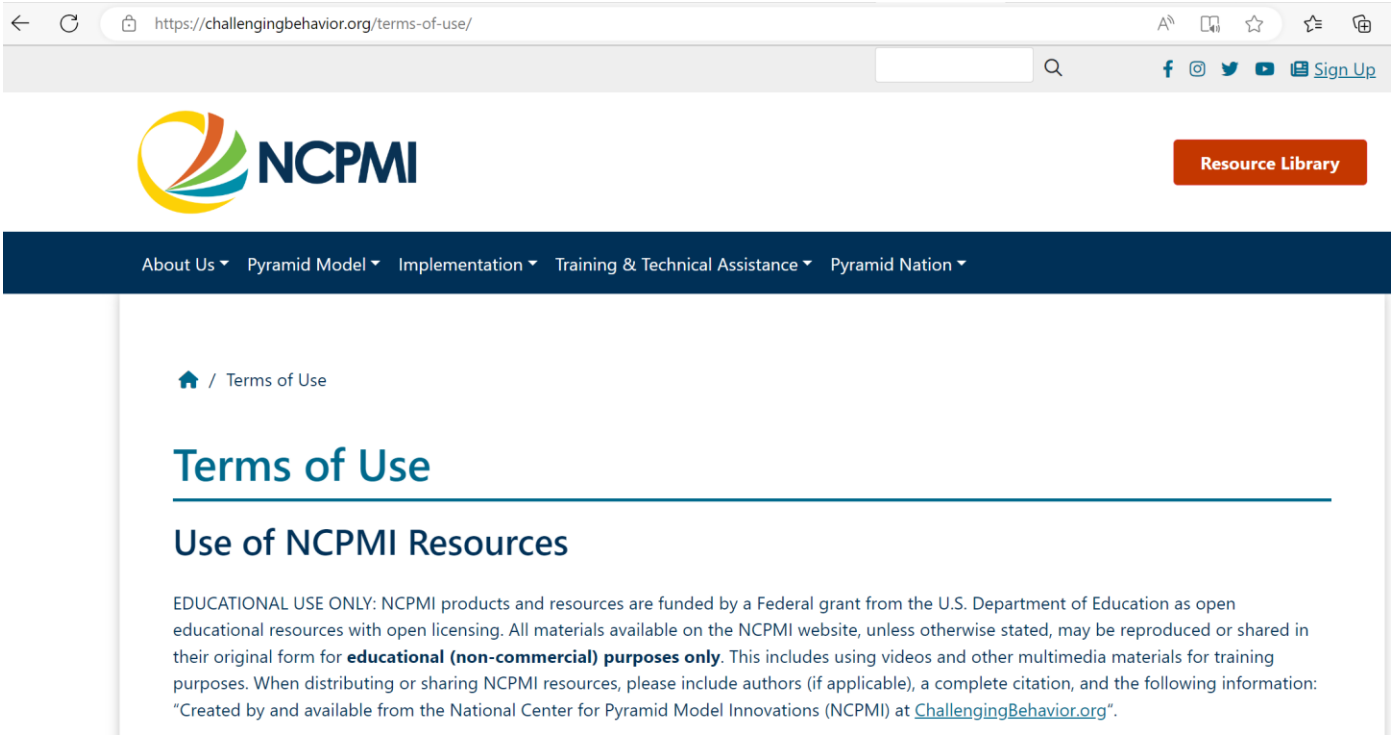
1. How have your professional experiences in higher education shaped your views on teaching the ECE workforce about universal supports needed to promote social and emotional competence for all children in ECE classrooms? SQ1
2. How have your professional experiences in higher education impacted your ability to equip the ECE workforce with targeted social and emotional strategies needed to prevent developmental challenges for children who may require extra support in ECE classrooms? SQ2
3. How have your professional experiences in higher education guided your philosophy on competencies needed by the ECE workforce to collaborate in intensive intervention services for children requiring an individualized support plan? SQ1

Appendix J
Audit Trail

Date:	Action Item:
9/15/2023	-Received IRB approval from Liberty University. -Pasted approved IRB documents into manuscript appendices.
9/17/2023	-Set up Zoom and Calendly accounts to use for study. -Set up e-mail notifications for Google forms. -Created a checklist to ensure each step of data collection is completed correctly once participants complete recruitment screener survey.
9/18/2023	-Started recruitment online in social media networks. -Created post with flyer and recruitment screener survey.
9/19/2023	-Monitored recruitment survey responses. -Began sorting and identifying eligible participants.
9/20/23	-Selected 14 participants that met participation criteria. -Selected participants reflect a diverse group of individuals with instructional experiences at community colleges and universities. -Created files with pseudonyms for participant names and colleges. -E-mailed participation selection e-mails and consent forms. Asked participants to return signed consent form by 9/22/23.
9/21/2023- 10/2/2023	-Received signed consent forms, e-mailed Calendly scheduling links, e-mailed Zoom links, and sent interview reminder e-mails -Conducted first interview on 9/21/23 -Conducted last interview on 10/2/23 -E-mailed transcribed interviews for member checking within two days of interviews, e-mailed qualitative survey links after each interview -Received e-mail from P004 on 9/25/23 that stated due to family health emergency, she will not be able to participate. -Received e-mail from P011 on 10/6/23 that she had been busy and that is why there was no response to e-mails regarding interview scheduling. At this time, saturation was reached in the data; therefore, data collection had ended. -E-mailed P010 and P012 to schedule interviews; however, a response was never received so those participants did not participate in the study. -All 10 participant interviews were conducted via Zoom between 9/21/23 and 10/2/23
9/25/2023- 10/2/2023	-Printed submitted qualitative surveys as participants completed via Google Forms. -Began analyzing and coding member checked interviews on 9/25/2023.
10/3/2023- 10/11/2023	-Emailed focus group scheduling invitation to all participants. -Sent Zoom links for selected dates to all participants.
10/12/2023	-Conducted first focus group meeting and transcribed discussion.
10/13/2023	-Conducted second focus group meeting and transcribed discussion.

10/14/2023- 10/21/2023	-Continued data analysis and coding of remaining member checked interviews, qualitative surveys, and focus group discussions
10/22/2023- 10/23/2023	-Mailed $50 Amazon gift cards to all participants.
11/1/2023- 11/27/2023	-Added participant data to chapter four. -Wrote drafts for chapters four and five.
11/28/2023	-Met with committee chair to discuss data analysis and remaining tasks.
11/28/2023- 12/7/2023	-Finished writing chapters four and five. -Manuscript completed and e-mailed to chair for formal review.

Appendix K
Pyramid Model (Figure 1) Open Use Disclaimer



From the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) at

https://challengingbehavior.org/terms-of-use/.