

An Exploratory Case Study: Early career elementary teacher perceptions of adverse childhood experiences and classroom behavior

by

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B.S., Missouri Western State University, 2010
M.S., Missouri Western State University, 2012
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the lived experiences of six early-career educators as they confront their district-assigned duties and the profound effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) within public elementary classrooms. Through an integrated analysis of teacher experiences and social-emotional learning (SEL), this research employs a four-pillar conceptual framework to investigate how elementary teachers navigate their beliefs, rapport-building strategies, motivations, and cultural awareness while supporting students facing extreme adversity. Informed by the theoretical foundations of Bandura (1986), CASEL (2023), Maslow (1943), Gorski (2019), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Gay (2000), the study addresses the complex challenges educators encounter in fostering emotional regulation and social-emotional development in high-needs educational environments.

The four-pillar framework provides a comprehensive lens for understanding trauma-informed education's critical dimensions. The first pillar focuses on educators' beliefs and decision-making, emphasizing how personal reflections and biases inform pedagogical practices. The second pillar examines the transformative potential of SEL, underscoring the importance of building meaningful educator-student relationships while addressing the emotional labor teachers endure in managing both student and personal emotional triggers. The third pillar studies the motivational influences that sustain educators' commitment to student well-being, even in the face of compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion. The fourth pillar addresses cultural competence, exploring how teachers' lived experiences and implicit biases shape their ability to create inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Findings suggest that while early-career elementary educators are highly motivated to support their students, they often lack sufficient preparation and institutional support to manage

their roles' significant cognitive and emotional demands. The study also highlights that cultural awareness and equity are essential to ensure trauma-informed practices do not inadvertently reinforce biases or perpetuate inequalities. Integrating the author's narrative of overcoming childhood trauma, this research bridges personal experience with scholarly inquiry, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges of emotional regulation faced by both students and teachers.

The dissertation advocates for greater acknowledgment of the emotional labor required for elementary educators to work daily with trauma-affected students. The close interaction between educators and students necessitates continuous emotional engagement, with teachers tasked with academic instruction and managing the emotional well-being of their students and themselves. The study concludes with actionable recommendations to enhance teacher education programs, focusing on SEL, trauma-informed practices, and cultural awareness better to equip educators for the complexities of contemporary classrooms. By addressing these critical gaps, this research contributes to the advancement of more equitable and trauma-responsive educational opportunities, promoting environments that meet diverse student needs while supporting teachers' professional growth and emotional resilience.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), cultural awareness, early-career educators, elementary education, emotional regulation, social-emotional learning (SEL), sustainable practices, teacher preparation, trauma-informed education

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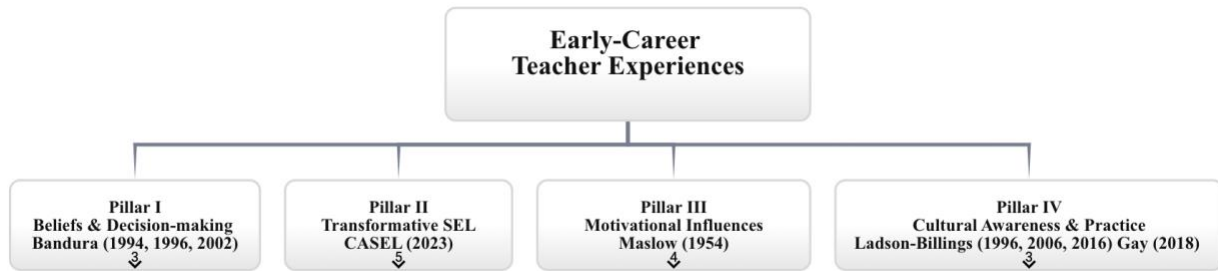


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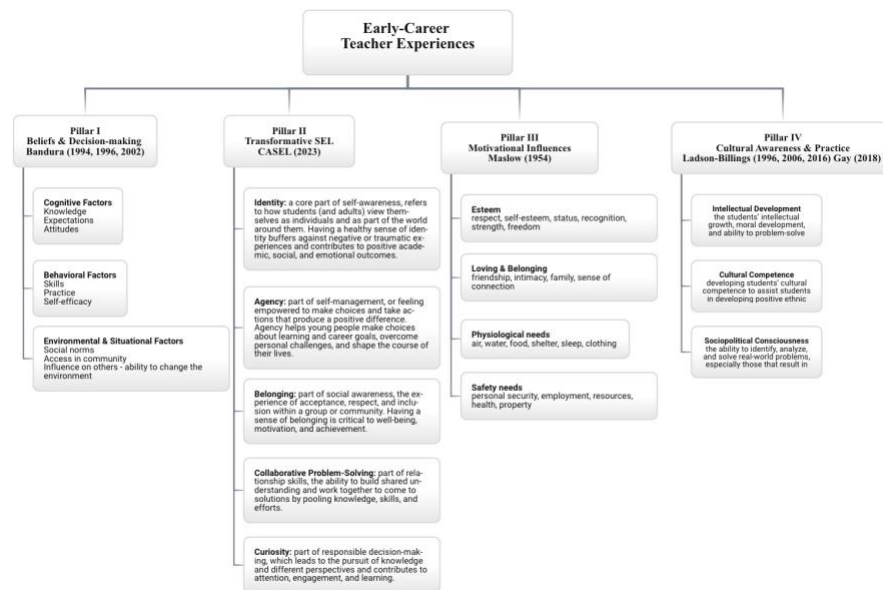


Figure 4.1 Codes and Emerging Themes 124

Emerging Code	Description
Emotional Regulation	Techniques like check-ins, calm-down spaces, and behavioral charts for regulation.
Bias Awareness	Recognition and mitigation of unconscious biases, especially from diverse students.
Resource Scarcity	Limited resources lead to teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion.
Classroom Management Strategies	Techniques to manage behavior and emotional needs in classroom settings.
Support for Students with ACEs	Need for additional resources and emotional support for students with ACEs.

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Dedication

To the devoted public school elementary educators who grapple with the weighty responsibility of nurturing and educating children shaped by life's early adversities, this work is born from your dedication. This dissertation is a tribute to your resilience, a recognition of your tireless pursuit of equity, and homage to your unyielding belief in the power of education to transform lives.

Preface

My experience as a public school teacher has deeply informed my understanding of the challenges elementary educators face in navigating the intricate intersection of trauma, equity, and student well-being. Having observed firsthand the significant effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on students' academic, social, and emotional development, I was compelled to investigate how teachers perceive and respond to these complexities. This dissertation, *An Exploratory Case Study: Early-career Elementary Teacher Perceptions of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Classroom Behavior*, critically examines the perspectives of elementary educators who are on the front lines of this work. By amplifying their voices, this research underscores the pivotal role of teachers' beliefs and practices in fostering supportive and equitable learning environments for students affected by trauma.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Professional Connection

In preparing for this dissertation, I took the problematic yet illuminating step of reading the notes in my adoption file and reports from my early educators. Though often disheartening, these documents revealed critical insights into my own educational journey and the challenges I faced as a young learner. The candid assessments and observations in those files, while at times painful to revisit, were a necessary part of understanding how childhood experiences, including trauma, shape learning, and development. This process reinforced my belief in the need for education reform to support elementary students with similar backgrounds better and has fueled my determination to contribute to that change through this research.

The journey toward understanding the profound impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on educational outcomes and lifelong well-being is deeply personal. My childhood, set against the backdrop of the 1980s, was marked by the harsh realities of parental addiction, domestic violence, and the pervasive instability defined my early developmental years. Born in 1985, I was thrust into a world where uncertainty reigned, my young life shaped by my biological mother's volatile relationships. These experiences, though not fully understood then, now fall under the umbrella of ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998), a framework that illuminates the struggles I faced and continues to resonate with countless children today, who remain unseen and unsupported by an education system that has largely remained static.

My educational philosophy is greatly shaped by my individual experiences as a child affected by multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and later on, I became an elementary educator. These experiences have shaped my understanding of children's numerous challenges, particularly those from turbulent backgrounds, which underscore emotional

regulation education's critical role in their development (Felitti et al., 1998). My resilience has fueled my determination to advocate for meaningful educational shifts aimed at sustainably addressing the needs of all children, especially those grappling with the consequences of trauma.

Children are not machines programmed to ignore their realities while subjected to academic demands imposed by educational systems. They require deep, consistent connections with caregivers who understand trauma's profound impact on development. As Perry and Szalavitz (2017) assert, "Children who have been hurt or neglected need far more than someone giving them treats or gold stars" (p. 115). This sentiment resonates with me as I reflect on my childhood, recognizing the parallels between my experiences and those of countless children currently bearing the weight of trauma. Burke-Harris (2018) notes, "Exposure to toxic stress in childhood changes our biology in ways that can last a lifetime" (p. 16), emphasizing the necessity for educational systems to integrate a framework that acknowledges the lasting effects of trauma. One of my biological sisters, adopted into our family, faced significant challenges due to prenatal exposure to methamphetamine and subsequent mental health struggles that showed up early in her development. My sister's early battle with ADHD, and addiction ultimately led to her passing in 2021, underscoring a personal tragedy that highlights an urgent need for sustainable emotional support from an early age. The pervasive impact of ACEs on individuals and families reflects a broader societal concern that demands evolving elementary educational systems to address the unique needs of children profoundly affected by trauma. Research highlights the significant long-term consequences of ACEs, including emotional dysregulation, cognitive impairments, and diminished academic outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998; Bethell et al., 2017).

My academic needs were substantial as a child, particularly in reading, writing, and mathematics. Fortunately, I had access to various external support services that were critical to my academic development, including specialized reading and math tutoring, vision therapy, and counseling with a clinical psychologist. These resources were available to me primarily due to my caregivers' proactive efforts and educational awareness, my parents were informed about and committed to securing the necessary interventions. However, this level of support is different for a large population of elementary students in public schools still today.

A sizable portion of today's student population faces limited access to essential educational and psychological resources, often due to numerous factors such as socioeconomic barriers, limited parental knowledge about available services, and inadequate support systems within schools (Lareau, 2011; Reardon, 2013). Lareau, 2011 indicates that students from lower-income families are less likely to receive the same level of academic interventions and mental health support as their more affluent peers, exacerbating educational inequalities.

Additionally, many parents, particularly those from marginalized communities, may need to be fully aware of the resources available to their children, further contributing to this gap (Murray et al., 2014). The absence of robust support structures within schools, such as specialized tutoring and counseling services, further widens the opportunity gap, disproportionately impacting students in underserved areas (Reardon, 2013; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). This growing disparity underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure equitable access to academic and emotional support for all students, regardless of their background (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Historically, the education system has placed a greater emphasis on academic achievement, often at the expense of addressing students' emotional and psychological well-

being (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). A strong focus on federal funding criteria, standardized testing and measurable academic outcomes has led to the marginalization of social-emotional learning in many schools (Reyes et al., 2012). As a result, the holistic development of young students, particularly in areas related to emotional regulation and mental health, has frequently been overlooked despite growing evidence that emotional well-being is integral to academic success and overall development (Ravitch, 2010; Reyes et al., 2012). This approach persisted into the late 20th century when the term “Adverse Childhood Experiences” had yet to gain traction among educators. The recognition of ACEs gained momentum in the late 1990s following a pivotal study by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente, which elucidated the long-term effects of childhood trauma on health and well-being.

This research highlights the pressing need for early intervention, stating that “adverse childhood experiences are the single greatest unaddressed public health threat facing our nation today” (Anda et al., 2006, p. 44). Implementing trauma-informed strategies fosters resilience and emotional well-being (Craig, 2016; Hammond, 2015). Despite the growing evidence supporting trauma-informed practices, states, large school districts have been slow to implement necessary changes and choose to prioritizing academic performance over the holistic needs of young children (Craig, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Purpose of Study

This exploratory case study examines the experiences of early-career elementary educators, including how they respond to challenging student behaviors and whether their responses are informed by their awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences. This dissertation represents a rigorous academic exploration, and a profoundly personal mission rooted in lived experience as a child and an adult.

Research shows that children with three or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are five times more likely to struggle with attendance, six times more likely to exhibit behavioral challenges, and three times more likely to experience academic failure (Bethell et al., 2017; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Guarino & Sklar, 2020). These statistics underscore the critical need for trauma-informed approaches in elementary educational settings, as the impact of ACEs can profoundly disrupt students' ability to thrive in school and other social environments (Porche et al., 2016; Thompson & Reid, 2019). As an individual who has endured the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and has been a teacher in multiple public elementary schools, the connection between my past and the modern challenges young students face today is profoundly unaddressed in elementary classrooms. These parallels underscore the urgent obligation for educators to possess an understanding of the lasting impacts of ACEs.

Overview of Issues

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Despite increasing awareness of the profound effects Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have on children's emotional and cognitive development, many public schools continue to lack the necessary resources and structures to effectively address these needs prior to emphasizing academic achievement (Bethell et al., 2017; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Guarino & Sklar, 2020). Research consistently highlights the critical role of early intervention in supporting trauma-affected students, yet schools often prioritize academic outcomes without adequately integrating trauma-informed practices (Bethell et al., 2017; Porche et al., 2016; Thompson & Reid, 2019). Current research indicates a pressing need for industrial education to evolve beyond outdated, non-operational teaching methods and adopt trauma-informed practices that effectively address the urgent needs of young students impacted by trauma. Traditional educational

approaches often need to recognize the unique challenges faced by these students, resulting in disengagement and ineffective learning outcomes (Blume, 2018; Gorski, 2016).

Traditional educational approaches often fail to address the unique challenges that trauma-impacted students face, leading to disengagement, behavioral issues, and overall ineffective learning environments. This disconnect not only affects students' emotional well-being but also contributes to widening achievement gaps, as students with unaddressed trauma struggle to keep up with their peers (Blume, 2018; Gorski, 2016). Moreover, these students may internalize feelings of failure or frustration, which can reinforce negative self-perceptions and further impair their learning ability.

Implementing trauma-informed strategies is not just beneficial but essential for fostering resilience, emotional well-being, and academic success among all students, especially those impacted by ACEs. Trauma-informed practices involve rethinking discipline approaches, restructuring classroom environments to promote emotional safety, and training educators to recognize and respond to trauma-related behaviors with compassion and understanding (Cummings et al., 2021; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). These strategies support the holistic development of students by fostering a learning environment that prioritizes emotional and psychological safety, which in turn enhances academic engagement and performance.

Furthermore, research shows that trauma-informed practices also lead to improved classroom dynamics. When educators become more attuned to their students' emotional and behavioral needs, behavioral disruptions are often significantly reduced, allowing for more effective classroom management and teaching (Miller, 2015; Vasquez et al., 2019).

To fully realize the potential of trauma-informed practices, schools must also invest in ongoing professional development for educators. Teachers often lack the training and resources

needed to effectively support trauma-affected students, which can contribute to burnout and feelings of helplessness when faced with challenging behaviors (Craig, 2016; Hammond, 2015). Professional development programs that focus on trauma-sensitive strategies, self-care, and emotional regulation can equip teachers with the tools they need to create safe, supportive learning spaces where all students, regardless of their background or experiences, have the opportunity to thrive both emotionally and academically.

With that said, adopting trauma-sensitive educational practices in elementary classrooms is crucial for addressing the pressing needs of students impacted by trauma. By fostering environments that prioritize emotional well-being and resilience, schools can create equitable and effective educational experiences that promote both academic success and overall well-being (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Fostering critical awareness in educators requires professional development centered on anti-racism, equity, and inclusion. Kendi (2019) emphasizes that anti-racist training is essential for helping teachers recognize biases and implement culturally responsive methods. This training equips educators to create inclusive environments while reflecting on their assumptions. Additionally, educators should engage with the communities they serve, as Paris and Alim (2017) highlight the importance of community relationships for understanding students' needs and fostering belonging.

Cultural competence is another key aspect of effective teaching. Teachers need to critically examine trauma, poverty, and racism and understand how these factors shape the classroom environment. Incorporating knowledge of the stress response system enables students to manage emotions better, leading to academic success and resilience (Santiago et al., 2011;

Masten & Barnes, 2018). This is crucial for marginalized students, who face compounded barriers from poverty, trauma, and racism that hinder emotional and academic success.

Foundational frameworks by scholars like Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings provide insights into equitable education. Ladson-Billings (2014) stresses empowering students to question inequalities, while Gay (2010) focuses on aligning teaching methods with students' cultural contexts to meet diverse learners' needs. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) fosters engagement by reflecting students' cultures in the curriculum, boosting belonging and motivation. Additionally, restorative justice practices in discipline shift the focus from punishment to healing, addressing underlying behavioral causes and supporting marginalized students.

CRT is vital for addressing trauma, especially in marginalized communities. By integrating students' cultural experiences into learning, CRT creates an inclusive environment where students feel seen, valued, and supported, which is essential for overcoming trauma's effects.

Social Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) focuses on teaching students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills alongside academics. CASEL's (2020) framework promotes activities that build self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL fosters a supportive environment, helping students thrive socially and academically. Collaboration is essential in modern education, where teachers, students, families, and communities must work together to develop communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (Gorski, 2019).

Historically, education emphasized discipline and conformity over individual growth, with harsh measures like physical discipline and zero-tolerance policies rooted in social control (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). This legacy persists today, where rigid, test-driven models and strict discipline often marginalize disadvantaged students, perpetuating inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Gorski, 2013). The focus on compliance over creativity and critical thinking disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for a more equitable and supportive approach that addresses students' diverse needs (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015). Addressing these systemic challenges requires dismantling historical inequities and promoting holistic, inclusive education.

Teacher Bias

Research highlights the significant impact of teacher beliefs and implicit biases on students' academic and social outcomes. Implicit biases: unconscious attitudes shaped by factors like race, socioeconomic status, and language proficiency, affect instructional strategies, classroom management, and student-teacher interactions (Baker et al., 2016; Gay, 2018). These biases often lead to lower expectations for marginalized students, resulting in less challenging materials, fewer opportunities for engagement, and harsher disciplinary actions, particularly for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Educators who view themselves as authoritarian figures, rather than facilitators of learning, may create rigid classroom environments that suppress student autonomy, especially for trauma-impacted students who need empathy and flexibility. Misinterpreting trauma-related behaviors like hypervigilance or withdrawal as defiance can lead to exclusionary discipline, disproportionately affecting vulnerable students (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Skiba et al., 2014).

Teacher biases also shape instructional approaches, with educators neglecting culturally responsive teaching if unaware of their own biases. This results in disengagement and underachievement among non-dominant cultural groups (Gay, 2018). Lower expectations based on bias can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where students internalize these expectations and perform below their potential (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Addressing implicit biases requires intentional reflection and professional development focused on cultural competence and trauma-informed teaching (Oakes et al., 2015). Educators who engage in reflective practices can create more equitable learning environments, reducing the perpetuation of systemic inequities (Flook et al., 2013).

Statement of Problem

The increasing social-emotional demands placed on elementary educators, particularly in addressing the needs of trauma-affected students, pose significant challenges within the public education system. The emotional well-being of elementary-aged children and teachers has emerged as a critical national concern, particularly as states grapple with difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified teachers while attempting to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) practices into K-12 education (Jones et al., 2018). The documented teacher shortages, especially in high-need areas, exacerbate this issue, with states facing escalating challenges in filling teaching positions (García & Weiss, 2019). The growing emphasis on SEL necessitates additional teacher training and support, further intensifying the demands placed on educators and aggravating the existing recruitment and retention crisis (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021). Without sufficient institutional support and preparation, the current teacher shortage will likely deepen, as demonstrated by the widening gaps in teacher availability across the nation (Sutcher et al., 2016). Addressing this crisis requires

systemic reforms within teacher education programs and state and local school districts to ensure novice educators have the strategies to effectively implement SEL and trauma-informed practices (Darling-Hammond, 2017). These evolving educational demands place new elementary teachers in a more complex and challenging landscape, requiring pedagogical expertise and heightened emotional and psychological competence to navigate the intricate dynamics of modern classrooms.

In the United States, public schools are legally mandated to educate all children, including those from diverse backgrounds who may have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The prevalence of ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, is substantial. Research indicates that nearly two-thirds of American children experience at least one ACE during their formative years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). This data underscores the imperative for elementary schools to integrate trauma-informed practices into their educational frameworks to meet the unique needs of students impacted by trauma.

Failure to address the effects of trauma in public schools' risks overlooking a fundamental aspect of student well-being. Unaddressed trauma can significantly impede a student's academic, social, and emotional development, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and negative educational outcomes (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Despite ongoing reform efforts over the past two decades, students are frequently expected to engage in learning activities that may not align with their developmental readiness. As Siegel (2012) notes, "The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions such as impulse control, working memory, and flexible thinking, is not fully developed in children and adolescents. This means they are

often required to engage in tasks beyond their current cognitive and emotional capacity, particularly in stressful or high-demand environments like school" (p. 27).

Incorporating trauma-informed practices into public schools is essential not only for addressing the needs of students with ACEs but also for promoting educational equity. Embedding these practices into daily instruction enables educators to create responsive and supportive learning environments that accommodate all students' diverse needs, ensuring that students affected by trauma receive the necessary tools to succeed, framing trauma-informed education as a foundational element of a holistic educational strategy. Such an approach is not merely an additional intervention but a vital component of providing all students with equitable academic and personal success opportunities, regardless of their background or experiences.

However, before these reforms can be implemented sustainably, it is essential to reexamine the structure of elementary school environments, including academic practices and behavioral expectations. Only by addressing these foundational aspects of the education system can meaningful and lasting improvements be made to ensure that SEL and trauma-informed practices are effectively integrated into daily classroom operations.

Research Questions

There are four questions that guided this research. One question aligned to each of the conceptual framework pillars.

Beliefs & Decision-making (Pillar I): How do early-career educators' beliefs about their abilities shape their support for students with social and emotional challenges?

Transformative SEL (Pillar II): In what ways do early-career educators build rapport with students facing social and emotional challenges?

Motivational Influences (Pillar III): How do human needs affect early-career educators' commitment to supporting students with social-emotional needs from childhood adversity?

Cultural Awareness (Pillar IV): How do early-career educators consider their experiences, biases, and cultural competence when working with diverse students?

Key Terms

These key terms have been defined as they are used often within this study:

1. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. ACEs have been shown to have lasting effects on physical, mental, and emotional health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019).
2. Emotional Labor refers to the process by which teachers manage their emotions to meet the emotional and relational demands of their profession. It involves regulating personal feelings to create a positive learning environment, respond empathetically to students, and handle classroom challenges, often resulting in stress and burnout if not adequately supported (Hochschild, 2012; Yin et al., 2019).
3. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021).
4. Trauma-Informed Education an approach to teaching that recognizes the presence of trauma in students' lives and seeks to provide a supportive and understanding environment that promotes safety, trust, and healing. This approach includes strategies to

help students regulate emotions and behavior while fostering an inclusive learning environment (Craig, 2016).

5. Teacher Retention refers to the ability of educational institutions to retain qualified teachers over a sustained period. High teacher turnover rates negatively impact student achievement and institutional stability (Ingersoll, 2012).
6. Teacher Burnout a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to stressful work conditions, often characterized by depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment, and overwhelming exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
7. Novice Teacher is an individual in the first three years of their teaching career. Novice teachers often face unique challenges related to classroom management, instructional practices, and professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).
8. Cultural Competence refers to an educator's ability to effectively teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds by understanding, appreciating, and adapting to students' different cultural experiences (Gay, 2010).
9. Executive Functioning includes cognitive processes such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control, which are critical for goal-directed behavior and academic success. Deficits in executive functioning can be exacerbated by trauma (Diamond, 2013).
10. Implicit Bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence an individual's behavior and decision-making. In the educational context, implicit bias can affect teacher expectations, classroom interactions, and student outcomes (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006).

11. Behavior Management involves strategies and techniques used by educators to encourage positive behavior, reduce disruptive behavior, and create an environment conducive to learning (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).
12. Resilience is adapting and thriving in adversity, stress, or trauma. In education, fostering resilience involves helping students develop coping skills and a growth mindset that allows them to overcome challenges (Masten, 2014).
13. Professional Development refers to ongoing training and education for teachers to improve their teaching practices, stay current with educational research, and meet the evolving needs of students (Desimone, 2009).
14. Case Study Research a qualitative research method that involves the in-depth exploration of a specific case within its real-life context. It is particularly useful for examining complex phenomena, especially when the boundaries between the case and its context are not immediately clear (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
15. Equity in Education refers to ensuring all students have access to the same educational opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, or disability. This concept focuses on fairness, social justice, and removing barriers to achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
16. Emotional Dysregulation refers to difficulties in managing and responding to emotional experiences in an appropriate way. This can lead to behavior challenges in the classroom, particularly for students affected by trauma (Cole et al., 2013).
17. Teacher Preparation Programs are higher education programs designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be effective

educators. These programs typically include coursework, fieldwork, and student teaching experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

18. Restorative Practices in education focus on building and maintaining positive relationships and addressing conflict through dialogue and mutual understanding. This approach is used to create a supportive learning environment and reduce punitive disciplinary actions (Wachtel, 2016).
19. Classroom Management encompasses the strategies educators use to maintain an orderly, productive learning environment. It includes organizing students, materials, and classroom space, as well as establishing routines and expectations (Marzano, 2007).

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual framework offers a structured approach for organizing ideas, the research questions, and methods. It is intended to setup the scope and focus of the study, ensuring that data collection and analysis are aligned with the overarching goals of the research. Each pillar is based on a set of theoretical foundations that informs how researchers and practitioners develop a deeper understanding of “teachers experiences in understanding and addressing the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

This research is guided by a conceptual framework consisting of four pillars: Pillar I Beliefs and Decision-making (Bandura, 1997), Pillar II Transformative SEL (CASEL, 2023), Pillar III Motivational Influences (Maslow, 1954) and Pillar IV Cultural Awareness (Ladson-Billings). The four pillar framework provides structure and boundaries for the study’s data and the theoretical underpinnings are used to provide context and relevancy.

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

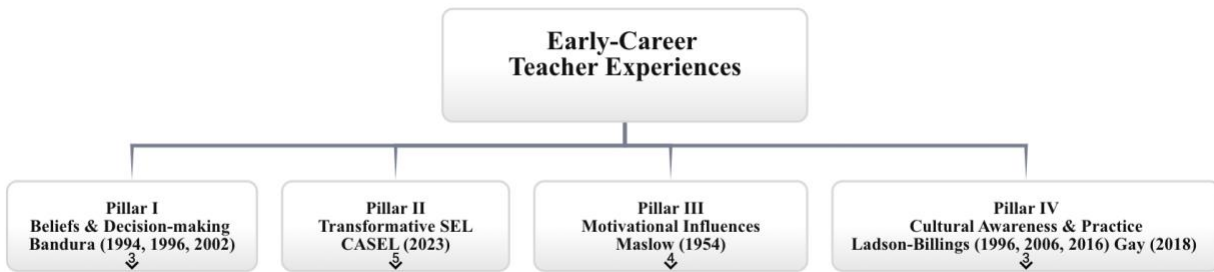
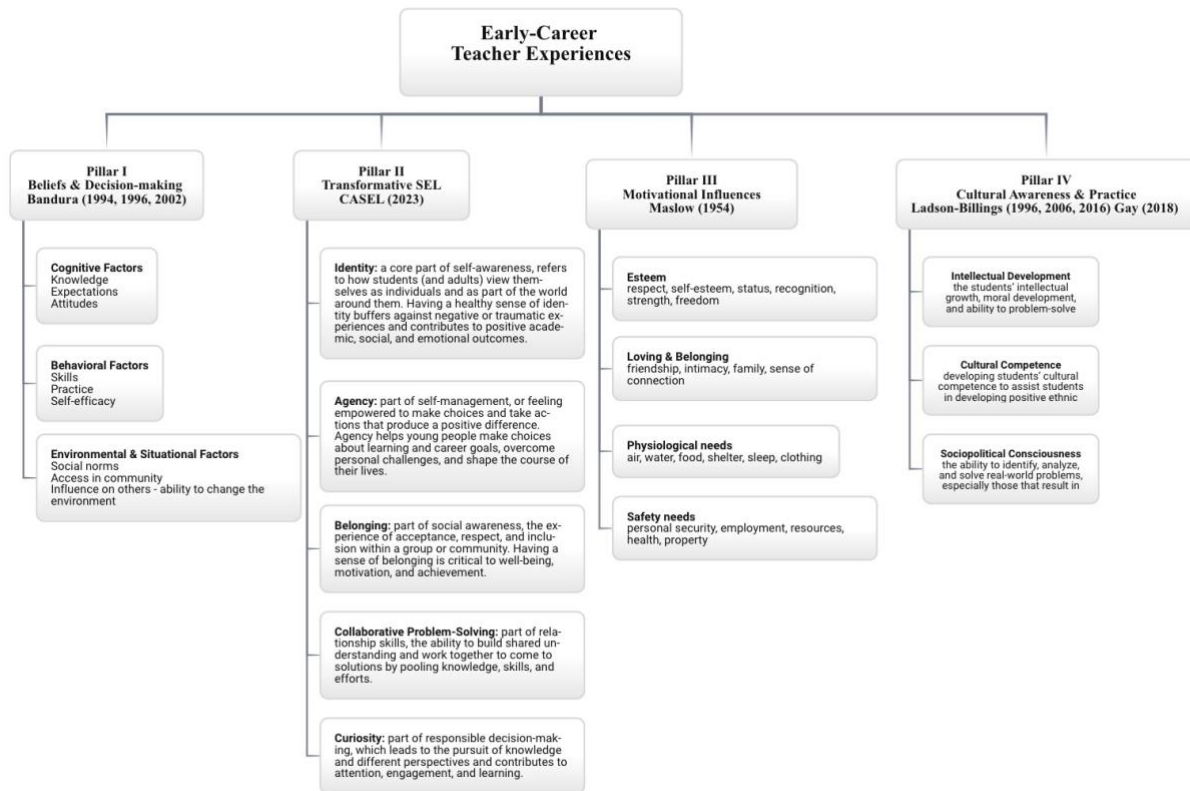


Figure 1.2 Theoretical Frameworks



Pillar I: Beliefs & Decision-Making, based on Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, explores how teachers' beliefs about their capabilities influence their decision-making in the classroom. Teachers are active agents who interpret and respond to the dynamic challenges of the classroom environment. Understanding their belief systems provides insight into how they shape instructional strategies and classroom management practices. Focusing solely on SEL or

any other theoretical lens would risk overlooking the critical role that belief systems play in shaping teachers' social-emotional practices.

Pillar II: Transformative SEL emphasizes how educators implement SEL strategies to foster supportive, emotionally safe environments (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023). The effectiveness of SEL is closely tied to a teacher's belief in their capacity to deliver these strategies successfully (Bandura, 1997). SEL cannot be analyzed without other factors, such as beliefs, motivations, or cultural competence, as these elements significantly influence how educators integrate SEL practices into their classrooms. CASEL (2023) highlights that creating emotionally safe environments is a dynamic and ongoing process requiring continual adaptation and teacher reflection.

Pillar III: Motivational Influences, informed by Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, examines the underlying factors that drive teachers' engagement, persistence, and resilience. Motivation plays a vital role in determining how teachers approach their work, especially when faced with the demands of early-career teaching. This pillar enables the study to investigate how personal and professional motivations shape teachers' evolving identities and their ability to effectively integrate SEL and other teaching practices. Without considering the motivational aspects of teaching, the study would miss an essential element of how teachers maintain their emotional well-being and effectiveness in the classroom.

Pillar IV: Cultural Awareness focuses on educators integrating cultural competence and diversity awareness into their pedagogy. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, cultural awareness becomes integral to effective teaching. Cultural competence is closely intertwined with SEL practices, belief systems, and motivational influences, making it necessary to understand how early-career educators address the complexities of diverse classrooms. This

pillar ensures that the study captures how teachers respond to and incorporate the increasing cultural diversity in their schools, essential to fostering inclusive learning environments. The four-pillar framework provides the foundation for the research questions and serves as the analytical lens through which the data is interpreted.

Each pillar addresses a distinct but interconnected aspect of teaching, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the participants' experiences. Integrating Beliefs and decision-making, Transformative SEL, Motivational Influences, and Cultural Awareness ensures that the study captures the full range of factors influencing early-career educators in large, diverse school districts. This holistic approach aligns with the growing emphasis in educational systems on comprehensive teaching frameworks that prioritize social-emotional, cultural, and motivational dimensions. The decision to incorporate all four pillars reflects the reality of teaching in diverse classrooms, particularly in large school districts like those in large Midwest districts. Teachers are not expected to compartmentalize their practices but must integrate their beliefs, motivations, cultural competence, and SEL strategies into daily student interactions. Using a multi-pillar framework ensures that the study mirrors the complexities of modern teaching environments and contributes to a more complete understanding of early-career educators' experiences.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the intersection of social-emotional learning (SEL) practices and the unique challenges elementary educators face in public school settings. While substantial evidence had already demonstrated the positive impact of SEL on student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004), far less research explored how elementary teachers navigated the complexities of implementing these practices

amidst high student-to-teacher ratios, varying levels of institutional support, and the increasing demands of trauma-informed education.

Methodology

Designing this study as an exploratory case study was essential for capturing early-career educators' complex, real-world experiences in public elementary schools. Exploratory case studies are particularly effective for investigating phenomena that are not yet fully understood, allowing for an in-depth, focused analysis of early-career educators as distinct "cases." Each participant in the study was treated as a single, bounded case, enabling a detailed exploration of their professional roles, challenges, and the specific educational contexts in which they work.

The qualitative case study methodology was well-suited to address the research questions. It aimed to explore how early-career educators' perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences shaped their teaching practices and decision-making processes with challenging students. As Stake (1995) emphasizes, case studies provide a robust framework for capturing the complexity and depth of participants' experiences within their real-world environments. This approach allowed the researcher to gather rich, context-specific insights into novice educators' personal and professional trajectories, aligning with the study's goal of developing a comprehensive understanding of these experience.

Building on Stake's perspective, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight the inductive nature of case studies, which supports the emergence of themes and patterns through holistic analysis. This inductive process was particularly valuable in examining the evolving nature of early-career teaching, where educators' beliefs and practices are continuously shaped by their ongoing experiences and challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By treating each participant as a bounded case, the methodology allowed for an individualized examination of each teacher's

context and broader insights into early-career teaching dynamics. Yin (2018) also underscores the relevance of case study methodology in focusing on real-life settings, a key consideration when studying complex social phenomena such as teaching and learning. This approach enabled the researcher to examine the intersectionality of personal and professional identities, particularly among novice teachers. By situating each participant within the specific educational environments they navigated, the study provided a context-sensitive and layered understanding of how external factors, such as school culture and student demographics, interacted with internal beliefs and perceptions.

Furthermore, the depth of analysis offered by this methodology yielded valuable insights into how early-career educators developed as professionals and responded to the challenges they faced in real-time (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The qualitative case study method thus proved an ideal tool for uncovering the complexities of teaching in high-needs environments, where educators are required to constantly adapt to diverse student needs and institutional expectations.

Organization of Study

Chapter One opens with a personal narrative, a poignant account that briefly outlines my experiences with childhood trauma and its profound effects on my behavior and learning outcomes. This chapter lays the groundwork for the research by clearly defining the study's purpose, introducing the key issues under investigation, articulating the problem statement, and presenting the research questions that guide the inquiry. It also defines critical terms relevant to the study, provides an overview of the research methodology, and outlines the organization of the entire dissertation.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review examining the primary themes relevant to this study. These include childhood adversity, the effects of adverse childhood

experiences (ACEs) on learning outcomes, the role of social-emotional learning (SEL), the impact of stress on child development, culturally responsive teaching practices, and the professional development of novice teachers. The chapter aims to situate the study within the broader field, providing a foundation for understanding the complex factors that influence the experiences of early-career educators and the students they serve.

Chapter Three provides a brief description from two pilot studies that informed the development of this research. Additionally, the chapter outlines the study's methodological framework, restating the research questions and thoroughly describing the research design and procedures. This chapter explains the criteria for participant selection, the role of the researcher, and the specific data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, it discusses the timeline of the research and the measures taken to ensure the study's trustworthiness, including ethical considerations, triangulation of data sources, and strategies for enhancing credibility and dependability.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, focusing on the themes that emerge from the data analysis. This chapter offers a detailed discussion of the coding process, highlighting key patterns and relationships that surface through the participants' narratives. The theoretical analysis is interwoven throughout, providing insights into how the four-pillar framework; Beliefs and decision-making, Transformative SEL, Motivational Influences, and Cultural Awareness, intersects with the experiences of early-career educators.

Chapter Five synthesizes the study's findings, drawing connections between the data and the theoretical framework. This chapter discusses the implications of the research for educational practice, particularly in addressing the needs of students affected by childhood trauma. It also considers the study's limitations and offers suggestions for future research, providing

recommendations that may inspire further investigation into the experiences of elementary educators and the role of social-emotional and culturally responsive teaching practices. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's contributions to the field of education, emphasizing the potential for a lasting impact on both policy and practice.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This study explores the experiences of early-career elementary educators as they navigate the intricate dynamics between social-emotional learning (SEL), culturally responsive teaching (CRT), and the unique challenges posed by students affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). As the demographics of American classrooms continue to evolve, with an increasing presence of culturally and socio-economically diverse students, the need for educators to address not only academic outcomes but also the profound socio-emotional and developmental impacts of childhood trauma has become paramount (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Educators are increasingly tasked with fostering environments that are both inclusive and responsive to the complex interplay between culture, trauma, and learning (Brunzell et al., 2016; Hammond, 2015).

This study is deeply informed by both personal and professional perspectives, particularly the researcher's own experiences with childhood trauma and the limitations of emotional and academic support systems within the public school system. These lived experiences underscore the urgency of this research and have shaped the study's focus on trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive pedagogies. The disconnect observed between the needs of vulnerable student populations and the public education systems superficially designed to support them (Darling-Hammond, 2020) further necessitates this investigation.

Through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, this chapter seeks to establish a nuanced understanding of the multi-faceted factors that influence both educators and students in contemporary classrooms, thereby providing a robust academic foundation for the study's exploration of trauma-informed and culturally responsive educational practices. In meeting this

aim, this chapter is comprised of five sections: 1) adverse childhood experiences, 2) culturally responsive pedagogy, 3) social emotional learning, 4) teacher bias, and 5) theoretical foundations.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

The elementary-aged children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often face significant disruptions in their brain development, particularly in areas responsible for emotional regulation, executive functioning, and social behavior. The prefrontal cortex, which governs decision-making and impulse control, and the amygdala, which processes emotions, can be impaired due to chronic stress (Teicher & Samson, 2016). Prolonged exposure to trauma and stress during early childhood can lead to heightened sensitivity to stressors, causing children to react disproportionately to minor challenges. This altered brain development can result in difficulty focusing, controlling impulses, and managing emotional responses in the classroom.

According to Anda et al. (2006), children with high ACE scores are more likely to display behavioral issues, struggle academically, and have trouble forming positive relationships with peers and teachers. Moreover, the hippocampus, critical for memory and learning, can be adversely affected by toxic stress, leading to attention challenges, information retention, and overall cognitive performance (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). As a result, elementary children with ACEs often require targeted, trauma-informed interventions to support their emotional and cognitive development, creating a safe and supportive environment that fosters resilience and academic success.

Stress Response and Learning

The stress response system, often referred to as the fight-or-flight response, is a critical adaptive mechanism that enables individuals to respond swiftly to perceived threats. This system initiates a series of hormonal and neurological processes that prepare the body to manage emergencies. Research consistently demonstrates that chronic stressors such as childhood poverty significantly impact brain development, particularly during its most formative stages (Evans & Schamberg, 2009). Prolonged exposure to poverty-related stress disrupts neural circuits responsible for emotional regulation and executive functioning, resulting in long-term cognitive and emotional challenges (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

For educators to effectively support students exposed to adverse conditions like poverty, they must understand the profound effects of chronic stress on cognitive and emotional development. Shonkoff et al. (2012) explain that prolonged activation of the stress response system can lead to toxic stress, which fundamentally alters brain architecture, impairing a child's ability to learn, remember, and regulate emotions. Toxic stress, prevalent among students from low-income families, creates barriers to learning that extend beyond academic content, highlighting the need for educators to adopt holistic approaches to teaching (Blair & Raver, 2012).

Trauma-informed practices are crucial in addressing these barriers within the classroom. Darling-Hammond (2015) emphasizes the need for educators to move beyond traditional disciplinary approaches, advocating for trauma-informed strategies that reduce anxiety and promote resilience among students. These practices focus on addressing the root causes of stress-related behaviors, creating a more supportive environment that allows students to thrive both academically and emotionally (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). A thorough understanding of

how the stress response manifests in behavior is vital for educators seeking to implement effective trauma-informed practices tailored to students' emotional and cognitive needs.

Poverty and Cognitive Development

Poverty is a chronic stressor that profoundly affects brain development, particularly during early childhood, when the brain is most malleable and sensitive to environmental influences. The stress associated with poverty is not limited to financial hardship; it encompasses a range of challenges, including food insecurity, a lack of housing, exposure to violence, and lack of access to healthcare. These conditions collectively create an environment of toxic stress, which has been shown to significantly impact cognitive and emotional development. Perry and Szalavitz (2006) explain that "Chronic exposure to poverty-related stress can disrupt the development of neural circuits, particularly those involved in emotional regulation and executive function, resulting in long-lasting consequences for learning and behavior" (p. 120). This disruption can manifest in numerous ways, including difficulties in emotional regulation, reduced attention span, and impaired social interactions—all of which are critical for academic success.

One of the primary ways poverty-related stress affects brain development is through the constant activation of the body's stress response system. Research shows that prolonged activation of the stress response system, particularly during early childhood, leads to toxic stress, which can alter the architecture of the developing brain. Shonkoff et al. (2012) argue that "toxic stress disrupts the development of brain circuits, especially in areas critical for learning, memory, and executive function" (p. e232). These areas of the brain are essential for academic tasks such as problem-solving, attention, and self-control, meaning that students exposed to chronic poverty may face significant challenges in these areas as they progress through school.

Evans and Kim (2012) further elaborate on the physiological impact of poverty-related stress, noting that "children growing up in poverty exhibit higher levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, which is linked to poorer cognitive function and emotional regulation" (p. 345). Elevated cortisol levels can impair a child's ability to concentrate, remember information, and manage emotions, which are vital skills for success in the classroom. This biological response to chronic stress creates a feedback loop, where children struggling to focus or control their emotions may fall behind academically, leading to further stress and compounding their challenges.

Moreover, poverty-related stress often results in emotional dysregulation, which significantly impacts a child's social interactions. Children who experience chronic stress may have difficulty forming secure attachments with peers and teachers, further hindering their ability to succeed in a school environment. Luby et al. (2013) emphasize that "children living in poverty are more likely to exhibit social withdrawal or aggressive behaviors, both of which can negatively impact peer relationships and classroom dynamics" (p. 78). Social connections are crucial for learning, as positive relationships with peers and educators provide emotional support and encouragement, which can help mitigate the effects of stress. When these relationships are strained or absent, students are more likely to disengage from the learning process.

In addition to emotional and social challenges, poverty also influences academic performance through its impact on executive function. Executive function refers to a set of cognitive processes, including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control, which are essential for goal-directed behavior. Blair and Raver (2016) explain that "children raised in low-income households tend to have lower executive function skills, which are necessary for academic success, particularly in tasks that require planning, attention, and

problem-solving" (p. 52). These deficits in executive function make it more difficult for students to follow instructions, complete tasks, and stay focused during lessons, all of which contribute to academic underachievement.

Additionally, children growing up in poverty are often exposed to environments that lack the necessary resources to stimulate cognitive development. According to Duncan and Magnuson (2011), "low-income households are more likely to have fewer books, educational toys, and other resources that promote cognitive development, further widening the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers" (p. 35). The lack of enriching activities and materials can hinder a child's cognitive growth and limit their ability to build foundational skills that are critical for later academic success.

Poverty-related stress also affects the development of language skills, which are crucial for communication and learning. Hart and Risley (1995) famously found that "children from low-income families are exposed to significantly fewer words in their early years compared to children from higher-income families, leading to a substantial vocabulary gap by the time they enter school" (p. 142). This vocabulary gap is intricately linked to reading comprehension and overall academic achievement, placing low-income students at a disadvantage from the outset of their education.

Furthermore, the compounded effects of poverty can lead to a lack of engagement in school, increasing the risk of dropout. Children facing chronic poverty-related stress are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, such as hyperactivity or defiance, that can lead to disciplinary actions, which in turn can result in absenteeism and disengagement. As McLoyd (1998) argues, "the cumulative effects of poverty-related stressors increase the likelihood of

academic disengagement and school dropout, particularly during adolescence, when students are more vulnerable to external pressures" (p. 188).

Poverty serves as a chronic stressor that significantly affects brain development, leading to enduring consequences for emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, social interactions, and academic achievement (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Shonkoff et al., 2012). The toxic stress that accompanies poverty disrupts the formation of essential neural circuits involved in learning and behavior, particularly in areas responsible for executive function and emotional control (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). This disruption makes it more difficult for children from low-income backgrounds to succeed in academic settings, as they are more likely to struggle with attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation (Evans & Kim, 2012). Research has shown that children exposed to prolonged poverty-related stress exhibit higher levels of cortisol, which further impairs cognitive and emotional development, compounding the challenges they face in school (Luby et al., 2013). Addressing the impact of poverty on brain development requires a multifaceted approach, including early interventions, supportive learning environments, and access to resources that promote cognitive and emotional well-being (Blair & Raver, 2012; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Without such interventions, the long-term effects of poverty continue to undermine students' academic potential and social development. Racism, both structural and interpersonal, plays a profound role in shaping the educational experiences of marginalized students. Structural racism refers to the systemic inequalities embedded in educational policies and practices, while interpersonal racism manifests in discriminatory actions and attitudes between individuals within the school system. These dynamics create hostile learning environments that hinder the academic success and emotional well-being of students from marginalized communities. As Ladson-Billings (2021) notes, "Educators must be equipped not

only with content knowledge but also with a critical awareness of the socio-political contexts that influence their students' lives" (p. 43). This critical awareness is crucial for addressing the root causes of educational disparities and fostering an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

Structural and Interpersonal Racism

As Ladson-Billings (2021) argues, "Educators must be equipped not only with content knowledge but also with a critical awareness of the socio-political contexts that influence their students' lives" (p. 43) without this awareness, teachers may unknowingly perpetuate oppressive ideology and practices that harm their students. Racism, both structural and interpersonal, significantly shapes the educational experiences of marginalized students by creating hostile learning environments and perpetuating systemic inequities. Educators play a critical role in addressing these disparities by developing a critical awareness of the socio-political contexts that influence their students' lives and implementing practices that promote equity and inclusion. Through culturally responsive teaching, restorative justice, trauma-informed practices, and policy advocacy, educators can create learning environments where all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, have the opportunity to succeed. Structural racism in education manifests through unequal access to resources, biased curricula, and discriminatory disciplinary practices. Schools in predominantly marginalized communities often receive fewer resources, leading to larger class sizes, outdated materials, and fewer extracurricular opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2019). "Resource inequity in schools serving marginalized students is a persistent issue, contributing to the achievement gap between white students and students of color" (Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 77). These disparities in funding and resources create systemic barriers that make it more difficult for marginalized students to succeed academically.

Additionally, biased curricula contribute to the marginalization of students by failing to represent diverse perspectives or acknowledging the contributions of people of color. As Gay (2018) emphasizes, "Culturally responsive teaching is essential for correcting the historical inaccuracies and omissions in the curriculum, which often marginalize students of color by failing to reflect their histories and experiences" (p. 65). Without inclusive curricula, students from marginalized backgrounds may feel alienated or devalued in their educational environments.

Discriminatory disciplinary practices are another aspect of structural racism that disproportionately affects marginalized students. Black and Latino students are more likely to face harsher disciplinary actions, such as suspensions or expulsions, for the same infractions as their white peers (Skiba et al., 2014). "Disparities in school discipline are a clear example of how structural racism operates to exclude and criminalize students of color, pushing them out of school and into the school-to-prison pipeline" (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 153). These punitive measures not only disrupt the educational trajectory of marginalized students but also contribute to a cycle of disengagement and academic failure. More recent studies continue to highlight these disparities, with evidence showing that Black students are nearly four times as likely to be suspended than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Furthermore, restorative justice practices, which aim to address behavioral issues through mediation and support rather than punishment, have been increasingly advocated as an alternative to these exclusionary practices (Anyon et al., 2016).

Interpersonal racism, or the discriminatory behaviors and attitudes exhibited by individuals within the school system, also plays a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of marginalized students. Teachers, administrators, and peers may consciously or

unconsciously perpetuate racist stereotypes, leading to biased interactions that harm students' self-esteem and academic outcomes. "Microaggressions, subtle yet pervasive forms of interpersonal racism, are a daily reality for many students of color in schools, often making them feel unwelcome or unworthy" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). These microaggressions can take many forms, from a teacher consistently mispronouncing a student's name to making assumptions about a student's abilities based on their race or ethnicity. "When teachers hold lower expectations for students of color, it can negatively impact their academic performance and self-perception, contributing to a phenomenon known as 'stereotype threat'" (Steele, 2010, p. 97). Stereotype threat occurs when students internalize negative stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group, leading to anxiety and underperformance in academic settings.

Moreover, students who experience interpersonal racism from their peers may face bullying, exclusion, or social isolation. "Racial bullying is a significant issue in schools, and it can lead to severe emotional distress, academic disengagement, and absenteeism among students of color" (Rodkin & Ryan, 2012, p. 491). This type of peer-based racism exacerbates the hostile learning environments that many marginalized students navigate daily. Addressing both structural and interpersonal racism in education requires educators to develop a critical awareness of the socio-political contexts that influence their students' lives. As Ladson-Billings (2021) asserts, "Educators must move beyond a colorblind approach and actively engage with the realities of race and racism in their classrooms" (p. 44). A colorblind approach, which ignores the existence of racial differences, can inadvertently perpetuate racial inequities by failing to address the specific challenges faced by students of color.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

One essential aspect of fostering critical awareness in educators is providing professional development that focuses on anti-racism, equity, and inclusion. Kendi (2019) notes that “anti-racist training for teachers is critical in helping them recognize their own biases, challenge discriminatory practices, and implement culturally responsive teaching methods” (p. 184). Such training encourages educators to reflect on their own assumptions and behaviors, while also equipping them with the tools to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students. In addition to professional development, educators must actively engage with the communities they serve to understand the specific challenges and strengths of their students. Paris and Alim (2017) express that “community engagement is a vital component of culturally responsive teaching, as it allows educators to build meaningful relationships with students and their families, fostering a sense of belonging and trust” (p. 92). By collaborating with families and community members, educators can better support the holistic development of their students and address the socio-political factors that shape their educational experiences.

Cultural competence is another essential component of effective teaching. Developing this competence requires educators to critically examine and deconstruct understandings of trauma, poverty, and racism and to consider how these factors impact the classroom environment. Incorporating knowledge of the stress response system into educational practices empowers students to better manage their emotions, ultimately enhancing their academic success and overall well-being (Santiago et al., 2011). School districts and teachers who adopt strategies aimed at reducing the activation of the stress response system enable students to focus on learning and develop essential coping mechanisms that foster long-term resilience (Masten & Barnes, 2018). This approach not only mitigates the adverse effects of chronic stress but also

equips students with the emotional tools necessary for success in both academic and life pursuits (Evans & Schamberg, 2009). The intersection of poverty, trauma, and racism significantly increases the vulnerabilities of marginalized children within public elementary schools. These compounding factors create systemic barriers that severely hinder students' ability to thrive emotionally and in turn academically.

Foundational frameworks for inclusive pedagogy, such as those developed by Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, offer valuable insights into creating more effective and equitable education environments that support diverse student populations. Ladson-Billings (2014) emphasizes the importance of empowering students to question and challenge societal inequalities, positioning this approach as central to fostering a just and equitable educational environment. In contrast, Gay (2010) advocates for the adaptation of teaching methods to align with students' cultural contexts, underscoring the necessity of culturally responsive teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners. Darling-Hammond (2015) further argues that culturally responsive practices have a significant impact on student engagement and learning outcomes, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing the cultural dimensions of education.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

To effectively address the root causes of educational disparities, educators must implement practices that promote equity and inclusion in the classroom. One key strategy is the integration of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices. "Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning, not only as a means of engaging students but also as a way to challenge the dominant narratives that marginalize students of color" (Gay, 2018, p. 88). CRT practices ensure that students see

themselves reflected in the curriculum, which can enhance their sense of belonging and academic motivation. Another important practice is the use of restorative justice approaches to discipline. "Restorative justice shifts the focus from punishment to healing and reconciliation, encouraging students to take responsibility for their actions while also addressing the underlying causes of their behavior" (Zehr, 2015, p. 105). This approach contrasts with traditional punitive disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect students of color and instead promotes a more equitable and supportive school environment.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an essential approach for addressing the effects of trauma, particularly for students from marginalized communities. CRT recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning, not only as a means of engagement but also as a way to challenge the dominant narratives that marginalize students of color (Gay, 2018, p. 88). By integrating students' cultural experiences into the curriculum, teachers can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, which is critical for helping students who have experienced trauma feel seen and valued.

Z. Hammond's (2015) framework for culturally responsive teaching builds on foundational work by scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), extending the concept beyond the mere inclusion of diverse content or surface-level cultural celebrations. Z. Hammond argues that culturally responsive teaching centers on leveraging students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences as cognitive scaffolds to facilitate deeper learning and critical thinking. This approach echoes Ladson-Billings' (1995) emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy, where the goal is to empower students by validating their cultural identities and fostering academic success.

Z. Hammond (2015) adds a neuroscience dimension to this discussion, highlighting how culture shapes the brain's information processing. She posits that culturally responsive teaching enhances students' ability to process information by linking new knowledge to their existing cultural frameworks, aligning with Darling-Hammond's (2010) assertion that effective teaching requires understanding students' backgrounds to promote equitable learning outcomes. Hammond's work advances this by explaining how culturally responsive teaching reduces the cognitive load associated with navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts. This reduction frees up mental resources for higher-order thinking, fostering cognitive development and critical engagement.

Furthermore, Z. Hammond (2015) stresses the importance of trust and psychological safety in the learning environment—an idea that intersects with Darling-Hammond's (2010) focus on the social and emotional dimensions of learning. By creating a classroom atmosphere where students feel culturally affirmed and safe, teachers can promote cognitive growth. In line with Vygotskian principles, Z. Hammond emphasizes the value of productive struggle within students' zones of proximal development, using their cultural knowledge as a scaffold to support learning challenges. The ultimate aim of Hammond's (2015) culturally responsive pedagogy is to cultivate students' cognitive capacity and independence, aligning with Ladson-Billings' (1995) vision of education as a tool for liberation and Darling-Hammond's (2010) call for teaching practices that close the achievement gap. By integrating cultural knowledge into instructional strategies, Hammond frames culturally responsive teaching as a critical tool for promoting educational equity and addressing systemic disparities in academic achievement.

Z. Hammond's (2015) work emphasizes that culturally responsive teaching is not just a set of strategies, but a mindset and approach that leverages students' cultural assets to promote

cognitive development and academic success. This perspective has significant implications for teacher preparation. Z. Hammond (2015) argues that "Culturally responsive teaching is essential for addressing the disparities that arise from institutional trauma, as it equips educators with the tools to understand and support the unique challenges faced by marginalized students" (p. 82). Hammond's (2015) work emphasizes the need for teachers to develop strong relationships with their students, grounded in empathy and cultural competence. These relationships are vital for creating a sense of emotional safety in the classroom, which is necessary for students to engage fully in the learning process. Moreover, CRT encourages teachers to critically examine their own biases and the ways in which they may unconsciously perpetuate systems of oppression. "By engaging in self-reflection and actively working to dismantle racist structures within their classrooms, teachers can create more equitable learning environments for all students" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 92). This process is particularly important when working with students who have experienced trauma, as it helps to counteract the additional stress caused by microaggressions and other forms of interpersonal racism. In addition to culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed classroom management practices are crucial for supporting students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Educators can also promote equity by adopting trauma-informed teaching strategies. "Trauma-informed teaching acknowledges the impact of systemic racism and other forms of oppression on students' mental health and well-being, and it seeks to create a classroom environment that is sensitive to the needs of students who have experienced trauma" (Brunzell et al., 2016, p. 72). By fostering emotional safety and trust, trauma-informed teaching can help students overcome the negative effects of both structural and interpersonal racism. Trauma-

informed practices shift the focus from punishment to understanding the root causes of students' behaviors. As Perry and Daniels (2016) explain, "Trauma-informed approaches focus on creating an environment where students feel safe, supported, and connected, which is essential for their ability to learn and succeed in school" (p. 28). This approach contrasts with traditional behavior management strategies, which often rely on punitive measures that can exacerbate the effects of trauma and alienate students from the educational process.

In addition, trauma-informed practices involve understanding the effects of trauma on learning and behavior and adapting teaching strategies to support students who have experienced trauma. According to Shonkoff et al. (2012), "The prolonged activation of the stress response system can lead to toxic stress, which disrupts the architecture of the developing brain and impairs a child's ability to learn, remember, and regulate emotions" (p. e232). SEL provides students with the tools to manage their emotions, develop healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions, all of which are crucial for mitigating the effects of toxic stress. Trauma-informed practices transcend traditional classroom management strategies by creating an environment where students feel safe, supported, and connected. As Perry and Daniels (2016) explain, "Trauma-informed approaches focus on creating an environment where students feel safe, supported, and connected, which is essential for their ability to learn and succeed in school" (p. 28).

Trauma-Informed Classroom Management

Trauma-informed classroom management contrasts with traditional behavior management strategies, which often rely on punitive measures that do not address the underlying causes of challenging behaviors. Recent studies have highlighted the effectiveness of trauma-informed practices in improving academic and behavioral outcomes for students who have

experienced trauma. For example, McInerney and McKlindon (2014) found that "Trauma-informed classrooms require educators to be not only managers of behavior but also facilitators of healing, using strategies that de-escalate tension and promote resilience" (p. 9). This research underscores the importance of training educators in trauma-informed practices to create a more supportive and effective learning environment for all students.

Effective classroom management is crucial for maintaining order and creating a conducive learning environment, yet traditional strategies often fall short in addressing the complex needs of students who have experienced trauma. Trauma-informed classroom management emphasizes the importance of building strong, trusting relationships between teachers and students. These relationships help to create a sense of stability and predictability, which is crucial for students who have experienced trauma. "When students feel safe and supported by their teachers, they are more likely to engage in learning and less likely to exhibit disruptive behaviors" (Craig, 2016, p. 47). By focusing on emotional regulation and providing students with tools to manage their stress, trauma-informed practices help students develop the skills they need to succeed academically and socially.

While clear expectations, consistent routines, and firm boundaries are foundational to any classroom management approach, they are not enough when dealing with the emotional and psychological challenges that traumatized students may bring to the classroom. As Perry and Daniels (2016) note, "Students who have experienced trauma often require more than just structure; they need a sense of safety and emotional support that allows them to engage in learning" (p. 28). Trauma-informed classroom management goes beyond traditional methods by emphasizing the importance of creating a nurturing and responsive environment that fosters emotional security, positive behavior, and academic success. This approach involves not only

managing behavior but also understanding the root causes of behavioral issues and addressing them with empathy and care. By integrating trauma-informed practices, educators can create a more inclusive classroom where all students feel supported, (Brunzell et al., 2019) which is essential for their academic and emotional development.

McInerney and McKlindon (2014) emphasize that "trauma-informed classrooms require educators to be not only managers of behavior but also facilitators of healing, using strategies that de-escalate tension and promote resilience" (p. 9). This approach encourages educators to be flexible and adaptive, employing various strategies tailored to individual students' emotional and behavioral needs. In trauma-informed classrooms, teachers are better equipped to foster resilience and emotional regulation, which are critical for academic success (Brunzell et al., 2016). Trauma-informed practices are essential for equipping educators with the skills needed to manage classroom dynamics effectively. Cavanaugh (2016) found that teachers who undergo trauma-informed training are better prepared to recognize the signs of trauma, respond appropriately to students' emotional needs, and implement strategies that prevent and reduce challenging behaviors. This professional development enables educators to move beyond punitive measures, fostering an environment that supports the well-being and academic success of all students (Santiago et al., 2011).

Research by Perry and Daniels (2016) underscores the importance of understanding trauma's impact on behavior and learning, advocating for a shift in classroom management strategies that prioritize student emotional health. While traditional classroom management techniques are crucial for maintaining order, they fall short when it comes to addressing the deeper needs of students who have experienced trauma. Trauma-informed practices provide a more comprehensive approach by integrating emotional, psychological, and behavioral support,

fostering a learning environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed. As educators become increasingly aware of the significant impact trauma can have on students' learning and development, the implementation of trauma-informed strategies becomes not just advantageous, but an essential component of effective classroom management (Cavanaugh, 2016; Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). These approaches are fundamental for ensuring that schools are places of healing and growth, especially for students from vulnerable populations.

Traditional behavior management strategies, though essential for ensuring structure and discipline within the classroom, frequently fall short in addressing the multifaceted emotional needs of students impacted by trauma. Research indicates that trauma can significantly affect children's cognitive and emotional development, making it challenging for them to respond to standard disciplinary practices (Perry, 2014; Souers & Hall, 2016). In response, trauma-informed frameworks advocate for approaches that prioritize emotional regulation, relationship-building, and trust, which are critical for student engagement (Craig, 2016). However, the sustainability of these trauma-informed practices in public schools requires consistent institutional support, professional development, and policy alignment (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Without these systemic elements, the long-term viability of trauma-informed interventions may be compromised.

As Craig (2016) emphasizes, "Traditional behavior management strategies may inadvertently escalate conflicts by not addressing the underlying emotional needs of students" (p. 47). For students who have experienced trauma, this can be particularly harmful, as it may reinforce feelings of powerlessness or fear, exacerbating behavioral problems instead of resolving them. This shortcoming underscores the need for more nuanced, trauma-informed practices in classrooms, where emotional safety and individualized care are prioritized over rigid

disciplinary measures. Trauma-informed approaches in classroom management shift the focus from simply managing behavior to understanding the root causes of students' actions. These approaches emphasize relationship-building, emotional safety, and responsive interventions tailored to each student's unique needs (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019). Trauma often disrupts a student's ability to regulate their emotions and respond to stress in healthy ways, leading to behavioral outbursts or withdrawal. Therefore, trauma-informed practices are essential for creating an environment where students feel safe, supported, and understood, which is critical for their success both academically and emotionally.

For students who have experienced trauma, stability and predictability in the classroom are essential. According to Perry and Daniels (2016), "Students who have experienced trauma often require more than just structure; they need a sense of safety and emotional support that allows them to engage in learning" (p. 28). Trauma can significantly alter how children perceive the world around them, often leaving them hypervigilant and fearful of unpredictable environments. In a classroom where routines and expectations are clear, these students can begin to feel secure, which is a prerequisite for effective learning. When students feel safe, they are more likely to trust their teachers and peers, which opens the door for relationship-building—an essential component of trauma-informed care.

Moreover, trauma-informed practices acknowledge that behavior is a form of communication. When students act out, it is often a signal that their emotional needs are not being met, rather than an attempt to defy authority or disrupt the learning environment (Souers & Hall, 2016). Recognizing this shift in perspective is crucial for educators working with traumatized students. Instead of responding to misbehavior with punitive measures, trauma-informed educators seek to understand what the behavior is communicating about the student's

emotional state. This approach not only reduces the likelihood of conflict but also helps students develop healthier ways of expressing their emotions, leading to long-term behavioral improvements. Consequently, students with a history of trauma often face academic challenges, frequently lagging behind their peers. This struggle is further exacerbated by lower engagement in school and an increased risk of dropping out, as highlighted by studies on the long-term effects of chronic stress on brain development and educational outcomes (Shonkoff et al., 2012, p. e232). Consequently, addressing these cognitive and emotional challenges is crucial for supporting the academic progress and overall well-being of trauma-affected students.

Professional Reflective Practice

Ladson-Billings emphasizes the importance of reflection for educators as an integral part of culturally relevant pedagogy. In her work, she argues that culturally relevant teaching is not just about technical skills but requires continuous reflection on one's instructional practices and worldview. Teachers must engage in reflective work to better understand their biases and cultural frameworks while supporting their students' academic and social success. This reflection allows educators to adapt their practices, ensuring that they are culturally responsive and inclusive in their approach to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Such reflection is essential for all educators, as it challenges them to critically analyze their role in perpetuating or dismantling inequities within the classroom and broader educational system. By fostering a reflective mindset, teachers can better serve diverse student populations and address the needs of students with traumatic backgrounds or those impacted by systemic inequities.

Reflective practice is a cornerstone for effective teaching in a 21st-century classroom, where the demands of rapidly changing educational landscapes, diverse student needs, and

evolving technologies necessitate continual self-assessment and growth. Farrell (2018) asserts that "teachers must continuously reflect on their practice, assess the impact of their teaching strategies, and adjust to meet the evolving needs of their students" (p. 39). This iterative process of reflection not only fosters adaptability but also enhances the effectiveness of instructional methods, ensuring that the classroom remains a dynamic and responsive learning environment.

Reflective practice serves as a critical mechanism for teachers to stay attuned to their students' needs. In today's classrooms, students present a wide range of learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and social-emotional needs, requiring teachers to continually reassess and recalibrate their teaching approaches (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 2017). By engaging in reflective practice, teachers can evaluate whether their instructional methods are achieving desired outcomes and adjust as needed. As Dewey (1933) emphasized, reflection is essential for deeper learning and professional development because it encourages educators to think critically about their experiences and actions.

Incorporating reflection into daily practice is particularly important given the complexity of modern educational environments. The rise of digital learning tools, increased emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL), and the need for culturally responsive pedagogy all demand that teachers remain agile and open to change. Korthagen (2014) points out that reflective practice allows educators to navigate these complexities by developing "practical wisdom" through continuous evaluation and adaptation (p. 24). This wisdom is rooted in the ability to draw connections between theory and practice, ensuring that teachers can apply research-based strategies to real-world classroom situations.

Moreover, reflective practice promotes professional growth, which is essential for maintaining ambitious standards of teaching excellence. According to Larrivee (2000), reflection

allows educators to "move beyond a technical focus on pedagogical methods and towards deeper consideration of the ethical, social, and emotional dimensions of teaching" (p. 294). This broader perspective helps teachers cultivate a more holistic approach to education, enabling them to address not only academic achievement but also the personal development of their students.

Reflective practice is also integral to fostering a growth mindset among educators. As Dweck (2006) suggests, embracing a growth mindset allows individuals to view challenges as opportunities for improvement rather than obstacles to success. Teachers who engage in reflective practice are more likely to adopt this mindset, as they actively seek feedback, identify areas for growth, and continuously strive to improve their teaching. This approach aligns with Hattie's (2009) research, which emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and ongoing professional development in improving student outcomes. By reflecting on their instructional practices, teachers can develop a sense of agency and confidence in their ability to influence student learning positively.

In an era where educational reforms are frequent and often politically driven, teachers must be able to navigate new standards and expectations while maintaining high-quality instruction (Schön, 1987). Reflective practice enables teachers to critically analyze these changes, assess their impact on classroom practices, and integrate new policies into their teaching in a way that benefits student learning. For example, when implementing modern technologies in the classroom, teachers need to reflect on how these tools enhance or hinder student engagement and achievement (Killion & Todnem, 1991). Without reflection, teachers risk becoming stagnant in their practices, relying on outdated methods that may no longer serve their students effectively.

Furthermore, reflective practice supports collaboration and peer learning, which are increasingly important in 21st-century education. Teachers who engage in reflective dialogue with colleagues can share insights, challenges, and best practices, fostering a collaborative culture of continuous improvement (Brookfield, 1995; Fullan, 2011). Collaborative reflection not only enhances individual professional growth but also contributes to the development of a learning community that is committed to student success. In this context, reflective practice extends beyond individual self-assessment to become a collective endeavor that benefits both teachers and students.

Finally, reflective practice is vital for addressing the challenges of equity and inclusion in education. As Darling-Hammond (2015) points out, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to be reflective about their own biases and assumptions, as well as the ways in which their instructional practices either support or hinder marginalized students (p. 76). By reflecting on their interactions with students from diverse backgrounds, teachers can develop more inclusive pedagogies that promote equity and social justice in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Reflective practice is an essential element of effective teaching in the 21st century. It allows teachers to remain responsive to their students' needs, adapt to new educational challenges, and engage in continuous professional growth.

As Farrell (2018) and other scholars suggest, reflective practice empowers educators to critically assess their teaching strategies and make informed adjustments, ensuring that the classroom remains both nurturing and academically rigorous. Through reflection, teachers not only enhance their own professional competence but also create learning environments where all students can thrive.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the explicit and enacted curriculum that helps students develop emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills alongside academic knowledge (Citations). CASEL's (2020) framework advocates for the integration of SEL activities that build self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. As students learn to manage their emotions and engage with others constructively, they become better equipped to navigate the challenges of a collaborative and interconnected global society (Osher et al., 2020). Incorporating SEL into the daily routine of the classroom fosters a supportive environment where students can thrive academically and socially.

Collaboration is central to the 21st-century learning environment. Teachers and students must work together, and connections must extend beyond the classroom to include families and the wider community. As Gorski (2019) notes, "Classrooms that foster collaboration help students develop essential skills for the workforce, such as communication, teamwork, and creative problem-solving" (p. 52). Teachers who cultivate collaborative relationships with families and community stakeholders create a more holistic approach to education that addresses the diverse needs of their students.

As Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) assert, physical discipline was frequently viewed as a key component of moral training, with the belief that such measures fostered spiritual development (p. 45). This belief system became embedded within educational institutions, where rigid discipline and conformity were prioritized over individual growth and equity (Pryor, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014). These practices, deeply rooted in social control, were designed to produce obedient, morally compliant citizens, often prioritizing discipline and conformity over children's well-being and educational growth (Goldstein, 2000). For instance,

strict zero-tolerance policies in many public schools today echo this historical approach, where students are punished for minor infractions with harsh disciplinary measures such as suspension or expulsion, without considering the underlying emotional or behavioral needs of the child. Similarly, rigid, test-driven instructional models continue to prioritize academic conformity and performance over fostering creativity, emotional development, and critical thinking, reinforcing the long-standing emphasis on compliance at the expense of a more holistic education. These examples demonstrate how the legacy of social control in education persists in contemporary public school settings.

The long-term effects of these disciplinary approaches are still visible in today's public education environment, where inequities persist and continue perpetuating compliance. Ladson-Billings (2014) notes that historical practices have left a lasting imprint on educational structures, perpetuating systems that marginalize vulnerable populations (p. 89). Similarly, Gorski (2013) highlights how the focus on discipline and control over support has disproportionately impacted students from disadvantaged backgrounds, reinforcing cycles of inequality (p. 17). The emphasis on control and punishment has often alienated marginalized students, exacerbated disparities and hindering their academic success (Goldstein, 2000; Gorski, 2013). Moreover, the institutionalization of these disciplinary practices has broader societal implications, influencing the ways educational success is defined and who is deemed worthy of support even when district assessment may show specific concerns.

The enduring preference for discipline and conformity reflects a societal prioritization of obedience over creativity and critical thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This has particularly affected students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more likely to face stricter disciplinary measures and less access to supportive resources (Gorski, 2013). As these inequities

have become deeply embedded in the educational system, they highlight the urgent need for a more equitable and supportive approach that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs of all students (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Tharni, 2007). Consequently, addressing these systemic challenges requires a comprehensive and multifaceted educational approach that acknowledges historical inequities and actively seeks to dismantle them (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Teacher Bias

Research on the interplay between teacher beliefs and biases underscores the profound influence of educators' perceptions on their students' academic and social outcomes. Specifically, teacher beliefs, especially those linked to implicit biases, significantly shape instructional strategies, classroom management practices, and interpersonal interactions, thereby defining the educational climate (Baker et al., 2016; Milner, 2012). These biases often subconsciously affect how educators interpret student behavior, evaluate academic performance, and implement disciplinary measures. Without deliberate reflection and proactive intervention, implicit biases can perpetuate systemic inequities, particularly for students from diverse and trauma-impacted backgrounds (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Implicit biases are individuals' automatic associations and attitudes without conscious awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In educational contexts, these biases manifest in various forms, including differential treatment of students based on race, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and perceived academic potential. For instance, research by Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2014) demonstrates how implicit racial biases lead educators to maintain lower expectations for students of color, which, in turn, influences critical decisions regarding academic rigor, placement in advanced courses, and disciplinary actions. As Ladson-Billings (2014) notes, "Teachers who unconsciously harbor lower expectations for marginalized students

may inadvertently provide less challenging materials, offer fewer opportunities for critical engagement, and impose more punitive disciplinary responses for perceived behavioral infractions" (p. 96).

Furthermore, educators' beliefs about their educational roles significantly affect their engagement with students. Those who perceive themselves as facilitators of learning, rather than authoritarian figures, are more likely to foster supportive and empowering classroom environments. Conversely, educators who adopt a rigid, top-down pedagogical approach may inadvertently suppress student autonomy and creativity, particularly for those who have experienced trauma and require a more flexible and empathetic instructional framework (Nakamura et al., 2020).

Research indicates that trauma-impacted students may exhibit behaviors that can be easily misinterpreted through a biased lens. For instance, a student displaying hypervigilance or withdrawal due to trauma might be mischaracterized as defiant or disengaged, prompting educators to respond with stricter disciplinary measures rather than supportive interventions (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). When teacher beliefs are shaped by stereotypes—such as the presumption that certain racial or ethnic groups are predisposed to misbehavior—these students are more likely to encounter exclusionary disciplinary practices, including suspension or expulsion, disproportionately affecting students of color and those from low-income backgrounds (Skiba et al., 2014).

The implications of teacher biases extend beyond classroom management to encompass instructional strategies. Culturally responsive pedagogy, which entails recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds, is essential for effective teaching (Gay, 2018). However, when educators remain unaware of their biases, they may neglect to incorporate culturally relevant

materials or teaching methods. This can create a disconnect those results in disengagement and academic underachievement, particularly among students from non-dominant cultural groups (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2012). Consequently, these students may not see their identities or experiences reflected in the curriculum, further alienating them from learning (Irvine, 2010).

Moreover, implicit biases can have a profound impact on the educational trajectories of students from marginalized backgrounds. Studies have shown that teacher expectations can shape student achievement, with lower expectations often leading to diminished academic performance and engagement (Hattie, 2009; Jussim & Harber, 2005). For instance, teachers who harbor implicit biases may inadvertently perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein students internalize lower expectations and perform below their potential (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This cycle of bias and underachievement underscores the urgency of addressing implicit biases within educational settings. In response to these challenges, the research notes that it is important to address implicit biases through intentional reflection and targeted professional development focused on cultivating cultural competence and trauma-informed teaching practices (Oakes et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007).

As noted by Flook et al. (2013), “Teachers who engage in reflective practices regarding their biases are better equipped to foster equitable classrooms” (p. 3). Without such initiatives, the educational system risks perpetuating existing inequities, ultimately failing to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. The literature consistently indicates that teacher beliefs and implicit biases play a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes, especially for students from diverse and trauma-impacted backgrounds. Addressing these biases requires a comprehensive approach integrating cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed practices into educator

training and professional development, ensuring all students receive the equitable and supportive education they deserve.

Theoretical Frameworks

I designed a four pillar conceptual framework to help shape the interpretation of data, allowing keen sense of patterns and themes in relation to existing knowledge. It provided a lens for analyzing findings and organizing data. The conceptual framework offers a structured approach for organizing ideas, the research questions, and methods. It is intended to clarify the scope and focus of the study, ensuring that data collection and analysis are aligned with the overarching goals of the research. Each pillar is based on a set of theoretical foundations that informs how researchers and practitioners develop a deeper understanding of early career teachers experiences in understanding and addressing the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Pillar I Beliefs and Decision-making

Grounded in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, Pillar I examines the critical role that teachers' beliefs about their own capabilities play in shaping their decision-making processes in the classroom, particularly when working with students who have experienced trauma. Bandura (1997) posits that self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes—profoundly influences how individuals approach tasks, persist through challenges, and respond to setbacks. In the educational context, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs directly affect their instructional choices, classroom management strategies, and interactions with students.

When educating children who have experienced trauma, these belief systems become even more significant. Research suggests that teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adopt flexible, student-centered approaches, persevere through behavioral and academic

difficulties, and implement trauma-informed practices that foster a supportive learning environment (Gibbs & Miller, 2014; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Conversely, teachers with lower self-efficacy may feel overwhelmed by the complex needs of traumatized students, leading to reliance on punitive measures or avoidance of proactive interventions.

Moreover, the literature emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their experiences with student outcomes. Teachers who believe in their ability to positively influence students are more likely to engage in reflective practice and professional development, further enhancing their ability to address the needs of trauma-affected learners (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Ultimately, fostering teacher self-efficacy in the context of trauma-informed education is essential for promoting resilient, adaptive, and equity-driven decision-making processes.

Pillar II Transformative SEL

Pillar II explores the transformative role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in trauma-informed education, aligning with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) 2023 framework. CASEL's model emphasizes five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In the context of trauma-informed teaching, this pillar specifically highlights the importance of emotional regulation and relationship-building as fundamental components of effective classroom environments.

Teachers' implementation of SEL not only impacts their students' capacity to develop emotional regulation and resilience, but also plays a crucial role in shaping the classroom climate. Research consistently demonstrates that when teachers prioritize SEL practices, they foster emotionally safe and supportive environments where students—especially those who have

experienced trauma—can thrive (Zinsser et al., 2020; Jones & Kahn, 2017). These environments help students navigate their emotions, build positive relationships, and engage more deeply in the learning process.

Furthermore, transformative SEL goes beyond the development of student skills. It also requires teachers to manage their own emotional well-being. Given the emotional labor inherent in teaching, particularly when addressing the needs of trauma-affected students, teachers must cultivate self-regulation strategies to maintain their own mental health and sustain their effectiveness in the classroom (Jennings, 2016). Teachers who are able to manage stress and model emotional regulation are more likely to establish trusting relationships with students, enhancing their ability to intervene effectively in moments of emotional or behavioral dysregulation.

Pillar II underscores the necessity of embedding SEL practices into trauma-informed education to create environments that are not only emotionally supportive for students but also sustainable for teachers. By prioritizing both student and teacher well-being, transformative SEL becomes a powerful tool for fostering long-term resilience and educational equity

Pillar III Motivational Influences

Pillar III, informed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), examines the role of personal and professional motivations in shaping teachers' commitment, perseverance, and engagement, particularly in the challenging context of trauma-informed education. Maslow's theory posits that human motivation is driven by a hierarchy of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs and ascending through belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. In this framework, teachers' ability to sustain resilience and engagement is influenced by the fulfillment of their basic and psychological needs.

In the initial stages of their careers, teachers often face numerous professional challenges, from navigating diverse student needs to managing the emotional and logistical demands of the classroom. Understanding how teachers' motivations interact with these challenges is critical for fostering resilience and long-term commitment, especially in trauma-informed settings. Research shows that teachers who feel a sense of belonging and purpose within their school community are more likely to persist through difficulties and remain engaged with their work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The need for esteem, including recognition from peers and administrators, further supports their sense of professional efficacy and accomplishment, contributing to greater perseverance.

Maslow's theory also highlights the significance of self-actualization in motivating teachers to pursue growth and mastery within their profession. For educators working with trauma-affected students, the desire to make a meaningful impact can serve as a powerful motivational force, driving them to seek out professional development, adopt innovative practices, and continue their personal learning journey. However, if teachers' basic needs—such as feeling safe, supported, and valued—are not met, their motivation can falter, leading to burnout or disengagement (Taris, 2006).

Pillar III, therefore, offers insight into how teachers maintain resilience in the face of professional challenges, particularly during the formative years of their careers. By ensuring that teachers' foundational needs are met and by supporting their pathways to self-actualization, schools can foster a motivated, engaged workforce capable of withstanding the demands of trauma-informed education and promoting positive student outcomes.

Pillar IV Cultural Awareness

Pillar IV, grounded in the work of Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006, 2016) and Gay (2018), focuses on the development of cultural competence and the integration of diversity awareness into instructional practices. In trauma-informed education, cultural awareness is essential, as students' experiences with trauma are often shaped by their cultural contexts. This pillar emphasizes the critical need for teachers to recognize and address the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students in order to create inclusive, equitable, and responsive learning environments.

Ladson-Billings' framework of culturally relevant pedagogy highlights the importance of fostering academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness in students. In the classroom, this requires teachers to actively engage with and honor their students' cultural identities while facilitating meaningful learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Gay (2018) extends this by emphasizing culturally responsive teaching, which calls for educators to use students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and perspectives as assets in the learning process. When working with trauma-affected students, these culturally responsive strategies become even more important, as they can help mitigate the adverse effects of trauma and provide students with a sense of belonging and validation.

The literature on cultural competence underscores that teachers must go beyond surface-level awareness of cultural diversity. Instead, they should engage in continuous reflection on their own biases and assumptions while actively working to understand the unique sociocultural factors that influence students' lives (Nieto, 2017). This reflective practice is vital for addressing implicit biases and for creating an educational environment where all students feel seen, respected, and valued. Teachers who develop cultural competence are better equipped to build

meaningful relationships with their students, which is especially important for trauma-affected learners, as positive teacher-student relationships can foster emotional safety and promote healing (Hammond, 2015).

Pillar IV stresses that cultural awareness is not only a pedagogical responsibility but also a moral imperative in trauma-informed education. By integrating cultural competence into their instructional practices, teachers can help bridge educational inequities and support the holistic development of all students, particularly those from marginalized and trauma-affected backgrounds. This approach fosters inclusivity and equity, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed in a supportive and culturally responsive learning environment.

Summary

Educators need to develop cultural competence to tackle the various challenges students face, especially those with high ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) scores. This involves recognizing and challenging their own biases and fostering inclusive classroom environments that reflect and honor the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, where reflective practices enable teachers to understand and address the unique needs of their students. By engaging in this reflection, teachers can provide more equitable and responsive instruction, especially for students who have experienced trauma or systemic inequities.

Additionally, trauma-informed classroom management is critical in supporting students with high ACEs. These students often exhibit behaviors shaped by past trauma, requiring teachers to respond with empathy and restorative practices rather than punitive measures (Craig, 2016). Trauma-informed strategies create a safe, supportive environment, helping students regulate their emotions and focus on learning despite the challenges posed by their adverse

experiences. Understanding the link between ACEs and student behavior allows educators to reduce disciplinary actions and foster a more nurturing atmosphere.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is also crucial in supporting students with ACEs. SEL helps students develop essential skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and positive interpersonal relationships, which are particularly important for those impacted by trauma. These skills enhance academic achievement and improve students' ability to manage stress and build resilience (Zins et al., 2004).

Finally, educators must consider the profound intersection of poverty, trauma, and racism in shaping students' experiences. ACEs often intersect with systemic inequities, further compounding the challenges that marginalized students face. Gay (2010) highlights that teachers aware of these sociocultural realities can better meet the diverse needs of their students. By integrating cultural competence, trauma-informed practices, and SEL, educators can dismantle systemic barriers and create equitable, supportive learning environments for all students, particularly those most vulnerable due to high ACEs.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This study employed a case study methodology to collect and analyze data through the lens of four thematic pillars. The case study approach is particularly suitable for this research as it enables an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of early-career educators in elementary classrooms. According to Yin (2018), case study research effectively examines complex phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not well defined. By focusing on individual experiences, case studies provide rich, detailed insights into educators' daily realities, challenges, and successes.

Prior to the main research, two pilot studies were conducted to refine the qualitative data-gathering process and inform the development of research questions and collection methods. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, all names mentioned in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms.

The pilot studies played a crucial role in informing the final study by highlighting key areas of focus, refining data collection methods, and shaping the overall research design.

Pilot Study One: Lane's Story

This narrative provided an in-depth exploration of the trauma-informed strategies used by a veteran teacher to support a student affected by severe trauma. The study underscored the emotional labor involved in trauma-informed teaching, the importance of teacher-student relationships, and the limitations of available resources in supporting students with complex needs. These findings highlighted the need for more comprehensive emotional support in elementary classrooms and teacher training related to ACEs, which informed the development of

research questions and the emphasis on teacher decision-making and emotional labor in the final study.

Pilot Study Two: First-Year Teacher Experiences

This case focused on the experiences of a first year elementary teacher navigating the challenges of working with trauma-impacted students in a low-income public school. The study revealed the critical role that teachers' backgrounds and empathy play in shaping her instructional approaches and highlighted the real barriers that limit her effectiveness, such as a lack of background knowledge of the ACEs students face, sparse administrative support and limited specialized resources for students that struggle emotionally at school. These findings refined the focus of the final study, particularly in examining how early-career teachers' motivations and cultural awareness influence their practice in trauma-informed settings.

Together, these pilot studies informed the final research framework, leading to the adoption of a four-pillar structure (Beliefs and Decision-Making, Transformative SEL, Motivational Influences, and Cultural Awareness) that guided the investigation into how early-career teachers navigate the complexities educating children who have been impacted by trauma. The studies also streamlined data collection methods, ensuring they were practical for busy teachers while maintaining a focus on the emotional, professional, and cultural challenges they face.

Exploratory Case Study Design

This qualitative study is situated within the evolving educational context, focusing on how early-career teachers in public schools manage challenging student behaviors. The pandemic has intensified pre-existing educational challenges, particularly in schools serving economically disadvantaged populations. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) have noted that the

pandemic exposed systemic vulnerabilities in public education, particularly within elementary schools. One notable concern during this period was the insufficient attention to students' emotional well-being, a factor exacerbated by the increasing awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs encompass a range of potentially traumatic events in childhood, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, which have been linked to long-term negative impacts on mental health, behavior, and academic achievement (Felitti et al., 1998; Bethell et al., 2017).

The pandemic has brought these issues into sharper focus, highlighting the urgent need to address the emotional and social well-being of students within the educational system. In response, there has been a growing emphasis on trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning (SEL) as essential components of education (Dutil, 2021). Through this exploration, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how novice educators navigate the complexities of behavior and emotional support.

Data Collection

The data for this study consists of interviews with early-career educators, classroom observations, and a review of relevant educational documents and policies. These data sources provided valuable insights into the intersection of social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation and the challenges educators face in supporting students affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Through these insights, the study aimed to explore how SEL practices influence student outcomes and teacher well-being, highlighting the need for systemic support and professional development to address the complexities of modern elementary education.

Harvard Implicit Bias Test

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., race, body type) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). It works by having participants quickly categorize words or images displayed on the left and right sides of the screen using the "E" and "I" keys. The IAT consists of five stages:

Concept Sorting: Participants categorize items (e.g., "fat people" vs. "thin people") based on the concept shown. Evaluation Sorting: Participants categorize words based on evaluations like "good" or "bad." Combined Sorting: Both concept and evaluation categories are combined (e.g., "Fat People/Good" vs. "Thin People/Bad"). The order of combinations varies. Concept Switch: The concept categories switch sides (e.g., "Fat People" moves from left to right). Opposite Combination: Categories are combined in reverse (e.g., "Fat People/Bad" vs. "Thin People/Good").

Adverse Childhood Experience Assessment

The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Assessment is a questionnaire designed to measure the impact of traumatic experiences during childhood. It covers ten categories of adversity, including abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), neglect (emotional, physical), and household dysfunction (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, domestic violence, and parental separation). A higher ACE score indicates a greater number of adverse experiences, which research has linked to increased risks of physical, mental, and behavioral health problems in adulthood. The ACE Assessment helps to understand the long-term effects of childhood trauma on health and well-being.

Two Digital Surveys

The participants were asked to complete two digital surveys designed to gather their personal perspectives on the challenges and experiences they encounter in the classroom. These surveys included open-ended, extended-response questions, allowing participants to share their thoughts in their own words, rather than being confined to predefined answer choices. This format provided an opportunity for deeper reflection, enabling the participants to elaborate on specific situations, emotions, and practices they face in their daily teaching roles. The responses were intended to capture the nuances of their individual experiences, offering rich, qualitative insights into the realities of classroom life.

Data Analysis

The four pillars that structure this study's analysis provides a set of lenses through which early-career teachers' lived experiences can be examined.

Pillar I, Beliefs & Decision-making, grounded in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, explores how teachers' beliefs about their capabilities and the teaching profession influence their decision-making processes in the classroom. Understanding these belief systems is critical, as they shape how teachers navigate instructional challenges and respond to diverse student needs.

Pillar II, Transformative SEL, aligns with CASEL's (2023) model of social-emotional learning, which emphasizes the importance of emotional regulation and relationship-building in teaching. This pillar examines how teachers' approaches to SEL affect their ability to create supportive, emotionally safe environments for students while also managing their emotional well-being.

Pillar III, Motivational Influences, is informed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) and focuses on how personal and professional motivations impact teachers' commitment,

perseverance, and engagement levels. This pillar provides insight into how teachers maintain resilience in the face of professional challenges, particularly in the formative early years of their careers.

Finally, Pillar IV, Cultural Awareness, is based on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006, 2016) and Gay (2018) and explores how teachers develop cultural competence and integrate diversity awareness into their instructional practices. This pillar emphasizes the critical need for teachers to recognize and address their students' diverse cultural backgrounds, which is essential for creating inclusive, equitable learning environments.

Coding the Data

The coding process followed a qualitative thematic analysis framework, facilitating the systematic identification of patterns and themes across multiple data points utilizing a four pillar conceptual framework.

Data Organization and Familiarization

The first stage of analysis involved organizing the data collected from each participant, including: All written and transcribed data were stored in a secure digital format to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts and written responses were read four times to gain a deep understanding of the data and to familiarize myself with emerging patterns. During this phase, I took reflective notes and memos to capture initial observations, thoughts, and potential areas for deeper analysis.

Open Coding

Next, an open coding process was initiated, systematically reviewing all data line by line to identify meaningful segments. The open coding process was inductive, allowing for the emergence of concepts directly from the data rather than imposing predefined codes. Linneberg

Korsgaard (2019) states that open coding is vital for new researchers to develop their skills in qualitative analysis. They mention, "To provide a thorough yet practical presentation of the vocabulary and craft of coding. The authors, thus, discuss the central choices that must be made before, during, and after coding, supporting novices in practicing careful and enlightening coding work (p. 260). Open coding is "Breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). I spent time open-coding the data related to their experiences as they reported. The table below shows the standard codes from the initial coding process. The following are the codes that were aligned to the framework.

This phase was characterized by labeling individual responses, actions, or statements that related to:

- Perceptions of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Social-emotional strategies
- Implicit biases are affecting student relationships and decision-making.

For example, responses like "I feel more patient with students who have a difficult home life" were coded as "empathy towards students with ACEs." In contrast, comments about bias, such as "I tend to favor students who remind me of myself," were coded as "implicit bias toward students with similar backgrounds."

Axial Coding

Axial coding was employed to identify and establish connections between the initial codes developed during open coding, thereby refining the analysis process and leading to the emergence of core categories. This method enabled grouping related codes into more focused categories, facilitating a deeper understanding of the relationships between various concepts and themes in the data. Researchers who support axial coding highlight its role in organizing data

into coherent patterns, allowing for a more structured interpretation of complex social phenomena. According to Charmaz (2014), "axial coding specifies relationships among categories and subcategories, linking them to form more precise explanations" (p. 148). Corbin and Strauss (2015) also note that "axial coding helps in relating categories to their subcategories by explaining how and why certain phenomena occur" (p. 106). Furthermore, according to Saldaña (2021), axial coding is a critical phase in which the researcher focuses on the relationships and linkages between categories (p. 58). This study employed axial coding to systematically analyze data, ultimately contributing to developing grounded theoretical insights. For instance, codes related to "empathy towards students with ACEs" and "social-emotional teaching strategies" were grouped under a broader category of "emotional regulation strategies."

Verification and Refinement of Themes

The last step in the analysis involved a thorough review of the identified themes to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. As Saldana (2021) emphasizes, "themes must resonate with the data and align with the research focus, providing an accurate reflection of participant perspectives" (p. 213). Data from multiple collection sources—including interviews, structured questions, and quiz results—was triangulated to enhance the credibility and validity of the emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation allowed for the cross-verification of data from various sources, which is critical for minimizing the risk of bias and ensuring that the themes genuinely reflect participant experiences. Additionally, peer debriefing was incorporated to validate the findings further and mitigate the influence of personal biases in the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer feedback was instrumental in refining the themes; as Saldana (2021) points out, "immersion in the data and feedback from peers can offer new perspectives

and sharpen the researcher's interpretations" (p. 219). This reiterative process of refining themes ensured the results were grounded in rigorous analysis and reflected the research focus.

This explanation allows readers to comprehend the methodology used to interpret the responses, providing a structured and objective approach to the findings. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) emphasize, "a clear coding process demonstrates the rigor of the research, showing how patterns and themes emerge from raw data" (p. 74). Detailing this process helps readers follow the logical progression from data collection to analysis, establishing trust in the study's validity and reliability while offering a deeper understanding of the connections between data categories before engaging with the participants' voices. The data will be presented according to the central themes aligned with each digital survey form, categorized by participant.

Ethical Considerations

As a novice researcher, I am committed to upholding impartiality and embracing diverse perspectives throughout this study. To ensure the collection of an unbiased and accurate dataset, I will employ several strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, and consistently using a reflective journal. These practices will enable me to continuously identify and address any preconceptions that may arise during the research process. Acknowledging my personal history of childhood trauma, I recognize that my experiences could potentially shape my empathy and understanding of the participants' narratives. Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that "Reflexivity requires researchers to be self-aware of the potential impact of their own values, beliefs, and experiences on the research process" (p. 41). Consequently, I will remain vigilant in identifying any biases that may emerge, ensuring that they do not compromise the integrity of the study.

My professional background includes experience in Title I public schools, which has equipped me with a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by new teachers in these environments. However, I acknowledge that this familiarity may lead to certain assumptions. Maxwell (2013) observes that "Preexisting knowledge and assumptions can subtly influence how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted" (p. 92). I will consciously monitor these assumptions to mitigate this risk to ensure they do not color my data collection or analysis.

Transitioning from traditional classroom teaching to virtual education and assessment writing has given me a comparative perspective on different instructional methods. While this perspective can yield valuable insights, I must remain cognizant of potential bias towards or against specific teaching environments. As an experienced educator, I am acutely aware of the inherent power dynamics that may emerge when engaging with early-career teachers in this study. To address these dynamics, I will adopt a participatory approach that fosters open dialogue, ensuring that the participants' voices are heard and respected. Stake (2010) emphasizes that "Researcher-participant dynamics must be carefully managed to prevent any power imbalances from affecting the study's outcomes" (p. 58).

Navigating my dual role as researcher and educator requires careful consideration to ensure that these dynamics do not adversely impact the research process. My commitment to equity and inclusion, especially given my background in Title I schools, drives my advocacy for marginalized groups. However, I recognize that this commitment must not overshadow the necessity of presenting a balanced and unbiased view of all perspectives. Mertens (2015) posits that "While advocacy in research is important, it must be balanced with a rigorous commitment to objectivity and impartiality" (p. 109). I will ensure that this study reflects a comprehensive

view of the participants' experiences, guarding against any inclination for advocacy to distort the analysis.

Furthermore, my extensive research on social-emotional regulation informs my understanding of these skills' critical role for both students and educators. While this background provides a valuable lens for data examination, it also introduces the risk of bias. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) caution that "Researchers must remain vigilant in ensuring that their prior knowledge enhances rather than biases their research" (p. 301). I will maintain a rigorous approach to ensure that my focus on social-emotional aspects enriches the study rather than introduces bias.

I have had the opportunity to meet each participant in person and possess a thorough understanding of the university program from which four of the six participants graduated. While this familiarity may be advantageous, it could influence my interactions and interpretations. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that "Prior relationships with participants can introduce bias, making it essential for researchers to actively reflect on and manage these dynamics" (p. 234). I will remain attentive to this potential influence, striving to uphold an objective stance throughout the research. Additionally, having previously served as a substitute teacher in one of the schools where three participants work, I recognize that this prior connection may shape my research. Glesne (2016) points out that "Previous relationships with participants can shape data collection, requiring careful consideration to avoid bias" (p. 145). This challenge was particularly notable when participants did not respond within the designated timeframes, necessitating a balance between my professional familiarity and the integrity of the study.

By acknowledging these subjectivities and maintaining a critically reflective stance, I aim to conduct research that is both respectful and rigorous. My goal is to contribute valuable

insights to the field while adhering to the highest standards of academic integrity. Participants in this study, early-career educators teaching in Title I public elementary schools in Missouri, were selected based on specific criteria. This selection was crucial as it targeted teachers at a pivotal stage in their professional development, particularly in economically disadvantaged and challenging educational environments. Including teachers from Title I schools ensures that the study captures the unique experiences of educators working in contexts that demand a heightened focus on equity, social-emotional learning (SEL), and cultural competence. Their role in this study is invaluable, and their experiences are integral to our research.

Informed consent was obtained through a rigorously designed process prioritizing transparency and anonymity. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that ensuring ethical practices, such as obtaining informed consent, is essential in qualitative research to protect participants' rights and encourage openness (p. 140). Consent forms were distributed via participants' preferred email addresses, allowing them to respond anonymously through a secure Microsoft Forms platform. This platform enabled participants to review the study's objectives and provide informed consent without disclosing their identities. A total of six early-career teachers from Title I public elementary schools in Missouri were recruited and provided informed consent.

This method is particularly well-suited for understanding teachers nuanced and context-dependent experiences in Title I schools, where socioeconomic factors significantly shape educational practices and student outcomes. Moreover, case study methodology facilitates an in-depth exploration of these experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of how early-career elementary teachers implement SEL strategies in response to their unique teaching environments. Recent scholarship supports the use of case study methodology in educational research. Simons (2020) asserts that "case study research in education provides a comprehensive,

systematic, and contextualized understanding of the complexities of educational processes and outcomes" (p. 112). This perspective underscores the capacity of case studies to explore the intricate factors influencing teaching and learning, making it an effective tool for investigating the experiences of educators working in economically disadvantaged settings.

By integrating these insights, this study is poised to provide a deep, contextually rich understanding of how early-career teachers in Missouri's Title I schools respond to the pressing need for SEL strategies while navigating the complexities of teaching in economically disadvantaged communities. Through this exploration, the study aims to offer practical insights into how SEL can be more effectively integrated into classroom practices, thereby contributing to teachers' and students' professional development and well-being.

Data Collection Procedures: Survey Distribution

Surveys were systematically administered to participants every six weeks via Microsoft Forms, ensuring a rigorous and continuous data collection process. This longitudinal approach enabled the capture of nuanced changes and developments in participants' teaching experiences over time. The structured format of Microsoft Forms ensured a goal-oriented data collection method that prioritized participant accessibility and ease of engagement. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "providing multiple points of data collection over time enhances the richness and depth of the insights gathered" (p. 89). Each round of survey responses was automatically compiled into an Excel spreadsheet, streamlining the data organization for subsequent analysis and coding. The efficiency of Microsoft Forms in aggregating and organizing data allowed for a seamless transition of responses into a consolidated dataset, thus supporting systematic tracking and comparative analysis of responses across the study's timeline.

The data collection was structured into several phases to comprehensively capture participants' experiences. The initial phase focused on gathering demographic data, facilitating the creation of detailed participant profiles that included current teaching positions, roles, and years of experience. This foundational information provided essential context for the ensuing phases, ensuring a thorough understanding of participants' backgrounds prior to engaging with more complex aspects of their teaching practices. Yin (2018) asserts that "contextual data is essential for understanding the complexities of participants' experiences within their real-life settings" (p. 45).

In the second phase, participants were prompted to provide data regarding implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies in their classrooms. Educators were encouraged to share explicit examples of how they integrated SEL practices to foster student learning and emotional well-being. The design of the data collection schedule allowed participants the flexibility to submit responses at their convenience, thereby promoting thoughtful and comprehensive reflections while respecting their professional responsibilities and personal commitments and making them feel valued and respected.

Additionally, participants were invited to identify specific students requiring social-emotional support, offering critical insights into their ability to recognize and address SEL needs within their classrooms. Safeguarding participant anonymity was paramount during this phase, particularly as educators were encouraged to discuss potentially sensitive cases. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, "ensuring participant anonymity is vital for fostering trust and obtaining honest, detailed accounts" (p. 95), a principle that underpinned the ethical framework of this study and ensured the participants' security and comfort.

The fourth phase investigated participants' self-awareness concerning potential biases that could influence their teaching practices, particularly in interactions with students necessitating SEL support. Educators were prompted to engage in reflective practices regarding their assumptions and preconceptions, leading to a deeper understanding of how these biases might shape their instructional approaches. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight the significance of self-reflection in qualitative research, noting that "critical self-reflection often results in greater insight into participants' beliefs and behaviors" (p. 63).

A fifth phase was planned to collect follow-up data to clarify participants' previous responses. However, participation in this phase was anticipated to be limited due to the timing coinciding with the end of the academic year. Despite this potential limitation, the multi-phased design—combined with the flexibility and anonymity afforded to participants—enabled a thorough and nuanced exploration of educators' experiences, practices, and perspectives on SEL in Title I schools. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that "a phased approach to data collection allows researchers to gather detailed and comprehensive information, even when time constraints are a factor" (p. 110).

The data collection procedures were meticulously crafted to ensure participant engagement, transparency, and rich, meaningful data acquisition. The study ensured efficient and effective data management by utilizing Microsoft Forms and systematically organizing the data into Excel for coding. The phased approach, combined with flexible response timelines, facilitated deep reflection on participants' experiences, enhancing the collected data's authenticity and validity. This methodologically rigorous strategy reinforces confidence in the research process. It aligns with established best practices in qualitative research, ensuring a deep

exploration of early-career teachers' experiences with SEL in Missouri's Title I public elementary schools.

Participant's Role

The study engaged six early-career educators, each teaching in Title I elementary schools, to provide comprehensive insights into their personal and professional experiences. These participants were carefully selected based on specific criteria, including their early-career status, defined as having three or fewer years of teaching experience, and their employment in schools serving predominantly low-income student populations.

The data collection process was structured into multiple phases, each designed to capture distinct aspects of the participants' backgrounds and teaching practices. In the initial phase, demographic data were collected to establish participant profiles, including current teaching positions, roles, years of experience, and the specific contexts of their schools. This foundational information was essential for contextualizing the subsequent data collection and analysis, as it provided a clear understanding of the educational settings in which these teachers operated (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Subsequent phases of the study investigated participants' understanding and implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies. Educators were prompted to provide explicit examples from their classroom practices, illustrating how they integrated SEL into their daily routines and interactions with students. These examples offered valuable insights into the practical application of SEL frameworks, highlighting both the successes and challenges the participants encountered in fostering students' social and emotional development (CASEL, 2023). Participants were also asked to identify and describe specific students who required additional social-emotional support. This focus allowed the study to explore how educators

recognized and responded to the SEL needs of individual students, providing a more nuanced understanding of the teachers' capacities to address diverse student needs within their classrooms. The ability to offer targeted support is crucial in Title I settings, where students often face significant external stressors that impact their learning and well-being (Jensen, 2013).

Moreover, the study investigated participants' self-awareness regarding potential biases that could influence their interactions with students needing social-emotional support. Teachers were encouraged to reflect on their assumptions and preconceptions, facilitating a deeper understanding of how implicit biases might shape their teaching practices. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize the importance of critical self-reflection in qualitative research, as it allows participants to explore how personal beliefs and experiences may impact professional behavior (p. 63). An optional fifth phase was introduced later in the study to gather follow-up data and reflections. However, due to the timing of this phase at the end of the academic year, not all participants were able to engage fully. Despite this, the multi-phased design of the study provided a comprehensive examination of the educators' experiences, practices, and perspectives on SEL, offering a rich exploration of their professional journeys within the context of elementary education.

Chapter 4 - Data Analysis and Presentation

Introduction

This chapter presents the data collected for this study. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to the research questions. The findings are organized according to major themes, offering insights into the experiences and perceptions of participants. Each theme is supported by relevant data, including excerpts from interviews, surveys, and any other data sources utilized in the study. This chapter lays the groundwork for the discussion of these findings in Chapter 5

Participant Descriptions

All participants teach in an elementary public school that is classified as Title I.

Susan Smith, age 22, is in her second year of teaching. She currently teaches 18 students in the 5th grade. She teaches at an elementary school. Macy Son, age 23, is a 4th-grade teacher. She is in her first year of teaching and is responsible for a class of 20 students. Macy teaches at a large elementary school. Sandy Orr, age 23, is also in her first year of teaching. She is teaching 20 students in the 1st grade. Sandy works at a Title I elementary building. Rachel Rita, age 26, has been teaching for two years. She currently teaches 17 students in the 5th grade. Rachel teaches in a Title I-funded elementary school in a large Midwest district. Jenna Green, age 24, has three years of teaching experience. She is responsible for a class of 20 students in the 3rd grade. Jenna teaches at a large elementary school. Randy Rock, age 23, is in his first year of teaching. He currently teaches 20 students in the 5th grade. He teaches at a large elementary school in a rural area.

Data Presentation

After following the rigorous coding procedures, including open and axial coding, the themes identified serve as the foundation for deeper insights into participants' experiences. As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize, "thematic analysis moves beyond mere description of data to interpreting and making sense of the patterns that emerge" (p. 593). This transition is essential to ensure that the coding process captures surface-level responses and delves into the underlying dynamics of early-career perceptions. The subsequent section will present findings, aligning the emergent themes with the study's core objectives/pillars. By systematically organizing the data, the presentation will offer a structured view of how the themes interconnect and reflect broader theoretical constructs, providing a comprehensive answer to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transition from understanding the emerging themes into data presentation marks a critical juncture in the research process, where the initial analysis addresses the emerging themes, and the four research questions guide the final analysis.

Survey One Data Presentation

The first survey, centered around identity, beliefs, and decision-making, provides a critical starting point for analyzing how personal and professional factors have shaped the participants' journeys to becoming educators. This phase explores the self-perceptions, core beliefs, and significant decisions that informed their entry into the teaching profession. The data gathered from this initial survey offers a rich tapestry of insights into the participants' motivations, values, and experiences, each contributing to their paths in education.

Moving forward, the data will be presented through the lens of four emerging phases: identity formation, belief systems, decision-making processes, and the impact of these factors on classroom practices. This organized interpretation of the findings will offer a comprehensive

analysis, addressing the research questions to highlight the diversity of participant experiences while remaining aligned with the study's objectives. Each phase will be discussed in detail, revealing how these themes influence and intertwine with the participants' professional lives as educators.

Susan Smith, Identity: Susan provided critical insights into her identity and professional journey as a fifth-grade educator. She identifies as “a 22-year-old, cisgender, white female” who speaks English and has been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Now in her second year of teaching, this marks her first year managing a class independently. She co-taught with a veteran teacher in her first year, sharing responsibilities for 42 students. This experience provided her with collaborative and independent teaching opportunities that significantly influenced her development as an educator. **Beliefs and Decision-Making:** Susan, pursuing a master’s degree in Elementary Education, was deeply inspired by her fifth-grade teacher, Stephanie Ritter. She described Ritter as “strict, but loving; funny, but serious in her teaching; stern, but calm in delivery.” These attributes, along with Susan’s firsthand experiences, including her struggles with a binge-eating disorder in the fourth grade, have informed her belief that “every behavior is an indicator of students' feelings.” Her educational philosophy focuses on understanding students' emotional needs through their actions.

Macy Son, Identity: Macy offered a comprehensive description of her identity and current life circumstances, which shape her experience as a first-year teacher. She identifies as “a 23-year-old, cisgender, white female” who primarily speaks English, with some proficiency in Spanish. Macy also disclosed her diagnosis of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a condition that potentially influences her teaching style and classroom management.

Additionally, she is engaged, with her wedding scheduled for August 2024, marking a significant personal milestone.

Beliefs and Decision-Making: Macy draws inspiration from her family's long history in education and her formative experiences with her second-grade teacher, whom she described as "extremely nurturing but held high expectations." This balance of care and rigor profoundly influenced Macy's teaching philosophy. Her volunteer work in Ecuador further solidified her commitment to education, as she reflected, "Getting to experience school in some fashion in another country...was something I will never forget." Macy's approach to teaching is shaped by both her family legacy and international experiences.

Sandy Orr, Identity: Sandy Orr, a 23-year-old cisgender white female, provided a detailed account of her identity and how her life experiences shape her approach to teaching. She is a native English speaker and has been diagnosed with both anxiety and ADHD, conditions she acknowledges may influence her teaching methods and classroom management strategies. Sandy's background includes being in a long-term relationship for three years, and while she does not have children, she is committed to understanding the developmental needs of the students in her care. Her experiences with mental health challenges provide her with a heightened sensitivity toward the emotional and behavioral needs of her students, many of whom have experienced trauma or social-emotional difficulties. Sandy's reflection on her identity highlights how her experiences contribute to her empathetic and patient approach to working with students with diverse needs. **Beliefs and Decision-Making:** Sandy's beliefs about her ability as a first-year teacher are deeply influenced by her struggles with anxiety and ADHD. She acknowledges that these conditions can make her job more challenging but also believes they enhance her capacity to empathize with students who face similar difficulties. Sandy stated, "I

know how it feels to struggle with focus and anxiety, so I try to be as patient as possible with students who are having a tough time." This belief in the importance of patience and empathy shapes her decision-making processes in the classroom. For example, when working with students who are easily distracted or emotionally overwhelmed, Sandy often gives them extra time or alternative ways to complete assignments, recognizing that each student has diverse needs. Her approach is rooted in a strong belief that every student deserves the time and support necessary to succeed, regardless of their challenges.

Rachel Rita, Identity: Rachel shared significant details about her identity and background, which have shaped her perspective as an educator. She identifies as "a 26-year-old white female" who speaks English and is currently single. Rachel has experienced family trauma, explicitly noting that "my parents got divorced when I was 4," an event that has had a lasting influence on her personal and professional life. These experiences inform her understanding of students who may face similar familial challenges. **Beliefs and Decision-Making:** Rachel plans to begin her master's studies soon, inspired by her experiences with third- to fifth-grade teachers, whom she described as "genuine caring people." These formative relationships motivated her to "do what they did for me for other kids." Rachel's prior experiences as a substitute teacher and nanny have equipped her to address the diverse needs of her students. Her focus is on creating supportive, individualized learning environments.

Jenna Green, Identity: Jenna provided insights into her identity and background, which influenced her teaching approach as an educator with three years of experience. She identifies as "a 24-year-old female" who primarily speaks English but understands Spanish, particularly in familial settings with her father's side of the family. She is currently engaged and has been diagnosed with anxiety, a factor that may impact her personal life and professional practices.

Jenna grew up with her two parents and a brother, shaping her perspective as a teacher in low-income, trauma-impacted settings. Beliefs and Decision-Making: Jenna's teaching philosophy is deeply rooted in her family's education legacy and her anxiety management experiences. She remarked, "I show up because I want every one of my kids to know they are loved and celebrated," emphasizing her commitment to creating a nurturing environment. Jenna's philosophy is shaped by her childhood hardships, fostering a deep sense of empathy and dedication to her students' well-being.

Randy Rock Identity: Randy offered a detailed account of his identity, reflecting on cultural and personal challenges that have shaped his perspective. He identifies as "a 23-year-old male" who speaks English and is of Mexican heritage. Randy shared a significant personal challenge, revealing, "When I was 10, I was diagnosed with a rare form of diabetes," a condition that has had a profound impact on his life. He also highlighted the influence of his family and faith, noting, "I was raised in a two-parent household; however, my parents separated when I was in high school. I was raised in a Christian household but did not take my faith seriously until high school." Beliefs and Decision-Making: Randy's approach to teaching is shaped by the positive relationships he experienced with his teachers and his deep commitment to providing students with a safe, supportive environment. He remarked, "I wanted to help ensure kids had a safe place where they felt loved and cared for." His involvement in youth programs at his church further reinforces his belief that "every student needs a safe and loving environment," reflecting his holistic approach to fostering academic and social-emotional development in his classroom.

The diverse identities, beliefs, and decision-making processes of each participant in this study illustrate the profound influence of firsthand experiences, backgrounds, and values on their roles as educators. From navigating the challenges of mental health diagnoses and family trauma

to drawing inspiration from influential teachers and volunteer experiences, each individual brings a unique perspective to their teaching practices. These insights highlight the importance of understanding the holistic experiences of teachers, as their identities and beliefs inevitably shape their approach to creating inclusive, supportive, and emotionally responsive learning environments. As educators, they are not only transmitters of knowledge but also caretakers of their students' social-emotional development, informed by their journeys and aspirations for their classrooms. By examining these elements of identity and belief, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how teachers make critical decisions that affect their professional growth and the success of their students.

Survey Two Data Presentation

The second survey focused on social-emotional awareness and childhood adversity, examining how these critical factors shape participants' teaching practices and student interactions. This data set captures the participants' understanding and application of social-emotional learning (SEL) principles in the classroom and their awareness of the impact of childhood adversity on student behavior and learning.

Susan Smith described several strategies she employs to assist students in regulating their emotions, including a "Calm Down Corner" and "Walking Breaks." The "Calm Down Corner" allows students to take a break when experiencing emotional or survival states. Similarly, "Walking Breaks" permits students to leave the classroom for a walk if they feel escalated or struggle to manage their emotions. She emphasized that these strategies were developed through research and discussions during her Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) course in her master's program. Additionally, Susan noted that her school implements "Conscious Discipline" and provides "daily SEL time for 30 minutes daily." Susan expressed frustration with the current

approach to managing students who disrupt the general education setting, particularly when safety is compromised. She stated: "I am frustrated that we have been allowing students who are not safe for a general education setting to continue attending class and disrupting. It should not be okay for a student to assault a teacher and be allowed to stay at the school physically or verbally." Susan questioned the equity of the school's approach, noting that while the school may be striving for equity for students with challenging behaviors, it may negatively impact other students: "I understand that everyone has different needs, but when the safety and emotional well-being of staff and students are placed on the back burner, I have to begin to question the equity of a school building. We may be 'equitable' for the students who are providing trauma to our school, but equity is thrown out the window for all other students who are now attending school in their survival/emotional state and cannot learn." These statements were also reiterated with other participants.

Susan also felt overwhelmed due to a lack of support, particularly from the school's psychological and administrative teams when stress was high in the classroom. She explained that in situations where administrative support is unavailable, she has had to manage crises on her own which also meant other student needs were ignored, "There have been multiple times I needed an admin, but they were too busy responding to a different situation, so instead, I have to try to function in an executive state and continue teaching, even if I may be in a survival zone. I feel overwhelmed with the amount of support that we do not have. Our psych program in our school is understaffed, so often, our admin team has to respond to emergencies, leaving our general education teachers on a ledge some days." To manage disrespectful behavior and maintain her well-being, Susan uses various techniques: "I normally take deep breaths", have

students take a meditation break as a whole class, or if it gets to the point of a possible blow up, I ask for someone to cover my class while I take a walk.

Susan emphasized the importance of self-care, which includes daily walks, watching reruns of favorite series, and engaging in spiritual practices: "My self-care involves daily walks outside for at least a mile after work. During these walks, I listen to either an audiobook or podcast. I watch reruns of series I have watched multiple times and often take long showers to clear my mind. I play with my new puppy and cuddle each night before I go. I try to read and study the Bible daily as well. she prays each night before bed.

Macy Son's responses to the second survey underscore her profound commitment to addressing the social-emotional needs of her students, particularly regarding their struggles with emotional regulation. She notes that her "group of students definite immensely with emotional regulation," which is evident in behaviors such as outbursts and shutting down. Macy's approach to this challenge involves integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) practices into her classroom routines, primarily through "morning meetings to discuss feelings and to create a space to connect between peers." This strategy aims to help students articulate their emotions and develop the skills necessary for emotional regulation. However, ledges that "when it is peer to peer, they do not practice the same things."

Macy's awareness of the impact of childhood adversity is also evident in her discussion of Student 1, a child with a history of significant behavioral challenges. She reflects on her initial apprehension, noting that her "only knowledge of this child was that Student 1 had large, sometimes dangerous, behaviors." Despite these concerns, Macy strives to approach the student without preconceived judgments, recognizing the importance of understanding the complete

picture of who Student 1 is. This reflective stance is crucial to her practice as she seeks to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Additionally, Macy highlights the difficulties she faces in maintaining consistency in behavioral expectations across different settings within the school. She expresses frustration with the lack of "set expectations for that child across the entire school building," which leads to confusion and difficulty for students transitioning between different classrooms. This inconsistency adds to the challenges Macy experiences as a first-year teacher, leaving her feeling "overwhelmed" and "unsure of what to expect." In her personal life, Macy is making conscious efforts to prioritize self-care and work-life balance. She reflects on her goal of leaving school by 5:00 p.m. each day, noting that "it made me feel that I did not have a life outside of school." This goal is part of her broader strategy to ensure she has time for personal activities, including spending quality time with friends and engaging in wedding planning. Macy's commitment to balancing her professional responsibilities and personal well-being is evident in her determination to "not allow [herself] to work on school stuff" on Saturdays, reserving that time for self-care. Overall, Macy's responses illustrate her thoughtful application of SEL principles in the classroom, her awareness of the complexities of childhood adversity, and her ongoing efforts to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Sandy Orr's responses to the second survey vividly illustrate the complex and often frustrating realities she faces as a teacher. Her experiences underscore the core tenets of the transformative SEL pillar, which focuses on creating nurturing environments and fostering self-awareness and self-regulation for educators and students.

Sandy recounted a particularly disheartening situation where administrative decisions during a student's meltdown deeply impacted her: An experience at school that frustrated me as a

teacher was having the administration go against the decisions I made in class and give in to a student because they were having a meltdown. It was frustrating, as it undermined my decision and rewarded negative behavior. I am still working with the administration on deciding for this student and not rewarding the negative behavior by giving the student what they wanted.

This experience highlights Sandy's struggle with maintaining consistent behavioral expectations in her classroom. It reflects the challenges with discipline with the transformative SEL principles, which advocate for a unified approach to managing student behavior. Her ongoing efforts to collaborate with the administration to address the student's needs without reinforcing negative behavior exemplify her commitment to creating a fair and supportive learning environment.

Sandy also shared a moment of overwhelming stress when her students had trouble following directions, and she received critical feedback from the P.E. coach:

"An experience at school that felt overwhelming was a day in which my students had been struggling to follow directions and school expectations, and when I went to pick them up from P.E., I got a lengthy list of all the things that happened while they were there and was told my students would no longer be welcome into the gym if they could not follow expectations. At that moment, I felt overwhelmed by feelings of frustration and sadness. Our assistant principal was with my class then as they had called for assistance. She allowed me to take a moment to step away and reset, which was highly beneficial." This moment underscores the importance of emotional regulation and support systems within the classroom. The assistant principal's support allowed Sandy a crucial opportune to her emotions, reflecting the transformative SEL pillar's emphasis on creating systems that help educators navigate stress and maintain their well-being.

Sandy further described how noise levels and student behavior in the classroom contribute to her sense of being overwhelmed: "Something that makes me feel overwhelmed at work is when the noise level in the room is deafening, and students crowd me and tap on me to ask questions instead of raising their hands. This scenario highlights the need for effective classroom management strategies that promote respectful and productive interactions. It points to the necessity of creating a classroom environment that supports students and teachers, a critical component of transformative SEL. Additionally, Sandy expressed concern about her students' emotional well-being, especially when they engage in negative self-talk during meltdowns:

Something that makes me feel worried and stressed is when my students are struggling with big feelings and begin melting down and using negative self-talk. I address these emotions by taking a moment to breathe and taking time for myself after school.

Sandy's approach to managing these emotional challenges illustrates her focus on self-awareness and self-regulation, central aspects of the transformative SEL pillar. Her practices of taking a moment to breathe and engaging in self-care after school model emotional resilience and well-being, benefiting herself and her students. Despite these difficulties, Sandy feels supported by her team and administration, which highlights her commitment to maintaining a balanced work-life dynamic: Self-care for me looks like leaving school at contract time, not staying excessively late to work on things, and asking colleagues for ideas and help. In my free time, I like to take care of myself by spending time outdoors (going on walks and hikes), going for a drive and listening to my favorite songs, or doing things to take care of myself, like face masks and getting my nails done. Sandy's dedication to self-care aligns with the transformative SEL pillar's focus on fostering environments where educators can thrive. Her proactive approach to setting boundaries around work hours and engaging in personal relaxation activities underscores

the importance of maintaining one's health to sustain effectiveness and resilience as an educator. In her first year of teaching, Sandy strongly emphasizes building rapport with students, particularly those with social and emotional challenges. She frequently uses morning check-ins and brain breaks to help her students feel more comfortable and supported in the classroom. Sandy shared, "I always try to create a safe space where students feel like they can come to me with anything." One of her key strategies is fostering open communication, encouraging students to express their feelings, and providing a calm environment where they can de-escalate when necessary. Sandy has created a classroom culture that prioritizes emotional well-being alongside academic achievement by doing so. Her use of relationship-building strategies, like one-on-one conversations and personalized attention, allows her to connect deeply with her students, which she believes is essential for their success.

Rachel Rita's responses to the second survey offer a detailed perspective on the social-emotional challenges her students encounter, particularly concerning their ability to form healthy friendships and develop independence. She observes that "some students have a hard time making healthy friendships," which often results in conflicts with those they are closest to, which are difficult for them to resolve. Additionally, Rachel notes that other students struggle with independence, frequently requiring ongoing assistance from themselves or their peers to complete their work.

Despite having previous experience with some of her current students during her student teaching, Rachel finds that this familiarity has not significantly mitigated the academic challenges she faces this year. She remarks that "they have changed" over time, although the established relationships have provided a foundation of trust. This trust has made students feel "comfortable confiding in me with some of the more sensitive topics they may need to discuss."

In response to these social-emotional challenges, Rachel has implemented various strategies in her classroom. For instance, she allows "certain students to sit near their friends but not at the same table group," which helps reduce distractions while still offering the comfort of proximity to trusted peers. Additionally, she employs "open seating during individual work time," with the caveat that students who have demonstrated an inability to manage the responsibility are not permitted to sit together. This strategy aims to balance the benefits of being near friends with the need to maintain a productive learning environment.

Rachel's school supports social-emotional learning (SEL) by incorporating the "Second Steps" program once a week for 30 minutes as part of the students' specials or encore time. The school counselor further reinforces SEL by teaching specific skills during her lessons and leading small groups for students requiring additional guidance. Rachel has faced notable challenges when dealing with escalated student behaviors, especially when immediate support from other staff members was unavailable. She recounts an incident where a student's escalation led to physical fighting, which she describes as "frustrating" due to the compromised safety in her classroom. To address these issues, Rachel and her colleagues employed restorative circles, whole and small group discussions, and student success plans on behavior plans. These interventions proved crucial in resolving conflicts and enhancing the classroom environment.

In managing persistent conflicts among her students, Rachel emphasizes the importance of fresh starts and forgiveness, concepts initially challenging for her students to understand. Through extensive parent contact, write-ups, and emotional involvement from students and herself, Rachel and her mentor successfully underscored the importance of resolving these issues. The collaborative efforts of the principal, Behavior Interventionist, counselor, the entire

class, and Rachel herself culminated in a solution that included restorative practices and behavior plans tailored to the needs of her students.

Rachel's responses highlight her unwavering commitment to cultivating a supportive and emotionally aware classroom environment. She aims to help her students navigate their challenges and develop healthier relationships by integrating social-emotional learning into daily practices. Jenna's responses to the second survey reveal her students' significant social-emotional challenges, particularly their "inability to regulate frustrations and sadness." She also notes that "a large amount of students struggle with not being able to receive immediate one-on-one support," which leads to difficulties with "vocal and physical impulsivity." Jenna's awareness of these challenges is informed by her observations and information from previous teachers. She believes this knowledge has helped her build stronger relationships with her students by understanding "what supports were already in place."

To address these needs, Jenna has implemented several strategies in her classroom, including "proximity with my students who need more frequent check-ins," providing a "break space for my students to use at all times," and arranging seating to allow specific students to simply move during whole group instruction." Additionally, she incorporates "choice within instruction" to engage students and meet their individual needs. These practices were influenced by her experiences and those of previous educators. Despite her efforts, Jenna expresses frustration with the lack of a formal social-emotional learning (SEL) program in her building.

Although the school counselor provides lessons, and the district has "pre-determined social-emotional targets" for assessment, Jenna wishes for more comprehensive support. She describes ongoing challenges with specific students who exhibit severe behavioral issues, such as "screaming at full volume" and "destroying the classroom space," noting that these behaviors

have persisted with "little change being done" over the years. This ongoing struggle leaves Jenna feeling that her other students' needs are not being prioritized. Jenna recounts a particularly traumatic experience from her first year of teaching when a student attempted self-harm during a whole-group reading block. She recalls having to hold down a hammer the student found, waiting "anxiously" for someone to respond to her call for help while simultaneously managing the other 21 students in the room. The student, in a state of distress, was "yelling how they wanted to 'smash their fucking brain out.'" Even two years later, this incident remains on Jenna's mind, as she worries that the student may be "falling through the cracks." These experiences have left Jenna with a persistent sense of inadequacy, feeling that "there is only one of me and how I can even give my all, but it will not fill all my students' needs." Despite these challenges, she tries to focus on "the good I have been able to do with students" and draws strength from the support of some of her co-workers.

In her personal life, Jenna makes a concerted effort to disconnect from work and be present with her "2-year-old dog and my now husband." She acknowledges that this can be difficult, as the emotional weight of her work sometimes feels "too much to hold in." To cope, Jenna finds solace in exercise, which "mainly lets me disconnect," providing a brief respite from the pressures of her teaching responsibilities. Jenna's responses highlight the profound emotional toll her role as a teacher takes on her as she navigates the complex social-emotional needs of her students while striving to maintain her well-being. Randy's responses reflect a deep awareness of the critical social-emotional needs of his students, particularly the need for love, belonging, and safety. He observes that "many of my students come from homes where they are told they are not enough or are treated like they are a burden to their parents." In response, Randy strives to create a classroom environment that feels like a home, ensuring that his students feel valued and

supported. He makes it a point to "tell all of my students how happy I am to see them every day" and takes the time to get to know them, asking about their interests. Randy also acknowledges the severe challenges some of his student's face, including those who lack basic safety necessities. He shares the situation of a homeless student who has been staying in a hotel. Henry has been self-harming, and despite efforts to contact her parents, they "do not seem to care." Randy has addressed this by reporting the situation and ensuring the student meets with the school counselor.

Having student-taught at the same school where he now works, Randy had some familiarity with the students from conversations with previous teachers. However, he was not provided with any official data. He consciously chose to "avoid negative talk from previous teachers" to form his impressions of the students without preconceived judgments. Randy implements daily morning meetings in his classroom that include a social-emotional learning (SEL) lesson and opportunities for students to connect. These meetings are part of a district-wide requirement, and school district counselors created the program used. The program focuses on teaching distinctive character traits and social skills, with each day dedicated to a specific aspect, such as a breathing exercise on Monday, character traits on Tuesday, and social skills on Thursday. On Fridays, the class participates in "Compliment Friday," where students write compliments to someone in the class or another class. Randy shares a particularly challenging experience with a student named Hazel, who has a "pretty rough home life" and lives out of a motel. Hazel has been self-harming, and despite Randy's efforts to contact her parents and hotline the situation, the parents were unresponsive, and the report was dismissed. Randy expresses his concern, noting that Hazel "has bad attendance," but he is "happy when she comes to school because I know she is safe." He also reflects on the emotional toll this situation takes,

stating, "My heart hurts knowing that she is living this life at such a young age." Randy is also dealing with increasing behavioral challenges in his classroom. He notes that while this group of fifth graders has fewer behaviors than the group he student-taught with, "the behaviors seem to be getting worse as the school year has gone on." He finds it frustrating when the assistance he seeks results in only temporary solutions: "I do not get answers, just tips and tricks that work for a bit and then stop working because this makes it hard to teach, and for many students, it is distracting." Despite these challenges, Randy expresses appreciation for the supportive environment at his school, where coworkers "help each other out" and provide a space to talk through stress. However, he acknowledges his struggles with self-care, noting that he has "a hard time saying no" and often takes on too much to make others happy. Recognizing the importance of self-care, Randy has started to "learn to say no and take time for just me," engaging in activities such as watching his favorite TV show, going out with friends, or napping.

Randy's responses reflect his dedication to creating a nurturing classroom environment, his concern for the well-being of his students, and his ongoing efforts to balance the demands of teaching with his self-care.

Survey Three Data Presentation

The third survey explored the participants' approaches to focusing on individual students and establishing meaningful relationships within the classroom. This data set delves into the strategies used by the participants to identify and support the unique needs of their students, as well as their methods for building trust and fostering positive student-teacher relationships.

Susan demonstrates a keen awareness of her students' complex and multifaceted needs, many of whom require consistent attention and specialized interventions to succeed in the classroom. She describes "Student A" as particularly reliant on receiving continuous attention to

maintain focus and achieve success. Susan explains that this student seeks attention regardless of the outcome, noting, "Student A needs much attention to feel successful" and will pursue it "whether the consequence is negative or positive" (Susan, survey three, 2024). To manage Student A's behavior, Susan implements a range of strategies throughout the day, including providing "special attention," utilizing behavior trackers, giving reminders, and maintaining regular contact with the student's parents (Susan, survey three, 2024).

Student A's behavioral challenges are deeply rooted in a tumultuous home environment characterized by instability and violence. Susan details that law enforcement has responded to the student's home on multiple occasions due to incidents of "physical aggression" between the parents (Susan, email communication, 2024, para. 1). As a result, Student A frequently enters what Susan describes as a "trauma mode—survival mode" when they feel unheard or frustrated, manifesting in disruptive behavior that requires ongoing intervention (Susan, email communication, 2024, para. 1). The student's response to this trauma emphasizes the importance of providing emotional and psychological support alongside academic instruction, highlighting the profound impact of external factors on student behavior and performance.

In addition to Student A, Susan also grapples with the unique challenges posed by "Student B," who requires constant supervision due to persistent behavioral issues. Susan notes that if these students are not closely monitored, they engage in disruptive activities such as "playing with toys hidden in their clothes" or damaging classroom property (Susan, survey three, 2024). Despite Susan's consistent efforts to address these behaviors, progress has been limited, mainly due to parental resistance to specific interventions. To mitigate the disruptive behaviors, Susan allows Student B to take learning breaks, during which the student can use a doodle pad or iPad after completing a set amount of work (Susan, survey three, 2024). However, when toys are

confiscated due to misbehavior, the student sometimes responds aggressively. This ongoing challenge has prompted Susan to develop and refine behavior management strategies to foster effective communication and clarify classroom expectations (Susan, survey three, 2024).

Susan's reflections underscore her deep awareness of many of her students' socioeconomic challenges. She notes that three of her students participate in the free and reduced lunch program and receive backpack snacks, highlighting the financial difficulties affecting their daily lives (Susan, survey three, 2024). This acknowledgment of her students' economic hardships reveals Susan's sensitivity to the intersection between social-emotional needs and economic barriers. These challenges, she notes, complicate students' ability to thrive academically, emphasizing the broader context within which her teaching must operate.

Despite these obstacles, Susan's responses illustrate her unwavering commitment to supporting her students. She takes a holistic approach to teaching, focusing on academic success and fostering emotional resilience and stability. This approach is evident in her efforts to address immediate behavioral challenges and more significant issues affecting her students' well-being, such as testing, and student data tracking.

Behavioral issues present a significant challenge in Susan's classroom, often diverting her attention from instruction. She candidly remarks, "My day is filled more by behavior managing than it is teaching," illustrating the extent to which managing student behavior consumes her time and energy (Susan, survey three, 2024). Susan explains that she is frequently "putting out 'fires' between students, telling students no, redirecting, or discussing restitution with students" (Susan, survey three, 2024). Although she can often complete a mini-lesson without significant disruptions, extended lessons and activities like small-group or independent work are frequently interrupted as she shifts her focus to managing behaviors (Susan, survey three, 2024). This

dynamic underscore the considerable impact that behavior management has on her ability to deliver consistent academic instruction.

Susan's challenges with behavioral issues are exemplified by her experiences with "Student B," who requires constant supervision to prevent disruptive behavior. Susan observes that when she does not closely monitor these students, they engage in behaviors such as "playing with toys hidden in their clothes" or damaging classroom property (Susan, survey three, 2024). Despite Susan's persistent efforts to implement behavioral interventions, progress remains slow, primarily due to parental objections to specific strategies. To manage Student B's disruptive tendencies, Susan allows learning breaks using a doodle pad or iPad after the student has completed a set amount of work (Susan, survey three, 2024). Nevertheless, when consequences such as taking toys away are necessary, the student sometimes reacts with aggression, prompting Susan to develop strategy plans to improve communication and clarify expectations (Susan, survey three, 2024).

One of the critical tenets of Susan's teaching philosophy is the importance of building strong, trusting relationships with her students. She dedicates the first two full weeks of school primarily to relationship-building rather than content delivery, passionately believing that academic success naturally follows when students "feel trusted, respected, and seen" (Susan, survey four, 2024). Throughout the school year, she maintains these relationships through consistent one-on-one conversations and weekly check-ins, providing her students with a safe space to express themselves. Whether students need to vent, laugh, cry, or express anger, Susan prioritizes ensuring they feel supported and heard (Susan, survey three, 2024, para. 2).

Beyond the classroom, Susan recognizes the importance of engaging with families as part of her holistic approach to student support. She uses various communication methods to keep

parents informed and involved, including sending out monthly newsletters, conducting parent-teacher conferences, and making phone calls to discuss positive and negative behaviors (Susan, survey three, 2024). By maintaining regular contact with parents, Susan fosters a collaborative environment where families actively engage in their child's education. Family engagement from school is significant for students who experience complex home lives, as parental involvement can provide additional support and reinforcement.

Susan's reflections also reveal her deep concern for her students' emotional and psychological well-being, many of whom come from unstable home environments. She notes that she has three students whose home lives are particularly challenging, sharing that these students' "first two brain states are not met: survival (Am I safe?) and emotional (Am I loved?)" (Susan, survey three, 2024). These insights come from conversations with students, information from previous teachers, and reports from counselors and social workers, all of which highlight the severe impact that home environments can have on student behavior and learning.

For example, "Student A" faces significant trauma at home, where "law enforcement has responded multiple times due to physical aggression" between the parents (Susan, email communication, 2024, para. 1). This student's exposure to violence has led them to frequently enter a "trauma mode—survival mode" when they feel unheard or frustrated, causing behavioral disruptions that Susan must continually manage (Susan, email communication, 2024, para. 1). Despite these challenges, Susan remains dedicated to providing the emotional support that her students need, recognizing the importance of addressing their trauma in order to foster both their emotional resilience and academic growth.

Susan's responses convey her profound dedication to her students' well-being inside and outside the classroom. She navigates her students' complex behavioral, emotional, and

socioeconomic challenges with compassion, patience, and a commitment to holistic teaching. Susan creates a classroom environment that prioritizes emotional support alongside academic instruction by focusing on relationship-building, engaging families, and addressing both immediate and systemic obstacles. Her efforts underscore the critical role that educators play in shaping not only the intellectual but also the emotional lives of their students.

Macy Son's responses provide a comprehensive view of her strategies for addressing the individual needs of her students and creating a supportive and structured classroom environment. Macy demonstrates a deep awareness of the student's unique requirements and stresses the importance of routine and consistency in fostering their success. For example, she emphasizes the necessity of structure for "Student 3," stating that this student "needs structure and routine" and does not respond well when deviating from the established classroom routine (Macy, survey four, 2024). She explains that this structure is built on "boundaries, clear and consistent expectations retold several times" (Macy, survey four, 2024). Macy notes that maintaining the student's schedule is essential for ensuring their emotional regulation, further observing that even minor deviations, such as initial release Wednesdays, can cause significant distress. "One little thing out of place can cause this student to be upset, unregulated," she notes, illustrating the importance of predictability in the student's ability to navigate the school day (Macy, survey four, 2024).

In addition to structure, Macy highlights the need for flexibility and clear expectations when working with other students. For instance, she notes that "Student 1 needs clear expectations to be successful" and benefits from being met with flexibility, as the student thrives when given choices and opportunities for compromise (Macy, survey four, 2024). This flexible approach helps Macy navigate the student's "explosive feelings" and aids in keeping the student

out of what she describes as a "red, survival state" (Macy, survey four, 2024). By remaining calm and focused on de-escalation, Macy effectively helps students regulate their emotions and behaviors, demonstrating her nuanced understanding of individual needs.

Macy also recognizes the external factors that influence her students' ability to succeed in the classroom. She identifies that one of her students "struggles with food scarcity at home" and participates in a school-based backpack program that provides weekly food and snacks (Macy, survey four, 2024). This acknowledgment of her students' home lives further informs Macy's holistic approach to teaching as she considers the broader challenges that affect her students' emotional and academic well-being.

Macy strongly emphasizes building meaningful relationships with her students, seeing this as an essential component of her teaching practice. She views relationship-building as a daily process and uses specific parts of the school day, such as the "morning meeting time," to cultivate these connections (Macy, survey four, 2024). Macy believes "listening to my students plays a huge role in building relationships" (Macy, survey three, 2024). She emphasizes the importance of respect and intentional listening in making students feel heard and valued, strengthening their trust in her and enhancing their classroom engagement. She also expressed concern with the amount of time she is provided at her school to plan for all the activities and subjects.

Macy regularly conducts class meetings to foster a sense of community, which provides a space for students to address concerns or celebrate achievements. She notes that these meetings "play a massive role in enhancing relationships" within the classroom, promoting a culture of openness and mutual respect among her students (Macy, survey four, 2024). Macy's focus on

building an intense community atmosphere highlights her commitment to creating a positive and supportive learning environment where students feel connected to their teachers and peers.

Macy's relationship-building efforts extend beyond the classroom, including regular communication with students' families. She believes that "over-communicating" is essential for fostering trust with parents and caregivers, which in turn makes it easier to engage in "tougher conversations when/if they arise" (Macy, survey three, 2024). Macy sends positive mail and newsletters to maintain this connection, ensuring parents are informed and involved in their child's educational journey.

Macy's attentiveness to her students' emotional and psychological well-being is evident in her awareness of their challenges outside school. She is susceptible to signs of a "rougher home life," which she identifies through students' responses to disappointment or criticism (Macy, survey three, 2024). Macy observes that some students shift into a "survival state" when faced with difficulties, which can indicate more profound emotional struggles related to their home environment (Macy, survey three, 2024). These insights help her better understand her students' behaviors and provide targeted support for those facing instability or trauma. One particularly concerning case involves a student who "falls asleep all day, every day" and has a history of prolonged absences (Macy, survey three, 2024). This student's behavior raises red flags about the conditions at home, leading Macy to consider potential interventions that address her students' academic, emotional, and physical needs. Macy's ability to identify and respond to these challenges reflects the necessity of a holistic approach to education.

Macy Son's responses reveal her deep commitment to addressing the individual needs of her students and building strong, supportive relationships in the classroom. Macy effectively meets her students' diverse needs by focusing on structure, routine, and flexibility while creating

a stable learning environment. Her emphasis on relationship-building with students and their families further enhances her ability to support her students' emotional and academic success. Macy's holistic approach to teaching demonstrates her dedication to understanding the external factors that impact her students' well-being and her resolve to provide a classroom environment where all students feel valued, respected, and supported.

Sandy Orr's responses provide a detailed and reflective account of her strategies for addressing the individual needs of students who experience significant emotional, behavioral, and academic challenges. Sandy strongly emphasizes positive reinforcement, individualized accommodations, and fostering strong relationships with her students, all of which are foundational to her teaching approach. One of her critical students, "Student A," presents a range of complex needs requiring substantial support. Sandy explains that Student A thrives with "positive reinforcement, breaks in the care room, and one-on-one support" to manage the classroom environment successfully (Sandy, survey three, 2024). This student frequently exhibits emotional outbursts when faced with frustration or complex tasks, leading to behaviors such as "screaming, crying, throwing items, self-harm, hitting/kicking, and elopement" (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Due to the severity and frequency of these behaviors, which are closely tied to both social-emotional and academic concerns, Student A is currently undergoing evaluation for special education services.

Similarly, Sandy describes another student, Henry, who requires individualized interventions to succeed in the classroom. Diagnosed with Autism and ADHD, Henry struggles with issues of self-control, including challenges related to "shouting out, talking, bodily control, and hyperactivity" (Sandy, survey three, 2024). To support Henry, Sandy employs a variety of accommodations, including movement breaks, the use of fidget tools, and adjustments in seating

arrangements. Central to Henry's success, however, is the establishment of positive, trusting relationships with adults. Sandy notes that Henry responds particularly well to physical touch and affirmations such as "I love you," "You can do it," and "You are doing good" (Sandy, survey three, 2024). These gestures reassure Henry to stay focused and maintain a positive attitude during the school day. Sandy's commitment to supporting students with social-emotional needs stems from her understanding of how crucial emotional regulation is for academic success. She is mainly motivated by the small breakthroughs she witnesses in students who struggle the most. "When I see a student having a hard time finally grasping a concept or feeling proud of themselves, that keeps me going," Sandy remarked. Her own experiences with anxiety have shaped her belief that providing students with emotional support is just as important as helping them academically. This intrinsic motivation drives her to consistently encourage students dealing with adversity, ensuring they feel seen, heard, and valued in her classroom. Sandy is also acutely aware of the socioeconomic challenges that impact her students' lives. She identifies that three of her students were previously receiving snack packs from the school as part of a program to address food insecurity. Unfortunately, due to cuts in the program, these students no longer qualify for this essential support, a change that Sandy became aware of through the school nurse (Sandy, survey three, 2024). This situation illustrates Sandy's attentiveness to the external factors that influence her students' overall well-being and her desire to provide holistic support for their academic and emotional needs.

Behavioral disruptions are a significant challenge in Sandy's classroom, often diverting her focus from instruction and requiring immediate intervention. One of the most disruptive behaviors comes from "Student A," whose emotional outbursts occur multiple times daily. These outbursts often necessitate the student's removal from the classroom by an administrator or the

care room teacher. The entire class must be evacuated on particularly severe occasions for safety reasons (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Recently, Henry has begun experiencing similar outbursts, which include screaming and running from the classroom (elopement), further disrupting instructional time and impacting the learning environment for other students.

Sandy also notes that several students in her classroom have been diagnosed with ADHD, which contributes to frequent behavioral interruptions. These students often struggle with hyperactivity and self-control, leading to behaviors such as shouting out, moving around the room, and requiring constant reminders of classroom expectations. To manage these behaviors, Sandy provides a range of accommodations, including preferential seating, fidget tools, and regular movement breaks to help these students remain focused (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Despite these interventions, managing the frequent disruptions takes considerable time away from instruction and often detracts from the learning experience of other students.

Sandy places a strong emphasis on building genuine and supportive relationships with her students as a means of fostering both their emotional well-being and academic success. She initiates this process at the beginning of the school year by dedicating the first few weeks to games, activities, and community-building exercises (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Sandy continues to nurture these relationships throughout the school year by offering students opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings in class, responding to their questions and concerns, and spending time with them during free periods and recess. She also conducts weekly check-ins with her students, greeting them each morning and saying goodbye at the end of the day, which ensures that each student feels acknowledged and supported (Sandy, survey three, 2024).

Family engagement is also a critical component of Sandy's approach to relationship-building. She communicates regularly with her students' families through multiple channels, including weekly newsletters, emails, and phone calls. These strategies allow Sandy to keep parents informed of both positive developments and any concerns that arise in the classroom. Additionally, she shares academic materials and strategies with parents to help them support their child's learning at home (Sandy, survey three, 2024).

Sandy is particularly sensitive to the challenges some of her students face at home, which often impact their behavior and emotional state in the classroom. For example, she notes that one of her students currently lives with grandparents due to the father's incarceration and the mother's relocation to another state (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Another student frequently expresses emotional distress about going home, indicating feelings of being unloved, which raises concerns for Sandy about potential verbal abuse in the home (Sandy, survey three, 2024). Additionally, a third student is being raised by a single mother and a stepfather whose presence is inconsistent, leading to significant emotional instability for the student (Sandy, survey three, 2024). These observations underscore Sandy's students' complex emotional and psychological needs and the importance of her continued efforts to support them academically and emotionally.

Sandy Orr's responses reflect her deep commitment to providing individualized support for her students and navigating the numerous challenges in a classroom with significant emotional, behavioral, and academic demands. Her emphasis on positive reinforcement, relationship-building, and accommodations tailored to her students' needs exemplifies her holistic approach to teaching. Despite the constant disruptions and challenges she faces, Sandy remains focused on fostering a supportive environment where students can feel safe, valued, and capable of succeeding both in the classroom and beyond. Her attentiveness to the broader

socioeconomic and emotional issues affecting her students' lives further highlights her dedication to understanding and addressing the full scope of their needs.

Rachel's responses offer a thorough understanding of her strategies for managing students with significant needs, particularly those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and challenging home lives. Her approach highlights the importance of tailored interventions, relationship-building, and open communication with students and their families.

Rachel is acutely aware of the specific needs of her students, especially those who require additional support due to behavioral and academic challenges. One example she provides is "Student A," who has an IEP for reading and writing services, is medicated for ADHD, and is on a Tier 3 behavior plan with other out-of-class interventions (Rachel, survey three, 2024).

"Student A" faced multiple suspensions throughout the school year and requires "extra support/attention." Despite these challenges, Rachel notes that "the interventions we have put into place over the school year have proven to be successful for this student unless triggered" (Rachel, survey three, 2024). However, de-escalation becomes difficult when triggers occur, indicating the need for ongoing, adaptive support strategies.

Another student, "Student B," presents different challenges. Rachel describes this student as "withdrawn from school often" and lacking the motivation or drive to complete tasks promptly despite being "very bright" (Rachel, survey three, 2024). Student B receives out-of-school counseling and in-school check-ins with the School Counselor and Resource Specialist (SCRS) and participates in a lunch group focused on friendship and relationships. Rachel highlights the difficulty of supporting this student in the classroom, mainly because of her emotional state and difficult home life, where she "seeks woman attention as she lives solely with her grandpa" (Rachel, survey three, 2024). Ms. Rita also acknowledges the broader issue of food insecurity

among her students, noting that she has "3 students who receive bags of food each week" as part of a back snack program sponsored by a local church (Rachel, survey three, 2024). This awareness of her students' basic needs is integral to her approach to supporting their overall well-being.

Behavioral issues and transitions are significant challenges in Rachel's classroom. She identifies behavior as a major factor that "takes away from instructional time," noting that "we struggle with transitions as a whole" (Rachel, survey three, 2024). Additionally, unresolved issues from other parts of the school building often resurface in the classroom, further disrupting instructional time and highlighting the need for consistent, school-wide behavioral support and communication to ensure a more seamless learning environment.

Building solid relationships with her students is crucial to Rachel's teaching practice and she admits that there is not enough time to effectively plan for deep lessons. She uses various strategies to foster connections, including "team building, one-on-one conversations, conferring during reading/writing, and participating in brain breaks/PE/Recess games" (Rachel, survey three, 2024). These activities help Rachel establish a rapport with her students, making them feel supported and understood within the classroom.

Rachel also emphasizes the importance of communication with families despite its challenges. She tries to keep parents informed by sending a monthly newsletter via SeeSaw, calling, or emailing parents regarding both good and "bad behavior," and sending notes home (Rachel, survey three, 2024). However, she acknowledges the difficulties some of her students face at home, particularly those living with grandparents due to parental deaths or involvement in custody battles or child abuse cases. Rachel's sensitivity to these situations underscores her commitment to providing a supportive and understanding environments for all her students.

Rachel's responses reflect a thoughtful and responsive approach to teaching, emphasizing individualized support, behavior management, and relationship-building. Her strategies are designed to meet the diverse needs of her students, particularly those facing significant academic and emotional challenges.

Jenna's responses provide a nuanced view of her strategies for addressing the complex needs of her students, particularly those with significant behavioral and academic challenges. Her approach is characterized by focusing on immediate intervention, tailored support, and active engagement with students and their families.

Jenna is deeply committed to providing individualized support to her students, especially those facing multiple challenges. For instance, she describes "Student A," who requires "instant attention and support" when starting to become frustrated (Jenna, survey three, 2024). This student, diagnosed with OCD, a form of bipolar disorder, and ADD/ADHD, requires consistent adult guidance using specific strategies and tools to help with de-escalation. However, Jenna notes that the student's medication for these diagnoses is not administered consistently, which complicates the support process. Additionally, "Student A" has a primary reading level and requires modifications across all aspects of the third-grade curriculum (Jenna, survey three, 2024). The student's home life is also unsupportive due to the conflict between separated parents, further exacerbating the challenges Jenna faces in the classroom. Another student, "Student B," struggles with hyperactivity, focus, and self-awareness. Although these students are gifted, they have significant learning gaps due to an inability to address tasks effectively (Jenna, survey three, 2024). Jenna points out that redirection is usually ineffective for this student, who requires a separate area to complete work. Despite ongoing concerns from the parents, no diagnosis has been made, and no significant changes have occurred, highlighting a long-standing issue that has

persisted for several school years (Jenna, survey three, 2024). Jenna is also aware of food scarcity among some of her students, which is addressed through the school's provision of free breakfasts and lunches (Jenna, survey three, 2024). This acknowledgment of students' basic needs reflects Jenna's broader understanding of the numerous factors that affect her students' ability to learn and succeed in the classroom.

Behavioral concerns are a significant challenge in Jenna's classroom, often leading to disruptions that take away from instructional time. She notes that "Student A has caused multiple classroom evacuations" and that this student's vocal escalations interrupt instruction daily (Jenna, survey three, 2024). Additionally, "Student B" exhibits disruptive behaviors, such as throwing himself on objects, further complicating classroom management. These challenges are compounded by other students who disrupt class by blurting out, being off-task, or not following directions, creating an environment where maintaining focus and productivity can be challenging (Jenna, survey three, 2024).

Building authentic relationships with her students is crucial to Jenna's teaching approach. She emphasizes the importance of getting to know her students by talking with them about their interests, home life, and activities outside of school (Jenna, survey three, 2024). Jenna also participates in school functions outside of regular hours, further reinforcing her commitment to connecting with her students on a personal level. Some students seek physical attention, such as hugs and high-fives, which Jenna provides to comfort and reassure them throughout the day.

Jenna also prioritizes building relationships with her students' families, understanding the importance of family engagement in supporting student success. She maintains an open line of communication with families, beginning with intake conferences at the start of the school year, where families can share concerns and provide insights about their child (Jenna, survey three,

2024). Jenna views families as vital partners in the educational process and reaches out to them as needed to ensure that they participate in supporting their child's learning and well-being.

Jenna's insights into her students' home lives reveal the complex challenges many face. For example, she describes a student whose parents do not get along, with the father lacking permanent housing and the mother relying on him for financial support, leading to further conflict. This situation has contributed to the student's development of eating issues, mirroring the mother's hyper-focus on food after weight loss surgery (Jenna, survey three, 2024). Another student lost their home due to a fire and is currently living with grandparents while also dealing with a high-needs sibling. Jenna also mentions a student whose father was recently released from jail and reintroduced to the student, which was confusing due to the father's prior absence from the child's life (Jenna, survey three, 2024).

Randy's reflections offer valuable insights into the daily challenges of supporting students, particularly those who face significant difficulties at home. One of the students Randy focuses on is Hazel, a child who struggles with academic success due to frequent absences and a challenging home environment. Randy describes Hazel's home situation as one where she "is not given much attention and is not shown love," which further complicates her engagement in school (Randy, survey three, 2024). Randy deliberately tries to ensure that Hazel feels seen and valued despite these barriers. He emphasizes the importance of small gestures, saying, "Every day she shows up, I tell her how happy I am that she is here." This consistent positive reinforcement is part of Randy's strategy to build a sense of belonging for Hazel and to encourage her regular attendance and participation in learning activities (Randy, survey three, 2024).

Similarly, Randy's experience with another student, Zachary, who was diagnosed with ADHD and Autism, underscores the importance of early identification and intervention. Zachary initially struggled with paying attention in class, fidgeting, and making noises, which hindered his ability to focus on academic tasks. Recognizing these behaviors, Randy worked closely with Zachary's mother to seek appropriate support, which led to his diagnosis and placement in special education services. Since receiving these services, Zachary has demonstrated remarkable progress. Randy proudly notes that Zachary went from "getting every question wrong on a test to getting 100% correct" (Randy, survey three, 2024). This transformation highlights the impact of tailored interventions and the importance of advocating for students who require additional support.

In addition to these individual cases, Randy is aware of the broader issue of food insecurity within the school community. Many students rely on the school's program that provides Harvester Bags—packaged meals intended to sustain students over the weekend. Randy notes that “lots of students struggle with food at home,” directly impacting their ability to focus and succeed in the classroom (Randy, survey three, 2024). This awareness of students' basic needs further informs Randy's approach to supporting their overall well-being beyond academic performance.

While Randy is deeply committed to the well-being of his students, he also feels overwhelmed by the sheer number of students and the range of needs he is expected to address. Reflecting on juggling these demands, Randy states he is "not qualified to do it all." He recognizes that his role has expanded beyond teaching, as he now finds himself responsible for addressing many emotional, behavioral, and academic needs that extend far beyond the scope of his training and expertise (Randy, survey three, 2024). This frustration is compounded by the

fact that Randy does not work on classroom preparation outside of his contract hours, which adds to the pressure of meeting his students' diverse needs within the limited time available during the school day.

Randy's core priority is creating a nurturing classroom environment where students feel valued. He believes fostering a positive atmosphere is essential to student success, stating, "If my kids do not feel loved or welcome, then they are not going to want to learn" (Randy, survey three, 2024). Randy's dedication to this principle has not gone unnoticed; he often receives compliments from other staff members on the positive energy in his classroom (Randy, survey three, 2024). This focus on emotional well-being helps Randy establish a classroom culture where students feel safe, supported, and ready to engage in learning.

One of the ways Randy builds relationships with students is by showing interest in their lives outside of school. He shares that whenever a student tells him about something they are doing after school, he asks them about it the next day. "If a kid told me about something they were doing after school, I made sure to ask them about it the next day," he explains (Randy, survey three, 2024). This attention to detail helps to strengthen the bonds between Randy and his students, reinforcing the sense of trust and care central to his teaching philosophy.

While Randy believes he excels in creating strong relationships with students, he acknowledges that engaging with families remains a challenge. He uses platforms like Seesaw to send newsletters every other week but finds that "not many parents view these" communications (Randy, survey three, 2024). Of the 20 students in his class, only 10 parents read the messages, and only five actively participated or responded (Randy, survey three, 2024). This low level of engagement highlights the difficulties many educators face when establishing substantial home

and school connections, particularly in communities where families are dealing with their hardships.

Randy's observations of his students' home lives further underscore their challenges outside of school. He estimates that "6 or 7 of my kids come from a rough home," dealing with issues ranging from homelessness to lack of necessities (Randy, survey three, 2024). One student, for instance, often talks about the lack of love at home, which raises concerns for Randy about the child's emotional well-being. Another student who is experiencing homelessness struggles to focus on learning when their basic survival needs are not being met (Randy, survey three, 2024). These situations demonstrate home environments' profound impact on student's ability to succeed in school and reinforce Randy's commitment to creating a classroom that provides the support and stability many of his students lack at home.

Randy's reflections reveal the complex and multifaceted nature of teaching in a classroom where students face significant emotional, behavioral, and socioeconomic challenges. His approach to supporting individual student needs, building strong relationships, and fostering a positive classroom environment reflects his deep commitment to his students' well-being. However, Randy also acknowledges the immense pressure of being a teacher who is expected to meet many student needs with limited resources and time. Despite these challenges, Randy continues prioritizing his students' emotional and academic success, striving to create a classroom where all students feel valued and supported, even when the odds are stacked against them.

Survey Four Data Presentation

The fourth survey assessed the participants' cultural competence, awareness of bias, and strategies for promoting intellectual development within diverse classroom settings. This data set

provides a critical examination of the participants' understanding of cultural diversity and their ability to identify and address personal and systemic biases that may affect their teaching practices. Moreover, the survey investigates how participants actively foster the intellectual growth of students from various cultural backgrounds to create an equitable learning environment that acknowledges and values diversity.

A vital component of this survey was the inclusion of the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT), which served as a tool for participants to reflect on their unconscious biases. However, the degree to which participants disclosed their results was left to their discretion. This approach, while posing a significant limitation in terms of data consistency, was intentionally designed to support the primary research questions. The insights gathered from this data are vital for understanding how participants navigate the multifaceted challenges of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and their efforts to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can succeed academically. The self-reported nature of the IAT results offers a unique lens into the participants' evolving awareness of their own biases and their willingness to confront these biases in pursuit of more inclusive educational practices.

Susan's reflections on the implicit bias test results provide insight into her views on racial bias, the fairness of such assessments, and broader issues of diversity and equity in education. Susan reports that the test indicated a "faster response to white/lighter faces," a result she strongly disagrees with. She critiques the test's methodology, arguing that it "is not a fair assessment" because it "immediately [associates] dark skin/Black people with negative words and white/light skin with positive." Susan believes this setup could lead to a "practiced brain reaction" when taking the test quickly, influencing the outcome in a way that does not accurately reflect her true feelings.

Susan's disagreement with the test results highlights her skepticism about the validity of the implicit bias test. She questions the fairness of associating certain racial groups with negative or positive words, suggesting that this method could bias the test taker's responses. This critique underscores her concern that the test may reinforce stereotypes rather than accurately measure an individual's implicit biases.

In addition to reflecting on the test, Susan expresses concern about the current focus on school equity. She believes that schools are "too focused on equity" to the extent that they "are only providing equitable opportunities to students in a minority setting," such as those in special education or from specific ethnic backgrounds. Susan argues that "diversity goes WAY beyond the color of your skin," encompassing a wide range of factors, including "home life, family situation, economic situation, religious affiliation, access to health care, languages spoken, special needs, [and] disabilities." Susan's response emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multifaceted nature of diversity and ensuring that educational equity efforts address the needs of all students, not just those from specific minority groups. Her perspective adds depth to the conversation about how schools can balance the focus on equity with the need to consider all students' diverse experiences and backgrounds.

Macy Son's responses to the fourth survey reflect her cultural competence, awareness of bias, and approach to fostering intellectual development in diverse classroom settings. Macy acknowledges a "slight automatic preference for gay people over straight people," which she attributes to her identity as "a gay woman" who is "getting married to a woman in August" (M. Son, survey four,2023). She also notes a "slight automatic association with males with science and females with liberal arts," a result that surprised her, as she "did not know this about [herself]" (M. Son, survey four,2023). When discussing racial and ethnic biases, Macy reports

"little to no automatic association between weapons and harmless objects with white Americans and Black Americans," explaining that she focuses on "the personality of someone who owns more extreme weapons, rather than skin color" (M. Son, survey four,2023). Additionally, she indicates that she has "no automatic preference between Native Americans and white Americans" because she views "all people as individuals, regardless of what they look like, disabilities they might have, and any other label or category" (M. Son, survey four,2023). Furthermore, Macy notes "no automatic preference between other people and Arab Muslim people," reaffirming her belief that "individuals are unique" (M. Son, survey four, 2023).

Macy further reflects on her "moderate automatic preference for young people over old people," relating it to her work experience at a breakfast restaurant, where the older demographic "was not [her] favorite," and her natural affinity for "babies, toddlers, and younger children" (M. Son, survey four, 2023). She expresses no surprise at her "no automatic preference between disabled persons and abled persons," as she consciously strives to "see all human beings as individuals" (M. Son, survey four,2023).

Additionally, Macy reports a "slight preference for dark-skinned people over light-skinned people," a result she finds "interesting but not super surprising" (M. Son, survey four,2023). She critiques the methodology of the Implicit Association Test (IAT), citing "low resolution" images and categories that are "too similar" as potential limitations of the assessment (M. Son, survey four,2023). Macy also reflects on her challenges as an educator, mainly supporting students who have experienced trauma. She feels a deep sense of responsibility to "help hold the weight" of her students' emotional burdens. However, she admits struggling with how to "emotionally deal with it" on her end while maintaining a "positive and strong" presence for her students (M. Son, survey four,2023). Macy expresses concern that her fourth-grade

students are "growing up too fast" and are "so aware of what is going on around them," which occupies much of their mental capacity (M. Son, survey four, 2023). Her reflections demonstrate a strong commitment to creating an equitable and supportive classroom environment but provide little detail on specific strategies.

Sandy Orr's reflections on her Disability Implicit Association Test (IAT) results provide a nuanced understanding of her implicit biases and underscore her commitment to creating an inclusive classroom environment for students with diverse needs. According to Sandy, the IAT revealed a "moderate automatic preference for Abled Persons over Disabled Persons," a result she initially found surprising given her belief that she does "not have conscious biases" suggesting such a preference (S. Orr, survey four, 2023). This outcome prompted Sandy to critically reflect on the nature of implicit bias, recognizing that such biases often operate below conscious awareness. She admits that, as an abled person, it "makes some sense" that the test results reflect this automatic preference, acknowledging that "everyone has implicit biases" regardless of their conscious beliefs or intentions (S. Orr, survey four, 2023). This reflective stance demonstrates Sandy's willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about her biases, a crucial first step toward fostering a more equitable learning environment. Beyond her reflections on bias, Sandy shares a recent achievement in advocating for her students' needs. She celebrates the fact that "one of [her] students' parents finally consented to SPED testing" after multiple attempts to secure appropriate services for the student (S. Orr, survey four, 2023). Sandy expresses a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that this student, who has long required "more support than currently provided," will "finally get the support they need" (S. Orr, survey four, 2023). Although the services may not begin until the following school year, Sandy's

perseverance in advocating for this student exemplifies her dedication to ensuring that all her students receive the individualized support they require to succeed.

Sandy also reflects on the broader challenges she has faced throughout the school year, particularly the "behavioral and emotional needs" prevalent in her classroom, which have made the year "tough" (S. Orr, survey four, 2023). These challenges, while difficult, have not diminished Sandy's commitment to her students' well-being. Her reflections reveal a deep resilience and determination to meet her students' needs despite significant obstacles. By continually advocating for her students and seeking ways to support them better, Sandy exemplifies the reflective and adaptive teaching necessary in today's increasingly diverse and demanding educational landscape. Her reflections are a powerful reminder of the critical role that self-awareness and advocacy play in developing inclusive and supportive classroom environments. Sandy is acutely aware of her experiences and how they shape her interactions with students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. She reflects on her upbringing and acknowledges that her experiences as a white, cisgender woman may not fully prepare her to understand the complexities of her students' lives, especially those from marginalized communities. Sandy shared, "I know I cannot fully understand what some of my students are going through, but I try to listen and learn from them daily." She actively works to cultivate cultural competence by participating in professional development opportunities focused on equity and inclusion. Sandy also recognizes that her diagnosis of ADHD and anxiety may give her a unique perspective on the needs of students with similar challenges. However, she remains committed to learning more about effectively supporting students from all backgrounds. This self-awareness allows her to approach her teaching with humility and a willingness to adapt her methods to meet the needs of her diverse classroom better.

Rachel Rita's reflections on her Age Implicit Association Test (IAT) results demonstrate her critical and reflective engagement with the assessment and its implications. According to the test, Rachel was identified as having "a preference for young people over old people," a conclusion that she found unexpected given her self-perception. She explains that she does "not feel as if [she has] a preference either way," which led her to question the validity of the results (R. Rita, survey four, 2023). This initial surprise encouraged Rachel to scrutinize the IAT more closely, particularly its methodology. She is critical of the test's design, arguing that it is "designed to trick you" by frequently changing the keys associated with distinct categories.

Rachel believes that this frequent shift in key associations could influence the accuracy of the results, making her question whether the test truly measures implicit biases or simply reflects confusion caused by its design (R. Rita, survey four, 2023). Despite her reservations about its methodology, Rachel's willingness to engage critically with the IAT highlights her openness to exploring potential implicit biases. Rather than dismissing the test's purpose, her skepticism adds depth to the broader discourse surrounding the reliability and validity of implicit bias assessments. By questioning the accuracy of the results, Rachel raises essential considerations about the complexities involved in measuring unconscious preferences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how these assessments function and their limitations (R. Rita, survey four, 2023). Rachel's reflective process indicates her dedication to fostering an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. While she critiques the IAT's methodology, her engagement with the test nonetheless reflects a more profound commitment to self-awareness and an ongoing willingness to confront and examine potential biases that could influence her interactions with students. This openness aligns with Rachel's broader efforts to create an environment where all students feel valued and supported. Her participation in discussions surrounding implicit bias

also reflects a desire to continue professional development, as she expressed a willingness to further explore these topics in more depth during in-person discussions as part of Pilot Study II (R. Rita, email, 2023). Through this ongoing reflection and dialogue, Rachel fosters an inclusive classroom environment and contributes to broader discussions about diversity and equity in education.

Jenna Green's reflections offer essential perspectives on her experiences with bias assessments and the broader challenges of modern teaching. Jenna acknowledges the validity of the assessment results, noting that she "can see where the results would be valid" (J. Green, survey four, 2023). However, she also recognizes that as the assessment continued, she began to "figure out what [she] needed to do," indicating an increased awareness of how the assessment functions and how it might influence one's responses (J. Green, survey four, 2023). This process led to a "shift in [her] perspective," encouraging her to critically examine her unconscious biases, particularly in areas related to career, family, gender, and physical appearance (J. Green, survey four, 2023). Beyond bias reflection, Jenna discusses teachers' growing pressures in today's educational climate. She expresses concern that teaching "really is not teaching anymore" due to the overwhelming workload and emotional toll placed on educators (J. Green, survey four, 2023). Despite these challenges, Jenna takes pride in her ability to support students and emphasizes teachers' pivotal role in shaping students' lives. She also notes that many veteran teachers find this period the "hardest time in their careers," reflecting a shared sentiment among her colleagues and illustrating the difficulties educators collectively experience (J. Green, survey four, 2023).

Randy Rock's reflections on the Religion IAT offer a thoughtful perspective on the intersection of personal faith and implicit bias. The test revealed that Randy favors Christianity, a

result they expected, as their "faith plays a huge part" in their life (R. Rock, survey four,2023). Randy emphasizes that while they may favor their religion, they would "never treat someone differently" based on their beliefs, reflecting a strong commitment to inclusivity (Rock, survey four,2023). Randy appreciates the value of the IAT in helping individuals "see some biases [they] might not be aware of" but also notes concerns with the test's design, particularly the frequent switching of word associations, which may impact the accuracy of the results (R. Rock, survey four,2023). Despite these limitations, Randy enjoys taking such assessments, as they offer opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth (R. Rock, survey four,2023). These reflections contribute to a broader understanding of implicit bias assessments' complexities and how educators navigate personal beliefs and professional responsibilities in diverse classroom settings.

The analysis of participant responses in Chapter 4 has provided a look at the balance necessary for early-career educators. They are learning to navigate the complexities of cultural competence, trauma-informed practices, and social-emotional learning in diverse classroom settings. By organizing the data according to individual participant responses, this chapter has not only illuminated the diverse perspectives and experiences of the teachers but also highlighted recurring themes that speak to broader systemic issues within education. The insights gained from these data underscore the need for targeted professional development and support systems that equip educators to meet the needs of their students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The participants' reflections revealed varying levels of cultural competence, with some educators demonstrating a keen awareness of the social and cultural dynamics that shape their students' learning experiences. Others, however, showed areas where further growth is needed,

particularly in recognizing and addressing implicit biases. As Gay (2010) asserts, "Culturally responsive teaching is essential for improving the educational experiences of ethnically diverse students" (p. 48). The responses analyzed in this chapter support this claim, as participants who actively engaged with culturally responsive teaching practices reported more positive outcomes in terms of student engagement and academic achievement. The data also revealed that those who lacked cultural competence often struggled to connect with their students, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful learning.

Trauma-informed practices emerged as another critical theme, with many participants emphasizing the importance of creating safe, supportive environments for students who have experienced trauma. As Cole et al. (2013) highlight, "Trauma-sensitive schools recognize the impact of trauma on learning and behavior and provide a supportive environment that helps children feel safe and ready to learn" (p. 9). Participants who implemented trauma-informed strategies, such as fostering strong relationships with students and offering flexible, individualized support, reported greater success in managing classroom behavior and promoting emotional well-being. Conversely, educators who lacked training in trauma-informed approaches expressed frustration with student behavior and noted the challenges of maintaining an orderly learning environment.

The integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies also played a significant role in participants' classroom practices. Participants who incorporated SEL reported that students were better able to regulate their emotions, engage in positive peer interactions, and approach learning with a growth mindset. As CASEL (2020) suggests, "SEL provides a foundation for safe and positive learning and enhances students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life" (p. 6). The data confirmed that educators who prioritized SEL not only saw

improvements in student behavior but also in academic performance. However, some participants indicated that they were uncertain about how to effectively integrate SEL into their curriculum, suggesting a need for additional training and resources in this area.

A recurring theme throughout the analysis was the overwhelming nature of the teaching profession, particularly for early-career educators. Many participants reported feelings of being overworked and under-supported, which impacted their ability to implement best practices consistently. This finding aligns with research by Ingersoll and Strong (2011), who note that "novice teachers are often expected to perform the same duties as veteran teachers, without the same level of experience or support, leading to high levels of stress and burnout" (p. 203). The data underscore the need for systemic changes that provide early-career educators with the mentoring, professional development, and emotional support necessary to thrive in their roles.

As we move forward, these findings will inform the discussion and implication recommendations in Chapter 5, offering concrete strategies to support the growth and development of early-career educators. These codes and emerging themes are described in figure 4.2.

Codes and Emerging Themes

Figure 4.1Codes and Emerging Themes

Emerging Code	Description
Emotional Regulation	Techniques like check-ins, calm-down spaces, and behavioral charts for regulation.
Bias Awareness	Recognition and mitigation of unconscious biases, especially from diverse students.
Resource Scarcity	Limited resources lead to teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion.
Classroom Management Strategies	Techniques to manage behavior and emotional needs in classroom settings.
Support for Students with ACEs	Need for additional resources and emotional support for students with ACEs.

The emerging themes are emotional regulation, bias awareness, resource scarcity, classroom management, support for students with ACEs. These are each

Emotional Regulation as a Foundational Strategy

Participants consistently emphasized the critical role of emotional regulation techniques in their teaching practices. Strategies such as daily emotional check-ins with students, calm-down spaces, and individualized behavioral “*success*” charts were commonly used to help manage student behavior and foster an environment conducive to learning. These techniques were not only seen as practical classroom management tools but also as essential in addressing the emotional needs of students, especially those affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and struggle with emotional regulation when challenged. Participants noted that their understanding of their student’s adverse experiences directly influenced how they implemented these strategies, highlighting the importance of emotional regulation as a foundational element in trauma-informed teaching.

Bias Awareness and Mitigation in Classroom Interactions

Participants' reflections on the Harvard Implicit Bias Test revealed an increased awareness of how unconscious biases can impact their interactions with students, particularly those from diverse or trauma-impacted backgrounds. The participants recognized the need for intentional efforts to address these biases, acknowledging that unchecked assumptions could affect their expectations and responses to students' behavior and academic performance. This theme illustrated a commitment to creating more equitable and supportive classroom environments by actively working to mitigate implicit biases, ensuring that all students are treated with fairness and understanding.

Resource Scarcity and Emotional Exhaustion

A recurrent theme among participants was the need for more resources to support students with ACEs adequately. Teachers often felt overwhelmed by the demands of meeting students' emotional and behavioral needs without sufficient tools, personnel, or institutional support. This scarcity of resources frequently led to emotional exhaustion and burnout as teachers struggled to balance the needs of their students with the realities of limited funding, training, and assistance. The strain of attempting to provide effective social-emotional interventions without adequate support underscored the necessity for systemic changes, including better access to resources and professional development, to sustain teachers' well-being and the effectiveness of trauma-informed practices.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Discussion

Summary of Study

The research findings highlight the urgent need for universal changes that prioritize the social-emotional well-being of elementary students and educators alike. The array of current educational models with emphasis on academic outcomes as foundational fails to account for the complex realities of trauma-impacted young students and the teachers who support them. Without adequate adult reinforcement, resources, and systemic support, the demands placed on educators are unsustainable, leading to high burnout and turnover which has plagued the field of education that has long been burdened by elevated levels of burnout and high turnover rates, issues that continue to affect teacher retention and efficacy across the field (García & Weiss, 2019; Herman et al., 2020; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). This research was framed around four guiding questions that examine the experiences of early career elementary teachers.

Pillar I (Beliefs & Decision-making), Pillar II (Transformative SEL), Pillar III (Motivational Influences), and Pillar IV (Cultural Awareness) was utilized to analyze how these early-career teachers navigate decision-making, manage stress, and apply culturally responsive teaching practices. This study further highlights the role of these teachers' perceptions of their social and emotional self-awareness and how this awareness informs their classroom management and instructional strategies. While the teachers in this study are deeply committed to building supportive and trusting relationships with their students, they frequently express frustration with the limited understanding and support provided regarding how ACEs affect students' brain development, cognitive abilities, and emotional regulation.

The findings reveal that these early-career educators often feel overwhelmed by the emotional and behavioral needs of their young students, particularly when planning time is sparse for the number of demands, strong administrative presence and support is inconsistent or when classroom incidents, such as a student throwing supplies or using offensive language, arise.

The emotional intensity of working in elementary classrooms, where the balance between academic instruction and students' social-emotional demands is tenuous, underscores the significant challenge between teacher preparation and the realities of contemporary elementary classrooms. The participants reported feeling underprepared to address emotional dysregulation in students and frequently struggled to develop effective strategies to support students who have not yet acquired emotional regulation skills. This, in turn, had a direct impact on the emotional well-being of the teachers themselves. Institutional support plays a pivotal role in shaping teacher resilience and efficacy, particularly in environments where educators are routinely exposed to elevated levels of emotional and cognitive demands.

Effective administrative support, a collaborative school culture, and access to adequate resources including protected plan time are essential for promoting a supportive working environment that fosters teacher well-being (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Research underscores that teachers who perceive their schools as supportive and well-managed are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction and lower rates of burnout (Ingersoll, 2012). Administrative practices that prioritize professional development, mentorship, and open communication channels provide the structural backing needed for teachers to thrive in challenging classroom settings (Desimone, 2009). Additionally, a positive school culture that values shared decision-making and collaborative problem-solving can buffer the adverse effects of job-related stress, further contributing to teacher retention (García & Weiss, 2019). These are important

considerations for the field. The following section will share the analysis of the findings as they relate to each pillar of the conceptual framework.

Analysis of Findings

R1: Beliefs & Decision-making (Pillar I)

How do early-career educators' beliefs about their abilities shape their support for students with social and emotional challenges?

The findings reveal that early-career educators' personal beliefs play a significant role in shaping their decision-making processes, particularly when working with students affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The participants' responses highlight the interplay between individual experiences and professional practices, influencing how they support students in their classrooms.

For instance, Susan Smith emphasized her dual role as both an educator and an emotional anchor, noting that while "it is impossible for a teacher to meet every need of a class of 18," teachers must acknowledge that "there are times when you will be the right teacher at the right time." Susan's statement reflects her belief in the necessity of supporting students' emotional well-being alongside their academic growth, despite feeling underprepared for the emotional demands of the job. She remarked on the frequent emotional outbursts in her classroom, explaining that "there is still a lot of crying that happens at this age, and that takes a lot of time to recover from." This acknowledgment of emotional labor highlights the gap between her initial expectations of the profession and the reality of managing social-emotional challenges in elementary classrooms.

Similarly, Macy Son expressed strong convictions about giving students multiple opportunities to succeed, asserting, "I believe every child deserves a chance, multiple chances,

multiple opportunities." However, Macy also revealed a bias against students she perceived as "lazy" or disruptive, reflecting an internal conflict between her belief in resilience and her struggles to manage students' behavioral challenges. Macy's perspective underscores the need for comprehensive teacher preparation programs that address implicit biases and equip educators with the tools to understand the socio-emotional and cultural factors that influence student behavior.

These findings align with Gorski's (2019) argument that teachers who are not trained to critically examine their beliefs may inadvertently perpetuate harmful biases, especially when working with students from marginalized backgrounds. Gorski emphasizes that reflective practices are essential in helping educators align their beliefs with their teaching strategies, particularly in classrooms where trauma and cultural diversity are prevalent. Without this alignment, early-career educators may struggle to manage the emotional and behavioral complexities they encounter, leading to frustration and a sense of inadequacy.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory supports these findings, emphasizing that teachers' self-efficacy plays a crucial role in their ability to effectively manage diverse student needs. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to feel confident in their ability to support students' social-emotional development and to implement trauma-informed practices. However, many early-career educators, like Macy and Susan, report feeling overwhelmed and underprepared to meet these demands. As Darling-Hammond (2017) notes, "teachers trained in trauma-informed practices report higher levels of efficacy," yet such training is often lacking in traditional teacher preparation programs.

The theme that emerges from Pillar I: Beliefs & Decision-Making is the conflict between early-career educators' personal beliefs and the practical realities of supporting diverse students,

particularly those with social-emotional challenges. While participants such as Susan and Macy exhibit a strong commitment to providing care, high expectations, and second chances for students, they also reveal a disconnect between their ideals and the complexities of managing diverse classrooms. This highlights the critical need for reflective practices in teacher preparation programs that help educators critically assess their beliefs, address implicit biases, and align their decision-making processes with culturally responsive and trauma-informed strategies.

Without such reflective practices, new educators may find themselves unprepared to effectively support students with social-emotional and behavioral challenges, despite their strong belief in the potential of every child. As Gorski (2019) points out, when teachers are not equipped to align their beliefs with their practices, they risk perpetuating biases that can harm both students and educators. The findings from this study emphasize the importance of equipping early-career educators with the tools and training necessary to navigate the emotional complexities of teaching, ensuring that their personal beliefs are aligned with effective and equitable classroom practices.

R2: Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (Pillar II)

In what ways do early-career educators build rapport with students facing social and emotional challenges?

The findings demonstrate how early-career teachers employ Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to foster meaningful relationships and provide emotional support for students impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Through the theoretical lenses of CASEL (2020) and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, this pillar explores the ways in which educators navigate the complexities of rapport-building, emotional regulation, and the application of SEL strategies in environments where social-emotional challenges are prevalent.

Participant Macy Son highlights the importance of resilience and relationship-building in her approach to supporting students. She employs morning meetings as a strategy for rapport-building, creating a structured time for students to share their thoughts and set a positive tone for the day. This practice aligns with CASEL's (2020) emphasis on establishing safe, inclusive classroom environments as foundational to effective SEL. Macy's belief in the power of multiple chances for students reflects her desire to be a consistent source of support, stating, "I believe every child deserves a chance—multiple chances—but sometimes it is hard when you feel like you are just constantly spinning plates, trying to keep everyone happy and engaged" (Chapter 4, para. 12). While Macy's commitment to providing emotional support is clear, her reflections reveal the emotional labor involved in managing these efforts, often leaving her feeling overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands of academic instruction and SEL.

Macy's experience also illustrates the dissonance between the ideals of SEL and the practical challenges of managing diverse emotional needs. According to Bandura (1986), the belief in one's ability to positively influence outcomes. Self-efficacy is critical in navigating complex educational environments. Though, Macy's reliance on self-sourced SEL materials, due to a lack of formal training, raises concerns about the consistency and effectiveness of her rapport-building strategies. This aligns with Gorski's (2019) assertion that teachers who lack critical reflection on their beliefs and biases may unintentionally perpetuate inequitable practices, especially in trauma-impacted classrooms. Macy's struggle to balance care with high expectations highlights the need for systemic support to ensure that educators can engage in transformative, rather than reactive, SEL practices.

Sandy Orr also provides insight into how early-career educators use SEL strategies to build rapport with students. She implemented brain breaks and personalized seating

arrangements to support emotional regulation, thereby fostering a sense of trust and safety within her classroom. These efforts reflect the theoretical principles outlined by CASEL (2020), which emphasize the importance of creating emotionally supportive learning environments as key to rapport-building. However, Sandy's challenges—such as a lack of administrative support—hindered the effectiveness of her strategies. "I felt like I was doing everything I could, but without backup, the strategies just weren't enough" (Chapter 4, para. 32). Sandy's experience echoes the broader systemic issue where SEL is recognized as essential, but teachers lack the necessary resources and infrastructure to implement it fully. According to Bandura (1986), when educators do not receive adequate support, their perceived self-efficacy declines, limiting their capacity to sustain positive relationships with students.

Susan Smith illustrates the implementation of structured SEL strategies to build rapport with students by incorporating tools such as the "Calm Down Corner" and walking breaks. These strategies align with CASEL's (2020) framework, promoting emotional regulation and creating opportunities for students to engage in reflective practices. Susan's focus on individualized support demonstrates her commitment to building strong, trust-based relationships with students, particularly those facing social-emotional challenges. However, her frustration with inconsistent behavioral expectations and a lack of administrative support exposes the limitations of her ability to build rapport in a classroom where behavioral disruptions are frequent. "I am frustrated that we have been allowing students who are not safe for a general education setting to continue attending class and disrupting" (Chapter 4, para. 35). This illustrates the emotional strain of maintaining rapport in an under-resourced educational environment, where teachers are often left to manage extreme behavioral issues without the necessary support.

Rachel Rita's use of the Second Step SEL program further demonstrates the ways in which early-career teachers build rapport through structured, trauma-informed strategies. However, Rachel's frustration with the lack of timely intervention during critical incidents highlights the challenges of sustaining positive relationships in moments of crisis. "No one responded when I called for help during a crisis—how am I supposed to do it all alone?" (Chapter 4, para. 38). Rachel's experience emphasizes the importance of responsive support systems in ensuring that SEL practices are not just implemented but sustained. This aligns with Gorski's (2019) argument that without systemic infrastructure, even the best SEL programs can fail to meet students' needs, thus limiting the potential for strong teacher-student relationships.

The findings from Jenna Green's experience further reinforce the emotional and physical demands of rapport-building in trauma-impacted classrooms. Jenna utilized proximity and break spaces to provide students with emotional support, especially during moments of dysregulation. Her commitment to creating a trauma-informed classroom environment reflects her understanding of SEL as a tool for both emotional regulation and relationship-building.

However, Jenna's recounting of a traumatic incident during her first year—where she had to physically intervene to prevent a student from harming others—highlights the intensity of the emotional labor required in such settings. Her experience underscores the importance of training educators in crisis management as part of SEL, further supporting CASEL's (2020) advocacy for trauma-sensitive learning environments.

In answering Research Question two, the study reveals that early-career educators build rapport with students facing social and emotional challenges primarily through the consistent application of SEL strategies. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is often compromised by a lack of systemic support, formal SEL training, and administrative resources.

While educators like Macy, Sandy, Susan, Rachel, and Jenna demonstrate a strong commitment to creating emotionally supportive environments, the findings align with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, suggesting that self-efficacy is diminished when teachers are left to navigate these challenges without adequate support. Furthermore, the disconnect between SEL theory and practical implementation underscores Gorski's (2019) critique of education systems that fail to provide the necessary infrastructure for trauma-informed practices. This study highlights the need for more comprehensive SEL training in teacher preparation programs, as well as the development of responsive support systems to ensure that early-career educators can build sustainable, transformative relationships with their students. Without these supports in place, educators are at risk of burnout, and students may not fully benefit from the potential of transformative SEL.

R3: Motivational Influences (Pillar III)

How do human needs affect early-career educators' commitment to supporting students with social-emotional needs stemming from childhood adversity?

This research question is addressed through the exploration of the intrinsic motivations that drive educators to support students facing adversity, while grappling with the reality of competing academic and emotional demands in their classrooms. The third pillar, Motivational Influences, underscores the critical role that addressing students' fundamental human needs—such as emotional safety and food security—plays in the commitment of early-career educators to foster social-emotional development and academic success. These findings are aligned with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which posits that students' basic physiological and safety needs must be met before they can fully engage in higher-order cognitive tasks like learning (p. 370).

Macy Son exemplifies the emotional labor involved in meeting these needs, stating, “Listening to my students plays a huge role in building relationships” (Chapter 4, para. 11). While Macy’s focus on listening fosters strong relationships, she finds it difficult to balance the time and energy spent on emotional labor with the academic responsibilities of lesson planning, grading, and curriculum adherence. This tension is a common theme among educators working in high-needs environments, where addressing students’ social-emotional needs often supersedes academic instruction. The emotional toll experienced by educators like Macy is well-documented in the literature, with Brunzell, Stokes, and Waters (2016) finding that teachers working in trauma-affected schools are particularly vulnerable to burnout due to the cognitive and emotional strain of balancing student needs with academic objectives (p. 69).

Susan Smith adds another layer of complexity to this challenge, reflecting on her decision to prioritize relationship-building over academic content during the first two weeks of school: “I focus on relationship building the first two full weeks of school instead of content” (Chapter 4, para. 9). Susan’s deliberate shift away from immediate academic instruction demonstrates her understanding that students are more likely to engage in learning when they feel emotionally secure and valued in the classroom. This approach mirrors Maslow’s (1943) assertion that emotional and physiological safety must be addressed before intellectual engagement can occur.

However, the broader social contexts in which Susan operates, such as diverse family structures, absent parental support, and the unpredictability of trauma-affected students, intensify the emotional labor required to create a safe learning environment. Despite their commitment to supporting students’ well-being, both Macy and Susan expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration when attempting to balance these emotional responsibilities with academic expectations. Macy, in particular, noted that large class sizes and insufficient administrative

support exacerbated her sense of being overwhelmed. The demands placed on early-career educators to fulfill both instructional and emotional roles are substantial, leaving many feeling they are not doing enough for their students despite their best efforts. As Brunzell et al. (2016) highlight, the emotional and cognitive toll of balancing academic objectives with the needs of trauma-affected students places educators at considerable risk for burnout, a reality that many participants in this study echoed.

The emerging theme across participants reveals a troubling disconnect between the academic expectations placed on teachers and the lack of sufficient resources and support structures available to help them meet these demands. This gap is particularly stark in classrooms where students' foundational needs—such as emotional security, food stability, and safe home environments—are unmet. When basic physiological and emotional needs remain unaddressed, early-career educators like Macy and Susan find themselves facing an unsustainable burden. Macy's description of the emotional labor involved in “spinning plates” and Susan's decision to prioritize rapport-building over content both reflect a recurring conflict: teachers are often forced to choose between fostering students' emotional well-being and meeting the rigorous academic standards set by their schools. This tension exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and frustration, as teachers struggle to manage the complex social-emotional needs of their students without the necessary tools and systemic support to do so.

The emotional conflicts that arise when students do not have their foundational needs sustainably met are significant. Teachers witness firsthand the behavioral, social, and cognitive disruptions that occur when students are hungry, emotionally dysregulated, or lacking in basic safety. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs makes clear that without fulfilling basic physiological and safety needs, students cannot effectively engage in higher-order learning tasks.

Durlak et al., supports this concept (2011), who assert that students must feel emotionally safe and supported before they can succeed academically. In trauma-impacted classrooms, where students are grappling with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), teachers face constant emotional conflicts, caught between their desire to meet academic standards and the overwhelming need to address the trauma and emotional dysregulation manifesting in their students (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Moreover, the emotional toll on elementary teachers is further compounded by the absence of sustainable support systems. Research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) emphasizes the risk of burnout among teachers who are required to provide extensive emotional care while simultaneously meeting academic objectives. Without sufficient administrative support, mental health resources, and appropriate training in trauma-informed practices, educators are left to shoulder the weight of both academic and emotional responsibilities. This creates a cycle of emotional exhaustion, where teachers like Macy and Susan feel as though they are not adequately serving their students, which in turn negatively impacts their own well-being. As Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest, the absence of systemic support for teacher emotional health often leads to a decline in the quality of both academic and emotional care provided to students.

The emotional labor involved in managing young students' unmet needs frequently results in feelings of helplessness, as teachers recognize the futility of addressing academic goals without first resolving the foundational issues that hinder learning. Nodding's (2012) emphasizes the importance of caring relationships in education, arguing that schools must prioritize emotional care if students are to thrive. Yet, the current educational climate places overwhelming pressure on teachers to meet standardized academic benchmarks, leaving little room for the

essential emotional work required in trauma-affected classrooms. Teachers are asked to provide not only instruction but also emotional regulation strategies, mental health support, and even physical care for students who arrive at school without their basic needs being met (Howard, 2021). Additionally, systemic inequities exacerbate the problem, particularly in underfunded schools where high student-to-teacher ratios make it nearly impossible for educators to provide the individualized emotional support necessary for students to succeed. Darling-Hammond (2017) underscores the inequities in resource allocation that leave high-needs schools struggling to provide even basic emotional and academic supports. This lack of support creates an unsustainable burden for teachers, who must navigate complex emotional and behavioral needs without the tools and training required to do so effectively.

Research by Oberlin and Schonert-Reichl (2016) highlights the critical role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in addressing these emotional conflicts within classrooms. SEL provides a framework for equipping both teachers and students with the tools needed to regulate emotions, build resilience, and foster supportive relationships. However, without adequate SEL training and systemic integration, as is often the case in under-resourced schools, teachers are left to implement ad-hoc emotional interventions that lack consistency and efficacy. This leaves educators feeling overwhelmed, as they attempt to meet both academic and emotional needs simultaneously without sufficient preparation or institutional backing.

The emotional conflicts that arise in elementary classrooms where students' foundational needs are unmet reveal the unsustainable demands placed on early-career educators. Without systemic support, appropriate training in trauma-informed practices, and a stronger focus on SEL, teachers are left balancing the impossible task of addressing the emotional and academic needs of their students. This imbalance not only impacts student outcomes but also contributes to

teacher burnout and turnover, creating a cycle of unmet needs that further undermines the sustainability of teaching in high-needs environments.

This study emphasizes the need for teacher preparation programs to incorporate hands-on training in SEL, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Educators must be equipped with strategies that allow them to balance the significant emotional labor involved in working with students affected by ACEs, alongside their academic responsibilities. Moreover, systemic support is essential to mitigate the risk of burnout. This includes reducing class sizes, offering mental health resources for educators, and creating administrative structures that prioritize emotional safety for both students and teachers.

Ultimately, addressing students' physiological and emotional needs is foundational to building a supportive and effective learning environment. Educators like Macy Son and Susan Smith highlight the importance of rapport-building and emotional safety in their practice, but they also reveal the significant challenges posed by large class sizes, inadequate support, and competing demands.

R4: Cultural Awareness (Pillar IV)

How do early-career educators consider their experiences, biases, and cultural competence when working with diverse students?

This research question is examined through the lens of Cultural Awareness, revealing how early-career educators navigate their personal biases and develop cultural competence when supporting students from diverse backgrounds. The findings emphasize the critical importance of self-reflection, empathy, and cultural awareness in fostering inclusive classroom environments, particularly for students impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Teachers' ability to recognize and address their own biases directly influences their effectiveness in meeting the

diverse social, emotional, and academic needs of their students, many of whom face trauma, instability, or socio-economic disadvantage.

One of the major challenges faced by this group of educators is their lack of awareness regarding how personal biases and cultural assumptions shape their teaching practices. For instance, Susan Smith struggled with the results of the Harvard Implicit Bias Test, stating, "The test was not fair" because it seemed to associate "dark skin/Black people with negative words" (question set 4, para. 38). Although Susan disagreed with her results, her reaction points to a broader issue—the difficulty of confronting implicit biases that may influence classroom interactions. Gay (2018) argues that culturally responsive teaching requires educators to acknowledge their biases, understand their students' cultural backgrounds, and integrate that understanding into instruction (p. 85). Without this self-awareness, teachers may unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes, perpetuating inequities in classrooms that are meant to be inclusive. Susan's response underscores the importance of comprehensive cultural competence training, which should be embedded in teacher preparation programs to help educators critically engage with their biases and assumptions.

Rachel Rita's reflections further illuminate the importance of cultural awareness and individualized instruction in fostering inclusivity. Rachel expressed her belief that "all students are unique and have different needs as well as learning styles" (Chapter 4, para. 12), a perspective that aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction. However, despite her dedication to addressing the diversity of her students' needs, Rachel faced significant challenges due to inadequate administrative support. She noted, "There are more needs that are not being addressed because there is only one teacher with all these kids all day" (Chapter 4, para. 12). Rachel's experience reflects the strain placed on educators who are expected to navigate

complex cultural and emotional dynamics without sufficient resources. As Gay (2018) emphasizes, effective culturally responsive teaching requires not only an understanding of students' cultural contexts but also the structural support necessary to implement inclusive teaching practices. Without this, teachers like Rachel are left to manage diverse classrooms with limited capacity to fully address the needs of their students, potentially exacerbating educational inequities.

Jenna Green's experience teaching in a low-income community in St. Louis provides further evidence of the challenges faced by teachers working in trauma-impacted environments. Many of Jenna's students grapple with significant trauma, food insecurity, and domestic violence—factors that profoundly affect their ability to engage academically and emotionally in the classroom. Jenna's reflections highlight the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical realities of teaching in high-needs environments. "My frustrations do not outweigh my desire to help kids, but I wish I learned more about these challenges in college" (Chapter 4, para. 25). Jenna's frustration underscores the need for teacher education programs to include more robust training on trauma-informed practices, cultural competence, and emotional regulation strategies. While Jenna's empathy and commitment are evident, her experience reveals the inadequacy of teacher preparation programs in equipping educators to manage the cultural and emotional complexities they face in the classroom. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), "culturally relevant pedagogy must not only include cultural competence but also empower students by acknowledging and addressing the socio-economic and emotional realities they face" (p. 160).

Randy Rock's perspective offers a contrasting experience, as he teaches in a rural town north of Kansas City. Randy emphasizes creating a "safe and loving environment" for his

students, which aligns with trauma-informed practices that prioritize emotional safety (Chapter 4, para. 15). Randy's teaching philosophy highlights the critical importance of fostering emotional resilience and psychological safety in classrooms where students face significant social and emotional challenges. However, Randy's assertion that his religious views do not influence his teaching practice raises important questions about the intersection of personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. While Randy is committed to supporting his students, his statement suggests that personal values may subconsciously influence classroom interactions, a common phenomenon highlighted by Gay (2018). This underscores the need for educators to engage in continuous self-reflection to ensure that their personal beliefs do not inadvertently shape their teaching in ways that conflict with the goals of cultural competence and inclusivity.

The experiences of these elementary educators illustrate the critical role that cultural awareness, empathy, and self-reflection play in creating inclusive, supportive elementary classroom environments. Teachers like Rachel, Jenna, and Randy demonstrate the importance of recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of their students, yet their narratives also reveal the significant challenges they face in doing so without adequate institutional support.

Darling-Hammond (2017) asserts that "teachers who receive training in culturally responsive practices report higher levels of student engagement and academic achievement" (p. 105). Thus, it is essential for teacher preparation programs to prioritize cultural competence, ensuring that early-career educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the diverse needs of all students. The emerging themes from participant data highlights the importance of cultural competence and emotional resilience in early-career educators, particularly in classrooms with elevated levels of trauma and socio-economic disadvantage. Teachers' reflections on their implicit biases underscore the need for comprehensive cultural

competence training. Without such preparation, educators may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and fail to create inclusive, equitable learning environments. Participants like Rachel and Jenna emphasize the emotional and cognitive toll of supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds and traumatic histories, pointing to the need for systemic support and training to help educators manage the complexities of culturally responsive teaching.

By addressing the diverse social, emotional, and cultural needs of students is essential for fostering inclusive classrooms, particularly in the context of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The ability of educators to engage in self-reflection, acknowledge their biases, and develop cultural competence is critical for ensuring that all students feel valued and supported. As public school classrooms become increasingly diverse, it is imperative that educational systems provide early-career educators with the training, resources, and support needed to navigate the complexities of cultural diversity, trauma, and social-emotional challenges effectively.

Implications for the Field

The implications of this research are particularly striking for elementary teachers, administrators, district officials, and teacher preparation programs, all of whom play critical roles in shaping the future of education. By prioritizing social-emotional learning (SEL) as a fundamental component of elementary classroom practice, educators can more effectively address the diverse needs of their students, particularly those impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The following sections elaborate on the specific implications for these influential groups, drawing upon relevant literature to support these recommendations.

Implications for Teachers

Elementary teachers face the daily challenge of balancing children's feelings, academic instruction, schedule changes, family communication, emotional regulation with their students' socio-emotional development. This research suggests that SEL should be seen as something other than an additional or secondary focus but as a core foundation that enables academic success. When equipped with SEL skills, students can better regulate emotions, focus on academic tasks, and navigate interpersonal relationships (Osher et al., 2020). Research by Jones and Kahn (2017) underscores that early social-emotional competencies are predictors of both short- and long-term academic achievement, further highlighting the essential role of SEL in elementary education.

These pivotal changes mean that elementary teachers must intentionally incorporate SEL into their daily interactions and curriculum. Morning meetings, reflective journaling, and structured peer collaboration can help students develop self-awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2020). Teachers also need to employ trauma-informed practices, as many students, particularly those affected by ACEs, may exhibit emotional or behavioral challenges that can hinder learning.

Moreover, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) must be central to SEL integration, as students from diverse backgrounds often experience school environments that do not reflect or affirm their identities (Gay, 2018). By using culturally relevant materials and addressing systemic inequities, teachers can create more inclusive classrooms where all students feel represented and understood (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This holistic approach to teaching recognizes the interplay between cultural identity, emotional health, and academic performance,

ensuring that SEL is not a one-size-fits-all solution but one that adapts to students' diverse needs and experiences.

Implications for Administrators and District Officials

The successful integration of SEL into elementary education requires systemic support from school administrators and district officials. School leaders must ensure teachers have the necessary time to plan, sustainable resources, training, and time to incorporate SEL into their teaching practices effectively. Administrators and district officials must advocate for policies and resources prioritizing social-emotional development, executive functioning development and academic achievement. Professional development is essential in this regard, with research indicating that ongoing, targeted training is needed to help teachers develop the skills required for trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on SEL, and trauma-informed strategies can allow teachers to share best practices, discuss challenges, and receive feedback, fostering continuous improvement and collaboration (Gorski, 2019).

Additionally, administrators must advocate for policies that support smaller class sizes and increased access to mental health professionals universally in elementary schools. Large class sizes make it challenging for teachers to address individual students' social-emotional needs, leading to increased stress and burnout (Roeser et al., 2013). It is suggested that strong administrative support, including providing adequate planning time and reducing non-instructional duties, significantly enhances teachers' ability to focus on SEL integration.

District officials also play a critical role in establishing frameworks and allocating resources that can prioritize SEL. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recommends that districts adopt a systemic approach to SEL that includes

dedicated SEL programs, school-wide initiatives, and consistent messaging around the importance of SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). By embedding SEL into district policies and supporting it through funding and leadership, districts can help ensure that SEL becomes a vital component of the educational experience rather than an isolated or short-term initiative.

Implications for Educator Preparation Programs

The preparation of future teachers must be aligned with the growing recognition that SEL, trauma-informed practices, and cultural competence are essential to effective teaching. Teacher preparation programs must equip aspiring educators with a deep understanding of SEL as a foundational aspect of student development. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argue that teacher education should emphasize the importance of fostering cognitive and emotional growth in students, highlighting that successful teaching extends beyond transmitting academic content.

To this end, teacher education curricula must include coursework on SEL, trauma-informed care, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Programs should offer training on the neuroscience of learning and emotional regulation, as research has shown that understanding how stress and trauma impact brain development can help teachers respond more effectively to students' needs (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Additionally, prospective teachers should engage in field experiences that expose them to diverse student populations and allow them to practice integrating SEL into their instructional strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Furthermore, teacher preparation programs must instill in future educators an understanding of emotional regulation and a commitment to equity and social justice. By helping teachers develop critical consciousness and recognize and challenge systemic inequities, programs can prepare them to advocate for policies and practices that support marginalized

students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017), which includes training on how to create inclusive classrooms that address the specific emotional and cultural needs of students from diverse backgrounds, as well as how to engage families and communities in meaningful ways (Gay, 2018; Milner, 2020).

Conclusion

Elementary teachers must be supported in integrating SEL and trauma-informed practices into their classrooms to support all students. At the same time, administrators and district officials must advocate for policies and resources prioritizing social-emotional development, and academic achievement.

Teacher preparation programs also have a critical role in equipping future educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to meet their students' complex emotional and academic needs. By addressing these implications, the education system can move toward a more holistic, inclusive approach that promotes cognitive and emotional growth for all students.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include its focus solely on elementary school teachers, which does not capture the experiences of educators in other grade levels. Additionally, the study was geographically restricted to teachers in the Midwest, limiting its generalizability to other regions. The relatively short duration of the study may not have allowed for a full exploration of long-term impacts or changes in teaching practices. Lastly, the reliance on participant self-disclosure introduces potential biases, as participants may have underreported or selectively shared their experiences, affecting the accuracy and depth of the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore shifts in teacher preparation programs to better equip educators with the tools necessary to address the complex needs of students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Traditional teacher development needs explicit emphasis on trauma-informed practices, emotional regulation strategies, and implicit bias awareness. Incorporating comprehensive training on these topics would better prepare teachers for modern classrooms, where social-emotional learning and behavioral interventions are critical to a young child's ability to stay regulated and learn. Educator preparation programs should include coursework and hands-on experiences focused on recognizing and mitigating the effects of ACEs' effects and fostering culturally responsive and equitable learning environments. By embedding trauma-informed pedagogies and emotional regulation techniques into the core of teacher education, future teachers can enter the field with a more nuanced understanding of their student's needs, leading to more sustainable teaching practices and improved student outcomes.

Future investigations might look at the integration of tech-enhanced simulations in teacher training to provide pre-educators with realistic, interactive opportunities to practice classroom management and trauma-informed interventions. Such simulations allow teachers to engage with virtual classroom scenarios that reflect the complexities of student behavior and emotional needs, offering a safe space to experiment with different strategies. This practice-oriented approach could bridge the gap between theory and real-world application, giving teachers a more authentic sense of managing challenging situations related to ACEs and emotional dysregulation. Research could examine how these simulations impact teachers' confidence and efficacy in handling classroom disruptions and fostering inclusive learning environments, particularly in the context of students affected by trauma.

Class size reduction is another area for further exploration, particularly concerning its potential impact on supporting students with ACEs. Smaller class sizes allow teachers to provide more individualized attention, effectively tailor interventions, and build stronger relationships with their students. This is particularly important for students from trauma-affected backgrounds, who often require greater emotional and behavioral support. Future studies should assess how reducing class sizes enhances teachers' ability to implement social-emotional learning strategies and manage classroom behavior, as well as its potential to reduce teacher burnout by alleviating the pressures of managing large groups of students with diverse needs.

Finally, future research could explore the impact of providing additional paraprofessional support in every elementary classroom. Paraprofessionals can play a crucial role in classroom management, providing one-on-one support to students and helping implement behavioral interventions. Having an extra set of hands in the classroom would allow teachers to focus more on instructional strategies and less on managing disruptive behaviors, particularly in classrooms with a high percentage of students experiencing trauma. Research could examine how the presence of paraprofessionals affects teacher workload, emotional exhaustion, and overall classroom climate, as well as how it benefits students needing individualized attention. This added support could be a critical factor in enhancing both teacher sustainability and student success in trauma-informed educational settings.

Conclusion

In Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland*, she reflects on socioeconomic challenges and the impact of adversity resonate with the broader focus of this study on the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on educational practice in Midwest public schools. Smarsh poignantly observes, "Poverty was neither a circumstance nor a mind-set, but rather a sustained dynamic in

a system designed to keep people in their place” (Smarsh, 2018, p. 122). This assertion aligns with the focus of this study by illuminating the broader structural factors that exacerbate the challenges teachers encounter when working with students affected by ACEs, particularly in low-income, trauma-impacted communities in the Midwest. Furthermore, Smarsh’s reflection on the emotional toll of adversity is also relevant: “When survival is the priority, self-actualization is a distant dream” (Smarsh, 2018, p. 149) which is the highest level of cognitive development. This insight parallels the struggles these participants face when balancing the immediate needs of behavior management and social-emotional support, which often hinders the implementation of sustainable elementary teaching practices.

The findings of this research affirm the pressing need for transformative changes in elementary education, emphasizing the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a foundation for academic instruction to be successful, particularly for elementary students affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences that attend public school. The research sheds light on the complex challenges early-career elementary educators face, as they navigate the dual responsibilities of supporting students' emotional and social development while managing, academic demands, and their own professional and emotional well-being.

Addressing the social-emotional needs of elementary students not only pivotal to their academic achievement but also profoundly crucial in cultivating a classroom environment that promotes long-term resilience and holistic growth. Without prioritizing SEL in elementary classrooms, both students and teachers are at risk of burnout and disengagement, further underscoring the need for systemic reforms that provide educators with the necessary resources and professional development to sustain these practices effectively.

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Appendix A - Protocol Question Sets

Question Set 1

- How would you like to be identified that also protects your privacy? You must use the same name each time you submit a form.
- Age, race, gender, tribal affiliation, preferred spoken language, disability status, relationship status, and additional identifiers that you choose to share. This is how you will be described in the study report, so I want you to be comfortable with the details you share.
- What year were you born?
- In the Fall of 2023, what year of teaching will you be starting?
- What grade level will you be teaching during the study?
- How many children are in your classroom?
- What is the highest degree you have earned? Are you working on a higher degree? Do you have any other degrees or certifications?
- How would you describe your elementary school experience? Be specific, including how the experience made you feel socially and emotionally. (virtual, homeschool, private, public, multi-experience, military base)
- What factors (people/places/experiences) influenced you to become a teacher?
- Provide two life experiences that have prepared you for instructing young children.

Question Set 2

1. What is/are the most common social-emotional need(s) among your current group of students? How do you address the needs? Be specific.

2. Did you have any prior knowledge of any of your students before you had them in class?
3. What details did you know prior to being their teacher? Does this help or hinder your relationship with the student?
4. Describe 2-3 classroom practices/strategies/tasks you have in place to address the social-emotional needs of the students in your classroom. What/who influenced your decision to use these practices?
5. What is the name of the SEL program used at your school? How often do you explicitly teach from the program? Is there time in the daily/weekly schedule specified for social skills/emotional regulation practice?
6. Tell me about an experience at school that frustrated you as a teacher. Why was it frustrating? Was there a solution, or is this still on your mind?
7. Tell me about an experience at school that felt overwhelming. Why was it overwhelming? Was there a solution, or is this still on your mind?
8. This section will collect data on how you rate your social and emotional competence.
9. Definitions are from
CASEL: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/appalachia/events/materials/10-23-19-Building-Bridges-SEL_Competencies_508.pdf
10. What makes you feel angry/overwhelmed/worried/stressed at work?
11. How do you address these emotions? What support do you have at work?
12. What does self-care look like for you as an early career teacher juggling all these new responsibilities?

Question Set 3

1. Select one student (STUDENT A) and describe the specific support they need to succeed in your classroom. If additional concerns go beyond what can be addressed within the classroom, please include those as well.
2. Select one student (STUDENT B) and describe the specific support they need to succeed in your classroom. If additional concerns go beyond what can be addressed within the classroom, please include those as well.
3. Are any of your students' experiencing challenges related to food insecurity? How did you become aware of this information?
4. What distracts from instructional time in your classroom? Elaborate.

5. How many distinct cultures are represented in your classroom? Describe.
6. How do you build relationships with your students?
7. How do you build relationships with your students' families?
8. How many students in your classroom do you believe may be facing challenges at home?
What indicators lead you to this belief, and how do you define these challenges?

Question Set 4

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Coding table from Chapter 4 Data Analysis

Initial Common Codes

Code Round 1	Code Round 2	Code Round 3	Code Round 4
administration	attention	attitude	behavior
belonging	bias	brain states	break time
collaboration	community	competence	consequences
constraints	culture	curiosity	decision
decision-making	demanding	diagnosis	discernment
disruptive behavior	dysregulated	disrespect	emotional
emotional awareness	empathy	equity	experience
expectations	family	feelings	follow directions
freedom	health	home life	hygiene
identity	implementation	inequalities	influence
intellectual development	intellectual growth	knowledge	learning
love	mental health	mindfulness	morals
motivation	movement	needs	opinions
policy	positive interaction	practice	problem-solving
regulated	reflection	relationships	respect

Code Round 1

safety

situational factors

sociopolitical

teamwork

trust

Code Round 2

school environment

situational perspective

society

technology

understanding

Code Round 3

SEL

skills

strategies

time

vulnerability

Code Round 4

shelter

sleep

teacher beliefs

trauma

well-being

