

Running head: SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND THE  
IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT WITHIN THE TEAMING  
MODEL**

Doctoral Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

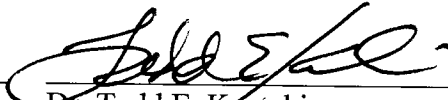
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### **Abstract**

With the growing need to address a more holistic approach to child development, social and emotional learning has emerged as a leading support to improve students' overall success. Still, schools and districts are challenged with finding ways to integrate social and emotional learning, and teachers are left to implement these supports and strategies with little resources. This research study focused on the teachers' confidence and understanding of social and emotional learning supports and resources and their impact on best practices and increased student engagement and motivation. Qualitative data was collected through a pre-and post-reflection questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observations. The data gathered evaluated the teachers' experiences, training, understandings, and classroom practices that increase awareness of social and emotional learning. Data Analysis showed a direct correlation between an increase in teachers' perception and implementation of core social and emotional competencies and strategies with an increase in teacher collaboration, shared focus, and professional development. Further research studies are recommended to outline the effects of social and emotional learning on student academic achievement and the impact outside the researcher's focus on middle school students.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

This study examines and describes the impact of social-emotional learning on middle school students' achievement within the teaming model framework, based on teachers' experiences, perceptions, and confidence in social-emotional supports. Research has shown that social and emotional learning can benefit students in affective, interpersonal, communicative, and academic realms (San Antonio, 2018).

The topic of social and emotional learning (SEL) and middle school students present a real challenge to educators worldwide and, more specifically, to this study's researcher.

With the researcher's experience as a leader in a seven through twelve junior-senior high school and the observation of middle school students struggling with transition, adapting to a new environment, and handling adversity and challenges, SEL's focus has become more prevalent in recent times.

The middle school teaming model was developed and implemented under the researcher's leadership over the past three years. With the foundation of teaming established and a more in-depth focus on SEL supports has emerged as a priority.

The middle school student faces a magnitude of challenges from transitioning into a new learning environment, preparing for an additional transition to the high school setting, and developing their sense of belonging and self-confidence.

The skills needed to help develop the whole child require a more in-depth examination of social-emotional learning effectiveness and its implementation within our middle school teams.

A vital feature of a middle school is teaming. The teaming framework reinforces the students' sense of belonging and community while supporting teachers to build trust and relationships. Hence, the teachers' perceptions, experiences, and confidence in strategies, resources, and their development with social-emotional learning within their teaming framework.

The initial stages of development and implementation of meaningful social-emotional learning supports are the study's overall goal. With the changing landscape of education and more demand on districts to increase student achievement and growth, the focus on the students' well-being and ability to navigate the challenges ahead is vital to their success. Implementation of social-emotional learning poses many challenges, and schools struggle with integrating social-emotional learning into a school day that is already brimming with curricula and assessment demands (Kress & Elias, 2006). The responsibility of educators is to determine the balance of academic and social-emotional support.

This study's information and knowledge will further develop our SEL curriculum, improve teaching strategies, and integrate academic standards that align curriculum with SEL strategies and resources. Second, knowledge and understanding will shape our staff and teachers' professional development to cultivate growth and personal development. Lastly, the foundation of understanding developed will assist in further teaming for our junior high students. We would grow our team supports from 148 seventh-grade students to 303 seventh and eighth-grade students. Adding 155 students impacted by teaming and

the SEL supports within the model. The possible systematic change in scheduling and programming could occur to support recommendations and further development.

This study's potential impact could involve the addition of resources such as SEL programs and professional development trainers, additional time paid to teachers to evaluate and rewrite curriculum, and increased staffing.

This study's potential recommendations and conclusion based on the research could impact the strategic financial planning over the next several district budgets. When forecasting the three to five-year budget projections, school districts would consider professional development costs, high school funding for other resources and supplies, and increased salary/benefits for additional staff.

This study's impact could have a substantial effect on the district's approach to initiatives, funding for programs, and work to help align the vision and mission of the comprehensive plan to the vision and goals of the district budget process, management, and allocation of funds.

Overall, this study's success could substantially support an increase in funding for SEL supports, resources, and staffing. Subsequently, additional focus on student mental health supports could evolve further to help, in parallel, with social and emotional learning.

Consequently, the current situation surrounding education and our nation concerning COVID-19 will play a big part in allocating funding and being realistic. Many of the recommendations and budget, though important, could be put on hold or

eliminated. The highest cost and predicted to be the first tabled or denied would be the addition of staff.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions and understanding of the importance of social-emotional learning instruction?
2. What are the teachers' experiences and comfort levels of social-emotional learning supports and strategies within the classroom?
3. How does the implementation of social-emotional learning strategies impact student engagement and motivation?

Throughout the research project, data will be collected through classroom observations, a teacher perception survey given twice throughout the 2020-2021 school year, and semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. All data collection instruments will focus on SEL's perceptions, experiences, and observable effects on students in the classroom.

The data collected and analyzed will help educators evaluate SEL's impact within the educational environment and guide steps forward in development and implementation to support children effectively.

To better understand SEL and help guide the study, it is critical to examine the literature and research on SEL. The research examined will help guide the study and

support the implementation of SEL supports for middle school students with the district's teaming model.



## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

#### **Social and Emotional Learning in Education**

The Collaborative for Academic Social & Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2019) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions. SEL looks to set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make decisions. Interpersonal, intrapersonal, communicative, collaborative, and problem-solving skills, alongside academic knowledge, encompass the child's success and achievement. SEL's benefits look to span throughout a broad range of disciplines, cultures, character traits, and competencies. With the growing focus on educating the "whole child," education worldwide has focused research, time, and funding on developing strategies and resources to help the collective need for more encompassing support for SEL. A strong need for additional support and research surfaces in middle school students and young adolescences.

Examining further, middle school students face a magnitude of challenges from transitioning into a new learning environment, preparing for an additional transition to the high school setting, and developing their sense of belonging and self-confidence. The challenges our middle school students face align with the growing focus on SEL. The skills needed to assist in developing the whole child require a more in-depth examination

of social-emotional learning effectiveness and its implementation within our middle school teams.

A vital feature of a middle school is teaming. This scheduling structure is designed to allow teachers to serve the same group of students, work together during common planning periods, and support those students at a deeper level than is practical when teachers have neither students nor available time in common (Maxey, 2019). The teaming framework reinforces the students' sense of belonging and community while supporting teachers to build trust and relationships. Ensuring our young middle school students receive the skills and tools for success falls directly on the teacher. The idea of creating a robust social-emotional school culture begins with the people who have the most direct contact with students: teachers (Brennan, 2015).

Therefore, the teachers' perceptions, experiences, and confidence in strategies, resources, and development with SEL within their teaming framework need more defined research. The educational stakeholders and their advocacy has laid the foundation of SEL in education, and what continues to shape future direction.

### **History of Social and Emotional Learning**

The term SEL was first introduced in 1994 at a meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute and attended by a group of researchers and practitioners involved with youth development, who defined it as “ the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills- self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making within the context of a safe, supportive environment ” (Cherniss et al., 2006). Since early 1990, SEL has emerged as a primary thematic and

programmatic emphasis in American Education, shaping researchers' and educators' focus worldwide. Concerns over the vulnerability of children and youth to various social and psychological problems and the potential role of schools in mitigating such risks have helped fuel the growing popularity of efforts to help youth become more socially and emotionally competent (Hoffman, 2009).

Researchers and educators have shifted their focus from an academic approach to a child's development, consisting of academic and social development factors. With that shift, one is now much more interested in the whole child, and the many factors contributing to their success. Therefore, emotionality, dispositions, physicality, and other more general attributes are added to the usual academic curricula that one must be shown concern. The latest results in studies and research seem to be to increase the range of attributes that contributed to student success and change the definition of school knowledge to include more personal and dispositional elements. These elements can also latently enable a wider possibility of labeling to go on in more open environments (Apple, 2004).

The new focus on student development and growth started to uncover student demographics' disparities and developmental effects. The expansion of variables that contribute to student knowledge and success brought into focus the stresses contributing to a child's development. The National Scientific Council of the Developing Child (2014) states, findings from neurobiology and the study of stress response system have illuminated how environmental factors such as poverty, chronic stress, and trauma can affect brain development to influence children's capacity to focus attention, recall

information, exercise planning, and self-control, and get along with others, thereby affecting their lifelong learning, behavior, and health. Research supports these findings and indicates that high-quality SEL programs can improve students' academic, mental health, behavioral outcomes, and classroom climate and teacher practices (Durlak et al., 2011). These supports and programs increase the success of students with disabilities or those that are designated as economically-disadvantaged. Some postulate that the decrease in social skill obtainment by students receiving special education services is directly related to an inability to process concepts such as environmental cues cognitively, interpret social environments, and regulate their emotions (Meadan & Halle, 2004).

The lack of social skills in disadvantaged students can be directly related to the research detailing the gap between the students' SEL and developmental needs and educators' understanding of child development. In the 1990s, scholars found that when educators lack a basic understanding of child development, children of color and children from marginalized communities suffer most (Comer, 2009). Recently, with more research and data compiled on student sub-groups, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have shown success in reducing bullying experiences among students with disabilities (Espelage et al., 2016). However, that same data and research have revealed that executive functioning deficiencies were observed as students struggled to maintain task completion (Bowers et al., 2018). The research's multiple findings indicate a present need to continue research on SEL and its effects, particularly students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students.

With further studies in SEL growing over the years and more programs becoming available to educators, studies have begun to closely examine educators' understanding of SEL and their own experiences with SEL and Mental Health behaviors. With more than 200 types of classroom-based SEL programs in United States schools (Hoffman, 2009), educators are asked to implement and evaluate SEL's success within their schools and classrooms without a firm understanding of SEL themselves. As of late, action research has been emerging in education to understand students' social and mental needs better and gain confidence in the strategies and resources to support their students. The challenge of action researchers is while using the perspectives of those immersed within the school system, maintaining an awareness of themselves, the subjectivity of their personal experience, and the research endeavor (Bowers et al., 2018). The limitations and bias in action research create challenges for educators and researchers alike, present valid findings, and often move the research in a planned direction.

From the early '90s to the present day, the growing focus on SEL and the impact on student development and success has come to the forefront of education. Most districts, administrators, and teachers have continued to learn, evaluate, and implement different strategies and programs to support the child's development. Circles within education say that social and emotional development has often been called the “missing piece” in America’s education system (Gayl, 2018). With the growing number of programs, researchers and educators caution districts to jump into the first program that comes available. Literature reviews and meta-analysis strongly support SEL strategies. It is essential to acknowledge that not all SEL programs are created equal (Shriver &

Weissberg, 2020). When developing and implementing the most effective program or strategies, the focus lies in the child's developmental needs. These needs can be different depending on cultures, environments, and experiences.

We are in a place with SEL in education that warrants more focus and understanding for all involved to support the educational community's growth. As more research becomes available, a better understanding will emerge, and SEL's strength will increase presently and into the future.

The history of SEL has created a foundation and framework to allow for further analysis, collaboration, and discussion to sharpen the focus and evolve to meet society's challenges presented to today's youth.

### **Social and Emotional Learning Framework**

The SEL framework has been established through the hard work of educators, researchers, and advocates of SEL over the years. Organizations and institutes have designed definitions, goals, and direction, while presenting a blueprint of effective SEL. Within the CASEL definition of social and emotional learning (SEL), five inter-related components exist. Those components are described as:

- Self-awareness is the ability to recognize one's own emotions and their influence, accurately assessing weakness and strengths;
- Self-management consists of regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in diverse situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, and setting and achieving goals;

- Social awareness entails adopting the perspective of those with different backgrounds, understanding social and cultural norms, and recognizing available resources and supports;
- Relationship skills include establishing relationships with different kinds of people, communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate peer pressure, negotiating conflict, and seeking help when necessary; and
- Responsible decision-making is the capacity to make choices based on realistic evaluations of consequences, well-being, ethics, safety, and social norms (Editorial Projects in Education, 2015).

In unison with the above components, any SEL framework should highlight intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and attitudes, be developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and empirically grounded, and offer evidence-based practitioner resources and supports to implement and evaluate programming (Blyth et al., 2019). The framework and components are designed for all students, and strategies and resources are developed accordingly. Each school-age group presents a set of challenges specific to them and requires variable levels of supports.

Middle school students bring a new set of challenges and demands on the educational community. The transition, self-discovery, and development of an adolescent teen in middle school proves critical to their future success. Adolescence can be an incredibly difficult time for youth as they experience the physical, social, and

academic changes that accompany maturation (McGorry et al., 2011). All young people bring their unique identities, strengths, values, lived experiences, and culture to school. Leveraging SEL to nurture all students can lead to better outcomes for all groups (Jagers et al., 2018). SEL can serve as a foundation to support students by learning and understanding who they are and what makes them unique.

Transitions and changes in routine can often cause students to alter behaviors to mask confusion and the lack of skills to be successful. These transitions happen in education from elementary to middle school, to high school, and then post-secondary. With the transitions, student motivation and behavior can change. Specifically, the transition from an elementary school to a middle-level school often marks a decline in students' motivation, and their behavior may begin to decline as well. The behavioral decline may include acting aggressively, pestering teachers, and irritating peers (Eccles et al., 2004). During the adolescent years, the students' SEL needs take shape through many children's different actions and experiences. The correct understanding of a child's development and the foundation of quality SEL supports and resources relies on the educational community and educational institutions. In particular, middle schools can address SEL in various ways, including the use of free-standing lessons or programs, integration of SEL into academic course work, and the promotion of SEL as a primary tier (schoolwide) initiative (CASEL, 2019). A more direct focus of SEL learning within the middle school can meet students' emotional and behavioral needs head-on.

SEL is instrumental in supporting students' behaviors and equipping them with the skills and tools to understand those behaviors. Many teachers and administrators



communicate the need for more professional development and understanding of SEL to meet students' needs effectively. As the number of children engaging in problem behaviors grows, teachers increasingly report feeling unprepared to meet students' mental health needs effectively. Social-emotional learning should be a central goal of school programs because social competence prevents school failure (Stoiber, 2011). Children with well-developed social and emotional competencies, moreover, later in life experience benefits in various domains, include better physical and mental health, more significant moral reasoning, and achievement motivation (Zins et al., 2004). Better preparing students with the proper skills to manage the challenges and setbacks will increase their chance of success.

To prepare our students with SEL skills, one must understand the urgent need for the skills, the challenges for students to relate the skills, and how SEL correlates to positive behaviors and mental health.

Although behavior issues in the school setting are not a new problem, there has been an outcry for more effective discipline procedures, especially in the face of recent school incidents and increased violence (Sherrod et al., 2011). Sherrod's research shows the need to shift our perspective from a reactive discipline mindset to a more proactive SEL education. The need in education is to understand student challenges and educate them on coping and growing within those challenges. The tools necessary to navigate unfamiliar or uncomfortable experiences is at the heart of SEL development. These needed skills from students rely heavily on communicating and build meaningful relationships. The ability required to connect emotionally to others often requires strong

social and communication skills, challenging some students (Espelage et al., 2016). These same students struggling to connect with peers and teachers have negative interactions in school. They are the same students that are failing academically, have a higher truancy rate, and a higher percentage of dropping out. The students who were failing classes and state assessments were the same ones who were visiting the office for discipline, were suspended, or were often absent (Brennan, 2015). Alongside the SEL skills and strategies to impact students' development, the environment in which students interact and learn is vital to success.

A strong learning community is a foundation for struggling students and their ability to connect, feel safe, and develop. Schools and educators are responsible for evaluating their environments, developing training and resources to support their staff, and defining a supportive school environment. When implementing a supportive school environment, factors that are essential to success are the following (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2009):

1. It is essential to have a staff of nurturing adults, who serve as mentors, are respectful and trusting of students, and are available to help students solve problems.
2. Schools must create opportunities for students to establish positive peer relationships.
3. Respect for diversity and intolerance for bullying and violence must be communicated to students.

4. Sensitive and responsive support services personnel such as counselors and psychologists must be available to students, and there must be coordination between school and community resource personnel.

The barriers preventing students' success are often found in the hidden variables such as culture, climate, and learning environment, making it difficult for professionals to assess—the ability to understand what effects adolescences are the first step to determining the proper supports and resources. The most common disorders that affect adolescents are anxiety disorders, behavioral problems, mood disorders, and substance abuse (Merikangas et al., 2009). These factors add stress to the students' educational experience and hinder social and emotional competencies. Prolonged and unresolved internal and external stress inhibits students from developing a strong sense of self-efficacy and resiliency (Logan & Laursen, 2019).

The educational community requires a continued practice of learning and growth in the area of SEL and child development. Professional development for educational professionals and sound targeted SEL programs for school districts show a positive impact on understanding adolescents' development and implementing the proper supports.

SEL programs and resources contribute to the support of student success. To be successful, teachers need to be accountable and buy-in to the potential of such programs. In Martinsone and Vilcina's (2017) study on social-emotional learning programs, the study showed the importance of teacher understanding of its foundation and the benefits.

The teachers were familiarized with the program's potential benefits, and these would be increased if the SEL principles were also incorporated in other aspects of the academic curriculum. For example, teachers were encouraged to apply the SEL lesson practices in the reaching of other academic subjects (i.e., setting lesson objectives which are meaningful for the students; planning multi-faceted activities; and a moment of assessment and reflection at the end of the lesson.), and parents were informed about the SEL program implementation (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). Communication with parents is another key attribute to a successful SEL program implementation. Addition to the teachers expanding practices with the academic curriculum and classroom lessons, Martinsone and Vilcina (2017) states:

The SEL program is based upon the principle that the teachers are teaching social and emotional skills within the program's confines, but then simultaneously supporting and providing opportunities for these skills to be used outside of the classroom so that they become a part of the daily routine.

This common practice from the teachers was supported by the administration, which empowered teachers to create meaningful, relevant experiences for their students focusing on SEL skills. One example from Martinsone and Vilcina describes a teacher's feedback from the study. A series of events, supported by the school administration, facilitated positive social interaction skills, emotion regulation, goal-setting, and problem-solving strategies. One teacher is quoted in the study as saying:

During the 'Prosocial Activity Week, the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students taught the first-grade students about traffic safety rules; each class prepared a special song to sing to the

other classes; teachers wrote letters to their students; there were presentations about the emotions of well-known people-how they have felt in certain situations. There was a special Students' Day where the teachers made some entertainment for the students. All of this helped to strengthen the ability to see situations from the others' perspective. (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017, p. 11).

Lessons and experiences such as these were shared and collaborated with other teachers and administrators throughout the program's study and implementation. Classroom interactions like these are effective teaching tools to bring teachers into conversation with each other, allow them to pause and take in the significance of these interactions, and notice their development (San Antonio, 2018).

Another program similar to the study described by Martinsone and Vilicina is the Second Step. The Second Step is designed for sixth through eighth graders and covers social-emotional targets (e.g., empathy, communication skills, problem-solving, bully prevention, friendship skills, harassment, emotional regulation, alcohol, and drug prevention) across the grades, but the context increases in complexity from one grade level to the next (Committee for Children, 2008). The program targets middle school adolescences and the challenges they face. The Second Step is a designed program focusing on changing behavior by improving social skills. Most educational and psychological professionals agree that such school-based initiatives to counter problematic student concerns should focus not only on reducing the incidence of disruptive behavior but also on improving social competencies among children and youth (Stoiber, 2011). An SEL program with a foundation of intergrade classroom strategies

partnered with a stand-alone component has shown effectiveness in students' educational environments.

SEL programs are only as good as the educators implementing them. Teachers' better understanding of the program and the SEL practice itself will make the delivery more effective. CASEL (2019) observes that although children have "universal developmental needs...in the five core areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skill, responsible decision-making," cultures may vary in how core emotional competencies are expressed. Today's challenge is for teachers to be aware of their cultural leanings and how they fit- or do not fit- with their students' cultural beliefs and behaviors (Lantieri, as cited in CASEL, 2019). Teachers today should practice familiarizing themselves with mindfulness to have a smoother transition implementing it within their classrooms (Logan & Laursen, 2019). SEL is most effective when emphasizing social and emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, caring, a sense of community, and responsible decision making into the entire school experience (Hoffman, 2009). This infusion is accomplished by the continued learning and development of the educational professionals alongside the students they are serving.

The framework continues to be established through years of research and the evolution of strategies, skills, and supports. The framework of SEL is grounded in the five components, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making. The more research and evidence that emerges will lead the evaluation and development of SEL. The evidence supporting SEL does not come from a

single set of studies but the coming together of many rigorous research strands, including numerous program evaluations conducted in the US and worldwide (Mahoney, 2018). Future development will lead to sustainable success in student development and growth.

The growth and development of SEL have been producing a positive response in schools and educational communities around the nation. However, the evolution of SEL in school does not come without challenges. The more researchers, practitioners, and advocates study these challenges, the more successful SEL will become.

### **Challenges in Social and Emotional Learning**

Social-emotional learning requires a supportive school environment. Unfortunately, about 76% of children and youth do not feel that school is a caring, nurturing place (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2009). The shift in an ideal classroom environment is changing. As the stand and deliver, the teacher is always right, and knows the best expectations are slowly changing into a more socially-emotionally supportive environment. This environment fosters the empowerment of teachers, creativity, collaboration, and discovery. Bodine and Crawford (1999) described the social and emotionally supportive classroom as emphasizing the following:

- Cooperation. Children learn to work together and trust, help, and share.
- Communication. Children learn to observe, communicate accurately, and listen sensitively.
- Tolerance. Children learn to respect and appreciate people's differences and to understand prejudices and how it works.

- Positive emotional expression. Children learn to express feelings, particularly anger and frustration, in ways that are not aggressive or destructive, and children learn self-control.
- Conflict resolution. Children learn the skills of responding creatively to the conflict in the context of a supportive, caring community.

The classroom environment is one of the many factors that contribute to the success of the child. The challenges surrounding quality SEL instruction depend on the delivery of resources and skills and the removal of barriers preventing implementation.

One area of concern lies with schools treating SEL as a separate and unequal educational track (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). The significant development of SEL skills and understanding depends on the inclusion of those skills within all learning opportunities. Suppose social-emotional skills instruction is restricted to a single place as the general education or the special education classroom. In that case, children will not likely use the skills in other settings. For children and youth to master social-emotional skills, they must be taught indirectly and directly through the school day (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2009). The integration of SEL into classroom lessons supported by targeted programs presents the best strategy for success. However, schools struggle to implement SEL within the school day with standards, assessments, and State mandated testing. SEL barriers within the school include:

- Implementation challenges (low fidelity, materials);
- Limited local buy-in:



- Lack of financial and personnel resources (cost);
- Poor integration into educational practice (only used in SEL blocks); and
- Low sustainability (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The focus of integrating both academic and social standards and competencies requires training and planning to allow teachers to fit social-emotional learning in their instruction. Consequently, this integration will help students grow accustomed to having and using SEL skills across the curriculum and providing sustainability in their supports, resources, and programs.

In today's educational landscape, educators have navigated an environment where student academic performance via high-stakes assessments has become the priority. This focus generally ignores SEL as a fundamental learning target (Stoiber, 2011). To infuse SEL into the course of a school day without taking from the demand of assessments and standards, schools use SEL as an intervention or stand-alone resource. SEL becomes more of a scripted lesson plan delivered at certain times to targeted students. This traditional approach to SEL, focusing on scripted, lesson-based curricula, has strong evidence of traditional approaches' efficacy. However, many schools and youth development programs do not have the time or resources to implement these programs as designed even in a traditional, stand-alone model (Bailey et al., 2019).

According to Stoiber (2011), the schools' context makes it considerably challenging to implement social and emotional interventions in the school setting. The reasons for context difficulties are:

- Schools can be Chaotic and/or lack the amount or type of resources.
- Availability and use of accurate and reliable measures of the school or classroom context and such contextual characteristics can influence SEL programs' effectiveness.
- Imbued with many extraneous factors that can impact whether a social-behavioral interventions work as intended.
- Measuring the outcomes of social and emotional interventions accurately and reliably (Stoiber, 2011)

Although these challenges are not new, they need to take place in the context of a shift in the lens with which educators examine the nature of US society's achievement toward a more context-based, relational, and cultural-situational view of problems and their solutions (Hoffman, 2009).

As we continue to evolve in the direction of more context-based problem solving and move away from the traditional stand-alone SEL interventions, being mindful of the increased volume of new programs, strategies, and resources is critical to the success of the schools and educators. Also, as SEL continues to grow, it is easy to build momentum and win allies by offering an inclusive or generic definition of SEL, which allows others to piggyback their projects in the name of SEL (Finn & Hess, 2019). Hence, creating a watered-down version of SEL in some cases.

Although all the SEL programs have a unified overall aim- to develop social and emotional competencies- there are variations in program design, implementation process,

instruction methods, and other technical aspects (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Nussle (2019) cautions these variations, along with the increased focus on SEL into the educational community, will have educators and schools moving quickly to adapt and evolve. Nussle warns all counterparts in the SEL movement to resist the allure of speed and scale. Take the time to craft their messages, create trust in the SEL brand, and build political coalitions (Nussle, 2019).

Another set of cautions with the development of SEL programs falls on the definition of SEL deficiencies. How are SEL deficits to be compared with other kinds of deficits? Does having an SEL deficit affect a child differently from having another type of deficit? There are indeed severe political, social, and ethical consequences if SEL is defined as an individual competency subject to the lens of deficiency and remediation (Hoffman, 2009).

SEL has evolved and come to mean many things to many people. Through this evolution, Shiver and Weissberg (2020) address concerns on how education can best define SEL, how to rein in those who oversell it, prevent it from becoming a separate and unequal education, clear political hurdles- must remain vigilant in protecting the quality of SEL programs (Shiver & Weissberg, 2020).

Ideally, SEL is about the relationship between the student and the environment in which they learn. Implementing practical SEL skills relies on security, safety, and relationship with the teachers, staff, and culture of their environment. Most teachers care about students; it is why they teach. Unfortunately, many students, especially struggling or diverse students, do not perceive that message from their teachers (Brennan, 2015).

Adults must build capabilities needed to manage stress within children, including the ability to focus attention, problem solve, plan, adjust to new circumstances, regulate behavior, and control impulses (National Scientific Council on Developing Child, 2015). These challenges continue to bring the teachers' attention to significant SEL development and implementation in our schools. The need to listen to our educators as we move forward into SEL's future is essential in improvement and sustainability.

The message that educators are portraying brings us to a set of challenges that mirror what researchers and colleagues have warned and stress over the past several years of SEL momentum. Research by Bailey, Stickle, Brion-Meisels, and Jones (2019) states that educators feel:

1. SEL curricula feel irrelevant because they do not reflect students' experiences, sometimes babying, oversimplifying, or ignoring the real challenges students face in their everyday lives.
2. There is not enough time for SEL because of competing academic priorities take precedent over SEL.
3. Teachers and staff do not receive enough support to successfully implement SEL programs or engage in their authentic social-emotional growth.
4. The rigid lesson plans do not allow teachers to respond to students' evolving needs daily. (Bailey et al., 2019).

These concerns presented by teachers show the need for further researcher and the push to bring more teachers and educators to the table to understand the challenges that must be addressed to move SEL into the future.

Overall, one of the most critical challenges in schools is teaching students positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills to succeed academically and emotionally. Unfortunately, despite the numerous individual examples of effective SEL programs, research has yet to provide a quantitative synthesis of all such programs. A quantitative understanding of their impact on school performance is missing. Consequently, a comprehensive meta-analysis is needed to estimate the overall effect sizes for interest (Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007). The need for more research on SEL and the development of research-based programs is necessary to produce a product that is not considered a hit or miss tactic for addressing social needs. The Critics continue to warn SEL has been overhyped and treated as a panacea for problems as varied as the achievement gap, low standardized test scores, racism, and the school to prison pipeline, collapsing national values, violence, and depression, anxiety, and more (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

Researchers are getting a better understanding of the needed supports and resources to make an effective SEL program. Moreover, those findings have proven to become the cornerstone of the added successes seen in the past few years in SEL.

### **Success in Social and Emotional Learning**

Today's schools in many countries are pressured to take greater responsibility for children's social, emotional literacy, which previously had been the family's function. For example, this is due to several reasons: change in the family structure weakened

contact with extended family and the local community and increased media impact. As a result, a significant segment of children come to school with insufficient skills in behavioral and emotion regulation, social awareness, and communication (Martinsone, 2016). The cause analysis of these insufficient skills shows the promise of SEL in positively impacting student success.

When looking to define what overall success is, it is critical to understand success in more broad terms, such as attitudes, motivation, relationships, and behavior. Students who feel good about themselves and have positive relationships with others are more emotionally engaged and tend to be more successful in school late in life. Social and emotional skills are fundamental building blocks that lead to a child's academic success and a positive school climate (Committee for Children, 2007).

School climate and academic success have a positive correlation with student achievement. First, the school climate is affected by staff and students' ability to navigate challenges and understand the emotions and cause involved in those challenges. Research links social-emotional learning (SEL) with improved school climate, increased awareness of self and others, openness to diversity, and a sense of civic responsibility (Durlak et al., 2011). These terms of achievement present the foundation for academic success and further career achievements.

Studies have shown that SEL approaches have shown success ranging from improved classroom behavior, increased reading and math achievement, higher graduation rates, and increased ability to handle stress. This success is associated with long-term academic and career success (Gayl, 2018).

Understanding the student and what equates to academic and career success develops a clear picture of what is needed to succeed in SEL and education in the future. Research shows that academic performance and achievement aligns more to the child's functional and emotional development as data continues to present itself to educators. Dymnicki (2006) carefully analyzed a small subset of studies examining SEL's effects on students' grades or performance on achievement tests. The effects would be positive, as student success defined in general terms-including school attitudes, school behaviors, and school performance-which evaluated programs more meaningful. The ability to assess students in more of a wide range of competencies creates data to aid in decisions on students' needs and program development.

Educators' ability to match quality programs to students' needs has become increasingly successful as researchers and educators gather a more detailed understanding of child development and adequate supports and resources. Programs that emphasize the development of empathy, affiliation, and civic responsibility as a primary concern of schooling, particularly when race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, and sexual orientation place students at risk socially, emotionally, and/or academically has seen increased success in overall achievement, school culture, and parent-school relationships (Hoffman, 2009). Additionally, Elksnin, and Elksnin (2009) add that home-school-community partnerships increase programs' effectiveness to teach children and youth social-emotional skills.

The one type of program, in particular, has seen a positive impact on student success is the positive behavior program. As students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills

increase, their behavior improves. The behaviors addressed across the school setting and addresses behavior are positive behavior support systems or programs (Sherrod et al., 2009). SEL programs and behavior support systems can address specific disabilities' deficits and provide functional development skills (Espelage et al., 2016). Each program working together designs a support system with the necessary resources to impact child development successfully.

A program or multiple programs' effectiveness supports the child's developmental needs while establishing a relationship and a safe environment to learn. The variety of developmental needs and the child's progress is different and requires multiple strategies and resources. Research on program effectiveness has shown the benefits of integrated intervention programs, which consist of multiple independent strategies or programs (Domitrovich et al., 2010).

The momentum gained with program success and positive child development in SEL has positively impacted teachers and administrations' own SEL awareness and mindfulness. SEL programs can contribute to teachers' and students' positive development by translating SEL's understanding in real-world contexts (Stoiber, 2011). The teachers' increased awareness of SEL and their development and growth allow for the vital relationship building between teacher and student. Research by Odabasi-Cimer and Palic (2012) presents that the teacher's self-reflection and evaluation of their role in the program outcome are essential aspects of program implementation and sustainability.

The main component of SEL success always comes down to the people tasked with developing, implementing, and evaluating strategies and programs. The long-term



goal of implementing any SEL program is developing the whole child and sustaining the supports. Research on the SEL program's sustainability show several steps of action to be performed. Each step is working in unison with the other to strengthen the program effect. The following are the steps of action identified by Martinsone (2016):

- Assessment
- Development
- Implementation
- Evaluation
- Reassessment/modification

It is also noted that there is a greater chance that an SEL program will be sustainable and achieve the best possible outcome if it is organized on a schoolwide basis-connected with other school activities and embedded in daily curriculum activities (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Ultimately, this sustainability and successful implementation rely on the teachers and support from the administration. An essential aspect of successful program implementation and sustainability is the school administration's engagement and support and the support of influential teachers who are opinion leaders in the school environment (Merrell & Guelder, 2010).

With the growing focus on SEL and a better understanding of the benefits from researchers, teachers, administration, and educators, the strategies we deliver SEL are

evolving. Educators' role changes as we facilitate developmental growth integrated with academic standards with the same rigor.

Furthermore, social and emotional learning in schools can proactively protect teachers against teacher burn-out. These programs can facilitate teachers' perceived self-efficacy, which is an essential aspect of re-defining the teacher's role (Martinson, 2016).

The future of SEL in our education system continues to evolve and expand with each success and discovery. Researchers continue to collaborate with educators, psychologists, adolescents, and parents who add context to children's needs regarding their development. The data and research presented moves SEL into the future with better programs, strategies, and training.

### **Moving into the Future**

SEL is gaining momentum and challenging leaders in education to embark on a different way of thinking regarding the foundation and framework of SEL supports, programs, and resources. The SEL movement is about changing educational practices to support positive emotional climates in classrooms and schools by building individual emotional competencies (Hoffman, 2009). This momentum has gained the attention of state and federal education departments, lawmakers, and policymakers.

States are beginning to develop focused guidance on SEL to lead schools through development and implementation. Eighteen states have introduced K-12 SEL standards or competencies, and 26 states have produced guidance documents or websites designed

to support SEL implementation. Also, more than 200 pieces of legislation referencing SEL were introduced in 2019 alone (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

There is a pressing need for an approach to SEL that is more flexible and feasible to implement, and adaptable to individual and place-based needs, while still achieving meaningful outcomes for children (Jones et al., 2017). Many lawmakers and educational leaders have advocated for this change to a more flexible approach in meeting children's needs, and Federal and State policymakers are listening. Lawmakers are listening to educators communicate a need for an approach to SEL that is developmental, flexible, and responsive to local needs. That SEL should focus on flexible strategies and practices. Moreover, SEL is most effective when teachers have the flexibility to respond to individual students' specific needs and experiences (Bailey et al., 2019).

The ones obtaining a better comprehensive understanding of SEL are the researchers and educational leaders in the field. The future success in SEL is dependent on the collaboration between the policymakers and the educational community, and current legislation and policy are trending in a positive direction.

On December 15, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The law outlined the future commitment to equal opportunity for all students, supporting and growing more evidence-based interventions, and championing all students' equity. Under ESSA, education leaders have greater flexibility to define student success and to design their systems and programs to ensure equity. ESSA allows policymakers to develop comprehensive strategies that consider all aspects

of children's learning and development, including social-emotional skills instrumental for school and life (Gayl, 2018).

With the foundation and support for SEL, educators and researchers press on to move child development forward and outline goals for teachers and educators to accomplish SEL success. Researchers, educators, and advocates emphasize that all students can benefit from SEL development. Additional work is needed with local agencies to shape capacity and implementation for social and emotional development (McShane, 2019).

The goal should remain to educate the whole child to optimize every child's achievement and positive development. Gayl (2018) speaks to achieve this goal by enhancing additional teacher practices that support all students' social and emotional development while integrating those supports into everyday practices. To further support positive teacher practices, The Center for Great Teachers and Leaders has identified ten teachers' practices for effective SEL implementation. Those ten practices are:

1. Student-centered discipline;
2. Teacher language that encourages student effort and works;
3. Responsibility and choice were given to students in the classroom;
4. Warmth and support shown by teachers and peers;
5. Cooperative learning strategies, such as supported group work;
6. Classroom discussions;
7. Self-reflection and self-assessments;

8. An appropriate balance between direct instruction, group learning, and independent work;
9. Academic press and high expectations for students; and
10. Competence-building instruction that includes modeling, practicing, feedback, and coaching (Gayl, 2018).

From this list of effective practices, we can further analyze data within the SEL content to strengthen supports and resources. In return, drawing from this content analysis, we can identify common strategies and practices-which we consider the essential “ active ingredients” that drive change in effective SEL programs and strategies (Jones et al., 2017).

One program that has taken shape as a resource designed for young adolescents in middle schools is Strong Kids. A recent evaluation and study on the researcher's program show that the curriculum supports SEL growth, wellness, and self-management. Strong Kids is an evidence-based SEL program designed to prevent internalizing symptomatology by promoting social and emotional wellness and coping. The focus of Strong Kids is teaching self and social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (Carrizales-Englemann et al., 2016).

The program goes a step further to identify at-risk students and providing specialized interventions as part of a multi-tiered intervention. The Strong Kids curricula help target self-regulated learning directly through tiered interventions and indirectly

through strategies to integrate skills into the daily lessons. Strong Kids helps students manage change by teaching healthy coping strategies (Neth et al., 2020).

Practical SEL programming elements show educators the obtainable success when programs address individual needs and promote prosocial attitudes and behaviors, including caring, empathy, and willingness to intervene in unacceptable situations to reduce negative experiences. Furthermore, this effective programming helps students successfully navigate school and life challenges, which increases academic and career achievement. A separate program, Second Step, which is an SEL program similar to Strong Kids, aimed at middle school students, showed an increase in student report card grades over three years in grades sixth-eight in a research study from Remedial and Special Education Journal (Espelage et al., 2016).

Lastly, the critic of the research continues for the positive evolution of SEL. As more data is analyzed from teachers, administrators, and program developers, understanding strategies, resources, and programming for SEL will sharpen.

An example of this future analysis driving the evolution in SEL is present in the research study focusing on interpreting SEL data and how that shapes development and planning for the future. Taylor and Dymnicki (2007) studied and analyzed the book *Building Academic Success in Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?*, and findings helped shape the current State of SEL and guidance for the future. The study's findings show that effective SEL programming must move beyond theory and towards more practical issues in designing, evaluating, and describing the research. The material presented a new way to conceptualize the impact of social and emotional

learning programs on students' school success by broadening the concept to include students' attitudes, behaviors, and performance. In addition to presenting a large body of empirical research, the research analysis provides detailed descriptions of many successful SEL programs and strategies (Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007).

There has been a large amount of research and discussion established to shape SEL's future and support progress. Moving forward in SEL, more research and further studies need to continue as momentum builds with SEL supports and resources. The framework and foundation of social and emotional are evident. The shift in educators thinking of what effective SEL strategies, resources, and programming are improving each year as more research is available.

The additional support by lawmakers and advocates have Federal and State education departments developing SEL standards and competencies to be implemented in unison with academic standards.

Through stakeholder collaboration and discussions, SEL is now considered a critical piece in a child's educational development. The components of SEL provide educators with the roadmap to integrate skills and strategies within their current lessons and curriculum and provide programming for multi-tiered support. Additional professional development and training and further research are needed in SEL to continue the success and adapt to the changing needs of adolescent development.

### **Summary**

Since the initial development of SEL in the 1990s and the progress through the years, researchers and educators have created an SEL definition that encompasses the key

competencies that impact a child's development. SEL works to equip students with the knowledge and awareness to manage their emotions and present strategies and tools to navigate unfamiliar situations.

Social and Emotional programs and resources span through the K-12 levels, but some programs and resources focus more specifically on young adolescents or the middle school level. Middle school students have challenges that could benefit from a strong SEL program and support from the teachers and educators implementing the learning.

Throughout the development of SEL over the years, effective programs have integrated the instruction and additional tier interventions' content and competencies. This framework is most effective in increasing the overall child's development while supplying focused resources to sub-groups and meeting students' individual needs.

Through the continued evolution of SEL, there has been challenges and success along the way. The educational community recognizes the shift in focus away from solely academic success to the child's development. However, this change in perspective has generated an increase in programs and resources available to educators. These programs are often developed to sell product and present a watered-down version of quality SEL.

Policymakers, researchers, educators, and advocates continue to move SEL forward and develop guidelines to help make SEL more focused and impactful on child development. As we continue the push to implement a well-rounded SEL curriculum and support system in schools, further research is required on the effectiveness of these



programs and strategies and the experiences and knowledge of the teachers implementing the materials.

Educators have unlocked SEL's potential in students' success, and it will take a continued effort from all involved to shape SEL in the years to come. The future research and analysis of data collected on SEL allow for an expansion of knowledge and understanding to guide the direction better. The perception and knowledge of the educators involved will determine how successful SEL will be in the future.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

The literature review outlines a clear picture of SEL and the vital role in students' development and success. Furthermore, reviewing the literature indicates the importance of the educators' role in student development, instructional practices, and educators' needs to support SEL development. The importance of educator's competencies in delivering intense SEL instruction and providing an SEL framework is changing and gaining momentum. The literature demonstrates a clear focus on a change from a strictly academic approach to a more holistic student approach. The pressures surrounding educators to achieve academic success presents challenges in implementing SEL. The presence of State standardized testing and the importance of district success in those tests correlates to additional funding, resources, and perceived progress. While a focus on standardized testing still exists, a slow shift has been emerging in the literature that suggests an additional focus on child development and well-being. A strong focus on developing SEL in education increases educators' and SEL advocates' need to outline effective classroom, building, and district programs, resources, and supports. The SEL development and mainstream practices within education lie heavily on understanding SEL and its impact on student growth and success.

To continue this momentum and cultivate an educational learning environment that examines not just academic but also SEL to measure overall success, a better understanding of SEL needs to be established by the practitioners delivering the resources

and supports. Furthermore, collecting data and further analysis of that data needs to be strengthened and further established.

This research study examined the educator's experience with SEL, the confidence in delivering SEL instruction to their students, and their perception of how SEL impacts student engagement. The study also explored the professional development opportunities teachers have engaged in throughout their careers to support SEL instruction, strategies, and resources.

The research study applied a qualitative approach, including a participant self-reflection questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations as the primary data collection methods. The research study participants consisted of middle school teachers assigned in math, science, social studies, English-language arts, health, physical education, guidance counselors, and two administrators. The participants varied in certification and assignments between regular education and special education.

### **Purpose**

As presented in the research, a shift in the importance of child development and a more holistic approach to achievement and growth is emerging. The emphasis on academic success is still present, and the continued focus on standardized testing presents a challenge in implementing SEL within the classroom. However, the integration of SEL within the classroom instruction, supported by target interventions, is a practice that correlates to increased academic success along with students better prepared to interact, overcome and participate in societal norms and challenges. For this process to continue, the literature articulates the need for educators and the educational community to

understand the foundations of SEL, a need for increased accountability, and the skills to implement supports and strategies.

Digging deeper, SEL within education is an encompassing framework for K-12 students, but particularly important within the teenage years and middle school students. Educators' understanding of adolescent children and their developmental needs plays a vital role in their SEL success and growth. The literature available and resources in SEL lean heavily on the transitional period of the middle school student and this developmental period. Hence, increasing the importance of educators' understanding of middle school development and the SEL strategies and practices to support them.

The action research study examined the teachers' experience, confidence, and perception of SEL and the impact on the middle school student. The study looked to determine the relationship between the teachers' perception and SEL delivery in the classroom, impacting student development. The research study will guide professional development opportunities and offer future teacher training and instructional focus in the classroom and stand-alone interventions.

The action research study planned to collect data on teachers' perceptions and explore further opportunities and resources to support SEL development at the middle school level. The research questions developed targeted the participants' understanding of SEL and looked to uncover their perception of the importance of SEL, coupled with the level of experience in implementing strategies within the classroom, impacting the students; motivation and engagement. The following three research questions guided the research:

1. What are teachers' perceptions and understanding of the importance of social-emotional learning instruction?
2. What are the teachers' experience and comfort levels of social-emotional learning supports and strategies within the classroom?
3. How does the implementation of social-emotional learning strategies impact student engagement and motivation?

The importance of educators' understanding of sound SEL grounded in research and data shapes the educational landscape when delivering instruction and support for children's development. This study examined the SEL framework, challenges, opportunities, and experiences presented in the literature review focuses on the district's current state, and develops recommendations to move closer to offering highly effective SEL supports and resources.

### **Setting and Participants**

The research study was managed, and data collected at the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School in the Wyomissing Area School District. The Wyomissing Area School District is a small suburban school of approximately 1,900 students. Those students are within three buildings within the four square miles of the District. The Wyomissing Hills Elementary School consists of about 600 students from K-4, the West Reading Education Center houses roughly 300 students in grades 5-6, and the Junior-Senior High School has approximately 900 students in grades 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>. The District operates within the Wyomissing Borough, an affluent area with an extensive trail system running

through the borough that attracts many doctors to the nearby hospital and successful business people. Wyomissing Area School District's student population draws from the Wyomissing borough and the neighboring West Reading borough.

The Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School is the researcher's place of employment for the past four years. The Junior-Senior High School is a grade seven through twelve school with about 910 students. Over the past three years, the junior high students (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade) have been transitioning into teams with seventh grade fully implemented. There are 90 full-time teaching staff and four guidance counselors. There are 16 teachers and two guidance counselors currently assigned to junior-high students. The 16 teachers and two guidance counselors assigned to junior-high students were invited to participate in the study. The study's participation was voluntary, and of the 18 invited to participate, 11 classroom teachers, two guidance counselors, and two administrators agreed to participate fully in the study. Each participant signed a Permission to Participate Agreement (Appendix A) before the study began and understood that each data collection method they participated in was voluntary separate from each other. Table 1 list the background of the participants in the study.

**Table 1***Participants in the Study*

Participant	Primary Job Duty	Content Area
Teacher A	Regular Education Teacher	ELA
Teacher B	Regular Education Teacher	Math
Teacher C	Special Education Teacher	Social Skills
Teacher D	Special Education Teacher	Emotional Support
Teacher E	Special Education Teacher	Math
Teacher F	Regular Education Teacher	Social Studies
Teacher G	Regular Education Teacher	Social Studies
Teacher H	Special Education Teacher	Math
Teacher I	Regular Education Teacher	Science
Teacher J	Regular Education Teacher	Math
Teacher K	Regular Education Teacher	Health and PE
Administrator	Junior High AP	
Administrator	Director of Assessment/RTII	
Counselor A	Grades 7-9	
Counselor B	Grades 7-9	

Each participant has been a part of the teaming planning and implementation. The chart in Table 2 shows the history and timeline of teaming implementation. The current status of the participants' experience in teaming has been cultivated over the past three years. The main focus was on developing a solid foundation of community, cross-curricular activities, and communication. The summer of the 2019-2020 school year saw the introduction into SEL, and the 2019-2020 school year and moving forward saw one 41- minute class period designated to SEL. That focus was based on resources and supports discovered, planned, and implemented by the teachers.

The small step towards a strong focus on SEL is present with the participants, but a strong foundation grounded in the research and a solid understanding of SEL is not evident in their practices.

**Table 2**

*Teaming Implementation Timeline*

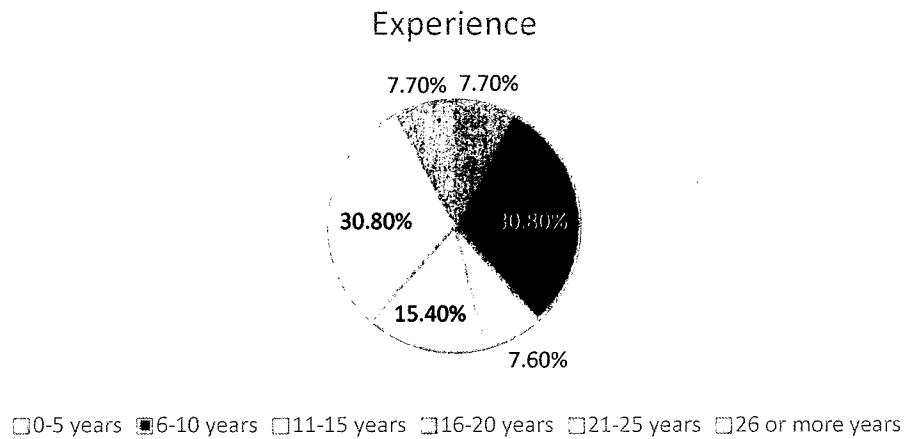
Date Range	Description
2018-2019 School Year	Piloted a 7th-grade team model and tracked progress and student data. Team members met weekly.
Summer of 2019-2020	7th-grade team members received training on foundations of teaming and one, three-day training on Responsive Classroom practices.
2019-2020 School year	Members of the 7th-grade team implemented an Advisory period with a focus on SEL. Team members met weekly to
Summer of 2020-2021	Members of the 7th-grade team and the limited number of 8th-grade teachers reviewed
2020-2021	Full implementation of the 7th-grade team with a modified 8th-grade team. The 7th-grade team meets weekly with a focus on SEL in the advisory period.

Each teacher and guidance counselor participated in the study in three ways. The two administrators participated in the semi-structured interview only. The first was a self-reflection questionnaire (Appendix B) administered at the beginning and end of the 2020-2021 school year through a Google Form. The second mode of participation included a semi-structured interview (Appendix C) conducted mid-year. Each classroom teacher and guidance counselor participated in the interview after filling out the consent form



(Appendix D). The final method of participation was through classroom observations. An SEL competency observation rubric (Appendix E) was presented to the participants, and classroom visits were completed throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

The study participants came from a wide range of classroom experiences, as shown in Figure 1. Approximately fifty-three percent of the participants have over 16 years of experience in education. That number increases to over sixty percent when looking at the participants with more than ten years of experience. The remaining thirty-seven percent of the participants had less than ten years of experience, bringing a new perspective to the education community. The balance of the participants' expertise shifts toward the established generation of teachers. These participants have not been overly exposed to SEL education, training, or discussion. Many of these participants have a limited number of trainings and professional development in SEL, as we will explore further in Chapter Four, Data Analysis and Results. Though exposed to more opportunities, the younger participants might not have the confidence or experience in education and relationships with their colleagues to be open about their exposure to SEL and offer their understanding and experiences.

**Figure 1***Participants' Years of Experience*

During the course of the research study, the learning environment for the participants was affected through learning model changes. Throughout the majority of research study, the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School implemented a hybrid learning model. The students with the last name A-L reported to in-person school on Monday and Tuesday, while students with M-Z's last name reported to in-person learning Thursday and Friday. The last month of the school year saw students return to four days a week in-person schooling. Wednesday, each week was designated an asynchronous day for students. The Wyomissing Junior-Senior High School offered students a full remote option during the 2020-2021 school year. These students consisted of twenty-seven percent of the middle school population and viewed the classroom through a Webex virtual meeting platform. Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School

experienced periodic transitions to full-virtual learning for periods no longer than seven days due to COVID-19 guidelines.

### **Interventions and Research Plan**

During the research study, the changing learning models, student and teacher home situations, and evolving guidelines and recommendations put on the school due to the COVID-19 pandemic factored into the plan and required flexibility and responsiveness.

Furthermore, the need for more structured and reliable SEL for our students was evident in the current situation and supported by the literature. The literature review presented a vital aspect in SEL and the development within educational settings. That was the critical component of teacher understanding, experience, and confidence in delivering SEL instruction embedded into their curriculum and stand-alone interventions.

Therefore, the research study looked to compile data, analyze, and produce a direction and focus for our teachers and educators regarding SEL and the target professional development needed for staff growth.

The research study was implemented in three phases. The first phase was collecting initial data to support the three research questions. The data was collected using three methods. A teacher-centered questionnaire on SEL competencies, classroom practices, experience, and knowledge was administered to participants as the baseline data. The self-reflection questionnaire would be administered again at the end of the study. Implementing a designated advisory period focusing on SEL and a common planning period for the teachers were in place and established to focus on SEL strategies

in the classroom and student concerns pertaining to engagement. The group of teachers met weekly throughout the study. Next, the participants took part in a semi-structured interview that elaborated and expanded on perception and understanding of SEL. Lastly, the researcher performed observations of the classroom participants, focusing on integrating the SEL competencies within the classroom instruction. The classroom observations were broken down during the first half of the year and second half of the year to compare better progress on teachers' understanding and implementation of SEL's core competencies within the classroom.

The second phase of the research study used the data to design a focus within the middle school team teachers surrounding the areas of need gathered from the data collected in phase one. Strategies and professional development opportunities will shape the resources and discussions within those meetings and professional learning times. The data collected continued to shape conversation within the weekly team meetings and help support planning and lesson delivery within the designated SEL intervention period.

The third phase of the research study continued with collecting data through classroom observations and the teacher-centered survey. The data collected was used to determine if the perception of SEL importance has changed and if participants' classroom practices began to shift from the increased exposure and focus of sound SEL practices and supports.

The data collected throughout the study in both the first and third phases will support and narrow the focus on professional development and resources teachers need to keep SEL in the classroom and school. The data collected throughout the study will be

triangulated to uncover common themes, expose pre-existing perceptions of SEL, and compare teacher growth through collaboration and the school day's designated learning period.

As presented in Chapter One, the current study's fiscal implications will be present as we develop more target strategies and resources to support teachers' growth in SEL. The cost of professional development, resources, and supports are forecasted to impact the future budgets with a more targeted focus on SEL. Adding staff, two and a half coaching positions will offer additional support to the middle school students. The direction, vision, and goals of those positions have not been established, but they look to support the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School's action plan.

The current interventions within the study show little financial impact currently. During the weekly meetings, support groups from Newsela presented SEL resources to the group to be used in the classroom instruction. Newsela offers this support from a current contract the district has to support a seven- twelve curriculum.

Secondly, funding was available for the middle school team to implement positive recognition to students, promote community, and encourage goal setting and reflection. However, with the impact of COVID-19 many of the activities and events were postponed or switched to a virtual environment.

Lastly, teacher conferences and collaboration time was allowed through Title II money that the district allocated. The funds were used for teacher development, and a portion of that was assigned to the team teachers and SEL training.

Much of the interventions and research plan was factored into the current 2020-2021 school budget. The team or another member of the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School team produced additional resources and supports and did not require additional funding.

### **Research Design, Methods, and Data Collection**

The research study used a qualitative approach to assess the research questions. The research plan was submitted to the Institution Review Board (IRB) on September 1, 2020. The IRB reviewed the proposal and submitted feedback with revisions on September 29, 2020 (Appendix F). The research study was re-submitted and received approval on October 8, 2020 (Appendix G). A qualitative method was designed to discover an overarching perspective of SEL, focusing on the big picture. Qualitative research is a concept that covers several forms of inquiry and helps us better understand an idea or notion with little disruption of the natural setting (Merriam, 1998). The Qualitative method was selected for this study to enact a well-rounded consideration of where our teachers were in the process of SEL understanding and implementation in their classrooms.

With the initial stages of SEL integration into the middle school environment, and the participant's early involvement in middle school teaming, a holistic approach to gathering data is most beneficial to examine the three research questions in the study.

Data collection consisted of three methods to deliver a general concept of the study and allows for the researcher to compare similar results from each method. The first instrument used to collect data was an online self-reflection questionnaire

redistributed to the participants through Google Forms. The survey was taken from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders (Yoder, 2014) and designed to focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies and educators' understanding of Social and emotional learning and SEL strategies. The tool aimed to reflect upon current teaching practices that impact SEL and assess SEL competencies. The data collected through self-assessment Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended responses allowed the researcher to analyze and categorize the data to support specific research questions. The participants' answers to the self-reflection questionnaire were predetermined to be rated or selected and aimed to help the first research question (see Table 2).

The second research question was aimed to capture teachers' experience and understanding of SEL supports, resources, and available professional development to assist in classroom activities and instruction. The focus was accomplished through a semi-structured interview consisting of nine questions. The questions were used as a guide to initiate conversations surrounding challenges in education and SEL, professional development opportunities, and the guiding understanding of SEL. The data collected through the interviews will begin to shape teachers' level of SEL understanding and provide the researcher with a better direction for SEL support. The participants' responses from the interview will be compared to the self-reflection questionnaire. The observation rubric, described later in the chapter, will formulate themes and patterns to drive further direction, discussion, and decisions.

The third method of data collection consisted of classroom observations. This measure focused on the third research question. It aimed to produce a correlation of the

teachers' perception, understanding, and SEL experiences obtained from the initial two methods with the participants' classroom practices. The classroom observations were directed towards the students and teacher interactions, how that looked with engagement and motivation, and informing any misunderstandings or strengthening teachers' perceptions on SEL. The classroom observation data were collected throughout the study with two distinct timeframes to compare changes in the participants' practices. Data collection was broken down from the first half of the year (November – February) and the second half of the year (February- May).

The three data collection methods worked to increase understanding of the study's research questions by analyzing the data through triangulation to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' experiences with SEL. Table two outlines the three research questions, data collection, and the timeline of the data collection. Data was analyzed throughout the collection timeline.



**Table 3***Data Collection Timeline*

Research Questions	Items to be Collected	Data Collection Date
What are teachers' perceptions and understanding of the importance of social-emotional learning instruction?	Teacher Survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher demographics</li> <li>• Social Interactions: Teacher practices</li> <li>• Teacher SEL competencies</li> </ul>	November-December 2020- First round  March-April 2021- Second round
What are the teachers' experience and comfort levels of social-emotional learning supports and strategies within the classroom?	Semi-Structured Interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SEL within the school environment</li> <li>• Challenging in address SEL needs</li> <li>• Professional Development opportunities</li> <li>• Professional Development focus (teacher needs)</li> <li>• COVID-19 impact of SEL</li> <li>• Increase need for SEL and cause of the need</li> </ul>	January-February 2021
How does the implementation of social-emotional learning strategies impact student engagement and motivation?	Observations/Walkthroughs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student engagement</li> <li>• Student motivation</li> <li>• Student collaboration</li> <li>• Student reflection</li> <li>• Student's voice</li> <li>• Teacher interaction/communication</li> <li>• Teacher as a facilitator</li> </ul>	November 2020- February 2021  February 2021-May 2021

**Validity**

The collection of multiple data sources in this qualitative study help strengthen the validity of the research study. Several strategies can be used to help increase the validity of a research study. The following are four categories, and their description was implemented throughout the research and worked to improve and reinforce validity.

- **Credibility-** Works to ensure the accuracy of the study's results.
- **Transferability-** Focuses on the results and how they can be used beyond the study.
- **Dependability-** The study is interchangeable. If conducted with similar participants, it would yield similar results.
- **Confirmability-** The results of the study removes research bias (Hendricks, 2017).

The researcher conducted the study in the place they worked, and the participants were members of the team in which the researcher supervised. This professional relationship between teacher and supervisor presented a limitation in the study discussed in this chapter's next section. The researcher implemented multiple strategies to safeguard the validity of the research study.

Peer debriefing on the study's progress was applied with the researcher's Committee Chairs and close colleagues in the education field.

Member checks were utilized with the participants throughout the study in the team's weekly meetings, and all sources of data collected were triangulated to increase validity,

Persistent planning and reflection throughout the research study were developed to warrant the interventions, discussion, and research to depict the results and findings accurately.

With multiple strategies to protect the research's validity, an account of possible researcher bias and communicating such limitations is critical to the study's validity and credibility. Within the study setting and the researcher's involvement in the supervision and interaction with the participants and educational delivery variables, several limitations were presented. The navigation through the COVID-19 pandemic has a direct impact on the research study.

### **Limitations**

There were four limitations to this qualitative research study. The first limitation comes from the number of participants in the study. The twelve participants give a small sample of the teachers' perceptions of social and emotional learning and how teachers' confidence and experience impact middle school students. Further studies with more significant teacher participation numbers can impact collecting and analyzing the data and providing a more focused conclusion and recommendation based on a greater data scope.

The second limitation of this study is the environment and uncertainty surrounding the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. Learning model changes, challenges in students' and teachers' lives, family sickness, and anticipation of school shutdowns limited the number of teachers willing to participate in the study. The pandemic presented an additional increase in teacher responsibility as students missed vital skills

and content. The balanced focus between SEL and academic needs was challenging, and SEL's validity and sustainability were brought into question in the classroom.

The third limitation to the study deals with the current hybrid learning model within the district. The new learning model is an added layer for teachers to learn, plan, and implement into their classrooms, both in-person and virtually. The attention and effort were given to understanding the new model effects the time and focus teachers had on developing and implementing SEL resources and strategies into their classroom routines and lessons.

The study's final limitation deals with the researcher's presumed bias to the topic and learning environment studied. As the administrator of the middle school students and direct supervisor of the participants, the researcher's motivation to have positive results from the data can be considered a bias. As the participants' immediate supervisor, willingness to be constructive and give specific feedback could be questioned depending on the participant's comfort level having the researcher as their supervisor.

### **Summary**

This Qualitative research study was designed to gain a valuable perspective of teachers and their perceptions, experiences, and understanding of SEL. The data were collected through three methods- a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and classroom observations. The data collected in the action research study was particular to one school, and the participants were active teachers within this school setting. With a deepened understanding of SEL and teachers' experiences and perceptions, the data

collected will help guide further research, help design targeted professional development, and help develop and implement resources and supports.

The methods used in this study to collect data will be triangulated, analyzed, and the results communicated in the following Chapter IV, Data Analysis and Results.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The research study yielded a valuable foundation on teachers' perception and understanding of SEL and can guide future professional development. Along with the more meaningful targeted professional development, focused supports and resources can be better analyzed, developed, and implemented to accommodate the needs of our students. The results of this study are used within the framework, culture, demographics, and dynamics of one particular school district. The data collected and analyzed could help support and benefit other districts looking to enhance SEL and support their staff. However, this study focused on the researcher's district, and the data and results presented in this chapter are established results about the researched district.

The qualitative study used data collected through three methods. Participants were given a beginning and end of year self-reflection questionnaire focusing on the teachers' practices, social interactions with students, and their understanding of SEL competencies. The beginning and end of year results will show teachers' development and growth through the study. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant to examine the level of understanding of SEL, the comfortability of SEL in the classroom, challenges in social and emotional learning, and their thoughts and feedback on the current state of professional development for SEL. Lastly, teacher observations were conducted throughout the 2020-2021 school year to measure student engagement in motivation in classroom collaboration, student reflection, student voice,

communication, and incorporation of SEL core competencies. The data collection ranged from November 2020 through May 2021.

### **Initial Data**

The data collected and analyzed through this study examined the teachers' perception, understanding, and classroom approaches regarding SEL. The initial data was collected through a self-reflection questionnaire to gauge the participants' understanding, confidence, and experience in SEL and how SEL is implemented within their classroom and school building. The initial stages of classroom observations were started at the same time as the self-reflection questionnaire. The classroom observations focused on SEL's five critical competencies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making. Within those five competencies, the observation rubric targeted student engagement, motivation, collaboration, and reflection while looking at teachers' ability to facilitate learning and communicate effectively. The participants continued to work together within the grade-level team to incorporate SEL activities and instruction within their classes through the initial data collection. Weekly grade-level team meetings allowed for collaboration surrounding SEL and effective practices and resources.

To better understand the initial data, the participants participated in a semi-structured interview midway through the 2020-2021 school year to assist the research to gain a more in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions, experiences, and ideas moving forward with SEL and how to better support students. The responses from these interviews were analyzed individually and coded for themes. The themes established

from the individual interviews were examined to compare and find the common themes that emerged for the data collection. During this period, the second round of classroom observation began using the same observation rubric from the initial data collection.

The last stage of data collection had participants revisit the self-reflection questionnaire to determine any change in perception and understanding of SEL through the 2020-2021 school year. The results from the second questionnaire will be compared to the initial questionnaire to analyze the responses for trends or themes. Also, the second round of classroom observation data was recorded and compared to the initial data set. As the initial and second data set was analyzed, common themes emerged to help support and answer the three research questions in the study.

Overall, the data was collected and analyzed in parts, with the initial and second phases being compared and common themes discovered. The self-reflection questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observations produced several common themes presented and discussed in this chapter. Each form of data was broken down and compared concerning the three research questions. Results will assist in future guidance and recommendations directed at the professional development, supports, resources, and programs needed for the research school.

### **Baseline Self-Reflection Questionnaire**

The initial data from the baseline self-reflection questionnaire (Appendix B) shows the perception of the participants' experience, knowledge, and strategies within the classroom relative to SEL. The thirteen participants with classroom responsibilities



completed the questionnaire with the guidance counselors and administrators excluded from the results.

The questionnaire asked participants questions focusing on the social interactions in the classroom and the five core competencies of SEL. Social interaction was measured through the areas of teacher-centered discipline, teacher language, responsibility and choice, and warmth and support. The five core competencies targeted teachers' perceptions surrounding self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships and social skills, and responsible decision-making.

Social interactions focused on teaching practices and the volume of implementation in various methods that influence students' social, emotional, and academic skills. A rating scale of one to five allowed teachers to rate how often and how well they used each practice. The rating scale guide is as follows:

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

The data was analyzed from the participants' responses in each of the four areas of social interactions. The area of warmth and support received the highest average with 4.3, and responsibility and choice scored a 3.1, the lowest average among participants. Table 4 shows the average score of the four areas of social interaction.

**Table 4***Average Score of Social Interactions*

Social Interaction Focus	Average Score
Teacher-Centered Discipline	3.8
Teacher Language	4.1
Responsibility and Choice	3.1
Warmth and Support	4.3

Within each area of focus, a series of questions were asked to determine the averages in Table 4.

All participants that completed the self-assessment questionnaire scored higher on warmth and supports while expressing lower confidence and understanding of giving students more responsibility and choice within the classroom.

The second section of the self-reflection questionnaire examined the five core SEL competencies and the participants' perception of those SEL competencies. Each participant was asked to investigate their SEL competencies and relate to implementing those competencies into practice. The participants were asked to rate their answers using the following rating scale.

1. Strongly disagree; I have a difficult time with this practice. I know I do some of the things mentioned, but I do not necessarily find them relevant to my teaching.
2. Disagree; I demonstrate some of these skills with my students. I think with more practice or more support, I could demonstrate these skills more to improve implementation of this practice.

3. Agree; I am strong in this area. I know I do a good job modeling these skills for my students. I use these skills most of the time when I implement instructional practices.
4. Strongly agree; I am very strong in this area. I can use these skills when I am implementing instructional practices.

### **Self-Awareness**

Participants were consistent in their responses to the questions designed to analyze social awareness in teaching practices. The answer was consisted of 75% agreeing and 25% strongly agreeing to the questions. I can effectively implement social teaching practices that showed 7.7% of the participants (1) disagreeing with the question. Amongst the five competencies, self-awareness was analyzed as the strength of the participants.

### **Self-Management**

The question set used to analyze the self-management competency showed an overall agreement with the importance and implementation of the strategies. However, each question showed that one or two participants, 7-15%, disagreed with questions and felt they did not implement the strategy in their practice. The questions examining the use of multiple strategies when implementing SEL in the classroom and the answer to refining participant's personal goals in their growth of SEL strategies in the classroom were outliers in the self-management data collection. The two questions showed all participants agreeing with the questions.

### **Social Awareness**

The data collected and analyzed in the initial self-reflection questionnaire under social awareness showed the most considerable discrepancy from the participants and their understanding and confidence in implementing classroom practices. Each response to the questions showed a minimum of 15% of the participants answering disagrees with the practice. One question led to 30% of the participant disagreeing. Overall, an average of 61.5% of the participant agreed to the questions, but the uncertainty of solid and effective practices is presenting itself in the data. The most significant discrepancy in the data was evident in the question: I address the commonalities and differences ( e.g., racial, ethnic, and cultural ) among students when I implement social teaching practices. Out of the 13 participants, 65.5% agreed to the questions while 30.8% disagreed, and 7.7% strongly agreed.

### **Relationships and Social Skills**

Participants showed an average understanding of relationships and social skills from the self-reflection questionnaire. On average, 70% of the participants agreed with the questions from the questionnaire relative to relationships and social skills. Table 5 shows the two outliers in the questions that presented outside the average of the questions.

**Table 5***Questions and results from Relationships and Social Skills*

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
I am comfortable helping my students resolve interpersonal conflicts during social teaching practices and have experienced success.	15.4%	61.5%	23.1%
I use social teaching practices to help cultivate my students' SLE skills, and I am usually successful.	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%

**Responsible Decision Making**

The final competency data collected and analyzed entailed responsible decision-making practices. The participants showed an overall agreement with the questionnaire, but the strength of the responses varied with fewer participants strongly agreeing and each question resulting in a percentage disagreeing. In Table 6, the questions and percentage responses outline the participants' confidence and implementation of practices surrounding responsible decision-making.

**Table 6***Responsible Decision-Making Responses*

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
I am effective at considering multiple forms of evidence, such as balancing the needs and the behaviors of my entire class while implementing the social teaching practices	23.1%	69.2%	7.7%
I regularly include my students or collaborate with colleagues to solve problems that arise in the classroom related to social teaching practices.	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%
I stay focused and consistent when I implement social teaching practices	7.7%	84.6%	7.7%
When I implement the social teaching practices, I balance students' emotional needs and academic needs.	23.1%	69.2%	7.7%

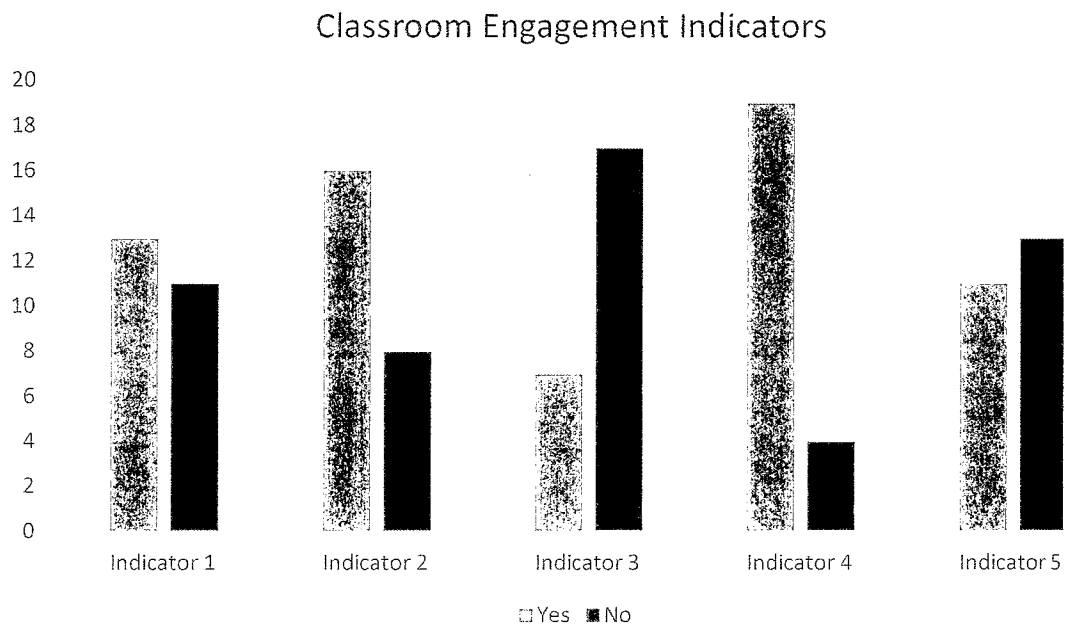
**Classroom Observations****First Semester**

Upon completing the self-reflection questionnaire by the participants, the researcher began conducting classroom observations using the SEL competency observation rubric in Appendix D. The researcher conducted 24 classroom observations in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year. All observations observed in-person instruction, with virtual students participating through the Wyomissing Area School District's online meeting platform, WebEx.

A series of five targeted indicators to target student engagement and motivation was observed through the observation rubric. The five indicators in Figure 2 are identified as follows and will be identified throughout the chapter.

1. Students demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, thinking, and problem-solving
2. Learning tasks that require high-level student thinking and invite students to explain their answers
3. Students highly motivated to work on all tasks and persistent even when tasks are Challenging
4. Suitable pacing for the lesson with time for closure and student reflection
5. Students actively working rather than watching the teacher teach

Figure 2 shows times each indicator was observed in the classroom environment from the 24 observations conducted.

**Figure 2***Indicators of Classroom Engagement and Motivation (First Semester)*

With the expectation of Indicator One and Indicator Five, students actively working rather than watching the teacher teach, a significant disparity emerged within the classroom observation. Indicator two and Indicator Four presents a positive correlation from the classroom observation. Indicator Two was observed 66.7% of the time, and Indicator Four observed 82.6%. The pacing of the lesson and time for closure was evident throughout the participants' classroom instruction.

Indicators Three and Five showed a negative correlation through the classroom observation. There was an observation of more teacher direct talk rather than student engaged in practice and activities presented in indicator five. The teacher was observed directly teaching 54.2 % of the time the research was in the classroom. Indicator Three



shows the most significant disparity from the classroom observation. Out of the 24 classroom visits, students' highly motivated and working through challenging tasks was observed 29.2% of the time.

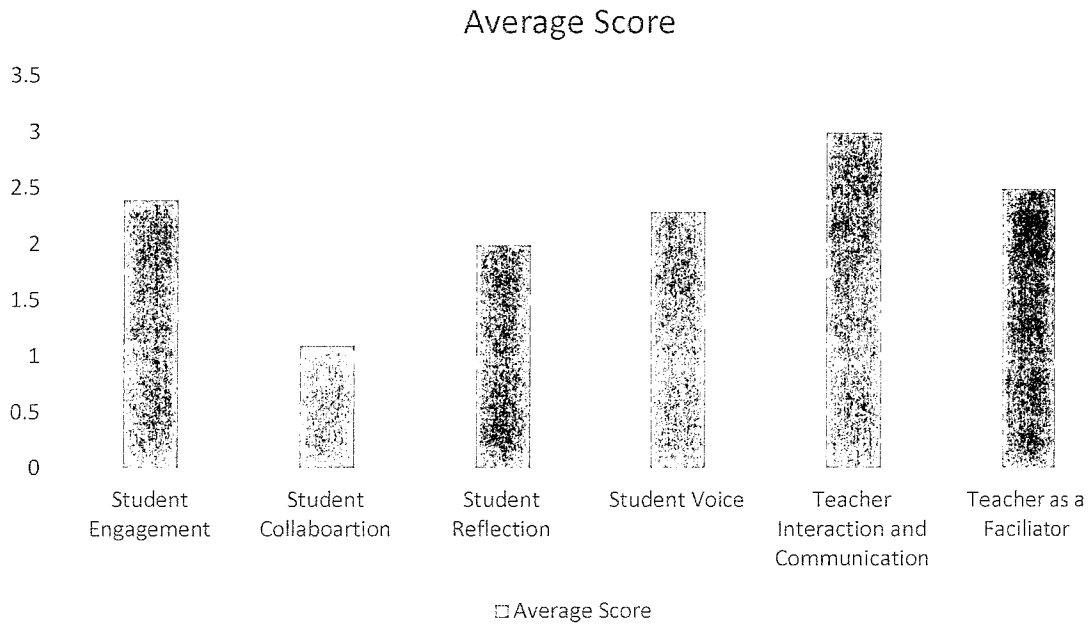
It is important to note that the researchers observed approximately 15-20 minutes of a 45 minutes class period. These percentages could be affected by the observation time and the part of the lesson plan observed.

The second section of the classroom observation rubric focused on SEL's six core competencies: student engagement, student collaboration, student reflection, student voice, teacher interaction and communication, and teacher as a facilitator. Each component was scored on a Likert scale ranging from 4 (highly effective) to 1 (needs improvement). The criteria listed under each rating level can be found in Appendix D.

Figure 3 presents the average Likert score of each component taken from the 24 classroom observation.

**Figure 3**

*Average Likert Score of SEL Components Observed (First Semester)*



As noted earlier in the chapter, classroom observations were conducted in 15-20 minute sessions and are not all-encompassing the participants' 45-minute lesson.

From the researcher's analysis, the four components that target student engagement, collaboration, reflection, and voice all scored on average below 2.5. Student engagement scored the highest with an average of 2.4, and student collaboration scored the lowest with a 1.1 average. Teacher interactions and teacher as a facilitator averaged higher than the student components. The current educational learning environment due to COVID-19 could factor into the more teacher-directed instruction and the lack of student collaboration and communication.

### **Second Semester**

The classroom observations continued into the second semester to allow for comparative data focusing on the SEL competencies. After an entire semester of teacher collaboration and discussion on SEL best practices, exposure to SEL resources, and time to plan more SEL-driven activities and instruction, the observations looked to measure growth in participants' understanding of SEL and its impact on students in the classroom. The researcher conducted 24 classroom observations, the same amount as semester one, and the same classroom rubric was used (Appendix C). In-person instruction was observed with virtual students participating through the Wyomissing Area School District's virtual platform. During the second semester, the District shifted from a hybrid model to a full in-person model, and social distance requirements were moved from six feet to three feet within the classroom.

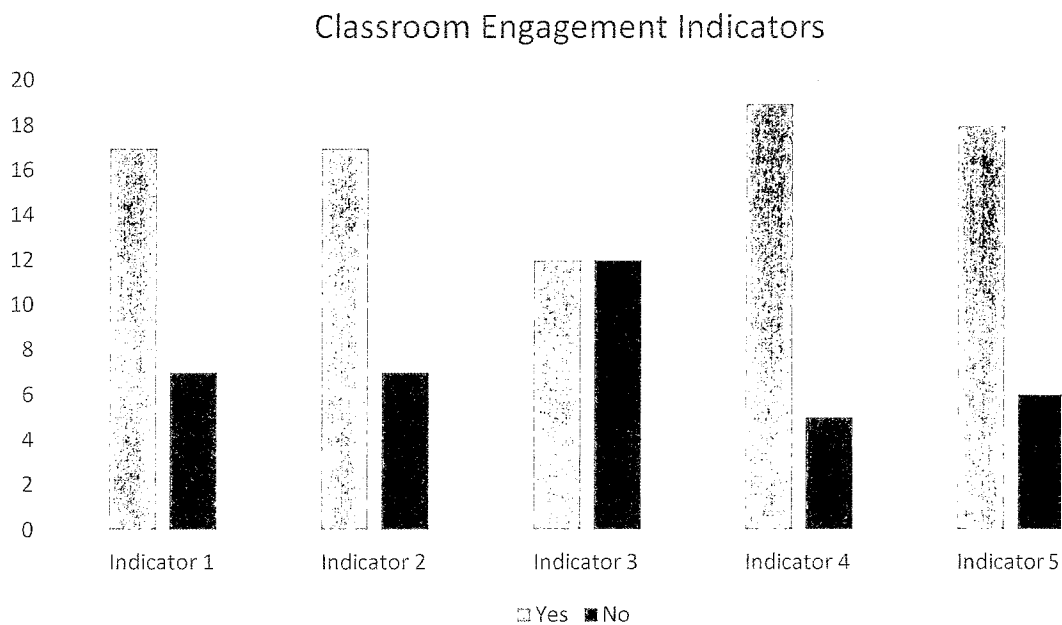
When analyzing the five indicators of classroom engagement, the second-semester observations saw an increase in four of the five categories. Indicator three, *students highly motivated to work on all tasks and persistent even when tasks are challenging*, saw decreased observable actions from the first semester. The indicator went from being present in 17 out of the 24 classroom observations to 12 out of 24 classroom observations the second semester.

The two indicators that showed the most growth from the first semester to the second semesters were indicator one. Students *demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, thinking, problem-solving*, and indicator five, *actively working rather than watching the teacher teach*. Indicator one was present in 17 out of 24 classroom observations in the

second semester compared to 13 out of 24 observed in semester one. Indicator five was observed in 18 out of the 24 classrooms in semester one compared to 11 out of 24 in the first semester. The remaining three indicators showed a consistent trend between semester one and semester two. Figure 4 outlines the observations of the five indicators observed in semester two.

**Figure 4**

*Indicators of Classroom Engagement and Motivation (Second Semester)*



The second section in the observation rubric targeted SEL's six core competencies. The scores from the 24 classroom observations were tallied, and an average number on the Likert scale was calculated. The scale and the rubric details remained the same from the observations conducted in semester one.

Table 7 shows the average Likert scores for the six SEL components from semester one and semester two with the variance in the score over the 2020-2021 school year. The data shows an increase in three competencies, a decrease in two competencies, and no change in one. Student engagement showed an average increase of .04 and a student collaboration increase of .05, signaling the most extensive growth from semester one to semester two. Teacher interaction and communication showed a decrease of 0.2 but remained the highest score of the six competencies. A correlation presents itself within the classroom observations showing when there is an increase in student collaboration and teachers facilitating instruction instead of delivering content, a positive growth emerges in student engagement. The positive interactions and communication between teacher and student decreased from semester one to semester two, while student reflection and voice stayed constant or decreased slightly. Added focus on student choice and personal reflection within teachers' interactions and communication presents itself as a possible area of improvement as teachers become more experienced and comfortable with the SEL competencies within the classroom.

**Table 7**

*Comparison of Average Likert Score of SEL Components Observed*

SEL Core Competencies	First Semester	Second Semester	Variance
Student Engagement	2.4	2.8	0.4
Student Collaboration	1.1	1.6	0.5
Student Reflection	2.1	2.0	(0.1)
Student Voice	2.3	2.3	0
Teacher interactions and communications	3.0	2.8	(0.2)
Teacher as a Facilitator	2.5	2.6	0.1

### **Participants Interviews**

Participant interviews were individually conducted to increase comfortability and foster honest dialogue in response to the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C). The teachers were asked a series of eight questions that allowed for a better understanding of their thoughts, ideas, and experience with SEL. Furthermore, the interview expanded on their idea of what professional development opportunities the participants have been a part of and their thoughts on what is needed in the future.

Participants were first asked to describe SEL in their school and classroom and talk about their overall thoughts on SEL. The common theme from the teachers is the lack of consistency within the implementation of SEL in the school and classroom. The response of "there is not enough time" was evident in the teacher's response. A positive theme emerged, showing that all participants in the interview agree that SEL is equally important as the academic rigor for the middle school student, and a focus on the whole child development is needed. The middle school teachers focused on the current implementation of SEL skills in a 41 minute advisory period as the stand-alone SEL delivery. However, 12 out of the 15 teachers interviewed stated that SEL skills need to be integrated within the daily classroom routine and curriculum.

In the following question, participants were asked to describe what challenges they have experienced when addressing the SEL needs of the students in the middle school and their classroom. Each participant gave a variety of examples of what factors into the challenges of SEL. The models range from student anxiety, maturity, accountability, coping skills, anger, and self-regulation. One middle school teacher

commented on the impact social media has played in the challenges of middle school students, which showed the need for more SEL skills development in young adolescents.

Teacher comment:

Social media has made it easy for our students to access and view adult material. It [social media] never lets the student shut down the noise and flow of information, both positive and negative. The students become distracted from reality and healthy ways of dealing with situations and issues. Communication skills are lacking, and social media provides students the opportunity to hide from reality and not accept accountability.

Out of the 15 participants who agreed to the semi-structured interview, 11 stated social media was a challenge to the development of middle school students and contributed to the increased need for SEL.

Personal experience, training, and professional development play a critical role in forming a positive perspective of SEL and increasing comfortability and understanding in teachers. The next series of questions in the interview targets teachers' experiences and thoughts on professional development. The range of experiences in SEL showed a reverse correlation with the years of teaching experience. More than 15 years of experience expressed less SEL training from their college courses and their personal choice in professional development than their counterparts with less than 15 years of teaching experience. Within the past ten years, college education programs have implemented more SEL and whole child development into their curriculum. Teachers gaining certification through those programs are exposed to SEL and are more likely to

seek additional training. Even though participants feel the educational community offers various professional development opportunities for SEL, the school district's professional development plans do not take advantage of those SEL opportunities. One administrator that participated in the interview discusses the challenges districts face with professional development.

Administrator's comment:

For schools to take SEL seriously, they need to commit to understanding what SEL is and become aware of the positive impact it can create. The need to take the time to talk with all stakeholders to develop a strategic plan surrounding SEL, or any initiative or program, is necessary for accountability, buy-in, and success. Often, districts are reactive, not proactive with professional development, and teachers begin to view professional development as just another thing.

The training and professional development views within the teachers participating in the interview were inconsistent based on years of experience and level of SEL understanding. Overall, all teachers agreed that SEL professional development is out there. Still, without a clear plan and focus from the district, teachers will continue to view professional development as reactive and a fad that will pass with the following concern, situation, and change of district leadership.

The final set of questions focused on the changing landscape of education and the impact on SEL, and how the current COVID-19 pandemic contributes to the importance of SEL in schools. Each participant strongly agreed to shift from a strictly academic focus to a holistic approach in child growth and development. COVID-19 has added to



the SEL focus, looking beyond the grade and addressing student developmental needs. In summary, over the last ten years, teachers agree that SEL is evolving, and an increased focus has emerged. However, that SEL increase can be seen in many situations, especially in the research setting, in using the SEL buzz words. The overall understanding of SEL and the school's commitment to implementation is still not completely evident.

### **End-of-Year Self Reflection Questionnaire**

The distribution and completion of the reflection questionnaire at the end of the second semester showed a measurable increase in the participants' perception and awareness of SEL knowledge, strategies, and confidence. The ongoing conversations and increased focus on the teachers' discussions and planning created a positive variance between the first and second-semester social interaction scores.

Each of the five categories measured under social interactions: teacher-centered discipline, teacher language, responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support showed an increase in the average score. Teacher language showed the greatest change increases an average score of 4.1 in the first semester to 4.5 in the second semester. Table 8 outlines the average score of each semester and the variance between each semester. The average positive increase ranges from 0.2 to 0.4.

**Table 8***Comparison of Average Social Interaction Scores*

Social Interaction Focus	Semester one Reflection	Semester Two Reflection	Variance
Teacher-Centered Discipline	3.8	4.0	0.2
Teacher Language	4.1	4.5	0.4
Responsibility and Choice	3.1	3.4	0.3
Warmth and Support	4.3	4.5	0.2

Consistent with the first-semester questionnaire, the second of the end-of-year questionnaire examined the five core competencies and the participants' perception of each. The five components consisted of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

A key question and indicator of the participants' awareness of their SEL knowledge and practices were *How would you describe your effectiveness of SEL in the classroom?* The comparative data from this question shows that teachers' reflections of their effectiveness and understanding of SEL practices shifted slightly throughout the year. A lower percentage of participants rated themselves highly or somewhat effective, and the percentage of somewhat ineffective or highly ineffective increased. Participants somewhat effective responses decreased from 76% the first semester to 66% the second semester. Subsequently, the rating scale of somewhat ineffective increased from 7% the first semester to 9% the second semester. The ineffective category increased from zero percent the first semester to 9% when given again at the end of the year. Table 9 shows the percentage adjustments from semester one to the semester two questionnaire.

**Table 9**

*How would you describe your effectiveness of SEL in the classroom?*

Rating scale	First Semester	Second Semester
Highly Effective	15%	18%
Somewhat Effective	76%	66%
Somewhat Ineffective	7%	9%
Ineffective	0	9%

Overall, the participants' responses depicting the five components showed consistency with the reactions from the first semester. Through the data analysis, social awareness and relationship skills were presented as outliers from the consistent averages of the five components.

#### **Social Awareness**

This component showed a decreasing percentage of disagree responses to the four questions with the category. Out of the four questions, I address the commonalities and differences ( e.g., racial, ethnic, and cultural ) among students when I implement social teaching practices showed the most noticeable change. Initially, 30% of participants disagreed with the statement in the first semester, while that number shrank to zero in semester two.

Overall, the added perception of importance in the participates increased agreement with the statements under social awareness presents a positive correlation between increased focus and discussion of SEL and teachers' thoughts on SEL importance.

### **Relationships and Social Skills**

The relationship and Social Skills component showed a shift in the teachers' perception of SEL competency. This component is the second competency that showed a change from the first semester to the second semester outside the overall minimal change. In all four questions within the element, the percentage of participants selecting disagree decreased. Questions one and three showed a decrease to zero percent, and questions two and four showed a decrease from 23% to 9%, respectively.

This data presents a positive change in the way participants viewed SEL and classroom practices. The reflection and continued discussion of SEL helped shape a perspective that opens future conversations and individual growth in SEL.

### **Summary**

The self-reflection questionnaire, interview results, and classroom observations in Chapter IV illustrated teachers' SEL perceptions. Further, it examined the impact those perceptions and experiences had on the middle school classroom. The data collected supports the research questions presented in the study, offers an understanding of teachers' experiences and confidence in SEL within their classrooms, and outlines a need to examine teachers' needs further and additional student supports.

The researcher used the three data collection methods (questionnaire, interviews, and observations) to help support the research questions. The data were triangulated through the collection and analysis of multiple data sets. This method provided a more consistent finding of the data and gave the participants more opportunity to detail their perspective, experience, and confidence of SEL throughout the study.

Though the data collected answers the research questions in the study, it is essential to understand the environment in which the study took place. Not all school districts are the same. Many districts operate with different funding abilities, support, allocate time to SEL, and district direction and focus can change from year to year. The data presented in this study was for the 2020-2021 school year and taken from a particular school district. Further generalizations, recommendations, and discussion will be presented in Chapter V- Conclusions and Recommendations that could be adapted and used from year-to-year, and in other districts.

## Chapter V

### Conclusions & Recommendations

#### Introduction

The research data analysis and findings proved beneficial to the researcher in planning, evaluating, developing, and implementing future SEL resources and supports. A strong foundation of SEL understanding and teacher confidence is necessary to impact student success and holistic development positively. The research study depicted, through the data, that teachers understand the importance of SEL embedded in the classroom instruction, and the perception is by the teachers that SEL is being implemented, but not consistently. Data shows teachers' willingness to improve their practices to serve student needs better. This eagerness was shown through team meetings, SEL discussions, planned activities and lessons, and professional learning. However, the data indicates that an even more targeted focus and meaningful professional development is necessary to support child development fully. The professional development needs to encompass the whole team or staff and focus on building their accountability and proficiency to positive SEL practices, consistent throughout the classroom environment. Without consistency, evaluation, and complete buy-in from staff, teachers, and administration, SEL practices and resources will continue to be inconsistent.

From the study, the Wyomissing Area School District and Junior-Senior High School where the study took place can benefit from understanding what components of SEL are required to increase teacher understanding and knowledge. Through the self-

reflection questionnaire, many teachers expressed the importance and need for a sound knowledge of SEL to effectively implement and integrate into daily classroom practices. Many going further in their interviews to say that more professional development and financial support are needed to be allocated to SEL awareness and practices. Without a concrete vision and goal for SEL direction in the classroom, an inconsistent SEL message was observed within the classroom and by the teacher. Specific competencies of SEL were considered necessary by some participants, while others focused on different areas. This inconsistency created pockets of SEL learning different throughout the team environment, and most times, SEL was used as a primarily stand-alone activity.

With a better knowledge of the SEL framework and creating a sound foundation and understanding, the observation and reflection of best practices will increase by teachers, as shown through the data. The recommendations in this research study will look to lay out a direction for professional development, resources, and standard practices to continue the upward projection of SEL integration in everyday classroom practices. In time, moving the SEL development forward to impact students in the elementary and high school level.

### **Conclusions**

The research was completed at the end of 2020-2021, and the data analyzed with findings and recommendations developed. The data presented allowed the researcher to revisit the research questions communicated in Chapter I of the study and answer those three questions.

The following are the three questions raised in the study:

- Question One: What are teachers' perceptions and understanding of the importance of social-emotional learning instruction?
- Question Two: What are the teachers' experiences and comfort levels of social-emotional learning support and classroom strategies?
- Question Three: How does the implementation of social-emotional learning strategies impact student engagement and motivation?

Each question was addressed through data collection methods, and here are the findings.

Question One looked to measure the perception of the participants on the importance of SEL within classroom instruction. The self-reflection questionnaire administered at the beginning and end of the 2020-2021 school year assisted in answering the first research question of the study.

The participants' originally in the first self-reflection questionnaire rated themselves much higher in their understanding of SEL and their abilities to deliver sound best practices in SEL. Opposite to the higher self-ratings in the participants' knowledge of the five core competencies, a lower average score in social interaction within the classroom was recorded. This initial data showed a non-correlation between what was happening in the classroom through the participants' classroom reflection and their understanding of SEL importance.

The second administering of the self-reflection questionnaire showed a change in the teachers' perception and understanding. While the average score of the social interactions questions increased, the teachers' understanding and perception of the core components were unchanged or marginally lower, indicating consistency with a



developing foundation of SEL in their practices. The more teachers focused on targeted SEL discussion, collaboration, and implementation, the better understanding of SEL emerged. Teachers were able to reflect objectively, and with a more sound understanding of SEL, turn the reflection into a positive practice within their current classroom routines and structures.

Teachers truly believe that SEL is an essential aspect of a child's development and requires a district's dedication and commitment to the development and sustained implementation. The participants' perspectives became much more consistent and clear throughout the school year, and their understanding of the importance of SEL increased. The data points to teachers understanding the positive impact SEL has on a child's development and the need for SEL's best practices and resources to be integrated throughout the instruction and pedagogy.

Even though the understanding of SEL is evident, a more comprehensive approach is needed to build on their knowledge and equip them with the proper professional development and time to implement the supports, resources, and practices that prove to impact students. The data collected is a small sample size of the teachers' perspective, and more reach is necessary to say all teachers believe SEL is vital in students' success with confidence.

In question two, the teachers' perception of SEL professional development opportunities, confidence, and experience were discussed and analyzed through individual, semi-structured interviews.

Common themes emerged through the interviews as teachers communicated the challenges they face within the classroom, types of training and the frequency of the training, the overall state of SEL in education, and the research district.

The challenges teachers see emerging over time in the classroom surround anxiety, coping skills, anger, and the ability to self-regulate. Teachers are observing students struggling to work through situations and failing to communicate their needs and concerns effectively. Those struggles emerge as anger, shutting down, and sometimes violence to others and self-harm. Students feel the answers should be handed to them these days, and if there is not an easy solution, giving up and avoiding is the defense. Most teachers emphasize the emergence of social media as a contributing factor to what one teacher described as "learned helplessness." Social media has increased students' need for immediate gratification, exposes them to the material they do not understand or can manage emotionally, and makes things seem instant. A decrease in communication skills and proper in-person interactions have become more difficult.

These challenges have teachers calling for SEL to become a consistent staple in district, building, and classroom practices. Through their responses, participants believe that social and emotional growth is equally as crucial to academic development. The learning of content and academic skill needs to mirror the SEL in the classroom. Teachers communicate that SEL is not a stand-alone program but a practice best utilized by integrating it throughout the lesson and classroom environment. Unfortunately, the current learning environment is inconsistent, and SEL gravitates to stand-alone activities

or intervention periods. The statement "there is not enough time" was echoed throughout the interviews.

A more considerable emphasis on SEL professional development was a common theme through the interviews. The district and research school have not taken the time to take advantage of all the SEL learning opportunities out there.

The increased professional development opportunities and a commitment to a consistent SEL practice will help support student challenges, help teachers grow with the experiences and confidence in the classroom, and implement the best strategies to support the whole child.

Question three was designed to take a closer look at the teacher and student interaction in the classroom. The observation rubric had five indicators to gauge student motivation and achievement and how the core SEL competencies were implemented in the classroom.

The data collected and analyzed from the first semester and the second semester shows that as students' exposure to SEL core competencies increases, student engagement and motivation increase. As teachers were exposed to more SEL resources, strategies, and ongoing discussion, the SEL components observed were more evident. Student collaboration and student engagement had a direct correlation in the study. The more meaningful student collaboration was regarded, a substantial increase in student engagement was present in the classroom.

The indicators in the observation rubric stayed consistent with the SEL core competency findings. The more teachers made SEL a focus in their planning, and a

positive implementation increase was evident in student engagement and motivation. Between semester one and semester two, student enthusiasm and problem-solving willingness increase. However, students' motivation to work on challenging tasks decreased. The students' motivation and engagement increased when the activity or lesson had a clear direction, and the endpoint was easily achievable. Basic level problem solving and attention was evident, but the students were still hesitant with higher-level, challenging tasks. They were swift to ask for help and, in some cases, the answers.

The classroom observations showed that increased student engagement and motivation emerged, forming a positive correlation with the increased focus on SEL discussion, training, and planning for the team teachers. However, that increase is a small step forward. Students still lack the resiliency, self-awareness, and decision-making skills to be confident in effectively working with peers and taking on challenging activities and tasks.

### **District**

School districts are in the business of working with people. A substantial amount of teacher and administrative interactions are with people. The SEL skills and competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, collaboration, communication, and empathy are necessary to create a safe learning environment to support student development and success. The discussion needs to begin to analyze the importance of intelligence quotient (IQ) versus emotional quotient (EQ) and a focus by the district on ways to integrate each with equal importance.

Moving the data analysis, findings, and recommendation forward from this research study, three main areas emerge as potential next steps to strengthen SEL within the district, buildings, and classroom.

The first area of focus looks to develop a clear and consistent vision and goals for SEL within building and classroom practices. A commitment to SEL from top administration through teachers and students is essential to create an environment that fosters a holistic approach to student growth and success. Teachers' perception of SEL and the importance is evident. Still, until the district looks to make SEL a requirement and top priority, the practice will remain inconsistent and show minimal success. For staff and students to experience the full impact of SEL, steps need to be taken to communicate the significance and demonstrate the district's commitment to its development and implementation.

The second area to consider is the growth and development of the district's staff, teachers, students, and administration for SEL. Professional development in the district is very reactive. It is constructed in the past with no clear focus or direction based on factual, measurable data centered around their stakeholders' needs. Once a commitment to SEL is established, an investment in professional development, resources, and supports is critical to build and sustain SEL success. A professional learning council or a similar team should be assembled to solicit feedback from stakeholders and develop a structured professional development schedule to build a solid understanding and foundation of SEL and implement best SEL practices in the classroom. The progress, training, and discussion need to be ongoing and evaluated consistently to adapt to the needs of the

staff, teachers, and administration. SEL integration and progress have to be supported with quality professional development opportunities and continuous discussion surrounding sustainable growth to acquire the best outcomes and cement SEL in every teacher's and administration's daily interactions with students and each other.

Lastly, the district must make a financial commitment for the first two areas to come to fruition. The third area of focus is allocating district revenues in the yearly budget to support SEL practices, professional development, and resources. SEL resources, supports, and professional development are becoming more readily available with the educational change to a holistic approach to student development. A time and financial commitment to research the best resources and supports by the district and then apply them to practice is essential for SEL to grow and become a staple in its overall comprehensive plan. Many opportunities for grants, partnerships, and additional funding is available for districts to explore to help supplement their budgets. Without the financial commitment from the community, SEL will be a practice that will continue to take a back seat to the programs, initiatives and resources that districts allocate funds for in their budgets.

### **Fiscal Implications**

As discussed in the previous section, to expand confidence, knowledge, and consistency in the district's SEL practices, funding is required. During the timeline of this research study, the global-wide Pandemic, COVID-19, was a contributing factor and significant challenge in both the data collection and analysis but was a substantial factor in the district's thinking and financial planning.

The following areas present financial challenges that factor into the continued development and implementation of SEL in the school district the research study was conducted. These areas presented are inclusive to the research district but could be challenging in other districts looking to increase SEL.

Challenge one is the COVID-19 Pandemic. The need for increased health and safety materials, virtual instruction platforms, software, and resources, coupled with additional staff to alleviate the shortage from the teachers opting out of the year, caused an increase in allocated funds not anticipated. The 2020-2021 budget and the 2021-2022 budget were directly affected by the pandemic and forced the district to fall into a deficit of approximately two million dollars before any tax increase. As restrictions and guidelines from COVID-19 change, the need for additional funding could decrease, which would allow for more funding to be directed to learning loss and student-directed initiatives such as SEL.

The hesitation from the board to increase taxes to the ACT I index indicates challenge two. The school board of directors has always been hesitant to take a tax increase to the Act I index (3%). Over the last three years, a tax increase was no higher than 1.5%. During this time, the district that receives roughly eighty percent of its revenue from local sources, and would need that tax revenue to help balance the budget. Without the extra revenue generated from the local tax increase, any additional focus on SEL is impacted negatively.

The final financial challenge surrounds the twenty-five million dollar renovation project the district took on for the 2021-2022 school year. Even though the money was

secured through refinancing current bonds and obtaining new debt, the focus, time, and money are not supporting new supports, training, and resources in SEL to make a substantial impact.

The one area of promise that could benefit SEL support and implementation is the funding received by districts through the CARES Act. As part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Congress established and appropriated a total of \$13.2 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. The research district received ESSER funds in three rounds, with the latest round coming after passing Congress's recent stimulus package. The total amount allocated to our district is approximately \$3.5 million.

The funding through the CARES Act will help offset some of the deficit occurring from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The first two funding rounds will support the added cost for PPE products, online learning options, and upgrades to facilities. The third round of funding will be focused on student and teacher needs moving forward into the 2021-2022 school year and provides an excellent opportunity to focus on SEL. This funding is not a permanent fixture because of the expiration of the money. Still, it could be the foundational start to begin the process of full implementation of SEL in the Junior-Senior High School.

Additional research and discussion are needed to look for the expansion of SEL into other areas outside this research setting.



### **Future Direction of Research**

The data collected through the study gave the researcher a greater perspective on teachers' thoughts, experiences, confidence, and classroom practices in SEL. The research provides a starting point for the building and district leadership to develop SEL supports, consisting of methods and professional development moving forward that will continue to impact student development.

Even though the data gives us the initial information needed to support SEL growth and change, further research and additional studies can be designed and completed. This research can work to gain a greater perspective of SEL needs and organize systematic SEL growth outside the research focus, a middle school student.

First, to develop and implement a systematic push for consistent SEL practices with a school building and district, a conscious effort must be made to support teacher mental health and social-emotion well-being. Especially during the challenging year, this research study was conducted, with COVID-19, changes guidelines and learning models, teachers were pushed to the edge, and an understanding of their current mental state is necessary. Future research can be conducted throughout the district to understand better teachers' perspectives of the current state of education and its effect on their ability to meet their students' diverse needs effectively. Before we can begin implementing more SEL supports, resources, and classroom practices as recommended in the study, we need to ensure the teacher delivering those resources and supports are in a good place mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Second, with additional implementation of SEL practices in the classroom and integrated throughout the instruction, a closer look at the effects those practices have on student achievement. A future study on the impact SEL instructional practices have on the students' academic and social growth. The future research would be a mix-method approach with more quantitative data in student assessments, discipline data, and attendance. A more comprehensive understanding of the direct correlation of SEL practices and student achievement will be beneficial in the evolution of any further SEL development. Data obtained through this study would allow teachers and administrators to make sound decisions on new resources and practices to support individual student needs and child development.

Third, SEL in the district and school buildings starts with the leadership. Building principals, assistant principals, and district administration need to foster a culture of social and emotional awareness in their everyday practices. Understanding the administrators' perspective on SEL and how it impacts their leadership style will give educators and researchers a better look at the people tasked with leading the buildings and districts implementing SEL. How the leadership perceives SEL will directly affect the accountability and buy-in of any initiative or shift in instruction aiming to focus more on SEL.

Lastly, with the junior-senior high school environment, the idea of expanding SEL practices and understanding outside of the middle school team impacts the senior high, grades 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>. A future study of SEL on senior high students and its impact on student success measured in academic achievement and post-secondary readiness. A

direct correlation between SEL skills and career readiness skills can be explored in a future study with senior-high students.

### **Summary**

The research study on the teachers' perception of SEL and the impact on the middle school student-produced results could assist the district in developing a plan to increase SEL supports and resources for their staff and students. The data collected from the participants serve as a foundation to build on through training, discussion, and further SEL studies and the impact on child development.

The data presented outlines the need for a deeper understanding of SEL, and it shows the positive correlation to teacher exposure to SEL supports, resources, language. The more conversations, collaboration, professional development, and classroom practices the participants took part in, the more confidence, knowledge, and optimistic perspective of SEL emerged.

In closing, the research study supports the idea that teachers' perception of SEL plays a vital role in the success, growth, and development of students. As teachers' experience and the integration of SEL skills develop and are supported by target professional development, the consistent implementation of best practices will emerge. In return, it results in a positive impact on student development and growth that will provide students with the skills necessary to navigate educational and societal challenges.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Permission to Participate Form**

Dear Faculty Member,

As an educational professional responsible for the instruction of middle school students at Wyomissing Area School District, you are being asked to participate in a research study on teacher perception of social-emotional learning and the impact on the middle school student. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more about how social-emotional learning is perceived and influence future learning opportunities and program development.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I take part in this study?**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to: (1) complete two Google Form electronic questionnaire self-assessments at the beginning and conclusion of the 2020-2021 school year, (2) participate in a semi-structured interview and (3) discuss feedback from classroom observations focused in student engagement and motivation.

#### **Where will this study take place?**

The questionnaire will be available online through Google Forms, using a secure website. Interviews and classroom observations will occur at the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School in teachers' classrooms or the researcher's office.

#### **How long will the study last?**

The study will last through the 2020-2021 school year or approximately nine months from September 2020 -May 2021. Each interview is expected to take 30-40 minutes. The questionnaire may take up to 30 minutes each or 60 minutes total to complete.

**What happens if I don't want to participate?**

Your participation is voluntary; you can choose whether you want to participate in the study or not. There would be no penalty if you decided not to participate.

**Can I quit the study before it ends?**

You can withdraw from the study at any point by notifying the researcher. There will be no penalty should you choose to withdraw. The researcher will not ask you why you opted out.

**What are the risks?**

There are minimal risks to this study. You will not be asked questions of a sensitive nature. The questionnaire and interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable as some people do not like to volunteer information/feedback that could be perceived as negative or complaining. However, participants are reminded that they are not required to answer any questions of which they choose. Participants can also stop their participation at any time without question.

**How will I benefit from participating?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will help the researcher better understand the current perceptions at Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School as it pertains to social-emotional learning and assist in the improvement of social-emotional strategies and resources through professional development and other possible learning opportunities.

**Will my responses be kept confidential and private?**

Yes, the questionnaire data and interview responses we collect from you will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to it. Your

questionnaire responses will be anonymous. No names will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored on a secured server or locked in the office of the researcher located in the Junior-Senior High School Assistant Principal/Athletic Office suite.

**Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Matthew Redcay, at [red5618@calu.edu](mailto:red5618@calu.edu) or 484-332-1048. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Todd Keruskin at [keruskin@calu.edu](mailto:keruskin@calu.edu).

*I have read this form. Any questions I have about participating in this study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study, and I understand that taking part is voluntary. I do not have to take part if I do not wish to do so. I can stop at any time for any reason. If I chose to stop, no one would ask me why.*

*By signing below, I agree to participate in this study. By doing so, I am indicating that I have read this form and had my questions answered. I understand that it is my choice to participate, and I can stop at any time.*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Teacher Self-Assessment Questionnaire

#### Consent:

I am conducting this survey to help gain a better understanding about how social-emotional learning is perceived by teachers and how to influence future learning opportunities and program development.

In this study, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your perceptions of social and emotional learning in supporting the needs of our students. Your perceptions on professional development and the effectiveness of supports and resources to the teacher will be addressed.

I will also collect information to describing your primary building location, years in your current position, and the type of classroom in which you work.

You have been selected to participate in this survey due to your role as a teacher who works with students on the Seventh Grade Team at Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School. You will be asked to participate in a survey that will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey is distributed and collected via Google Forms.

Your participation is voluntary; you can choose whether you want to participate in the survey or not. There would be no penalty if you decided not to participate. All responses will remain confidential and stored in the researcher's locked office, or on a secured electronic file that is passcode protected.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Matthew Redcay, at [red5618@calu.edu](mailto:red5618@calu.edu) or 484-332-1048. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Todd Keruskin at [keruskin@calu.edu](mailto:keruskin@calu.edu)

By clicking continue, you agree to participate in this survey through Google Forms.

#### Description:

The survey was taken from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders (Yoder, 2014) and designed to focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies and educators' understanding of Social and emotional learning and SEL strategies. This tool aims to reflect upon current teaching practices that impact SEL and assess SEL competencies.

## Section 1:

1. Please select the grade-levels you teach ( select all that apply)
  - a. 7<sup>th</sup>
  - b. 8<sup>th</sup>
  - c. 9<sup>th</sup>
  - d. 10<sup>th</sup>
  - e. 11<sup>th</sup>
  - f. 12<sup>th</sup>
  
2. Please indicate the number of years you have worked in education
  - a. 0-5 years
  - b. 6-10 years
  - c. 11-15 years
  - d. 16-20 years
  - e. 21-25 years
  - f. 26 or more years
  
3. How many professional development trainings have you received on Social and Emotional Learning?
  - a. 0-3
  - b. 4-6
  - c. 7-9
  - d. More than 10
  
4. How would you describe your effectiveness of Social and Emotional learning within the classroom?
  - a. Highly effective
  - b. Somewhat effective
  - c. Somewhat ineffective
  - d. Highly ineffective
  
5. What is the highest level of education you have received?
  - a. Bachelor's Degree
  - b. Master's Degree
  - c. Doctorate Degree

## Section 2: Social Interactions

Part A. Teaching Practices. Think about how often you implement a variety of practices that influence students' social, emotional, and academic skills. Think about how often

you implement teaching practices that focus on positive social interactions. Using a scale of 1 to 5, rate how often and how well you use these practices.

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

Student-Centered Discipline

SEL Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
I have discussions with my students about how and why classroom procedures are implemented.		
I implement consequences that are logical to the rule that is broken.		
I am consistent in implementing classroom rules and consequences.		
I respond to misbehavior by considering pupil specific social, affective, cognitive, or environmental factors that are associated with the occurrence of the behavior.		
I hold class discussions with my students so we can solve class problems.		
I ask my students to reflect and redirect their behavior when they misbehave.		



I teach students strategies to handle the emotions that affect their learning (e.g., stress, frustration).		
I model strategies that will help students to monitor and regulate their behavior.		

Teacher language

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

Responsibility and Choice

SEL Practices	Self-Reflecting	Comments
I let my students help plan how they are going to		

learn in developmentally appropriate ways.		
I ask for student input when making decisions about how the classroom will operate in developmentally appropriate ways.		
I give students meaningful choices (with parameters) on what they can work on.		
I make sure students make the connection between their choices and potential consequences.		
I arrange experiences that allow my students to become responsible (e.g., classroom aids or jobs, peer tutoring, specific roles in group work) in developmentally appropriate ways.		

### Warmth and Support

SEL Practices	Self-Rating	Comments
I demonstrate to each student that I appreciate him or her as an individual (e.g., appropriate eye-contact, greeting each child by name).		
I use the interests and experiences of my students when teaching.		

I display to my students that I care about how and what they learn.		
I let my students know that it is okay to get answers wrong or think outside of the box (e.g., modeling, praising attempts with “good thinking”).		
I check in with my students about academic and nonacademic concerns they might have.		
I follow up with my students when they have a problem or concern.		
I create structures in the classroom where my students feel included and appreciated (e.g., morning meetings, small moments, whole-class share outs).		

Part B. Teacher Social and Emotional Competencies. Now think about your own social and emotional competencies and how those competencies influence your ability to implement social interaction teaching practices. Please use the scoring guide below to rate yourself how your SEL skills affect your students' social interaction teaching practices. Consider each statement and score yourself according to where each statement holds for you.

1 = Strongly disagree. I have a difficult time with this practice. I know I do some of the things mentioned, but I do not necessarily find them relevant to my teaching.

2 = Disagree. I demonstrate some of these skills with my students. I think with more practice or more support, I could demonstrate these skills more to improve implementation of this practice.

3 = Agree. I am strong in this area. I know I do a good job modeling these skills for my students. I use these skills most of the time when I implement the instructional practices.

4 = Strongly agree. I am very strong in this area. I can use these skills when I am implementing instructional practices.

Self-Awareness

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am aware of social teaching practices that I need to improve upon and grow professionally.	1	2	3	4
I can effectively implement social teaching practices with my students	1	2	3	4
I am usually aware of how my emotions, culturally grounded beliefs, and background are precursors to my emotional reactions. I understand how they impact my social teaching practices with my students.	1	2	3	4
I understand how student responses ( positive and negative) affect	1	2	3	4

my emotions and behaviors during social teaching practices.				
I am aware of how my cultural beliefs and background affect my social teaching practices with my students.	1	2	3	4

Self-Management/Emotional Regulation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I continuously refine my personal goals about how I will best implement social teaching practices with my students.	1	2	3	4
I effectively use multiple strategies ( e.g., breathing techniques and mindfulness) when I have a strong emotional reaction in the classroom ( e.g., stress, anger) when implementing social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4

Through the effective management of my emotions (e.g., use of stress reduction techniques), I am better able to implement social teaching practices, use positive approaches to discipline, and develop a positive learning environment free from bias prejudice.	1	2	3	4
I model behaviors (e.g., form guidelines, set boundaries) to help students learn to regulate emotions during social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4

Social Awareness

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
To effectively implement positive social teaching practices, I usually understand my students'	1	2	3	4

perspectives and can pay attention to their emotional cues during classroom interactions.				
I try to understand why my students are not actively participating, and I am usually successful at providing my students with the necessary skills to participate in social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4
I successfully support positive emotions and respond to negative emotions during social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4
I address the commonalities and differences ( e.g., racial, ethnic, and cultural ) among students when I implement social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4

## Relationship/Social Skills

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I communicate behavioral and academic expectations in a manner that addresses students' individual needs and strengths when implementing social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4
I am comfortable helping my students resolve interpersonal conflicts that come up during social teaching practices, and I have experienced success with this.	1	2	3	4
I use the social teaching practices to help form meaningful relationships with my students and cultivate their SEL skills, and I am usually successful at building	1	2	3	4



meaningful relationships.				
I use the social teaching practices to help cultivate my students' SEL skills, and I am usually successful at building their SEL skills.	1	2	3	4

Responsible Decision Making

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am effective at considering multiple forms of evidence, such as balancing the needs and the behaviors of my entire class while implementing the social teaching practices	1	2	3	4
I regularly include my students or collaborate with colleagues to solve problems that arise in the classroom related to social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4

I stay focused and consistent when I implement social teaching practices.	1	2	3	4
When I implement the social teaching practices, I balance students' emotional needs and academic needs.	1	2	3	4

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Consent Form

I am conducting this semi-structured interview to help gain a better understanding about how social-emotional learning is perceived by teachers and how to influence future learning opportunities and program development.

In this interview, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your perceptions of social and emotional learning and supporting the needs of our students. Your perceptions on professional development and the effectiveness of supports and resources for the teacher will be addressed.

You have been selected to participate in this survey due to your role as a teacher who works with students on the Seventh Grade Team at Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School. You will be asked to participate in the interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. The interview will be held in-person in a private office within the Wyomissing Area Junior-Senior High School.

Your participation is voluntary; you can choose whether you want to participate in the interview or not. There would be no penalty if you decided not to participate. All responses will remain confidential and stored in the researcher's locked office, or on a secured electronic file that is passcode protected.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Matthew Redcay, at [red5618@calu.edu](mailto:red5618@calu.edu) or 484-332-1048. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Todd Keruskin at [keruskin@calu.edu](mailto:keruskin@calu.edu)

By signing this form, you agree to participate in the semi-structured interview.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Semi-Structured Interview for Teachers

The anticipation of additional clarifying questions could be asked to gain more information from the participant during the interview. All clarifying questions and information will remain within the scope of the research study.

The interview will begin with an opening thanking the participant, communicating and reviewing the research study's goal to ensure the participant has all the necessary background information to participate in the interview. The re-assurance that no identifying information provided or shared and ambiguity will be kept throughout the process of the research study.

#### Interview Questions

1. How would you describe social-emotional learning as it pertains to your School?
  - a. Your classroom?
2. What are your thoughts on social-emotional learning?
3. What challenges have you experienced when addressing the social and emotional needs of students?
  - a. Did you feel confident in your ability to meet those needs? Why or Why not?
4. What personal experiences and training have you been able to take part in?
  - a. Did it help in your understanding and experience in social and emotional learning? How so?
5. What are your thoughts on the number of professional development opportunities to help students meet the social and emotional needs of students?
  - a. Within the education professional community?
  - b. Within your district?
6. What types of professional development opportunities do you feel necessary to prepare classroom teachers better to meet students' social and emotional needs?
7. Over the past 5-10 years, do you agree the focus on social-emotional learning has increased?
  - a. If yes, Why do you suspect it has?
  - b. If no, Do you feel more needs to be done in the area of social-emotional learning? Why?

8. How has COVID-19 effected the importance of social and emotional learning in the classroom?
  - a. Impact on students' social and emotional needs?
  - b. Impact of staffs' social and emotional needs?
  
9. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to share about social-emotional learning?

## Appendix E

### Teacher Classroom Observation Rubric

The classroom observation rubric for the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders ( Yoder, 2014) will consist of two sections. (1) a series of five indicators to target classroom behavior that indicative of a highly engaged and motivating environment. (2) a Likert-scale to observe the range of Social-emotional competencies addressed by the teacher within the classroom environment with a focus on engagement and motivation. Social competencies consist of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and reasonable decision making.

Classroom Subject:

Grade:

Date:

#### Indicators

- Students demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, thinking, and problem-solving
- Learning tasks that require high -level student thinking and invite students to explain their answers
- Students highly motivated to work on all tasks and persistent even when tasks are Challenging
- Suitable pacing for the lesson with time for closure and student reflection
- Students actively working rather than watching the teacher teach

#### SEL Core Competencies

*Directions:* Score each component from 4 (highly effective) to 1 (needs improvement). Criteria listed under each rating level are examples or guides for what each numeric score looks like during an observation, not an all-inclusive or exclusive description.

	4	3	2	1	Score
Student Engagement	Most students are engaged in the lesson with interest, curiosity, motivation and passion. Electronic	Some students are engaged in the lesson with interest, curiosity, or motivation. Electronic devices are	Few students are engaged, interested, or motivated about lesson; some are easily distracted. Electronic devices are	Most students are disinterested, unmotivated or are distracted during the lesson. Electronic devices	

	devices are only used for classwork (if applicable).	mostly used for classwork (if applicable).	used for something other than classwork (if applicable).	are distracting and not used appropriately (if applicable).	
Student Collaboration	Students collaborate efficiently & respectfully with each other throughout most of the lesson.	Students collaborate with efficiency.	Students may be collaborating but with little efficiency.	No evidence of student collaboration.	
Student Reflection	The teacher allows for individual and collective student reflection by encouraging critical thinking to debrief academic & social-emotional learning	The teacher allows for either individual or collective student reflection by encouraging critical thinking to debrief academic or social-emotional learning.	There are classroom artifacts that show the teacher has engaged students in the reflection of either academic or social-emotional learning.	The teacher does not engage student reflection.	
Teacher interaction/ communication	The teacher interacts warmly, respectfully, and equitably; actively engages the majority of students; affirms students' contributions and uses student names. Teacher	Teacher interactions with students are pleasant overall. The teacher invites participation from most students and engages	Teacher interactions with students are neutral. The teacher engages a few students. Minimal evidence of teacher affirming student contributions. Teacher	Teacher interactions with students are poor or inconsistent. Teacher is unsuccessful in engaging all students or soliciting student participation/ contribution.	

	language is encouraging, effective, and culturally responsive.	some students. Teacher language is mostly effective.	language is somewhat effective.	Teacher language is harsh or ineffective.	
Student Voice	Students have developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant voice, choice, & leadership opportunities. Teacher encourages students to share their ideas and many students contribute.	Evidence of some opportunities for students to develop their voice, and leadership skills. Students are invited to share ideas, and some contribute.	Evidence or artifacts which show students have some opportunities to develop their voice or leadership. Teacher offers some encouragement for students to share but few contribute.	Students have no opportunities to develop their voice or the teacher does not invite students to share ideas.	
Teacher as a facilitator	The teacher is highly effective in facilitating student learning; uses open-ended questioning & “wait time;” the lesson is student-centered while the teacher acts as a guide; all students participate in the learning environment.	The teacher uses strategies to encourage learning and most students participate; teacher prompts students to participate in the learning environment.	Teacher encourages learning and some students participate, majority of the lesson is teacher directed.	The teacher is unsuccessful in facilitating learning. Teacher talk time highly outweighs student talk time; few students participate.	



## Appendix F

**Institutional Review Board  
California University of Pennsylvania  
Morgan Hall, 310  
250 University Avenue  
California, PA 15419  
[instreviewboard@calu.edu](mailto:instreviewboard@calu.edu)  
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.**

**Dear Matthew,**

**The IRB is in the process of reviewing your proposal titled “Teachers' perception of social-emotional leaning and the impact on the middle school student within the teaming model” (Proposal #19-088) the following issues have arisen:**

**Please resubmit the following:**

Make sure to take into account the potential impact any power dynamics between the researcher and participants might have on participates voluntary consent.

Include where the researcher’s office is located. Great informed consent form overall!

Since the participants are taking surveys and completing interviews, it would be helpful to have one informed consent form for each method. This would give the researcher a chance to reassure participants that their answers will be anonymous and confidential.

Methodology needs to be more detailed in description of data collection and analysis. What theories and scholarly research will inform your data analysis method? Describe the how you will reach out to participants (emails, in-person, etc.?), set up the interviews, and go through the informed consent documents with participants. Will participants take the survey at the same time as the interviews or at different times?

Interview questions should include one that addresses the impact of COVID-19 on any of the previous question topics.

Appendix B: #1 I would suggest changing “assigned” to “teach” #3 – What is the difference between “somewhat knowledgeable” and “learning” and “novice”? Is there another question you could ask to get this information? Maybe asking how many trainings they have attended on social and emotional learning or something like that?

Appendix D – Is this Observation Rubric also from Yoder, 2014 Center on Great Teachers & Leaders?

**Please respond to these issues so the Board may continue its review. Email responses (with attachments as needed) are preferred. If hard copies are submitted in response, they must be sent to Campus Box #109.**

**If you have any questions or comments, do not hesitate to contact me.**

**Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board**

**Appendix G**

**Institutional Review Board  
California University of Pennsylvania  
Morgan Hall, 310  
250 University Avenue  
California, PA 15419  
[instreviewboard@calu.edu](mailto:instreviewboard@calu.edu)  
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.**

**Dear Matthew,**

**Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled “Teachers' perception of social-emotional leaning and the impact on the middle school student within the teaming model” (Proposal #19-088) has been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board as submitted.**

**The effective date of approval is 10/08/20 and the expiration date is 10/07/21. These dates must appear on the consent form.**

**Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:**

- (1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)**
- (2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects**
- (3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).**
- (4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 10/07/21 you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact [instreviewboard@calu.edu](mailto:instreviewboard@calu.edu)**

**Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.**

**Regards,**

**Melissa Sovak, PhD.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board**