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EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL  
LEARNING CURRICULUM IN A SUBURBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By

Danielle N. Elsasser

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Education Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jeanne L. Surface and Dr. Tamara J. Williams

Omaha, Nebraska

March, 2020

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LEARNING CURRICULUM IN A SUBURBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Danielle N. Elsasser, Ed.D

University of Nebraska, 2020

Advisors: Dr. Jeanne L. Surface and Dr. Tamara J. Williams

This qualitative case study explores educators' experiences in a suburban elementary school during the implementation stages of a new social-emotional learning curriculum. This research combines educators' first-person accounts of the social-emotional learning curriculum implementation before and during the process as well as analyzes the results of their experiences as a whole. Altogether, this paper investigates the central phenomenon: *What are the experiences of elementary educators in a suburban elementary school implementing social-emotional learning curriculum?* Participants were invited individually to take part in the interview process. Data collected were analyzed through a series of codes and aggregated into themes. Participants reflected on professional development given before and during the implementation process. Data analysis illustrated that while participants believed in the value of the new social-emotional learning curriculum, they felt ill-prepared to teach it. Further research recommendations include establishing a system to elongate the implementation process during the school year by way of a peer-coaching component, monthly staff development led by peers, and staff members sharing curriculum success stories they have encountered in their classrooms.

## **DEDICATION**

This paper is dedicated to educators who wish to have their voices heard. They are influencers in the education system. They are the voice of their students. May they never stop advocating for education.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A tremendous feat like this is not accomplished alone. I have been blessed with an incredible team of supporters and cheerleaders. They encouraged me to take a seed and grow it into something meaningful.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Emotional intelligence is a way of recognizing, understanding, and choosing how we think, feel, and act. It shapes our interactions with others and our understanding of ourselves. It defines how and what we learn; it allows us to set priorities; it determines the majority of our daily actions.

Research suggests it is responsible for as much as 80 percent of the "success" in our lives.”

-J. Freedman

*Life skills, soft skills, conflict resolution, cooperation, and well-rounded education* are all historical phrases than can be replaced with *social-emotional learning* (SEL). SEL has always been a relevant topic in education. Multiple studies address the positive impact on students when taught social-emotional skills using a structured curriculum implemented effectively (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2018; Coelho & Sousa, 2017; Bautista, Ng, Múñez, & Bull, 2016). To demonstrate the importance placed on the topic, many states have put in place mandated standards for teaching social-emotional skills to students. Educators are expected to reach all learners, even those who are not ready to learn because of social deficits.

Even though SEL has elements that have historically been part of students’ school experience, SEL in today’s context is unique because of several factors. Contextual factors include the nation’s growing focus on mental well-being, support generated in current national legislation, and the emphasis placed on educators to meet mental health

needs. The unique context of SEL, new SEL curriculum, and distribution of responsibilities is seen differently today than in years before formal SEL adoption. These truths are the rationale for the research conducted in this study.

### **Problem Statement**

A need exists to know how educators experience new social-emotional learning curriculum implementation in an elementary setting. Understanding educators' experiences in implementing a new curriculum tell a unique story of how the curriculum is being implemented. Durlak (2016) states that the quality implementation of SEL matters; poor implementation of SEL puts students behind six months in academic studies compared to high-quality SEL implementation. If the curriculum is implemented with fidelity, the chances of a successful outcome will occur (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Humphrey, 2013; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012). The curriculum implemented satisfactorily promotes achievement as well as builds life skills (Polikoff & Porter, 2014; Coelho & Sousa, 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the experiences of implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum in a suburban elementary school. Looking through the constructivist lens allows researchers to identify meaning through individual experiences; in this case, elementary educators (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 29). Constructivism, in this sense, encourages educators' to think about their own lived experiences. Educators going through the implementation process have constructed their own meaning of the experience. As a descriptive case study, this research attempts to combine educators' first-person accounts of the SEL implementation and analyze the

results of their experiences as a whole. This research explores the various stages of implementation and records the experiences of educators part of the implementation process. At this stage in the research, educators' experiences are defined as the point of view educators hold about the implementation process of SEL.

Most studies have only focused on curriculum implementation alone or have explored the experiences of teachers' perspectives on social-emotional curriculum implementation at the secondary. Meanwhile this study focuses not only on social-emotional learning, but the perceptions of elementary educators experiences with implementing that specific curriculum chosen.

### **Contribution to Research**

This research is intended to contribute to the body of knowledge about effective curriculum implementation in public education settings, in addition to experiences educators possess regarding the change. Transferability allows this research to be applied in other situations (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Therefore, other school districts and administrators may benefit from knowing the impact the process of implementation has on its success. This knowledge affords educators to best teach the new curriculum with confidence and fidelity. Educators may implement curriculum changes successfully only if they have adequate and suitable training directed towards their classroom practice (Altinyelken, 2010; Carl, 2012; Park & Sung, 2013). Teacher perceptions may help determine the degree this goal is obtained.

### **Background Literature**

The purpose of this background literature is to give the reader necessary information aiding in understanding how SEL has taken up residence in the school

setting. This literature helps identify the critical role educators play in developing and nurturing positive emotional health in students. The background literature is divided into four parts: Social-Emotional Learning Legislation and Standards, Mental Health, Social-Emotional Learning, and Educators' Roles in Implementing Social-Emotional Learning.

**Social-Emotional Learning Legislation and Standards.** To demonstrate the importance placed on the topic, the United States spends nearly \$4 billion each year on school-related mental health services (Kang-Yi, Mandell, & Hadley, 2013; RAND 2001). United States lawmakers are readdressing and remediating mental health education by way of providing funding and updating past laws.

Change, in general, is the result of hierarchical decisions passed down from one level to the next, landing at the bottom tier for its intended target. This top-down decision-making calls for states and school districts to interpret legislation in an ideal way that meets the demands of their student population. Developing and supporting SEL in any school setting requires thoughtful consideration of students' needs and the logistics in how it makes its way to the classroom. From legislation at the federal and state level to the district administration and finally, to classrooms, each component will be analyzed.

**Federal Legislation.** Federal legislation emphasizes the importance of high school graduation rates leading to a higher number of students attending and graduating from college. This legislation allows the U.S. to compete with other countries in measuring the quality of education students are receiving. Adding to this, states are ranked across the country based on standardized test scores such as the ACT, meanwhile urban, suburban, and rural scores are compared to one another. School districts use these same test scores to compare high schools within the district. Finally, within each school,



test scores are compared across multiple domains, including grade-level and subject areas. The choice to compare countries, states, districts, and schools stems from a place where education policymakers can analyze what curriculum is working well and what needs to be altered.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education (Brenchley, 2015). The primary goal was to provide more funds for disadvantaged youth to close the gap in reading, writing, and mathematics. The government intended to make quality education available to all students, including students with disabilities and those with low socioeconomic status. This intention comes at the heels of the civil rights movement led in the 1950s and 1960s. One cannot help but presume a correlation between the two events.

In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signed by President George W. Bush, supported ESEA and added significance to academic achievement for all students. NCLB intended to modernize ESEA and work to close the achievement gap between students of varied demographics further. Federal lawmakers made this act more appealing to school districts by offering incentives if put in place. However, these incentives were conditional. If 100% of students were not performing at grade level by 2014, the school was labeled as failing, and interventions would attempt to remedy the school's scores (Executive Summary of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2007). Many policymakers and education administrators knew this was disadvantageous to districts, schools, and students. New legislation deliberated what system would provide the same

expectations without the detrimental consequences attached.

These two laws guide us fifty years into the future when NCLB was updated by way of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). The purpose of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). Federal lawmakers allow state governments to appropriate spending through the use of Title I and Title IV funds in ways each state deems appropriate (CASEL, 2019).

The purpose of Title I is to continue to close the achievement gap within student populations. These funds are typically given to schools that have a higher than 40% low-income rate among their students (NASSP, 2017). Title IV, Part A reinstates the Student Support and Academic Enrichment program that calls for the state, local authorities, and the community to provide a well-rounded education to improve academic achievement. The act defines a *well-rounded* education as one that allows education personnel the use of resources to address students’ emotional well-being; hence, the research into SEL and the adoption of the SEL curriculum.

To conclude this discussion, in May 2019, the House of Representatives voted to send a bill to the Senate in 2020, asking for \$260 million to fund the Social-Emotional Learning Initiative. The funds can be used for research, teacher development, school safety, and stationing mental health professionals in schools, emphasizing the importance emotional health plays in educating youth (House to Consider First Appropriations Minibus This Week, 2019). Educators and families will receive more resources as part of this funding.

***State Legislation.*** At the state level, the Nebraska Department of Education uses the National Health Education Standards (NHES), reviewed in 2004, to promote the use of these standards in school districts' policies. These state health standards support mental health development from Pre-K to 12. Five of the eight NHES align with the CASEL model: (1) Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks, (2) Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to improve health, (3) Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance health (4) Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks, and (5) Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health.

State legislative decisions are made with the financial support of federal legislation. Schools are allocated funding for the implementation of a quality SEL program that meets state health standards. States provide parameters to school districts who then determine the best curriculum able to meet their student population's needs. The NHES give a wide berth to educators, administrators, and policymakers in determining the most advantageous course of action and curriculum in which to best meet these standards.

Each state has a Commissioner of Education responsible for helping to improve education by advocating for proven programs to be put into place in each school district. She is responsible for assisting in developing and applying accountability programs for the states' schools. (Nebraska Commissioner of Education, 2020). The Commissioner of

Education is a spokesperson for school districts and an implementer of federal guidelines. She acts as a liaison between both parties, acting as an accountability piece.

***District Policy and Standards.*** Before the 2018-19 school year, a formal SEL curriculum in the school district part of this study was absent; the SEL was a superficial part of the general Health and Science curriculum. This school district now addresses SEL under its Board of Education policy, stating that students in the district should receive a quality health education that promotes and enhances a healthy lifestyle. The Board of Education is committed to students learning positive coping strategies intended to be utilized throughout their time in the education setting and out of school, and later in life as they move onto attending college and entering the workforce. The school district holds itself accountable to ensure students possess the necessary social-emotional skills to be successful in higher education and their careers. They call this endeavor College and Career Readiness. There is a strong correlation between established SEL skills and the preparedness students require to move past Pre-K through high school education.

Although change is generally experienced in a top-down model, Dunsmore & Nelson (2014) suggest building change from the ground up. When doing so, the capacity of the organization and its people grows. When an organization's role is strengthened, the chance for successful implementation of new initiatives increases. Many times, when change is driven from the top, it begins powerfully then fizzles out when interest in the topic wanes. For example, those invested in the problem identify solutions based on their expertise and interest in the new subject is long-lasting. The longer the initiative is present, the relationships between colleagues working in tandem on the program strengthen, and the relationship with the initiative is strengthened as well. For change to

be meaningful and sustained long term, all stakeholders should find curriculum implementation personal to themselves.

Based on the framework NHES has provided, district policymakers and administrators decide the parameters for creating or selecting curricula and the use of resources to achieve complete implementation. The school district in this study proposed using the Sanford Harmony (SH) curriculum as their primary source of curriculum for SEL instruction in the classroom. District leaders identified SH as containing relevant information that aligned with state and district standards. One reason being the SH curriculum encourages relationship-building among educators and students as well as connections between each other. The curriculum uses grade-appropriate strategies, stories, activities, and lessons (Everyday Practices, 2019) to support many of the components found in the social-emotional philosophy. Through modeling, coaching, and regular practice, children can employ social-emotional skills throughout the school day at all grade levels and in multiple subject areas.

Once identifying the advantages of SH, the school district took into consideration the magnitude of logistics involved in implementing a new district-wide curriculum. Trained teacher-presenters provided building educators professional development during the fall of the 2018-2019 school year. It was intended that each elementary school in the school district received the same presentation regarding presentation length and information. The SH curriculum also called for the timely distribution of materials to each educator in order to begin implementing the new curriculum right away.

In addition to adopting a formal SEL curriculum for classroom use, the school district part of this research utilizes its social workers as a resource to help match families

with an ideal community partner. The community partner is chosen based on the family's needs. Social workers partner with a district mental health coordinator to complete this process, which can take about four weeks. The family's insurance will cover the cost of the therapy unless the family is unable to pay for the service, in which case, they may be eligible to acquire funding by way of donations or government subsidies. Utilizing community partners outside of the school district helps guarantee students receive quality assistance from trained mental health professionals. This partnership strengthens the community's involvement in students' ability to add positively to their community.

The school district in this study requires all staff to take part in online mental health modules to increase educators' awareness of students' signs of emotional struggle. The module gives educators scenarios to identify and a student in distress and talking points to use in educator-student interaction. Also helpful is practice scenarios that help educators rehearse conversations with students' parents about their concerns. The mental health module intends to detect a wellness deficit and address it before it escalates. Completing training and engaging in conversations with peers brings about a moment for reflection on the teacher's part. Educators may use this as a temperature reading in recognizing their capacity to address mental health issues with their students successfully, leading to appropriate action (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

**Mental Health.** Mental health and social-emotional learning are not the same concepts; however, mental well-being can form a strong or weak foundation for children learning social-emotional skills. Positive mental health allows adults to be caregivers, employees, and valuable contributing members to their community (Canadian Institute

for Health Information, 2009). Internalizing positive mental health requires self-awareness and the importance of putting oneself first at times. When educators do this successfully, they can spend their energy instilling SEL skills with students.

Although mental health can be positive or negative (Weare & Nind, 2011), most people associate mental health with mental illness. Such mental illnesses include depression, anxiety, PTSD, ADHD, and other types of disorders (Goldberg & Bridges, 1987; Browne, Gafni, Roberts, Byrne, & Majumdar, 2004). In the recent past, admitting to having a mental illness disorder brought on shame, harassment, isolation, and even bullying. Those people possessing a mental illness would become withdrawn because of the embarrassment confessing to having a mental illness may cause (Tay, Alcock, & Scior, 2018).

However, as the stigma surrounding mental illness subsides, the general population is more willing to address these illnesses with an open mind. With open dialogue comes the opportunity to admit having a mental illness or being close to someone with a mental illness. While social-emotional learning can have a beneficial impact on these disorders, they are not intended to treat them.

***Mental Health in Children.*** Educators must take care of themselves if they are to help build resilience in children (Benard, 1993). To illustrate this, The World Health Organization (2014) and the Canadian Mental Health Association (2019) agree mental health is not just the absence of mental illness, but the presence of a definite sense of well-being emotionally, physically, and mentally. Educators find themselves partly responsible for creating positive mental health in students while negating forces that create poor mental health.

As social issues change, mental health remains a priority (Mental Health: Strengthening our Response, 2018). To support this, children are best prepared for success later in life if they have built a robust and resilient foundation. Henderson (2013) states that resilient children demonstrate attributes such as social competence, problem-solving abilities, autonomy, and a sense of purpose for their future.

Furthermore, resilient children feel as if they have control over their lives, leading to a sense of self-efficacy, believing they are in control of their future (Weare & Nind, 2011; Henderson, 2013). Students who often do not feel a sense of control were not given a chance at building an adequate foundation of resilience. This truth has the opportunity to change as school districts take a closer look at resilience and its connection to positive mental health and social-emotional well-being.

Surprisingly, twenty to twenty-five percent of children and adolescents experience a mental health disorder (Bains & Diallo, 2016; Capp, 2015; Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002). Students as young as preschool age are entering the school system with emotional or behavioral disorders: less than half of mental health problems in children are identified before they reach kindergarten (Klitzing, Döhnert, Kroll, & Grube, 2015). Therefore, very few students receive mental health services, such as therapy and mood disorder medication necessary to treat mental health illnesses. Additionally, students enter elementary school without the ability to use their executive functioning skills because of the energy a mental health illness exhausts. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University claims that *executive function* skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus, remember instructions, and complete multiple tasks successfully (2017). Lack of mental illness identification proves unfortunate because young students'



brains are still developing at an incredible rate, and identifying mental health disorders early on increases positive social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes (Cefai & Camilleri, 2015).

Statistics surrounding mental health in children are vital in understanding this case study because mental well-being is now formally addressed in schools. Numerous authors conclude 70 to 80 percent of students receiving mental health services are receiving such services in school (Borntrager & Lyon, 2015; Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003). This statistic is not surprising as students spend six or more hours a day at school. Therefore, the students' school is an ideal location to receive mental health services.

This drives school districts to work purposefully with mental health agencies in the community to provide adequate and timely interventions. As stated previously, the school district in this study requires mandatory training in identifying concerning emotional behavior among children. Through this informational training, educators develop an increased understanding of mental illness and have a better chance of identifying mental illness early in young children and adolescents. If educators can identify signs of mental illness in children and adolescents, there is a significant possibility that those students will perform at a higher level academically and socially earlier in their educational careers. School districts have placed mental health as a top priority because it correlates strongly with students' academic achievement and progress in school. This topic is addressed more in-depth in the *Academic Benefits* portion of the background literature.

**Social-Emotional Learning.** As expressed previously, mental health and SEL are not the same concepts; however, each one impacts students' academic careers and their relationships in the education setting. The purpose of the SEL curriculum is not to identify or diagnose a mental health illness in youth, it is the process through which children and adults (1) understand and manage emotions, (2) set and achieve positive goals, (3) feel and show empathy for others, (4) establish and maintain positive relationships, and (5) make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2019).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) uses the following five competencies to define SEL: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making. The primary goal of implementing the SEL curriculum is to support these competencies. Similarly, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) defines SEL as the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning in addition to caring about them as individuals. Furthermore, SEL is the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking and feeling and conducting oneself to achieve important life tasks (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007, p. 194).

These definitions of SEL closely resemble the description of "soft skills." According to Klaus (2008), "Soft skills encompass personal, social, communication, and self-management behaviors." Daniel Goleman has contributed seminal research in the area of Emotional Intelligence (EI). A person's emotional quotient stands in close relationship to their soft skills. EI stands in contrast to one's intelligence quotient and is defined by Goleman (1996) as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions as well as recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others.

Together, each definition of SEL aids in the development of students who possess a firm social-emotional foundation.

The use of SEL, soft-skills, and EI benefits students, families, and the community in multiple ways. These beneficial impacts are examined further in this literature review. Moreover, the advantages move beyond students, families, and the community. When schools, families, organizations, and other community stakeholders collaborate to promote social-emotional competencies, students have a better chance of succeeding in life and growing into people that can support others in learning these soft skills. As a result, the cycle repeats itself.

*Academic Benefits.* Donna K. Housman (2017) reaffirms that SEL is the missing link to boosting outcomes and transforming schools. Consistent use of strong social-emotional skills leads to a noticeable improvement in students' interpersonal skills, quality of peer and adult relationships, academic achievement, as well as a reduction in substance abuse, truancy, and other problem behaviors. For example, according to the Committee for Children (CFC, 2019), there is a 13% increase in academic achievement if SEL is appropriately implemented; therefore, academic success is tied to low rates of absenteeism. Because students attend school regularly, they receive other advantages, such as stronger peer and adult relationships and increased graduation rates.

Furthermore, students with strong social-emotional skills excel in academics from elementary school through higher education. For example, higher levels of emotional engagement significantly raise reading scores in counterpart to students with lower levels of emotional engagement (Hausman, 2017). One way emotional engagement can be achieved is through participation in extra-curricular clubs. Participating in a club or

hobby of particular interest helps provide protective factors in children (Christiansen, Christiansen, & Howard, 1997). Youth are more likely to experience success during their elementary years and beyond if they possess the social-emotional skills needed to participate successfully in extra-curricular activities and work with their peers in a new setting.

Fostering social-emotional skills provides students with assets that promote well-being and protect against negative influences commonly experienced at school. Developing these skills at an early age prevents peers from bullying each other: The CFC estimates that aggressive behaviors decline by 42%. Educators and school counselors can aid in promoting conflict-resolution skills and using dialogue to guide students through de-escalation steps is a practical approach in helping students to apply their knowledge of SEL skills in new situations and over the long-term. Therefore, students are more confident, trusting, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate, and better capable of relating to others (Housman, 2017; Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2008). These personality characteristics enable youth to be better prepared for college and careers once out of the Pre-K through the high school setting.

***Career Benefits.*** Higher graduation rates lead to a correlation in higher employment rates (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017; Krachman, LaRocca, & Gabriel, 2018). CFC reports 79% of employers agree SEL skills are vital in the professional setting: Employers seek employees with competent communication skills, the potential to work productively in groups, and develop sincere, meaningful relationships with their supervisors and coworkers. Often, employers hire employees

based on their personality with the idea that inexperienced hires can learn the job skills they do not yet possess for the position in which they are applying, whereas personality traits are difficult if not impossible to change. Education institutions place importance on developing cognitive skills, yet employers are now equally concerned with non-cognitive skills (Kyllonen, 2013), the skills taught through social-emotional curriculum. Therefore, reiterating the need for SEL curriculum in schools.

Social-emotional aptitude affords students the capacity to build social awareness and relationship skills, accordingly a natural transfer into the workplace as employees who can work effectively in teams to solve problems in the workplace. Adding to that, group decisions are more useful for the greater good of the company than those completed on their own (Bamber, Watson & Hill, 1996; LaFasto & Larson, 1992; Guzzo & Shea, 1992). The ability to work well in teams is one of the top characteristics employers look for when hiring new employees. Additionally, employees require the ability to work with customers productively, positively promoting the company's image. All of these things help organizations, employers, and employees thrive.

Proficient social-emotional skills do not just benefit employers: employees with strong SEL skills tend to receive higher wages (Krachman, LaRocca, & Gabriel, 2018). Therefore, not only does a quality SEL program prepare students to move successfully through Pre-K to 12, but it also motivates them to be valuable employees and the opportunity to contribute fiscally to their in a variety of ways in their community's economy.

***Relationship Benefits.*** Among other things, SEL is the collection of skills students possess to nurture vital relationships around them, in addition to supporting

students in performing optimally in school (Goleman, 1995). Not surprisingly, educators play a large part in strengthening relationship skills via social-emotional competence in children: Educators strengthen a child's belief they belong in their school by taking an interest in students' well-being and relating to them consistently and in a meaningful way. Teachers building these vital relationships offer students' an example of how healthy relationships are made and can be maintained.

Susan E. Craig (2016) explores how educators can establish trusting relationships with children. She adds building trust assists in securing the neural pathways necessary for establishing self-regulation practices and executive functioning skills, both imperative for life in and out of the school setting. Another aspect of student-teacher relationship building is the learning environment. The classroom environment should be predictable with structure and routines. A predictable, structured environment affords students to spend more time internally monitoring themselves to manage their emotions rather than consciously fixating on their surroundings. Students who can internally monitor themselves have a natural temperament, excellent reasoning skills, self-esteem, and a belief in their self-efficacy (Henderson, 2013). Students inhabiting these skills have a better disposition, making them more likable. Therefore, students can spend time building, maintaining, and nurturing relationships in the classroom with their teacher and peers.

Another thought probe is students engaging their peers in practice exercises for an added dimension of learning. Students often learn better from a friend than from the teacher. This peer-teaching, alongside the trusting, caring relationships, educators work hard to build within the classroom walls, makes learning and practicing these skills more

purposeful. With the appropriate training, collaboration, and continual staff development, educators are better prepared to take on a task such as this for the benefit of students (Altinyelken, 2010; Carl, 2012; Park & Sung, 2013).

By nature, humans yearn to form relationships naturally, starting at a young age. Part of a viable social-emotional curriculum is the promise to build courage in children to develop healthy relationships with peers. Students can learn to cultivate them in *morning meetings* by discussing topics or completing activities that include all students as part of the SH curriculum. Discussion topics are those every student can relate to regardless of their background. Activities can include mindful practices such as deep-breathing or community-building tasks. These acts of cohesion among students allow children to improve their communication skills, all while encouraging students' competence in academics, including language use (Housman, 2017) supporting the research that SEL positively impacts students' academics.

According to Ripley, changing one's IQ is nearly impossible, but growing one's character based on their social-emotional traits can be easily accomplished. "...motivation, empathy, self-control, and perseverance...work to build a person's character" (Ripley, 2013, p. 120). A person's EI creates the type of personality traits a person possesses, such as integrity. Students' integrity is built on students' knowledge of social-emotional attributes, hence leading to more fruitful, long-enduring friendships.

**Educators' Role in Implementing Social-Emotional Learning.** This section of literature differs from the preceding section that centered on students' improved relationships due to acquired social-emotional skills. The following information concerns the role educators play in implementing the SEL components in the classroom.

Educators play a chief role in the lives of their students from their very first encounter with students. In many instances, initial encounters occur before the morning bell rings or in the hallway during passing periods. Educators are friendly, high-fiving, interested adults students see everywhere in the building. Interactions such as these are commonplace in an elementary school setting and act as the first step in creating a positive, caring, and supportive environment for students. One belief that many schools invest in is that “all students are our students.” Meaning, teachers are not limiting their interactions in their homeroom; they are actively acknowledging all students walking into the school building. This belief ties back to the benefits of adults working to cultivate relationships with all students.

Educators serve as protective factors for children during the process of teaching social-emotional skills (Henderson, 2013). Protective factors include positive expectations and ongoing opportunities for participation in school events, such as clubs, as previously mentioned. Participation in or out of the classroom is equally beneficial to students. Contributing outside of the classroom gives students another medium for building relationships with caring, trusting adults. If opportunities arise for students’ to expand their circle of positive role models, they possess a better chance for success.

Another key thing to remember, educators have long been adept in the field of emotional well-being; more and more educators are taking on the responsibility of teaching informal and formal SEL skills that significantly grow and impact a student’s positive self-image (Vennstra, Lidenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). This confident self-image safeguards students from damaging peer interactions. A students’



positive self-image serves as a barrier against bullying and keeps youth from becoming bullies themselves (CDC, 2009), thus ending a vicious cycle children experience.

Multiple studies contend educators see various issues that lead to mental health crises such as bullying, violence in and out of the home, and other variables (Kirchner, Yoder, Kramer, Lindsey, & Thrush, 2000; Masia-Warner, Nagel, & Hansen, 2006). Although destructive behaviors are entering the classroom more frequently and with higher intensity each year, educators do not feel adequately prepared to educate students regarding their mental health and wellness even with the support of the school psychologist and school guidance counselor (Cohall, Cohall, Dye, Dini, Vaugh, & Coots, 2006). Thankfully, the classroom teacher is not isolated in this fight for positive mental health education. As stated in the previous section, school psychologists and school guidance counselors' aid in identifying mental illnesses and work with students requiring help in those areas or the necessity students possess for social-emotional skills.

***Curriculum Implementation.*** School districts choose curriculum and schools implement the new curriculum each year primarily because of the shortfall in academic achievement evidenced in state and district assessment data or because of new federal and state mandates. To the detriment of students and educators, curriculum implementation is often thought of as an event rather than a process (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994); therefore, the intended impact is not achieved. Teaching new curricula is unsuccessful when the implementation of new material is not done with care, collaboration among peers and administrators, and a plan for longevity (Brown, 2004). Brown's research will be explored more in-depth throughout this paper and in the conceptual framework.

For any school, Pre-K to 12, to see successful outcomes in the curriculum implementation, educators require quality professional development before implementation as well as during the implementation process. Additionally, educators need support from their building and district administrators (Durlak, 2016; Schultz, Ambike, Stapleton, Domitrovich, Schaeffer, & Bartels, 2010).

Commonly, administrators play a variety of roles during this process; one of the most prominent roles is acting as an instructional leader. Building administrators bring their own personal and professional experiences with them, which can help or hinder a new curriculum adoption process. In this case, Daniel Goleman (1998) purports that leaders with high EI can foster a culture that successfully nurtures relationships among colleagues. Goleman's description of EI in adults includes the capacity for self-awareness and self-regulation, among other domains similar to those attributed to students with high EI. Adding to that, these are the same social-emotional domains CASEL hypothesizes that children require to experience academic and social success during their years in school and their lives outside of school. This cyclical nature reinforces the notion that SEL skills follow children into adulthood, where the process repeats itself.

Stated earlier was the belief that educators rely on relationships with colleagues to aid in successful implementation of a new curriculum. As educators begin to appreciate the benefits of an adopted program through quality professional development, relationships among colleagues strengthen (Fullan, 1982). Healthy relationships allow for opportunities to collaborate and teach with a common purpose. With a common goal, educators and administrators encourage one another in the change procedure, celebrating progress made along the way. Relationships among staff members make a new initiative

successful because of the more profound connection with the said initiative (Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford, & Kirk, 2019). When stakeholders are empowered, they naturally collaborate with others to learn more about the curriculum and use one another's expertise to guide theory into action (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). These beliefs refer to the building's culture, which can determine if educators work as a team rather than working in isolation from their peers.

Likewise, for any school to see successful outcomes in students' academics, educators need quality professional development before implementation as well as during the implementation process. Federal and state mandates are continuously changing, so schools are continually introducing new curricula each year. Additionally, educators need support from building and district administrators to achieve desired results. Structured assistance from the district and building administration sends a message that the new initiative is vital to students' education and mental well-being. There are areas for growth when implementing any new educational curriculum, but implementing new curricula has a better chance of creating the desired impact with the right support.

**Conclusion.** This literature review provides a strong case for the legislative history, mandates, and necessity of implementing SEL in classrooms. SEL has long been thoroughly researched, and the literature reviewed here reinforces the purpose and urgency of SEL and the need to acknowledge students' mental health. Schools are part of a national priority to formally adopt an SEL curriculum in their school districts because of the curriculum's multitude and magnitude of benefits to students. Furthermore, the school district has a responsibility to challenge students to be college and career ready.

Without executive functioning, students do not possess the ability to succeed in higher education or the workforce, unfortunately. However, this does not have to be the case.

Working within the national, state, and district levels, students' health education needs are met by way of a thoroughly and thoughtfully designed well-rounded education with the help of community partners. While legislation and society are continuously changing, the desire to provide students with a well-rounded education that includes a focus on mental well-being is at the forefront of decisions. The government's focus on mental health in children leads to a stronger, thriving community.

Finally, educators prove to be vital instruments in taking action in their classroom, thus maintaining a clear focus on emotional well-being in the classroom. Students spend more hours at school than at home throughout the school week, making educators a natural resource from which to learn and practice SEL skills. The number of hours students spend with educators correlates positively with the chance of relationship-building among students and teachers. Generating meaningful relationships leads to establishing a strong foundation of trust. Building and nurturing relationships is a thread woven tightly into social-emotional learning subject matter.

Chapter Two shares the approach to data collection. Chapter Three discusses data analysis. Chapter Four includes an in-depth interpretation of the data collected from interviews with participants. Chapter Five illustrates the conceptual framework used to tie this research together as well as explore a variety of recommendations for curriculum implementation and offer implications for future research. Finally, Chapter Six brings closure to this descriptive case study.

## CHAPTER TWO: APPROACH

The literature in Chapter One describes the history of social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools and how the federal, state, and districts have put measures in place to ensure students are receiving a well-rounded education. SEL was contextualized in this study and offered evidence as to its importance to education and our community. Finally, Chapter One explored the role educators play in the curriculum implementation process. Chapter Two will inform readers of the approach taken to gather data.

### **Case Study**

This qualitative case study describes educators' experiences implementing the social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum at a suburban elementary school. This case study approach was chosen because of its intent to offer multiple points of view, uniting them in their similarities and distinguishing their differences, allowing both of these components to tell a complete story (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Yin (1994), clarifies that, "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context..." Teacher perceptions will be examined to define how educators make sense of the process.

Interview prompts have been carefully constructed to answer the central phenomenon: *What are the experiences of elementary educators in a suburban elementary school implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum?*

1. Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year.

2. Describe the staff development you received *during* the implementation process.

The implementation process being defined as the 2018-2019 school year.

3. Describe the opportunities given to collaborate with administrators and peers *during* the implementation process.

4. Describe your feelings regarding the Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum implementation process.

5. Is there more information you would like to share?

### **Participants**

An inclusive sampling was used for this study. The entire chosen population includes educators in a single suburban elementary school in a district with a population of 24,018 students and a population of 1,476 educators (Nebraska Department of Education, 2020). The elementary school selected for this study has a population of 578 students and 54 staff members. The school's demographics include 87% of the student population is White, 9% of students are labeled as gifted, and 3% of students are English Language Learners, and 17% of the population receives free or reduced lunch (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.).

Thirty certified educators were involved in the school-wide SEL implementation during the 2018-19 school year. Non-certified staff and educators hired after the initial implementation process of the SEL curriculum were excluded from the study population. Maximum variation sampling was used to invite educators with a variety of teaching experiences. This helped to develop many vantage points on the same topic (Creswell, 2015). These thirty educators received district professional development aligned with district standards and grade-level appropriate curriculum to apply in their classroom.

Kindergarten through fifth-grade educators, resource educators, and the school's Literacy Interventionist were invited to participate in the study. Ten participants agreed to take part in the case study.

### **Instrument**

As the researcher in this study as well as an educator implementing SEL, I have a personal and professional interest in this topic, and I find it necessary to understand where mental health in schools originated from and the purpose it serves presently in my role. As a teacher in the elementary school part of this study, I began my teaching career thirteen years ago, and I have witnessed a change in children's responsibilities as students, friends, family members, and other identity characteristics. Our society is ever-changing, with the use of technology being one of the most prominent key players, where social-emotional skills are often forgotten. As educators, we must adapt or be left behind. As an educator, I find personal accountability in preparing students for these changes.

I became a teacher, like most educators, to make an impact in children's lives. Not only do I have the desire to provide students academic knowledge that allows them to find success in their lives, but I also find enjoyment in meeting the needs of the whole child. Each child is unique, and they all require the necessary skills to navigate their world throughout various stages in their lives. As I see it, children from varied backgrounds deserve an equal playing field in achieving success. Not only do I want to meet this need academically, but socially as well. I believe I am a vessel to help students achieve this, and it is a responsibility I take seriously.

I am a 36-year-old married woman with two children, a first-grader and a preschooler. Part of the passion for this topic stems from my children. As an involved

mother with a supportive husband, I have the power and skills to instill as much emotional intelligence in my children as I can. Despite this, I fall short and will continue to do so. Such is the truth of being a human. I have no choice but to hope the other villagers in our human tribe can help with this critical task.

Educators are not just a resource to teach standards, they are the other caregiver that takes the reins when guardians have to let go. They act as another variable that offers students hope in life when their academic knowledge can take them only so far. These truths are what drives my passion for understanding social-emotional learning.

### **Data Collection**

**Personal Invitation.** Because of the nature of this study, participants were invited in a one-on-one discussion. The reason for this is two-fold. First, I wanted to generate as large a sample size as possible, and second, personally inviting each individual is born from the reality that educators at this school site are at different phases in the curriculum implementation process. Since educators were at various steps in this process, I believed it was essential that individual participants felt comfortable agreeing to share their stories. Participants' open responses to the interview prompts allowed for a valid case study. In this qualitative case study, participants needed to a safe place where they could be vulnerable in sharing their stories about their experience in the implementation process. On the other hand, a hindering aspect to conducting in-person interviews is that researcher may not elicit honest responses. Yin (2009) deduces some participants may provide responses they think the interviewer wants to hear or offer responses that make the participant look good.



During the personal invitation, I described the study in detail, disclosed the responsibilities as a participant, and assured the interviewee they would remain anonymous in the completed dissertation. In addition to the assurance of anonymity, I disclosed the nature in which the interview documentation will be safeguarded and destroyed once analyzed. A guide for this discussion can be found in Appendix A. Participants agreeing to take part in the study chose a time and place for the interview to occur (Appendix B). Although participants chose the location of the interview, I suggested using their teaching space to provide them with the most comfortable environment. I anticipated this would allow for a more detailed, elaborate, and honest description of the process.

Additionally, I took into account the time of year I invited participants to join in the study. Elementary teachers are easily overwhelmed at certain times in the year; I wanted to eliminate this as a factor in opting to take part in the study. Another aspect to choosing an opportune time is the consideration of when the study took place in relation to the curriculum introduction and its implementation process. Since the curriculum implementation process occurred 18 months prior to this research study, educators were in a propitious frame of mind to reflect on the process with clarity (Charmaz, 1990; Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Harris, 1992; Sandelowski, 1998).

**Interviews.** Before initiating the formalities of the interview process, I worked to build rapport with participants by greeting each participant with a friendly smile, talking about something not related to the study, or later in interview discussion, being mindful of my body language (Savin-Baden & Major Howell, 2013). Rapport-building creates a

relaxed environment. Participants feel more comfortable with the researcher, and this proves to be important in the quality of the participants' responses.

Prior to beginning the interview, participants signed a letter of informed consent that stated the nature of the study, the process in which their responses would remain anonymous, and the benefits the research may initiate (Appendix C), which include but are not limited to voicing their perception of a new curriculum implementation process and allowing other districts the opportunity to learn from their experiences..

Based on participants' responses to interview prompts (Appendix D), as the moderator of the discussion, I continued asking probing questions throughout the entire interview to acquire more detailed information as needed (Creswell, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This practice aided participants in recollecting specific details about the entire implementation process during the 2018-2019 school year.

I created a moderator's guide (Appendix E), adapted from Savin-Baden and Major (2013), to allow for organized and efficient use of time during the interview sessions. Participants' interviews were voice recorded and transcribed using a program provided by Google Docs. Each transcription was analyzed for accuracy in responses and the meaning of participants' ideas. In addition to the transcription, I manually recorded anecdotal field notes, including the day, time, space in which the interview took place, participants' body language and movement. Pauses in responses, voice tone, and additional were also recorded. These observation were important because it allowed for more of the participants' storied to be told other than what is verbally said. After reflecting on the interview as a whole, I recorded any additional thoughts in my field notes.

Participants invited to the study were asked to respond to four interview prompts: (1) Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year, (2) Describe the staff development you received *during* the implementation process. The implementation process being defined as the 2018-2019 school year, (3) Describe the opportunities given to collaborate with administrators and peers *during* the implementation process, (4) Describe your feelings regarding the Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum implementation process, and (5) Is there more information you would like to share?

After completing the interview process, I reflected on how the interview went overall asking myself if the participant felt she was able to share all of her thoughts and was additional information not relating to the interview prompts recorded. This additional reflection added more validity to the study.

Once interview responses were reread, member checking was initiated with interview participants. Each participants' response were given back to them to review. This act enabled participants to provide feedback and clarify any misrepresentation of their responses. Participants used this exercise as an opportunity to modify the language of their answers to more precisely represent their ideas. Additionally, participants reserved the right to omit any part of their responses or add additional information during this evaluative process. This exercise afforded to study participants adds credibility to the research findings (Stake, 1995). Most notably, participants voices were permitted to be accurately heard.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study will lend other educators, administrators, and district leadership insight into best practices for introducing a new curriculum once it has been proposed and adopted by the school district. Best practices can include staff development before the implementation initiative, on-going staff development during the implementation process, time given for collaboration with colleagues, and additional supports educators perceive as beneficial to the SEL implementation process.

Chapter Three addresses the data analysis components employed in this study and communicates a descriptive narrative of participants' responses to the interview prompts. Additionally, Chapter Three serves to describe educators' experience in the SEL curriculum implementation process specific to their elementary building. The data is intended to add in telling a complete story of elementary educators' experiences in this suburban elementary school.

## CHAPTER THREE: DATA ANALYSIS

As stated in Chapter One, the purpose of this descriptive case study was to investigate the experiences of implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum in a suburban elementary school. The central phenomenon developed to serve this purpose is as follows: *What are the experiences of elementary educators in a suburban elementary school implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum?* Chapter Two gave an account of the approach taken to collect the data for this qualitative study. The purpose of Chapter Three is to place meaning of participants' responses.

Data analysis methods administered in this study include coding, reflexivity, field notes, and disconfirming evidence. The combination of these analysis techniques resulted in credible data interpretation.

### **Coding**

Data from participants' interviews went through a coding process, producing categories, and thematic analysis. To accomplish this, I used the interview transcriptions and field notes. After completing the interviews, I explored the conversations for initial understanding, looking for repetitive phrases or words. Once each participant's answers were recorded, I reread my data for deeper understanding. I recognized the complete saturation of the data when no more new information was given during the interviews.

After multiple read-throughs of the collected data, I dissected the information, coding specific pieces of conversations that reappear in the transcription and interview notes. The data was cut and inserted in a mind mapping organizer. The interviewees' responses were deconstructed to look for similar words and phrases acutely (Kara, 2019).

Repeated words and phrases identified themselves as valuable information through the dissection process. Furthermore, specific words and phrases were identified as they pertained to the literature review and attribution to the central phenomenon.

Once data was coded, I aggregated similar codes into categories. Nine categories emerged from the interviews. They were: (1) Initial staff development was brief, (2) There was inadequate follow-up staff development, (3) Concerns about balancing the current curriculum with the new curriculum, (4) Is the effectiveness of the curriculum affected by fidelity and accountability, (5) Teachers found value in the curriculum, (6) Lack of time to collaborate with peers, (7) Teachers felt unqualified to teach what they consider a very important topic in education, (8) Some teachers did not teach the curriculum, and (9) Disconfirming evidence in regard to collaboration.

The similarities in the categories created comprehensive themes used to describe participants' experiences (Creswell, 2015). Four themes developed as a result of analyzing the initial categories process. I found there were commonalities between some of the categories, when combined would create a richer dialogue of the participants' experiences. The four themes that emerged were: (1) Staff Development, (2) Educators' Perceptions of New Curriculum, (3) Educator Self-Efficacy, and (4) Collaboration. Specific subcategories were developed within these themes to elaborate on specific information collected from interview participants.

The subsequent sections will include a descriptive narrative of interviews with staff members that led to the data interpretation in Chapter Four. Throughout the data analysis, I referred to field notes regarding interviewees' body language, wait time, thoughtfulness in response to the questions as well as the voice recording to the questions

and responses. As part of the analysis process, I read and reread interview transcripts and field notes, coding phrases, and words that led to an exploration of themes. I determined themes and have written about them in the following chapter. The themes found during the coding process were used to create a narrative interpretation of the data. The narrative description includes participants' quotations in sentence form, words, and phrases.

### **Field Notes**

I found value in collecting field notes as they provided a more detailed account during the interview. While I relied on the voice recording to tell each participant's story, I was able to add to their stories and the data interpretation using my observations. During the interview process, I used thoroughly recorded anecdotal notes in conjunction with interview voice recordings, and interview transcriptions to aid in completing a detailed narrative to help make participants comfortable, I explained the reasoning behind taking notes while they were responding during the interview.

Field notes collected included the body posture of participants; most participants were leaning forward into the conversation, indicating an interest in the topic. Many of the participants paused as they were collecting their thoughts before answering the interview prompts. A few participants wore smiles or smirks on their faces as they described the implementation process. This was interpreted as knowing there was a lack of continuity in the initial training of the new curriculum and the actual implementation process.

Using the voice recording from the interview, I cross-checked the accuracy of the field notes with participants' feedback, filling in the gaps where necessary. Rereading as a strategy was performed to reaffirm themes and the procedure in which data was

categorized. The rereading exercise repeated multiple times to prove the themes told the participants' stories as accurately as possible. Field notes proved to be valuable to the research process and the narrative interpretation.

### **Reflexivity**

I engaged in continuous personal reflexivity, considering the interconnectedness of my biases, values, and beliefs that have shaped me and, in turn, how the research has affected me (Willig, 2001). I acknowledged my experiences as part of the study and the results thereof. Part of reflexivity was accepting there is no right or wrong answer; only the lived experience of each participant.

As a veteran educator only having teaching experience in this school district, I hold innate biases due to the nature of the study. Acknowledging and reflecting on these biases allowed for an accurate and transparent summary of my data findings (Creswell, 2016). I have witnessed a variety of education trends implemented into the classroom because of what school administrators, district leaders, and lawmakers deem necessary to educate students.

As an educator in the building directed to teach the new SEL curriculum, I had personal experience with each of the themes found through the interview process. Through informal conversations before this study began, I had an idea of how staff members felt about the new curriculum and their experiences teaching it in their classrooms. This knowledge posed a need for accurate and meaningful reflexivity.

Therefore in this specific situation it was imperative to use reflexivity effectively, it was employed before, during, and after the research process. Before beginning research, literature about this topic was chosen based on factual accounts of other



educators in a similar situation. Choosing this research allows an opportunity to self-examine the situations I have lived as part of an implementation process. During data collection, it was imperative that I remained neutral while participants were sharing their stories. It was vital to the credibility of the study that I did not influence participants' responses. After research was concluded, the interpretations were kept neutral and factual by continually reflecting on my biases and experiences.

Because the participants in this study are colleagues, I work closely with them on a daily basis. It was vital that I continually reflected and adjusted the lens through which I received the interview data because of these relationships. The accuracy in which this data analysis method impacted the interpretation of the data, adding to the credibility of the case study.

### **Disconfirming Evidence**

I searched for disconfirming evidence to ensure that all participants' responses were being accurately recorded (Creswell, 2016). For this to occur, participants were invited to partake in an open, honest, non-evaluative conversation that reveals their lived experiences. This type of validity searches for a theme that stands in opposition to the other themes. It is necessary to acknowledge there is more than one side of the story in this curriculum implementation process; participants hold different perspective regarding different aspects of the implementation process. Not including participants' unique experience would have done a disadvantage to the data collected . The case study is reliable because all points of view are acknowledged.

Disconfirming evidence was found when participants answered question number three: "Describe the opportunities given to collaborate with administrators or peers

during the implementation process.” While many participants stated there was little to no time is given to collaborate about the new curriculum; participant ten described the opportunity she had to work with a peer. This educator described her experience as following, “I worked with another staff member once a month. She guided me to stay on track.” Participant ten recalled sitting down and looking through the curriculum to help hold each other accountable.

### **Conclusion**

Data analysis using coding, reflexivity, and disconfirming evidence led to an accurate interpretation of the collected data, thus conveying participants’ experiences implementing a new social-emotional curriculum as accurately as possible. In addition to careful and precise reflexivity, adding to the credibility of this case study is the belief that this study is transferable to other situations where like or unlike curriculum implementation is occurring. Savin-Baden & Howell Major (2013) state that transferability infers the findings contained in Chapter Four can be applied in other, similar situations.

In the following section, data interpretation will examine the significance of collaboration. The idea of assisting educators in need of instructional guidance can be achieved using a peer-coaching method to teach the new SEL lessons. Peer-coaching permits educators the opportunity to collaborate with a colleague to observe one another, self-evaluate and reflect on their teaching. This unique design works both ways since it is a team model where both educators have an equal say in supporting each other as they grow in their instructional practices and teaching styles.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INTERPRETATION

In the previous chapter, data collected was put through an analysis process to obtain rich data, providing the basis of Chapter Four. Consequently, Chapter Four comprises four themes. Each theme serves to answer interview prompts related to the central phenomenon. *Staff Development* answers statement (1) “Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year,” and (2) “Describe the staff development you received during the implementation process. The implementation process being defined as the 2018-2019 school year.” *New Curriculum and Educator Self-Efficacy* explain educators’ responses to the prompt “Describe your feelings regarding the Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum.” *Collaboration* addresses the prompt “Describe the opportunities you were given to collaborate with administrators and peers during the implementation process.”

In general, the findings from this research state that staff members in the elementary school where the social-emotional learning curriculum was being implemented felt ill-prepared to implement the program successfully. Participants believed there was inadequate staff development in the introduction of the new curriculum and throughout the curriculum implementation process which put them at a disadvantage because of the value they placed on the curriculum. There needs to be put in place a system with resources staff members can apply as they are teaching the new curriculum, such as utilizing a peer-coaching model, developing colleagues as instructional leaders, establishing a positive building culture, and designing an effective

accountability system to guide teachers through the steps of effective curriculum implementation without fear of backlash from administrators or suffer indignity from their colleagues. These recommendations will be discussed extensively in Chapter Five: Discussion.

### **Staff Development**

This subcategory is divided into three sections (1) Initial Staff Development, (2) Fall Staff Development, and (3) Follow-up Staff Development.

Staff development emerged as a theme because of the responses given to question one “Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year.” All of the participants explained they remember the SEL curriculum implementation at Fall professional development at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year.

At the beginning of each school year, and throughout the remainder of the year, staff members partake in professional development to put powerful practices into place for the benefit of students. During the 2018-2019 school year, educators in this district were given presentations relating to languages arts curriculum and math curriculum, both implemented the previous school year, 2017-2018. Some staff development reinforces practices that educators have already been practicing such as the language arts and math review, while other professional development is intended to introduce new methods to be put in place during the school year in each building in the classroom such as the implementation of the new social-emotional learning curriculum outlined in this study.

Since education has changed over the years for a variety of reasons, educators are continuously being trained in new implementation initiatives. Even the best of research-

based initiatives have a difficult time finding a foothold when there is a disconnect between research, training, and implementation. Findings from individual participant interviews in this paper indicate more productive professional development is needed to implement the specified curriculum successfully as determined by themselves, their administrators, and the school district.

Constructive staff development can be defined as, "...structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning and outcomes," (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). Staff development on new curricula does not always mean the new curricula will make its way successfully into the classroom for a myriad of reasons. Tooley and Connally (2016) determined there are four areas of improvement that schools and districts can address to facilitate increased effectiveness of professional development. They are: (1) Identifying professional development needs, (2) Choosing approaches most likely to be effective, (3) Implementing approaches with quality and fidelity, and (4) Assessing professional development outcomes. These areas of improvement are addressed via participant perceptions of the district's professional development. Tooley and Connelly's suggestion of implementing approaches with quality and fidelity will be addressed in the following section, "Initial Staff Development."

Researchers Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Tooley & Connelly (2016) outline beneficial practices for professional development that better puts structures in place for educators during these meetings.

**Initial Staff Development.** Educators in this study were tasked to put in place a new social-emotional curriculum in their classrooms. All certified staff members in the

building, including specialists such as the resource educators, school guidance counselor, Spanish teacher, as well as other educators, received the same training on the Sanford Harmony curriculum in the fall of the 2018-19 school year.

While the new social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, Sanford Harmony, was a district-wide initiative as part of its Strategic Plan, professional development took place separately at each elementary school during the fall of the 2018-19 school year. Based on the perceived needs of their community, the district's Strategic Plan aimed to address the mental and behavioral health of students. The school district needed to put in place an overarching system across all schools, elementary, middle, and high school to achieve this component of its Strategic Plan. The participants in this case study will speak to the training they received at their school building, although each elementary received similar training at their respective school sites.

***Fall Staff Development.*** When prompted to, “Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year,” multiple participants stated they felt the professional development they received was, “rushed, very brief, “a blur.” Participants six and seven stated they remember very little about the training. To illustrate this, participant six felt, “not a lot of training was done, and it seemed like another thing the district needed to check off the list.” This reality may correlate to educators’ belief that there is a lot to learn at the beginning of each school year, further establishing the participant’s position that the professional development given was not enough. There may be a connection between the time given during staff development and the quality of the program implementation.

Participant two went as far as to say, “I think we need more training. The training we received was rushed and cut short.” Participant six added to this thought, stating, “I feel the implementation process...did not give us a really good handle on what Sanford Harmony is about. I do think we’re teaching the aspects of the program, but maybe not as well as the district had intended it to be. I feel like it was thrown at us, told to take a look at it, and teach it.” Nonverbal communication and body language, such as hand gestures, mirrored the participant’s thoughts throughout the interview responses. This is not to say that the presenters did not do an adequate job in the short amount of time given for their training. Participant eight shared she thought, “the presenters did an okay job presenting the information to teachers.” The presenters may have presented the information better than ‘okay’ if they were allotted the full amount of time required for their presentation.

Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet (2000) add to the previously mentioned areas of staff improvement by stating that effective professional development consists of multiple components aiding in successful and sustainable implementation. One component is an adequate amount of time given for professional development. An additional group of researchers believes seven factors add to effective staff development; each one is found in this case study. They are:

(1) content-focused, (2) incorporates active learning using adult learning theory, (3) supports collaboration, (4) uses models and modeling of effective practice, (5) provides coaching and expert support, (6) offers opportunities for feedback and reflections, and (7) is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It takes time to integrate these factors into professional development. At the elementary building’s Fall Staff Development, many of the study’s participants recall the presentation before the Sanford

Harmony training running over its scheduled time allotment, therefore cutting the Sanford Harmony training short. Participant seven was a presenter of the SEL program at the Fall Staff Development. She and another staff member were given additional training from outside of the district to take back to their school buildings for Fall Staff Development. This additional training gave the teacher-trainers information needed to share with their peers for the new social-emotional learning curriculum. Participant seven added her thoughts about that particular staff development training. She confessed that not enough time was given to the presentation, and that could have resulted in teachers' feelings toward the professional development they received and the feelings they have toward themselves being able to put the new curriculum in place successfully, resulting in low self-efficacy.

Supporting participant seven's observation, other participants believed they did not receive a sufficient amount of time during professional development to learn new information and to retain it, resulting in a desire for additional learning opportunities. Mirroring this belief is participant five's statement, "I recognize the *need* to have more staff development, and I recognize my own *desire* to have more staff development."

Active professional learning requires quality time spent with new materials (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). To design more fruitful professional development, not only is adequate time to explore the materials needed, but there should be learning exercises educators engage in, in an attempt at feeling more comfortable being introduced to new content. During the school year, educators can reflect on the learning exercises completed at the beginning of the year in an attempt to implement the curriculum in their instruction fluidly.



During the interviews, participants did not mention collaboration strategies during the initial training such as interacting in small groups, forming discussions, or given the chance to apply what they were taught in a meaningful manner. Because of this participants, participants were not afforded time to make meaning out of the staff development, “by way of analyzing and synthesizing new information” (Borko, 2004; Dempwolf, 1993; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Kwang, & Birman, 2002; Galbo, 1998; Kinnucan-Welch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; Speck, 1996). Referencing Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), these acts of collaboration not only lead to more constructive staff development, but a better chance for implementing curriculum in their classrooms effectively. Staff development activities such as the ones mentioned prior, would have given participants necessary information on what adequate SEL curriculum could look like in their classrooms.

**Follow-up Staff Development.** In addition to describing staff development before the implementation process, interviewees were also prompted to “Describe the staff development you received *during* the implementation process. The implementation process defined as the 2018-2019 school year.” Reinforcing this prompt, Cohen and Hill (2001), determine professional development must be sustained to have an impact. The goal of continued long-term training is not new concerning curriculum implementation.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) propose that ongoing training SEL curriculum can include but is not limited to, workshops, coaching sessions, or using a digital forum. The use of coaching sessions or other methods of peer collaboration can lead to the opportunity of putting beneficial research into timely practice. This type of collaboration among peers reinforces educators’ belief that they have support in implementing the

program over an extended period of time. Ongoing peer collaboration supports the idea that the new curriculum is valuable and necessary in the school setting, even though educators' personal beliefs may already give them that inclination. The notion of acting as a collective body aids in accomplishing a mutual instructional goal.

Standing in contrast to the previous thoughts, some participants in this study did not recollect any formal, sustained professional development, while others remembered having an "occasional meeting here and there" (participant five). Participant three recalled, "I do not believe there was professional development quite like we do for other subjects where it is more continuous throughout the year. I feel like it was sporadic," indicating the absence of continued professional development.

Interpreting this portion of the interview takes us back to Hopkins's et al. (1994) notion that curricula implementation should act as a process rather than an event. "A common criticism of professional development activities...they are too short and offer limited follow up to educators once they begin to teach" (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). In this case, staff felt there was not adequate initial professional development or subsequent follow-up staff development meetings during the 2018-19 school year relating to the SEL curriculum. However, participants' interview responses have proven that they would have liked more training before and during the curriculum implementation. Participant three mirrors this thought in her response, "I do wish we would have gone into more depth of the why it is important to teach social-emotional health to students." This sentiment will further be discussed in the next section, New Curriculum.

## **Educators' Perceptions of New Curriculum**

Typically, new curriculum supplies instructional strategies, background knowledge for teachers, lessons, and in some cases, assessment options that relate to provided objectives; these allow educators the necessities for delivering instruction consistently and therefore implementing a new curriculum successfully (Wiles & Bondi, 2014). A new curriculum initiative provides most of the necessary resources to be implemented soundly. One thing it cannot offer is the resource teachers request most commonly; time.

**Educators' Perceived Value in the Curriculum.** Concerning this curriculum, one participant stated she was “happy that a system was put in place.” This statement confirms students building relationships with adults throughout the building, which, as previous literature stated, benefits student outcomes socially and academically. Students and educators naturally form relationships, but this curriculum emphasized the importance of those connections. For example, part of the new curricular system is *morning meetings*. Most staff members remember learning about this concept and the routine that takes place during it. Participants noted this was one of the more accessible ventures of the new curriculum to implement and one that students seem to enjoy. Staff members found value in students starting their day in this unique, interactive way. One participant believes in using the activity so much she suggests, “having other adults leading different morning meeting. This shared responsibility permits students to become familiar with other adults in the building and to learn what the adult’s role is.” This suggestion circles back to students forming meaningful relationships with other staff

members in the building. Participants expressed a desire to know the “why” behind the curriculum since it is perceived as an essential topic to be addressed in classrooms.

In their research, Brown & McIntyre (1982) & Richardson (1991), state educators’ attitudes are crucial in determining the success or failure of an *innovation*. Educators in this study believe the SEL curriculum is valuable and necessary, supporting the idea that educators are more likely to attempt teaching the new curriculum. In this case, one participant “knows it is important to integrate SEL into our curriculum.” Other participants believe it is “powerful teaching that naturally fits into the classroom,” adding the proposed idea that participants acknowledge the value in the new SEL curriculum.

When educators value the importance and need of a selected program because it betters the outcomes of students, educators will naturally have a more positive attitude (Ajzen, 2011). They are more inclined to put the new curriculum in place promptly. However, participants’ beliefs were tested in this study because they did not have the resources to begin teaching the curriculum, contradicting with the school district’s message that social-emotional learning is necessary for the classroom. Participant five determined that one of the reasons it was not fully implemented in her classroom was because of “a lack of resource material and time.” Participant four’s response underline this statement, noting, “(Sanford Harmony) kits were late coming in.” Educators were unable to teach the material because they did not have it. In turn, this affected the amount of time given to fit into their instructional routine.

Referring back to participants’ body language and facial expressions recorded in field notes, I noticed they were disappointed in not having more time to study the SEL curriculum, in particular, the resource teacher. She felt “her students needed it (more than

other students).” Additionally, while participants did not think there was adequate training on the Sanford Harmony curriculum, they knew enough about social-emotional learning to appreciate the significance of it and its impact on students. The thoughtfulness in participants’ replies reiterated the impression they felt social-emotional learning is of too much consequence of which to know so little.

In contrast to most participants feeling that the SEL curriculum was valuable, participant five described her grade-level team’s decision to implement or not implement the curriculum in their classrooms was related to a “lack of resource material and time.” This participant’s team did not teach the curriculum, even going as far as to “not even cracking open a book (regarding the Sanford Harmony materials).” This grade-level team acknowledged the necessity of commencing the curriculum but admit that nothing came of the discussion. Good teachers are sometimes put into situations where they do not perform at their best due to a “lack of resources and time.” This statement indicates that in order to do the program justice, sufficient time dedicated to professional development and planning is necessary to experience successful program adoption.

**Increased Workload.** Although participants part of the study openly admitted the significance Sanford Harmony curriculum would have on students’ academic and social growth, they expressed concern for their already burgeoning workload. At the time of the curriculum implementation, the elementary school part of this study was also introducing a Magnet Program. This new program required a great deal of work and mental energy. The unique Magnet Program was introduced over three years and required a substantial commitment from the educators at this research site. Participant one stated it would be “interesting to see how other schools not introducing a unique program were

implementing the Sanford Harmony curriculum in their daily schedules.” This statement indicates the participant believes curriculum implementation processes most likely transpires differently at other elementary schools part of this district.

None the less, many of the participants felt “overwhelmed.” Participant seven expressed concern that there are “too many things on our plates that I can’t be the best at all of them,” while another participant added, “I can’t do 100% at everything.” Field notes during this portion of the interview illustrated disappointment participants felt about the lack of time given for instructional practices. Participant three recalled being “disappointed about some other things that left the table because of Sanford Harmony curriculum such as read-aloud. Some teachers say they do not have time to read aloud to students anymore because I’ve got too many other obligations.” Housman (2017) proclaims student comprehension improves when they participate in read-aloud, that practice, “fell to the wayside.” In reference to previous literature, Housman adds (2017), learning among students improves communication skills and language use corresponding to research that states SEL positively impacts students’ academics, one area being reading comprehension. Referring back to field notes describing the participant’s facial expressions and uncertainty, I surmised eliminating this instructional practice was something she felt uneasy doing.

As one would expect, educators possess an innate, personal responsibility to their students because such is the nature of education. However, teachers are torn between their desire to learn new instructional practices that will improve student achievement and the weight they feel by their already established instructional obligations. Semadeni (2009) offers a simple thought, “Experienced teachers have seen innovations come and

go; therefore, they resist new programs.” This thought serves as a dilemma in the education field where teachers strive to do what is best for their students, but lack the buy-in needed to put new curriculum in place with fervor.

Educators are expected to implement this new SEL initiative, but as one interviewee expressed, “something has to give.” Not always do teachers believe in the power of the new curriculum may have, but in this case, these educators adamantly do. Educators notice the change in students’ needs entering schools, and they want to meet students’ needs; this curriculum gives them a structured measure in doing that. Ultimately, if given sufficient time and the necessary resources, educators possess a course of action to put in place their understanding of the new curriculum with fidelity with a better chance of successfully meeting students’ academic and social needs. Implementing lessons without fidelity does not allow the new curricula a fair chance to illustrate the program’s strengths or weaknesses.

### **Educator Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy determines how people feel, think, self-motivate, and behave (Bandura, 1993). Effective instructional practices are linked to high self-efficacy and therefore correlate with increased student achievement. The interpretation of this data shows there is a disconnect between high self-efficacy in the educators’ part of this study and their belief that they can teach the new SEL curriculum effectively.

**Efficacy and Academic Achievement.** Research tells us that teacher efficacy relates to student academic achievement; high teacher efficacy leads to high academic growth, while low efficacy leads to less academic growth. Ghaith & Yaghi (2007) and Wolters & Daugherty (2007) believe more efficacious teachers are more likely to adopt

innovative instructional practices in the classroom; are more open to new ideas; show flexibility; provide more feedback to students; exert more effort in organizing, planning, and delivering lesson content; and are better able to engage with students relative to their less-efficacious peers.

Participants openly expressed their emotions about their ability to establish the new curriculum. Teachers in this scenario seem to have a lower self-efficacy when it pertains to implementing the new SEL curriculum. In regard to the importance placed on social-emotional competencies in children, staff members feel the curriculum ought to be taught by someone more qualified such as the school's psychologist or guidance counselor. Participant seven went in-depth in her response, stating, "I am not a fully qualified teacher or person to be able to implement that (SEL curriculum). I feel like social-emotional lessons should come from psychologists and counselors, otherwise, I feel that I am just giving the students information at a surface level."

Adding to this, some participants hypothesized other staff members were "scared to try the Sanford Harmony curriculum because they didn't know what to do." If the school psychologist or school guidance counselor were not available to provide classroom instruction, educators expressed they would feel more comfortable if they were given more guidance on how to deliver lessons. This opinion was expressed during the participants' responses to prompt four: "Describe your feelings regarding the SEL curriculum implementation process." This opinion corroborates the idea in the previous section that a teacher's attitude is essential in determining if the new curriculum will succeed or fail (Brown & McIntyre, 1982; Richardson, 1991). Due to the fear educators felt about teaching the new Sanford Harmony curriculum, participant two's solution to



this concern is “to assist those educators during the initial SEL lessons,” thus instilling more confidence in trying the new curriculum. Further recommendations will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Educators’ willingness to adopt new initiatives is related to their belief that they can implement the initiative well. The participants in this study were put in a unique position because they find immense value in the curriculum concept and necessity; however, they do not feel they are a suitable source to deliver the curriculum. Bray-Clark & Bates (2003) argue that educators who have had past success in teaching lessons believe they will experience further success in teaching new lessons. Additionally, how educators accept change is the result of how they experience the change in reality versus how the change was intended to be carried out. This acceptance may determine the future of the new program.

Bray and Clark (2003) surmise empowering teachers to feel confident teaching new curriculum lessons is to give them ample opportunities during in-services to practice putting new materials to use in a variety of ways. Working in varied, small groups create valuable opportunities for colleagues to work alongside their peers, not on their grade-level team. This collaboration opens the door for multiple perspectives to be shared. Merging the Sandford Harmony curriculum information with other points of view from colleagues could result in unique learning opportunities for students.

Adding to this idea of success, when educators believe they can teach students new material constructively, they will. The power of high self-efficacy weaves its way through a teacher’s experiences, past, and present, and lands at the feet of the students for better or worse. Also, when teachers feel prepared and confident in their new role as

curriculum implementers, student academic, and social success in and out of the classroom is more likely to occur (Cerit, 2013).

Furthermore, to increase the self-efficacy of all teachers, give them ample, adequate, and comprehensive professional development. Professional development that includes time with the new materials, small group activities to communicate original ideas, and productive discussion to clarify their responsibilities or questions they have about the new curriculum. There lies an opportunity to empower educators to believe in their instructional strengths by giving them the necessary resources to achieve success. Building capacity in educators fans out to other areas of change in the school district and school sites.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration among peers is a valuable tool to utilize. The more teachers collaborate, the more they share their knowledge about proven instructional methods, which leads to improving their instruction (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Educators in the school district have participated in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for more than thirteen years. PLCs are the brainchild of Richard DuFour. In his article, “What is a Professional Learning Community?” DuFour (1995) states that there are three big ideas that PLCs encompass: (1) Ensuring that students learn, (2) A culture of collaboration, and (3) A focus on results. This dedicated time allows educators to collaboratively reflect on their instruction, frequently using data, to move all students forward in their academic success.

While behavioral data is harder to tie directly to social-emotional learning, educators use informal and formal methods in an attempt to record this data accurately.

As more data are collected over time, educators may be able to recognize a pattern in behaviors and how they impact academics. Collaboration is an opportune time to explore new instructional materials designed to be put in place in the classroom as each member of the PLC will most likely have similar concerns. Some participants in this study utilized their PLC for that purpose, while other participants did not.

As educators sit down to look through materials to prepare for teaching SEL lessons, they are working toward building relational trust with one another. When peers work together building trust and remaining transparent, there is a better likelihood that teams will make difficult decisions to maintain their focus on student outcomes (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). Building trust and strengthening relationships leads to colleagues working better together to develop solutions to problems.

During the collaboration, educators share their knowledge of the curriculum and receive instructional practices that stand to benefit their students. Teachers gain insight from their peers about strategies that work well and those that do not. Some participants in this study sought out colleagues to work with and to hold each other accountable while working together to maximize learning with the new SEL practices.

**Disconfirming Evidence.** It is essential to share the disconfirming evidence defined in Chapter Three during the study's interviews. While most participants affirmed there was no formal follow-up professional development, there was a small group of educators who chose to use the PLC time as a collaboration opportunity to discuss putting the Sanford Harmony curriculum strategies in place. These participants met once a month "to guide each other and keep each other on track." Garet et al. (2001) describe this type of peer collaboration as "collective participation." These participants found value in

leveraging their colleagues' knowledge as a means of becoming comfortable with the new curriculum and, therefore, more comfortable integrating it into their classrooms. Educators voluntarily worked together to share their ideas. These colleagues allowed each other the opportunity to gain knowledge from someone more expert than them, giving them the possibility to expand their learning outside of formal professional development (Ball & Cohen, 1996).

**Lack of Peer Collaboration.** Participants' responses to the prompt "Describe the opportunities you were given to collaborate with administrators or peers *during* the implementation process," led to the concept of accountability. The previous example of collaboration was not the norm, however. According to interview transcripts, most staff members did not go out of their way to work with their peers. To this end, some participants feel an accountability piece to the implementation process may allow for more consistency in collaborating and implementing the new curriculum.

As previously stated regarding follow-up professional development, most participants did not recall a time where they formally or informally collaborated with their grade-level teammates or other educators in the building, opening an opportunity to hold grade-level teams accountable for planning and implementing the Sanford Harmony lessons. To support this notion, one grade-level used their PLC time to address the curriculum and the need to implement it, but nothing came of the conversation. This opportunity was dismissed because of the team's belief that they did not have enough time to implement the new curriculum in their current instructional time. "We would sit down and look at the SEL standards...and it was more of a remember, we've got to plan our lessons." This notion balances between expressing value in the social-emotional

curriculum yet not implementing it because of the lack of time the grade-level perceived as a barrier.

This adds to the belief that school administrators are in a position to facilitate this matter and act as an accountability piece in the new curriculum implementation.

Nicholson & Tracy (1982) believe the principal's commitment to the change affects the implementation of the change. Whether or not a principal encourages collaboration outside of formal professional development may determine the success or failure of the initiative. This thought takes into consideration the popular philosophy that change trickles from the top tier of an organization down.

Although some participants believe there should be an accountability piece to the curriculum implementation, one participant went out of her way to learn more about social-emotional skills. Participant three, powered by her need to explore the topic more in-depth, registered for an SEL conference. Although this participant is not a classroom teacher, she still instructs students throughout the day, leading to searching for an opportunity to learn more about best instructional practice to increase social-emotional competencies. Participant three wanted "to learn more about the importance of social-emotional learning." One idea she remembers is "educators cannot pour from an empty cup. Educators have to take care of themselves before they can implement coping strategies with struggling students. That is a big take-away I brought back to our building; make connections and giving our building staff opportunities to find connections between social-emotional learning and their present curriculum." This participant felt it essential to share selected strategies expecting the strategies would make their way back to teachers' classrooms. This participant's choice was her way of incorporating the SEL

philosophy with staff members during professional development to prove the importance of necessary social-emotional skills for all people, educators included. This approach of sharing knowledge with her peers allowed her an opportunity to impact the school building's staff and students through an alternate route.

### **Conclusion**

The interpretation of the interviews highlight educators' acknowledgement of new curriculum training each year, they express a need for more follow-up training, they believe better qualified professionals should be immersed in the lessons, and peer collaboration is necessary.

Educators in this case study understand the need for new SEL curriculum adoption year to year. Student needs are changing, and schools are tasked with keeping up with and meeting those needs. Staff development, as described in this section, did not represent the importance of the new SEL curriculum. Participants expressed a need for more initial and follow-up professional development. Because they were not given this, teachers felt uncomfortable putting the lessons into their plans and implementing the curriculum in their classroom. Additionally, due to receiving the district provided curriculum post haste, students did not have a chance to benefit from its components early in the school year.

Educators felt the gravity of the topic called for better-trained professionals, such as the school psychologist or guidance counselor, that have more experience with the topics covered in the Sanford Harmony material. Teachers did not believe in their own self-efficacy to adequately cover the materials, without guidance or a more informed peer.

In contrast, some educators took the time given for collaboration. These educators met to plan Sanford Harmony lessons and held each other accountable for the implementation of the new curriculum. The following chapter will provide recommendations to meet teachers' needs in this endeavor better.

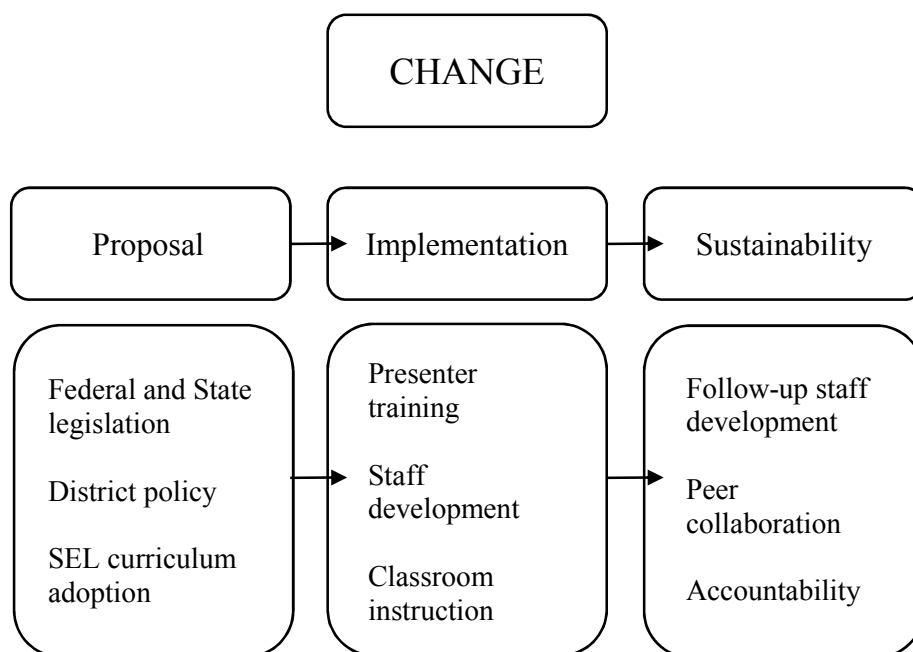
## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Based on the interpretation of research found through interviews and interpretation in Chapter Four, the following chapter describes the framework applied to conceptualize the findings, outlines recommendations, and promotes implications for future research.

### **Conceptual Framework**

An unconventional framework was administered in this descriptive case study, a quotation by Hargreaves and Fink (2006). These two authors claim, “Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain” (2006, p.1). This descriptive case study acts as a formative evaluation of the district’s new social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum implemented in the 2018-2019 school year. The quotation breaks this SEL curriculum implementation into three parts (1) proposal, (2) implementation, and (3) sustainability. See Figure 1 for a visual in how these three components coalesce with information presented the background, interpretation of analysis, and recommendations for sustainability.





*Figure 1. A change continuum using topics unique to this study. Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) quotation contributes to this figure as it is used as a conceptual framework in this study.*

The first stage in curriculum implementation is the proposal. Because of the federal, state, and district guidelines, the suburban school district, in this case study, proposed implementing specific social-emotional curriculums, preschool through high school, as part of the district's Strategic Plan. State guidelines indicate each school district must have an SEL program.

After researching and selecting the best curriculum appropriate for elementary students' developmental readiness, Sanford Harmony (SH), the district sent lead teachers to the curriculum training. Two lead teachers from this elementary site were entrusted with taking the new SH curriculum back to their school site and transferring the

knowledge to their peers via a formal professional development. All kindergarten through fifth grade teachers received the same presentation, however each grade-level was given specific curriculum to meet their students' age group.

This act of training staff members on the new Sanford Harmony curriculum led the proposed curriculum change into the phase Hargreaves and Fink (2006) described as, "Change in education is...*hard to implement*." Federal, state, and districts hold expectations that innovations will maintain the momentum established from the initial introduction of the topic and training. In this case, innovation is the SEL curriculum, and the training occurred at the beginning of the year. John L. Brown (2004) claims through his research that teaching new curricula is unsuccessful when the implementation of new material is not done with...a plan for longevity. The implementation process is not only the initial staff development introducing the new curriculum; it includes the follow-up staff development and informal development between colleagues and grade-level teams.

Using these notions and the earlier information presented, Sanford Harmony curriculum implementation at this elementary school site has room for improvement. The next section will provide a variety of recommendations for a more successful implementation process as related to the responses given by participants in this study.

To clarify, this case study is serving as a *formative check* regarding the initial and follow-up implementation practices taking place in this elementary school site in a suburban school district. This informal check-in leads us into the third part of what Hargreaves and Fink (2006) mention about change; that it is *extraordinarily difficult to sustain*. This belief encompasses all changes in any profession. Innovations come and go because of this distinct phenomenon regarding change initiatives. "Sustainable

improvement contributes to the growth and the good of everyone,” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). The following section includes recommendations the school district in this study and other school districts may use to ensure the sustainability of new curriculum implementation.

### **Recommendations**

After collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, I believe there is an opportunity to put a system in place for this genre of curriculum adoption. There is no question that teachers find the topic relevant, so it is necessary to capitalize on that kind of established motivation. The best way to achieve this is to put a formal system in place that does the SEL curriculum justice and validates teachers’ beliefs about the current implementation process. I will attempt to provide recommendations that may allow for a reliable implementation system leading to long-term sustainability in the elementary school part of this study. Recommendations include : (1) Peer-Coaching Model, (2) Colleagues as Instructional Leaders,(3) Create a Common Building-Wide Time for Social-Emotional Learning Lessons, and (4) Establish a Positive Building Culture Surrounding New Curriculum Implementation. These recommendations were born from a combination of information collected through participant interviews and research collected to add to the authenticity of each suggestion.

**Peer-Coaching Model.** Peer-coaching is a model frequently used in professional settings, especially in the education system. The school district in this case study uses one type of peer-coaching model in its ‘new staff induction program’ because of peer-coaching’s track record of success and its cost-effectiveness as a professional development strategy (Davis, 1987; Sloan, 1986; Stichter, Lewis, Richter, Johnson, &

Bradley, 2006, p. 668). Use of this strategy allows for an opportunity at bettering classroom instruction in a low-cost fashion for school district. Greene (2004) states that teachers part of a peer-coaching program were more successful than their counterparts in their implementation of instructional strategies, using them appropriately and over long periods. Peer-coaching is also linked with high self-efficacy in educators (Kohler, Ezell, & Paluselli, 1999; Licklider, 1995). Formal collaboration among teachers such as in this model offers teachers an opportunity to be more confident in their classroom instruction. Ross, Bruce, & Hogaboam-Gray (2006) expand on this thought stating teacher self-efficacy is a bridge from experience to action. This notion is demonstrated as colleagues offer their experience as a mode to observe allowing their peer a chance to put new practices learned into action.

Peer-coaching invites pairs of teachers to establish instructional goals, develop strategies to achieve those goals, observe each other teach, and provide specific feedback (McLymont, & da Costa, 1998). Peer-coaching has multiple components, but the central part of it is the idea of peer-to-peer collaboration. Peer-coaching is comprised of two teachers observing each other's instruction and providing feedback on established goals (Stichler, Lewis, Richter, Johnson, & Bradley, 2006). In this exercise, educators choose a colleague to act as their peer-coach. Because teachers are given the choice of whom they will work with, there is a better chance that a trusting relationship will be built, leading to instructional growth.

In this relationship, there is no hierarchical relationship between the peers; they are equals. Peers beginning this process as equals is an important component to this model and its effectiveness (Joyce & Showers, 1995). The pair collaborates to devise a

common goal. This established goal is what each partner will hold one another accountable. We will use *morning meetings* as an example in this peer-coaching exercise. After setting a goal, dates and times will be set for each observation. Both educators will observe each other conducting a morning meeting. The decision of observation frequency is at the discretion of the peer-coaching pair. They may meet as often as needed based on their goals. Ultimately, this is a strategy to strengthen the self-efficacy of teachers; growing teacher self-efficacy may occur at various times for each peer-coaching group.

As peers observe each other, they record only facts. They may write down what the teacher was saying or what the teacher was asking of her students. Next, the peer may observe and record what the students are doing and saying. Again, these observations produce factual anecdotal notes to give an accurate portrayal of the lesson. Another tool for observation is videotaping the lesson, allowing the educator to see their instruction firsthand. This method provides the teacher an opportunity to review as needed to understand the nuances of the lesson.

After observing one another, the peers will self-evaluate, reflecting on their instruction. Next, the two peers will reflect with one another about the lesson observation. Teachers receiving positive, constructive feedback provides a greater potential for that teacher to enhance their goal-setting, motivate them to be risk-takers, and give them confidence to implement challenging instructional strategies (Bruce & Ross, 2008, p. 348). Here stands a chance to be subjective about what was observed in the other's classroom, discussing what went well and what may need changing. Celebrating their instructional successes with a peer adds to their self-efficacy because of the conversation's positivity during the nonevaluative reflection process (McLymont & da

Costa, 2008). Finally, by blending this information, peer-coaches will guide one another in planning and teaching their social-emotional lessons, holding them accountable for the implementation of the lesson.

This model is one way to ensure proper implementation of the SEL curriculum and give the new curriculum a promise of sustainability. The degree of peer-coaching effectiveness may attribute to the fate of the initiative. If this strategy is used in the school building, it should be done with consistency among each peer-coaching group. However, if it is not, there still stands to be learning opportunities. “Peer-coaching can increase reflective practice, aid implementation of teaching models and instructional strategies...” (Jenkins & Veal, 2002; McAllister & Neubert, 1995). The benefits of this method are two-fold; educators become familiar with the curriculum, and students benefit from consistent, quality instruction. Green (2004) found that teachers participating in a peer-coaching model were more successful than their counter parts in implementing instructional practices and sustaining the use of those practices. This practice can be used throughout the school year or in periods of time the teacher pairs deem beneficial. As stated before, this is a cost-effect measure to ensure ongoing support for teachers (Abbot, Walton, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999; Boudah, Logan, & Greenwood, 2001; Cook, Landrum Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997; Guskey, 2000). Giving teachers multiple attempts to observe lessons being put into place in a real classroom, strengthens the notion that teachers will consistently implement the new curriculum in their own classroom. Reiterating the argument that students ultimately benefit from this collaborative model.

**Colleagues as Instructional Leaders.** Participants in this study desire more professional development opportunities, so let educators educate their peers. Even better, let educators in the same building with similar experiences educate their peers. Consistently using educators as facilitators of professional development opportunities over the long-term may have an impact on the curriculum implementation (Marrongelle, Sztajn, & Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2013). Professional development leaders confident with instructional methods and materials serve as excellent sources of information and guidance for their colleagues during curriculum implementation. Educators providing professional development are well-prepared, leading to high-quality and high-impact learning opportunities for students (Borko, Koellner, & Jacobs, 2014, p. 149). Not surprisingly, educators feel more at ease learning from peers in the building who have successful experience working with the SEL material. This also negates the frustration educators feel when required to attend a professional development aimed at a larger audience (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). As with students teaching their peers in the classroom setting, this idea reinforces the instructional practice of the educators teaching one another. This allows educators part of the staff development a chance to reflect on their successes and areas for improvement with their colleagues.

Another suggestion is to invite the school guidance counselor and school psychologist to give staff development on the best approaches to teach the social-emotional lessons. This option leads to the possibility that teachers will feel more confident and better prepared to take on the task of teaching such an important topic as the staff development is coming from what classroom teachers determine as experts in their field. Deferring to the school counselor and school psychologist to share their

knowledge of trauma-informed practices may potentially increase teacher self-efficacy and buy-in from staff members. Because of the training a guidance counselor or school psychologist receives as part of their degree program, they have an ability to also deliver high-quality professional development. Therefore, even though these professionals do not interact with students on a routine basis, they are impacting the students' learning (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010; Desimone, 2009; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, Orphanos, 2009). This may alleviate some of the concerns expressed by participants..

The school guidance counselor and school psychologist may take this opportunity as a chance to collaborate with classroom teachers in designing a staff development presentation gaining more buy-in from teachers. Alternatively, this type of peer-led training does not have to be face-to-face. Creating an online presentation in Google Slides, or sending a short video via Flip Grid may be more appealing to classroom teachers since they may educate themselves when it works best for their schedule.

Another way to gift time to educators may be part of the required staff meetings as previously stated in the Staff Development section in Chapter Four. Administrators may utilize this opportunity to carve out a portion of time, allowing grade-level teams the opportunity to collaborate. Teachers reflecting during this time, may lead to setting new instructional goals for lessons identified as needing improvement. Additionally, teachers may choose to use these revelations as a starting point in exploring the idea of participating in the peer-coaching model. As educators use this time as a chance to plan for upcoming SEL lessons, they are building confidence in their grade-level team. This



new found confidence may allow educators a chance to share their learning and thus, act as a domino effect for other grade-level teams.

### **Create a Common Building-Wide Time for Social-Emotional Learning**

**Lessons.** Participants in this study advocated for a system of accountability. This proposal may find foothold in that desire already in practice at the elementary school in this study.

The study site uses morning meetings as part of their behavior support system already established for all students. The concept of morning meetings comes from Responsive Classroom (2020). One guiding principle of Responsive Classroom is, “Teaching social and emotional skills is as important as teaching academic content” (2020). These morning meetings merge academic and social skills. There are four components of a morning meeting: (1) Greeting, (2) Sharing, (3) Group Activity, and (4) Morning Message.

The four components work in tandem with the Five Core SEL Competencies defined by CASEL (2020): (1) Self-awareness, (2) Self-management, (3) Social-awareness, (4) Relationship Skills, and (5) Responsible Decision-Making. All four components of the morning are meant to include all students in a climate of trust. This safe environment helps build a culture of classroom community. Community-building among students is a large component of the Sanford Harmony curriculum, the curriculum being implemented at this school site (Miller & Gaertner, 2014). Finally, students are engaged in a morning message which relates to the academic content they will be learning that day. This last step provides a connection between social-emotional learning and academics.

To exercise the practice of holding morning meetings, each classroom K to 5 in this elementary building would be asked to hold their morning meetings during the same block of time each morning. This suggestion naturally builds in time for each classroom teacher to meet the expectation of delivering SEL lessons consistently (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Humphrey, 2013; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012). Implementing SEL curriculum with fidelity meets the district, state, and federal goals to provide an adequate health curriculum resulting in higher academic achievement (NHES, 2004). This idea also allows specialists, such as the Music or PE teacher, the guidance counselor, literacy coach, paraprofessionals, custodians, etc. to visit classrooms and become part of their community. Students interacting with other adults in the building allows for more relationships to be built which as stated previously is beneficial to adequate social-emotional growth (CFC, 2019). This common block of time helps hold educators in the building accountable to their students in meeting their social-emotional needs. Adding to this thought, educators can be held accountable in a way that helps them to grow and feel more confident in the progress they make. conversation and goal setting to help teachers grow as instructional leaders in their classrooms.

Because specialists and other adults in the building are able to visit classrooms, they could be used as a source of feedback. As they are participating in the morning meeting activities they are able to mentally take notes that can be shared later either in an email or short note. This suggestion can be conducted more timely, as teacher peers would not have to place in goal setting meetings or reciprocal observations. Additionally, this type of informal observation requires no pre- or post-conference between the teachers. Keeping observations informal and non-evaluative lessens the chance of

teachers moving into a defensive mode where there is a regression in trying new teaching methods (Johnson, 2006), allowing teachers to serve as resources for their peers.

### **Establish a Positive Building Culture Surrounding New Curriculum**

**Implementation.** Celebrating successes routinely may have a positive impact on one's mentality. Teachers' perception of the culture in their building affects their motivation in adopting and teaching new materials. Practices such as celebrating one another's accomplishments may lead to a more positive culture in the building, in turn, increasing teacher motivation. Celebrating teacher successes leads to an increase in job satisfaction. When teachers feel happy in their roles, they are more likely to feel confident in implementing new practices in their classrooms (Polatcan & Cansoy, 2019). Comparatively, when teachers are happy, they are better instructional practitioners and are continuing to add to their sense of efficacy.

Schools possess resources to create a system where colleagues celebrate what is going well with SEL lessons. For example, putting a display in a high traffic locale grants colleagues access to the success of their peers via pictures with short descriptions. This idea may alleviate the belief that teachers possess that it is easier and they are more comfortable teaching the same lessons leading to avoiding the new methods (Fullan, 2001; Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Educators may feel comfortable enough to invite their colleagues to observe an SEL lesson in action. Participant seven remembered the SEL trainers recommending teaching it "when we can fit it in and try not to make it this big extra thing, so I tried to do it during my class's morning meetings." This suggestion is a good opportunity to nullify educators' timid feelings about the additional curriculum and to make it more manageable than they initially perceived.

These suggestions make room for an opportunity to increase the self-efficacy of those educators described as “nervous” or “afraid” to begin the curriculum (Lorti, 1975). Staff celebrations present a chance for educators’ relationships to grow over a commonality because they are invited into their colleague’s classrooms that are generally not easily accessible during the school day. Quay & Quaglia (2005) propose that when staff members believe in themselves, they are more likely to set future instructional goals and have a higher sense of confidence in meeting those goals. As stated previously, as educators’ relationships grow over a shared initiative, their relationship with the initiative will also grow, indicating a premonition of successful initial stages of implementation.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This descriptive case study is only one part of many research studies completed that describes the story of curriculum implementation in one suburban elementary school. There is a vast body of knowledge constructed already around this topic, yet there are still opportunities to add to this body of research. There is a possibility to explore different SEL curricula being put into place and the ‘how’ and ‘why’ it is being implemented in other Pre-K to 12 institutions. Below are two future research implications to move forward to aid in establishing a complete picture of this research.

**Correlation Between Quality of Initial Presentation and Quality of Implementation.** There is an opportunity to research various schools implementing new curriculum and the use of worthwhile professional development. Richman, Haines, and Fellow (2019, p. 207) propose that quality professional development uses “time and space to plan collaboratively” leading to better implementation of new curriculum. The initial staff development in this study was determined too brief for the participants to feel

comfortable implementing the new curriculum although they deemed it necessary for all of the students in the elementary building.

Researchers could use the effective staff development guidelines put forth by Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) and Tooley & Connelly (2016). In conjunction with providing adequate duration of the staff development, presenters should create engaging learning opportunities that will most likely be effective for adult learners, model teaching practices, allow time for collaboration, and give educators an opportunity to provide feedback in an effort to continue providing successful staff development. Choosing a school district that has already adopted a new curriculum and therefore, has plans to put the new curriculum in place for the upcoming school year, serves as an ideal time for researchers to utilize best practices for effective staff development to meet adult learners' needs.

**Population and Sample Sizes.** The population of this study included 30 certified educators in a suburban elementary school, and of that, a sample size of ten educators was chosen. Eight of the participants were classroom teachers, while two of them were specialists, meaning they work with students in the building but do not teach in a classroom with their own students. A more accurate picture may be painted with a larger population from which to choose a larger sample size; this may be achieved by including multiple elementary school sites in a study. Researchers would achieve a higher confidence level in their findings using a larger population and sample size (Littler, 2020).

Future research may include a focus on the middle school or high school implementation process in addition to the elementary process. Because this is a school

district of over more than 24,000 students and nearly 1,500 certified teachers, this implication allows for expansion of the research presented here, creating a meaningful impact on the body of knowledge surrounding this topic (Nebraska Department of Education, 2020). Studying multiple school sites in the same district or choosing other districts to evaluate, unearths an opportunity to transpose this descriptive case study on surrounding districts throughout the state and nation, adding value to the justification of credibility through the avenue of transferability.

**Urban, Suburban, and Rural School Settings.** The elementary school in this descriptive case study is located in a suburban setting. It is possible districts will place a greater emphasis on implementing the new SEL curriculum based on the variance in a school's population, taking into account the free/reduced lunch statistics, and the mobility rate. There may exist value in looking at different elementary schools in the same district and elementary schools in other districts taking into account unique variables at each site such as time given to initial staff development, follow-up staff development, support of the administrators, and opportunities for peer collaboration. Hargreaves & Fink (2003) state those who support the growth of a new curriculum, create an educational environment that leads to continuous growth. Another variable to consider is the academic achievement scores of other school districts since federal, state, and districts recognize that growth in academics is an important benefit of teaching students social-emotional skills.

After researchers have removed all relevant data from this descriptive case study, it may be advantageous to explore other districts' policies and standards established surrounding the SEL curriculum. Sample districts may include those in urban areas and

those claiming the rural landscape. Meyers, Tobin, Hubin, Conway, & Shelvin (2015) note that schools in rural communities are less likely to have trained mental health practitioners to assist with identifying mental illness or provide professional development.

If a system has been put in place to introduce and implement a curriculum, researchers could use the same prompts and question from this study to cross-reference similarities and differences between the two districts. As part of accurate and detailed comparison, it would prove beneficial to gather demographic data to include in future research findings (Creswell, 2015).

Finally, researchers should reflect on factors that impact educational institutions. Does the location or demographics of varying school districts affect the process of adopting a new SEL curriculum? Are factors such as the cost of the materials an issue? Is there monetary allocation to train lead teachers to take the information back to their school buildings? Do veteran teachers and new teachers feel the same confidence in implementing new curriculum? Are there opportunities between these two populations to meaningfully collaborate and learn from one another? How can the implementation process remain sustainable in the district? The answers to these questions will differ in each school and school district. There are many variables to consider when comparing one district to another district.

As it is, all students may benefit from consistent, quality social-emotional learning curriculum, particularly those in an urban setting because of the probability of higher poverty rates in addition to the likelihood of coming from an unsupportive household (Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty, n.d.). Higher rates in

poverty serve as one example that youth are experiencing trauma. The need for adequate SEL is more evident in urban school districts. Unfortunately, Darling-Hammond (2001) theorizes that urban and rural school districts have less funding than those districts in suburban settings, therefore limiting the amount of quality instructional resources those districts receive. This hypothesis may be confirmed by looking through data collected on demographics in various districts and schools around the country.

However, even with minimal access to resources, the new curriculum can be implemented effectively and gradually with the right strategies and supports (Kotter, 2012). Although there may be no remedy for lack of funding, these low socioeconomic status and high free/reduced lunch education institutions can look to other schools or districts with similar demographics and who have had success in implementing a curriculum like the one described in this study, to devise a system that works for individual districts' funding and population.

## **Conclusion**

There are multiple options districts may utilize to provide adequate and quality training to teachers that would allow them to implement the new SEL curriculum effectively. All schools or districts are not created equally; therefore, these implications for research may play a unique role in establishing a baseline for measuring the quality of the implementation process of one specific curriculum topic, SEL, among a variety of school districts. School districts in urban, suburban, and rural areas have varying needs for SEL based on the demographics of their school's population. It is possible the chosen school districts are in different stages of the implementation process; perhaps they have not entered the proposal stage, or they recognize they are on the opposite end of the



spectrum, already successfully maintaining a long-lasting system. Each district has a valuable story to share despite the curriculum implementation stage in which they find themselves.

It is imperative to note that a long-sustained system should demonstrate success as measured in the social and academic growth of the schools' students. If this is the case, these school districts have the opportunity to serve as a model for other school districts. Also, another factor to take into consideration is that school districts may learn from other districts that are still experiencing weaknesses in their implementation undertaking. This phenomenon puts the educational system at a unique advantage in that they can utilize each other as a resource to gain perspective of new implementation procedures and the successes and failures associated with them.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This descriptive case study explored the central phenomenon:

*What are the experiences of elementary educators in a suburban elementary school implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum?*

Social-emotional skills have gone by many names over the years, but they preserve the same essence. Children and adults require adequate social-emotional skills to contribute positively to their community. Our country's current legislation acknowledges that. National, state, and local governments strongly support the belief that social-emotional learning (SEL) is imperative to the well-being of our communities and support this belief by providing funding to school districts.

Students with strong social-emotional skills perform better in school, are more likely to graduate, and keep a job over the long term. Students transform into productive adults that thrive in the workplace, demonstrating their strength as a teammate and contributor to the success of the company's mission. These individuals maintain close relationships over time and are mentally and physically healthier in contrast to their counterparts. They are less likely to be overweight or suffer from depression and anxiety.

Furthermore, adults with exceptional social-emotional skills possess the ability to serve as a positive example to youth and have the power to pass on strong social-emotional skills formally and informally. Men and women serve as role models for youth needing a starting point in nurturing their social-emotional competencies.

While the importance of building social-emotional skills is inarguably necessary for the school setting, it is not met with confidence in the implementation process. Educators in this descriptive case study expressed a need for more in-depth professional development on the topic. They stressed the need for on-going professional development and the chance to collaborate with peers.

Some educators feel they cannot adequately implement the curriculum, causing them internal conflict because they value the necessity of the program. Participant seven asserts, “it’s very important and needs to happen during the school day.” This participant believes other, more adept professionals in the mental health field would be a better source of instruction for students. Other educators feel they would become more comfortable instructing the lessons if given time to collaborate with their grade-level peers. This time for collaboration would allow colleagues to discuss their students and how to best put into practice the SEL curriculum. That is to say, the opportunity to collaborate with other grade-level teams allows for an opportunity to hear multiple perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, allowing educators to work one-on-one with a peer to set a goal and hold each other accountable to that goal can prove beneficial to the implementation process. A one-on-one relationship with a trusted colleague allows staff to be vulnerable with each other, confiding their strengths and weaknesses in their instructional practices of the new SEL curriculum.

This relationship creates a place of learning for the sake of bettering students rather than a place where teachers feel uncomfortable with their shortfalls, thus afraid to address them. Theoretically, there would be an adequate number of educators in the

school confident in their instructional capacity to implement SEL lessons, that they can present proven strategies to their colleagues.

Along with that, staff members can build the culture around this process by celebrating one another's efforts. When teachers feel good about their instruction, they feel good about their job. These beliefs lead to a stronger staff culture. Working to create a positive culture in the school building empowers teachers to feel capable of implementing new initiatives. Teachers celebrating one another opens the door for teachers to continue building capacity, taking their learning into their own hands.

Inevitably, there is room for more research to add to this descriptive case study. Educators and administrators would benefit from a larger body of knowledge gathered by inviting a larger population and accruing a more substantial sample size into a study about the implementation process of an SEL curriculum. The higher the confidence in the findings, the better the chance at creating a study of greater magnitude. As stated before, social-emotional skills will always be imperative for the well-being of individuals and our society, so the topic will remain a focus in education for years to come.

In addition to procuring a larger sample size, future research would benefit from looking at a variety of school districts Urban, suburban, and rural schools probably have different stories to tell about their experience with SEL curriculum implementation. Moreover, stories would benefit educators and administrators in that they could serve to provide insight into alternative methods of implementation.

The findings of this study told the story of elementary educators' experiences implementing new social-emotional learning curriculum in their suburban elementary school. It attempts to do justice to their stories, in an attempt to strengthen curriculum

implementation processes this subject matter but can be employed in multiple scenarios. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) remind us, “Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain.” School districts, educators, and students benefit from an effective implementation process and the sustained long-term benefits of a new, advantageous curriculum.

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## **Appendix A: Personal Invitation to Participate in the Study**

During my initial conversation with educators, the following document will serve as a guide to explain in detail the nature of my study. Educators will have the option to participate in the research after being given a complete picture of the study.

“As part of my doctoral studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, I am conducting a research study titled, “Educators’ Experiences Implementing Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum in a Suburban Elementary School.”

I am inviting certified elementary educators part of the Sanford Harmony curriculum adoption during the 2018-2019 academic school year to participate. I encourage all invited staff members to participate, including those with minimal experience in implementing the curriculum and those who have substantial experience in implementing the curriculum.

All data collected from the research will be securely destroyed once the study is completed. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout the entirety of the study. Thank you for considering taking part in this research study. This opportunity will afford you the chance to provide feedback on the program implementation.”

**Appendix B: Interviewee Participation and Schedule**

| Subject Areas Represented | Number of Educators |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Kindergarten              | 1                   |
| 1st grade                 | 1                   |
| 2nd grade                 | 2                   |
| 3rd grade                 | 1                   |
| 4th grade                 | 1                   |
| 5th grade                 | 2                   |
| Literacy Specialist       | 1                   |
| Resource teacher          | 1                   |

| Date and Time    | Participant                    | Location           |
|------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| January 7th, AM  | 5th Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 8th, AM  | 2nd Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 8th, PM  | IB Coordinator/READ Specialist | Participant's Room |
| January 10th, AM | 2nd Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 10th, PM | 5th Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 14th, AM | Kindergarten Teacher           | Participant's Room |
| January 14th, AM | 1st Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 14th, PM | 3rd Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |
| January 16th, AM | Resource Teacher               | Participant's Room |
| January 24th, PM | 4th Grade Teacher              | Participant's Room |

## Appendix C: Letter of Informed Consent



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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

IRB # 895-19-EX

### Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Educator,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha: I am conducting a research study to learn about educators' experiences implementing social-emotional learning curriculum in a suburban elementary school.

For this study, participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview session outside of the school day contract hours. During these interviews, a series of open-ended questions will be asked about the social-emotional learning curriculum implementation process. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. After data analysis, the findings will be presented to you to ensure the validity of the statements.



Although there is no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, I will learn about how educators experience new curriculum implementation. This research could benefit other schools in our district, state, and nation.

There are no anticipated risks in this study. Your identities will remain anonymous, and there will be no individual identifiers attached to your participation in this study. Findings will be generalized in the written report. Upon completion of the report, the recordings and any written data will be destroyed.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to refuse participation altogether or discontinue it at any time. The choice to participate or not to participate will not impact any relationship with me, the school site, school district, or affiliated institutions.

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

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

## Appendix D: Interview Prompts

Interview Prompts include:

1. Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year.
2. Describe the staff development you received *during* the implementation process. The implementation process being defined as the 2018-2019 school year.
3. Describe the opportunities given to collaborate with administrators and/or peers *during* the implementation process.
4. Describe your feelings regarding the Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum implementation process.
5. Is there more information you would like to share?

## Appendix E: Moderator's Guide

### Logistics

Date:

Location:

Participant:

### Research Goals

- Determine teacher's experiences of implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum in a suburban elementary school setting.
- Learn about the SEL curriculum implementation process.

### Respondent Profile

- Certified educators part of the SEL curriculum implementation process
  - Classroom educators
  - Resource teacher
  - IB Coordinator/READ Specialist

### Timing guide

- Introduction - 2 minutes
  - This includes time for the participant to sign the research consent form
- Question 1 - 6 minutes
- Question 2 - 6 minutes
- Question 3 - 6 minutes
- Question 4 - 6 minutes
- Question 5 - 3 minutes
- Close - 1 minute
- Total - 30 minutes

## Introduction

- Thank you for coming. I am conducting a research study titled, “EDUCATORS’ EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CURRICULUM IN A SUBURBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.”
- I am voice recording our conversation and taking notes to record observations. I want you to feel comfortable describing your experience.
- Please know that your responses will remain anonymous and all data collected during this conversation will be destroyed.
- I will provide you with a consent form that describes what I just said.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Be honest; I want to know your lived experience.
- Your responses will remain anonymous in my paper.

## Participant introductions

- Name
- Teaching position
- Number of years teaching

## Question Guide

1. Describe the staff development you received before implementing the new Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year.
2. Describe the staff development you received *during* the implementation process. The implementation process being defined as the 2018-2019 school year.

3. Describe the opportunities you were given to collaborate with administrators and/or peers *during* the implementation process.
4. Describe your feelings regarding the Sanford Harmony social-emotional learning curriculum implementation process.
5. Is there more information you would like to share?

#### Conclusion

- I will reread these notes and prepare them for you to look at. If I have misquoted you or misinterpreted your dialogue, you can bring that to my attention. If you would like to add to or omit any of your responses, I will accommodate that request too.

Thank you for your help today. If you have any questions after this interview session, please contact me.