

**Teaching After the Pandemic: A Qualitative Exploration of
K–12 Teachers’ Experiences with Students’ Social-Emotional Learning Loss**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic altered students' learning globally and affected their social-emotional skills. The problem addressed in this study was the growing challenge that teachers in the K-12 classrooms were experiencing in response to students' loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) conceptual framework guided the study. A qualitative descriptive case study design was selected to provide an in-depth examination of the perspectives and lived experiences of educators facing this challenge. The participants included 12 teachers working in the NE school district of Wilmington, Delaware. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and both manual coding and NVivo 15 software were used to organize the data and develop themes. The key findings revealed that teachers implemented multiple strategies in the classroom to support students' social-emotional development, strengthening their relationship skills, self-management, and social awareness, as well as promoting teachers' SEL well-being. Participants highlighted the importance of building and maintaining a supportive classroom environment through relationship-building and the use of emotional regulation strategies. Recommendations include increased collaboration between teachers and parents to support students' social and emotional learning. Additionally, I would recommend including parents in future studies to gain insight into the challenges they faced after the pandemic, particularly regarding students' loss of social skills.

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Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Questions	6
Conceptual/Theoretical Framework.....	7
Definitions of Key Terms	10
Review of the Literature	12
Ethical Assurances	33
Summary	34
Section 2: Methodology and Design.....	36
Design and Method	37
Population and Sample	39
Materials/Instrumentation.....	41
Data Collection and Analysis.....	42
Assumptions.....	46
Limitations	46
Delimitations.....	47
Summary	47
Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations	48
Findings.....	49
Evaluation of the Outcomes.....	69
Implications and Recommendations for Practice	76
Recommendations for Future Research	80
Conclusions.....	81
References.....	83

List of Tables

Table 1 Participant Demographics	50
Table 2 Interview and Focus Group Transcript Information	52
Table 3 Alignment of Themes with Research Question	58

List of Figures

Figure 1 Framework for Social Emotional Learning. CASEL	7
Figure 2 Trustworthiness of the Data.....	52

Section 1: Foundation

It has been six years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when countries around the world suspended many activities. One of the activities that was suspended was in-person schooling. The reason for closing school buildings was to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and to protect the health of children and educators (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). COVID-19 has altered the lives of numerous individuals, including children and adults.

In March 2020, children worldwide were restricted to their homes instead of being in a school building with peers and teachers. According to Donnelly and Patrinos (2022), it was estimated that over 1.5 billion students were affected by the temporary closing of schools, roughly 94 percent of the global student body spanning over 190 countries. This resulted in severe negative impacts on children's social skills, academic progress, and behavior (Jackaria, 2022). Before the pandemic, emotional and behavioral issues ranged from 7 to 15% in several countries (Jing et al., 2024). However, during the widespread lockdown, research indicated that there was an increase of over 73% (Jing et al., 2024).

During the pandemic, children spent most of their time at home with their families until the pandemic ceased, and they returned to school (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Upon children's return to school, the teachers soon observed that some lacked social and emotional skills (Aksoy, 2020). Also, increased behavioral issues substantially impacted these children's learning and social-emotional development (Egan et al., 2021; Marlina et al., 2022).

Taking the lack of SEL and behavioral issues into account, one may ask the following questions: (a) What were the perspectives of teachers on children's social and emotional development skills? (b) What strategies could be utilized to alleviate this issue? Reflecting on these questions, one needed to consider the following factor: children's social-emotional

deficiency in the five core competencies of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, which were (a) relationship skills (Weissberg et al., 2015), (b) responsible decision-making, (Kaspar & Massey, 2023), (c) self-awareness, (d) self-management, and (e) social awareness (Gee, 2023).

The foundation and most critical time for social-emotional growth occurs during the early years of a child's life (Egan et al., 2021), and according to research (Stefan et al., 2022), SEL serves as a critical component for a young child. It helps to build positive relationships with teachers and peers (Ibarra, 2023) and encourages problem-solving. If SEL is practiced school-wide, it allows students to use their learned skills, for example, in the library, playground, and lunchroom (Steed et al., 2022). SEL is essential to children's mental health, academic, and emotional success (Stefan et al., 2022).

Children begin to develop their relationship and self-awareness skills at preschool age (Jing et al., 2024). If these skills are deficient, children may struggle to connect with teachers and peers (Bigham & McDaniel, 2023). Children who were unable to attend school in person due to the pandemic experienced considerable stress due to the lack of healthy and supportive relationships with peers and teachers (Qvortrup, 2024).

Working in a Pre-K-12 setting alongside families with low socioeconomic status, there was evidence of loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills and challenging behaviors. On a daily basis, parents and teachers struggled with children due to a lack of SEL skills (Gee, 2023). Loss of SEL skills meant that students were not demonstrating being team players (relationship skills) and did not demonstrate empathy for peers (social awareness) (CASEL, 2023).

Challenging behaviors can be classified as physical actions (running away, hitting, and kicking), verbal outbursts (screaming, yelling, and lying), and a lack of academic engagement (non-compliant, stubbornness, and interpersonal conflict) (Patnaik et al., 2022; Van Rensburg et

al., 2024). These behaviors were exhibited as (a) children creating threatening situations to their safety and well-being. (b) Deterioration or hindrance of an instructional environment /academic engagement (Aksoy, 2020). Challenging behaviors disrupted instructions and interfered with other students' learning in the classroom.

At times, students became physically violent. Other challenging behaviors included being unable to control their emotions (Skura & Wheeler, 2024) and being defiant (Van Rensburg et al., 2024). Challenging behaviors may have originated from underdeveloped social skills.

By introducing social skills in early childhood, children learned essential behaviors such as sharing, effective communication, following instructions, and taking turns (Aksoy, 2020). Children's behavioral issues often stemmed from challenges in their home environment; therefore, teachers were encouraged to be intentional and consistent when working with them (Gee, 2023). Research indicated that conflict between parents and children increased during the pandemic. While such conflict may have been internalized at home, it was often externalized in educational settings where students engaged in social interaction (Wang et al., 2021).

Social-emotional learning is a strategy that assists children and adults in obtaining the essential skills that will aid in cultivating healthy relationships, managing and identifying their emotions, showing concern for the feelings of others, demonstrating empathy, and demonstrating honesty (CASEL, 2023). Implementing SEL will assist in cultivating and transforming students to thrive academically and improve emotional competencies and well-being (Dyson et al., 2023). Research has shown that SEL programs help children and adolescents' social and emotional development by assisting them in dealing with stress-related symptoms, thereby improving their well-being and reducing the risk of mental health issues (Hunter et al., 2022). SEL can be utilized in the classroom, school, community, and home (CASEL, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the growing challenge that teachers in the K-12 classrooms were experiencing in response to students' loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). The loss of SEL skills resulted in an adverse effect on children's learning and increased behavior. Due to extended school closures and limited peer interaction, it made it impossible for children to participate in group team-building activities, communicate with friends, as well as teachers (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022).

Teachers encountered students who were socially unprepared (Jackaria, 2022). As a result, many students experienced considerable challenges with social interactions and self-regulation (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). The pandemic disrupted students' opportunities to develop key social and emotional competencies. These include social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, self-management, and self-awareness, as outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2023).

Teachers were observing more frequent outbursts from children following the pandemic. If this issue persists, it may result in long-term consequences, where a generation will be socially and emotionally impaired (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Children's loss of social skills represented a complex problem that required shared responsibility among educators, families, policymakers, and society (Weissberg et al., 2015). The consequence of not solving this problem may result in long-term detrimental and life-long effects, such as academic failure (An et al., 2021), behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health issues (Davis et al., 2021).

Additionally, consequences may prevent students from demonstrating empathy, developing a growth mindset, managing their emotions, making responsible decisions, and building healthy relationships (Kim et al., 2024). If unaddressed, the deficiency in SEL will

cause children to experience difficulties forming and maintaining healthy, supportive relationships, resisting negative social pressure, collaborating with peers, showing courage to take the initiative, and resolving conflicts (Davies et al., 2021). Furthermore, the inability to navigate in social environments can contribute to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, all of which may further impair interpersonal functioning and overall well-being (Denham et al., 2012).

A deficiency in social skills may lead to health problems such as obesity, increased risks of criminal behavior, and unemployment (Jones et al., 2015). The decline in interpersonal skills placed additional strain on teachers, hindering instruction, making it more difficult, and contributing to increased stress and burnout (Dawes et al., 2024). Moreover, the deterioration in SEL competencies negatively impacts students' academic performance and emotional well-being (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers utilized in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to gain insight into the strategies educators used to support the restoration of SEL competencies among children within the northeast region of Delaware to address the loss of social and emotional skills. Following the pandemic, teachers encountered many students who struggled with the loss of social skills (Robbins & Cipollone, 2023). Given the importance of SEL, it was imperative that students in the K-12 environment acquired the skills necessary to develop healthy and positive relationships, succeed both

academically and personally (Mahoney et al., 2021), communicate effectively, manage and identify their emotions (Durlak et al., 2022).

These skills will allow them to empathize with others, consider different perspectives, and set goals (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). Skura & Wheeler (2024) indicated that teachers were encountering higher rates of behavioral challenges, reduced student engagement, and difficulty maintaining positive classroom environments. Addressing this issue was essential for promoting healthy classroom communities and supporting students' holistic development in the post-pandemic era (van Rensburg et al., 2024). Teachers were able to implement strategies that assisted their students in regulating their emotions, increasing engagement in school, and building interpersonal skills (Kaspar & Massey, 2023).

Research Questions

RQ1

How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic?

RQ2

How are teachers addressing the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom environment?

RQ3

What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework utilized for this qualitative descriptive case study was social and emotional learning. This framework was established by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Framework for Social Emotional Learning. CASEL



<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

Note. CASEL Wheel lists the Five Core Components of SEL and the Four Focus Areas

In 1994, a team of researchers and educators met to discuss how to strengthen students' social-emotional abilities, academic achievement, and well-being, and minimize behavioral issues and mental stability (Weissberg et al., 2015). The team of leaders introduced the concept of “social and emotional learning” as a framework that would inspire and motivate children and young adults' academic, social, and emotional abilities with the assistance of the school, families, and communities (Weissberg et al., 2015). Social and emotional learning will strengthen essential skills, habits, and a growth mindset that will support both academic achievement and positive behavior outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

SEL is defined as a mechanism that assists young people in obtaining, practicing, and applying the essential skills that will assist them in developing healthy and supportive relationships (Jones et al., 2017). Individuals who have acquired SEL skills were able to communicate effectively, manage and identify their emotions (An et al., 2021), demonstrate empathy, show concern for others, show the courage to take the initiative, and demonstrate integrity and honesty (CASEL, 2023; Durlak et al., 2022). Students were more engaged in learning when their social-emotional needs were addressed, especially those who have experienced trauma (Kaspar & Massey, 2023).

This framework was important to the research as it provided the lens through which the researcher could examine and analyze the core competencies of social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL draws upon five interconnected competencies: relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023; Kasper & Massey, 2023). Together, these competencies not only support students' academic achievement but also shape their social interactions, emotional well-being, and ability to engage successfully within inclusive learning environments (CASEL, 2023).

- Social awareness refers to showing compassion, respect for others, and appreciation of diversity.
- Relationship Skills include making friends, collaboration, and effective communication.
- Responsible decision-making includes making good choices, reflecting on how the choices may affect you and others, and problem-solving.
- Self-management involves controlling your behavior and emotions, exhibiting self-discipline, and setting goals.

- Self-awareness involves identifying your feelings and having integrity.

Classroom and schoolwide SEL initiatives will benefit students by promoting social-emotional learning, positive relationships, and reduced behavioral issues. When implemented in schools, the CASEL SEL framework will help students who exhibit aggressive behaviors (Sutton et al., 2021). SEL will assist in building and transforming students to develop academically, enhance their well-being, and support their emotional and cognitive capabilities (Dyson et al., 2023). For students to succeed, they need to be educated with the necessary skills that will enable them to develop academically, socially (An et al., 2021), and emotionally (Dyson et al., 2023).

Parents and teachers play an important role in implementing SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). This framework will enable parents and teachers to implement evidence-based SEL strategies most pertinent in the home and classroom (Greenberg et al., 2017). When SEL is incorporated into the school and home, it helps build a holistic student experience where they can feel comfortable expressing their points of view and feel connected to peers, teachers, and family members (CASEL, 2023).

Research has shown that SEL programs assist children and young people's social and emotional development by helping them alleviate stress-related symptoms, reduce the risk of mental health issues, and improve their well-being (Dowling et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2021). The CASEL framework has evolved in the following ways: it includes Equity and SEL, Adult SEL, Workforce and SEL, and advocates for SEL in federal policies, as well as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015 (CASEL, 2023). It has also expanded from the classroom to the entire school, as well as the community.

Definitions of Key Terms

CASEL

Collaborative, academic social-emotional learning (CASEL) is a process that integrates academic instruction with social-emotional growth through the collaboration of educators, students, families, and communities to support holistic development (Zins et al., 2007).

Core Competencies

The essential social and emotional skills that help to support learning and growth consist of Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, and Social Awareness (CASEL, 2023).

Pandemic

An outbreak of an infectious disease that spreads across numerous countries, affecting a large number of individuals (Morens et al., 2009).

Relationship Skills

The capacity to initiate and sustain building and maintain a supportive and healthy relationship with various people and communities that includes effective communication, offering and seeking support when needed, resolving conflicts, collaborative problem-solving, and teamwork (CASEL, 2023).

Responsible Decision Making

The ability to make ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behaviors. This includes assessing the consequences of one's actions, recognizing solutions to personal and social issues, and identifying how critical thinking is helpful inside and outside school (CASEL, 2023).

Social Awareness

The ability to display empathy, compassion, and concern for others of diverse backgrounds. This includes understanding the perspectives of others, being able to express gratitude, and identifying different social, cultural, and customary practices (CASEL, 2023).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-emotional learning is an approach that is utilized to help children and adults develop skills for building relationships, making responsible decisions, managing their emotions, and navigating social interactions (CASEL, 2023; Kaspar & Massey, 2023).

Self-Awareness

The ability to identify and understand one's emotions and how they affect or impact behavior. This includes exhibiting honesty and integrity, having a growth mindset, developing a sense of purpose, and examining biases (CASEL, 2023).

Self-Management

The capacity to regulate one's emotions and behaviors in diverse situations. This includes recognizing stress management strategies, setting personal goals, showing initiative, and utilizing organizational skills (CASEL, 2023).

Social Skills

Learned behaviors that allow individuals to communicate in social environments. It enables them to interact and respond with others in diverse social situations effectively. They can be nurtured through observations and experiences. Social skills include but are not limited to forming positive relationships, sharing, being empathic to others, and regulating their emotions (Sørli et al., 2021).

With key foundational terms defined, the literature review will examine existing research on social-emotional learning, the challenges associated with SEL deficits, and the strategies teachers have employed to support student development. Understanding the challenges associated with the loss of SEL skills in students requires examining existing research on SEL development (Davies et al., 2021), instructional strategies, and teachers' emotional intelligence (Jones et al., 2017). The literature review will explore the impact of SEL deficits on academic and social outcomes, as well as evidence-based practices for addressing SEL gaps in classroom settings. It will provide the context and rationale for investigating teachers' experiences and strategies in supporting students' SEL development, thereby highlighting the significance and relevance of this qualitative descriptive case study.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This section reviews relevant literature on teachers' perspectives, the strategies used in the classroom to combat the loss of social skills, post the COVID-19 pandemic. This section also includes an overview of scholarly publications to support understanding the three research questions raised in this study: (a) How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic? (b) How are teachers addressing the loss of social skills in the classroom environment? (c) What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic?

To access information for this literature review, the following databases at the National University Library were used: APA PsycArticles, DOAJ, EBSCO, ERIC, GALE, JAMA, and SAGE Journals Online. The search terms used were “social-emotional learning,” “social skills,” “post COVID-19 pandemic,” “behavioral issues,” “teachers and educators” also “loss of social skills after the pandemic,” “social and emotional development,” “social-emotional well-being,” “impact on children,” “SEL policies,” “isolation,” “strategies teachers are using in the classroom,” “impact on adolescents,” “SEL and diversity, equity and inclusion,” and “impact on teachers.”

Social Emotional Learning

The history of social-emotional learning (SEL) began in the late 1960s with a YALE professor, Dr. James Comer (Bond, 2020). He launched a program to support academic achievement in two New Haven, Connecticut, low-income schools (CASEL, 2023). He believed there was a clear distinction between children’s home environment and school life experiences, emphasizing that these contexts play a critical role in shaping children’s social and emotional development and academic outcomes (Effrem & Robbins, 2019).

In 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) emerged when a team of individuals collaborated to solve the missing link in education. The group believed schools should assist children with their social and emotional needs (CASEL, 2023). According to CASEL (2023), students in a K-12 school environment will develop healthy habits if taught SEL skills, which are essential to education and human development. Schools, families, and communities collaborate globally to promote the positive development and academic achievement of children and young people (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is acquiring knowledge, mindset, and social-emotional skills that encourage positive outcomes for children in school (Souza et al., 2021) and beyond. SEL includes proficiency in developing interpersonal skills, making ethical choices, understanding oneself, regulating one's behavior and emotions, and understanding how others feel (CASEL, 2023). School-aged children who developed SEL skills tend to lead fulfilling lives and engage less in risky behavior (Kaspar & Massey, 2023).

SEL enhances students' learning capacity, fosters a positive attitude, and promotes prosocial behaviors while also alleviating emotional distress (Steed et al., 2021). By managing their emotions, children will reduce their stress levels and persevere in any challenge (Weissberg et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the primary role of the teachers is to implement the SEL curriculum (Ferreira et al., 2020), but they have difficulties incorporating it into the regular curriculum. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2016) suggested that professional development for SEL is not given enough time or attention; hence, teachers have limited training and lack the ability to support their students' social and emotional needs (as cited in Stickle et al., 2019).

Teachers should address their own socioemotional needs in order to provide students with adequate support (Lyons et al., 2020). Due to inadequate professional development opportunities in SEL, many educators are not fully equipped to implement SEL strategies for personal growth or to facilitate their students' social and emotional development (Stickle et al., 2019). To fill that gap, a coaching approach was designed and developed to assist teachers in increasing their use of SEL for their students as well as themselves. This coaching model helped teachers become more aware of their emotions, offered support, and enhanced their well-being (Stickle et al., 2019).

Socio-emotional skills involve two core components in the development domain: intra- and interpersonal. Within the CASEL framework, intrapersonal competencies include self-awareness and self-management. Interpersonal skills include social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). If children are not taught social skills at an early age, which include self-awareness and social awareness, they will unlikely be able to regulate their emotions, and as a result may become anxious, worried, and experience mood swings (Oppermann et al., 2024).

Countries that were strict with restrictions, such as the United States (US), Italy, and Germany, reported an increase in children who internalized and externalized their issues during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic (Oppermann et al., 2024). Countries such as Sweden and Jordan, which did not implement stringent restrictions, reported fewer socioemotional difficulties with their children (Oppermann et al., 2024). Not all children were affected the same way by the COVID-19 pandemic; how they responded to challenges depended on their personal and environmental resources, with perseverance playing an important role (Prime et al., 2020).

SEL not only establishes, supports, and develops children's personal and academic growth but also creates a safe and welcoming classroom environment (Greenberg, 2023). Per Greenberg (2023), SEL has short-term and long-term student outcomes. Short-term goals include an optimistic perspective for self and others, positive social behaviors and relationships, conduct issues will be minimized, less emotional discomfort, and greater academic performance (Greenberg et al., 2019). Long-term goals include graduating from high school and college and career readiness (Jackson et al., 2021; Schellenberg et al., 2022). Long-term goals will be

strengthened by forming and maintaining healthy relationships, strong mental health, and decreased involvement in criminal activity.

SEL interventions will also produce behavioral improvements (Greenberg et al., 2019). SEL is not a disciplinary tool but an intervention program to help prevent students from having or reducing behavioral issues (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emphasizes preventative strategies by helping students develop self-awareness, regulate their emotions, and build positive relationships, thereby reducing the likelihood of behavioral issues (CASEL, 2023). SEL programs serve as a curriculum-based approach, and lessons include positive attitudes and behavior (CASEL, 2023).

Social and Emotional Development

Children begin attending school at an early age to acquire knowledge; thus, a lack or loss of adequate education can impact a child's academic (Dorn et al., 2020) social, and emotional development (Kertih et al., 2023). The foundation for academic, social, and emotional growth is built during early childhood, making this stage particularly critical for development (Egan et al., 2021). Due to the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were encountering students who were struggling because of the loss of social skills (Robbins & Cipollone, 2023). Per Gee (2023), there was a significant impact on students' behavior, the lack of engagement, and motivation. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical component of a young child's development and is essential to a child's mental health, academic, and emotional success (Stefan et al., 2022).

Children usually learn four essential foundational skills in their early years: (a) Acceptance- students learn to bond and establish relationships with others. (b) Well-being - emotional, mental, and physical. (c) Participation and involvement - students explore and nurture

their curiosity. (d) Communication- students can express themselves in diverse modes (Timmons et al., 2021). SEL helps build positive relationships with teachers and peers while equipping students with skills that can be applied in the classroom, at home, and in the community (Low & VanRyzin, 2023).

Social and emotional development plays an essential role for a child because it assists in building their ability to recognize and control their emotions and minimize classroom issues, such as bullying, stress, and depression (Thaintheerasombat & Chookhampaeng, 2022). In early education, developing SEL skills can assist and enhance children's attention span and engagement in classroom interactions, laying the foundation to help them acquire additional practical skills in the future (Ressel et al., 2022). When implemented as designed, SEL programs prove highly effective in promoting positive outcomes for children across various areas of development, including academic achievement, emotional regulation, and social competence (Calhoun et al., 2020).

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's social development may be more significant and long-lasting. Children experienced difficulties in reestablishing peer friendships and building and maintaining healthy friendships. Rebuilding this skill may take years, depending on the child's developmental stage (Spronz et al., 2024). As a result of the pandemic and the decreased time spent in school and a social environment, children were unable to connect with peers, which contributed to developmental delays, especially in managing their emotions and cognitive development (Spronz et al., 2024). Parents and teachers should seek opportunities at home, in school, and in the community that will allow children additional activities that will assist in rebuilding and enhancing their social skills (Kaspar & Massey, 2023).

The pandemic affected racial/ethnic groups differently. In some instances, the relationship between children's activities and social skills differed (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022). According to Hernandez & Jabbari (2022), during the pandemic, there was an increase in social skills among children who spent significant time on screen, who actively completed schoolwork, and who participated in extracurricular activities with peers. There was an increase in interaction and social development in households with both parents and parents with higher education who were able to work from home and spend time with children (Singletary et al., 2022).

There was a decrease in social skills among children without technology, who had no interactions with their peers, could not complete their schoolwork, and had no extracurricular activities (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022). Poor social skills can lead to the following: aggressive behavior, crime, delinquent development (Beelmann & Lösel, 2021), lower academic achievement (Davis et al., 2021), and mental health issues (Vera, 2023). Persistent behavioral difficulties in children associate with a higher risk of difficulties in learning, peer relationships, and daily functioning across school, home, and community settings (Hukkelberg et al., 2019).

Implementing SEL in schools will significantly improve students' academic success, reduce behavioral issues, create a supportive learning environment, and promote social development (Ibarra, 2023). The social environment in a school consists of three components: (a) communication, (b) relationships, and (c) discipline (Luo et al., 2023). School discipline refers to rules applied to manage behavior and assist students in self-regulation (Sanders et al., 2022). In educational settings, SEL is critical in the development of a strong relationship between adults and students, thereby promoting a supportive learning environment that facilitates academic achievement and personal growth beyond the classroom (Conner et al., 2023).

Social Emotional Learning - Impact on Children

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is crucial to children's existence. It can be described as a procedure where children acquire skills and an understanding of communicating effectively, showing concern and compassion for others (CASEL, 2023), making responsible decisions, taking initiative (Ahmed et al., 2020), standing by their actions, and identifying their emotions (Durlak et al., 2022). SEL skills can lead to appropriate behavior, emotional well-being, and academic success (Durlak et al., 2015).

Children's daily engagement with peers provides a key source for their social and emotional development (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). The disruption of children's educational and social activities during the pandemic affected them negatively. There were missed opportunities for children to develop communication and relationship skills and emotional understanding (Brockmeier et al., 2024). Peer interactions offer opportunities for children to deepen their social knowledge, learn and follow norms essential for effective interaction, and communicate respectfully (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021).

By interacting daily with peers, children learn social awareness, how to accept diverse groups, and how to reduce biases. In addition, they will also learn how to build supportive and healthy relationships. Classroom environments not only allow children to learn academically but also include the development of essential social skills (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Social skills are complex and impossible to imitate through online platforms, which was the case during the COVID-19 lockdown. Another issue caused by being online was that the teacher-student relationship could not fully develop. Children could not expand their knowledge of different perspectives by being online and not in the same space to interact with peers. Students had difficulty collaborating with peers in the classroom (Gee, 2023).

From some parents' perspective, there was a positive side to the lockdown: they had more time to spend one-on-one with their children. Also, the children managed to spend time bonding with their siblings and experienced a short-term interruption of their daily routine (Egan et al., 2021). There were some benefits to young people who were autistic during the pandemic. There was a reduction in stress associated with school and relief from the ordinary workings of mainstream schools (Martineau & Bakopoulou, 2024).

Teachers noted that the shift to remote learning during the pandemic played a role in the growth of a stronger teacher-student relationship due to the smaller class sizes (Martineau & Bakopoulou, 2024). Teachers who engaged in online instruction during the pandemic reported stronger teacher-student relationships when they demonstrated respect, were responsive to students' needs, and communicated emotional support (Li et al, 2023). The attention that the students received allowed them to receive the necessary support, which resulted in improved behavior and increased levels of engagement (Martineau & Bakopoulou, 2024).

Impact on Adolescents

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected adolescents on multiple levels. They faced drastic changes in their daily lives, including being worried about family members, as well as not having many opportunities to be with their friends and peers (Viner et al., 2022).

Adolescence refers to when young people develop their identity, personality, peer relationships, and behavioral issues (Branje & Morris, 2021). Young people from low socioeconomic status environments (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022) during the pandemic suffered more frequently from anxiety, depression, stress (Viner et al., 2022), family and financial loss.

A significant number of adolescents struggled to establish and sustain relationships with other family members, friends, and peers. Due to the lack of social connection, these adolescents

missed the opportunity to continue regulating their emotions (Branje & Morris, 2021). Decreased peer interaction and isolation disrupted social development, contributing to socio-emotional challenges (Espinoza & Hernandez, 2021). As a result of the lockdown of all activities, including schools, youth programs, and recreational spaces, every essential support structure and safe environment was removed for adolescents (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022).

Behavioral Issues

Over the last ten years, various studies have investigated behavioral patterns and social struggles and have highlighted a negative association between behavioral challenges and children's social-emotional skills (Hukkelberg et al., 2019). Behavioral issues refer to those patterns of behavior that are disruptive, inappropriate, or challenging in school. Some behaviors may interfere with learning and/or relationships (Lane et al., 2025). Behavioral issues can be classified as external (e.g., aggression, noncompliance, disrespect) or internal (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) (Lane et al., 2025).

Post-COVID children's negative social behavior included disrespecting their parents, watching adult videos, and increased bullying (Marlina et al., 2022). Some changes teachers observed in their students were that students forgot how to communicate effectively, work with others, and be empathetic (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Students behaved in disrespectful ways by frequently talking during class time, moving around the classroom without permission, and throwing objects (Ashraf et al., 2024).

Increased behavior issues in the classroom, post-pandemic, were quite challenging for teachers and other students. When a teacher was unable to complete a lesson due to interruptions, they were forced to stop teaching to speak with the child who created the issue, which interfered with other children's learning time (Meinokat & Wagner, 2024). Teachers also revised their

lesson plans to accommodate the learning loss. Clear rules and expectations were set by teachers in order to prevent undesired behaviors and were intentional and attentive to students (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022).

A lack of urgency also exists among students; they were moving more slowly to complete tasks and assignments, and an activity that should take 10 minutes now takes 30 minutes (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). If negative behaviors are not addressed or social skills remain underdeveloped, children may encounter obstacles in forming relationships, achieving academic success, maintaining mental well-being, and developing into successful adults (Jones et al., 2015). Children need to develop cooperation and communication skills, responsibility, teamwork, and collaboration at an early age (Calhoun et al., 2020). Working together for a shared goal will help children follow the rules, show respect, build confidence, develop trust, and learn patience. Once these skills develop at an early age, they will become permanent and lasting traits that enable children to become successful adults (Marlina et al., 2022).

Social Isolation

Due to the pandemic, children of all ages were not permitted to interact with their families, friends, and peers face-to-face, and this affected their social and emotional behaviors (Viner et al., 2022). Because of their lack of interaction with others, children were unable to communicate regularly, self-regulate, practice teamwork, and demonstrate curiosity (Watts & Pattnaik, 2022). If children cannot receive sufficient support from home or school, their social development may be severely impacted (Günindi, 2022). Children interacting with their peers will allow them to express themselves and navigate social situations (Günindi, 2022).

Children ages 4-8 (Pre-K to 2nd grade) who were isolated and unable to interact with peers struggled to develop healthy relationships, identify and manage emotions, work in teams,

and demonstrate curiosity (Timmons et al., 2021). When children fail to develop supportive and healthy relationships, they may become more prone to aggression and exhibit disruptive behavior toward their peers (Sørli et al., 2021). Peer interaction plays an essential role in early childhood, as it helps to enhance a child's social-emotional growth (Oppermann et al., 2024).

When students returned to in-person schooling in Delaware, some were still in isolation; they were required to wear masks, and their desks had plastic shields separating them from their classmates and teachers. The desks also had to be 3 feet apart (Delaware Department of Education, 2022). Man was created to be a social being; isolation can lead to anxiety, depression, and health issues. A void of human interactions or prolonged isolation can lead to loneliness, physical health issues, and psychiatric symptoms (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020).

Benefits of SEL

Students will be taught a plethora of skills, including, but not limited to (a) demonstrating empathy and showing compassion for others, (b) communicating effectively and collaborating, (c) identifying and managing their emotions and problem-solving, (d) having a growth mindset and identifying solutions for personal problems (CASEL, 2023). In the classroom, students and teachers can create supportive and healthy relationships; students will learn to trust their teachers and seek help when necessary (Humphries et al., 2018). Implementing SEL in schools will significantly improve students' academic success, reduce behavioral issues, create a supportive learning environment, and promote social development (Ibarra, 2023).

Incorporating SEL skills in the classroom environment encourages emotional safety, boosts student engagement (Sandilos et al., 2023), and enables students to show courage while enabling teachers to meet their students' emotional and developmental needs (Ibarra, 2023). Creating and establishing SEL in schools helps to support students' focus on identifying and

solving problems, reflecting on their role in promoting personal, family, and community well-being (Cojocaru, 2023). Students proficient in SEL skills were actively engaged in learning, built positive, supportive relationships with peers, and demonstrated motivation and perseverance to achieve their goals despite any challenges (Ibarra, 2023).

One significant benefit would be that the teacher-student relationship would change. When teachers implemented SEL skills in the classroom, students were more likely to feel positive and confident about themselves and emotionally supported (Gee, 2023). In contrast, the teachers will become more empathetic to their students' needs (Sandilos et al., 2022). SEL plays a critical role in allowing teachers to build positive, supportive relationships with students and plays a significant role in preventing disciplinary incidents and conflicts (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Teachers who incorporate SEL in their classrooms take proactive steps to assist their students holistically to support the whole child (Germinaro et al., 2022). Once teachers receive training, they can integrate SEL into academic instruction (Taylor & Lein, 2023) and should be aware of their students' unique needs and be able to support their students accordingly (Mahoney et al., 2021). They should also foster a kind, welcoming, and pleasant classroom where students feel loved, safe, and motivated to learn, build healthy relationships, and strengthen their interpersonal/social skills (Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2021).

SEL skills will also help students' mental health by promoting a positive school climate. In addition, these skill sets will aid self-efficacy and reduce behavioral issues (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). The SEL skills that students acquire will help them in school, at home, and in the community (CASEL, 2023). By managing their emotions, children will be able to reduce their stress levels and persevere in any challenge (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Self-awareness is also essential for children to understand their thoughts, feelings, and others, so that they will be able to determine how to be empathetic to their teachers and peers (Beelmann & Lösel, 2021). Also, they will learn from their teacher that having a growth mindset will be of great benefit to them. Learning SEL skills can lead to positive behavior, mental health, and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2015). SEL increases students' learning capacity, positive attitude, and prosocial behaviors (Kim et al., 2024).

School leaders believe that students who were taught SEL skills will become better citizens and be better prepared for higher education and the workforce (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). A good citizen shows respect and responsibility, helps to resolve conflicts (Soheili et al., 2015), and acts ethically. School leaders with SEL skills and knowledge will want the best for their staff and students, and their beliefs will be crucial to shaping the culture in the school (Bailey & Weiner, 2022). If school leaders respond favorably to the implementation of SEL, they will support the teachers by providing professional development and policies that will be sustainable for all staff members (Mahoney et al., 2021). School leaders should encourage collaboration amongst their staff, those who will contribute to the school's vision. The implementation of SEL programs may be helpful to school leaders in reducing absenteeism, bullying, and suspension (Richerme, 2021).

When school leaders provide teachers with instructions, set clear goals and expectations for SEL implementation (Ibarra, 2023), and provide the necessary resources, lessons, and curriculum (Mahoney et al., 2021), it will help alleviate any burden on the teachers. School leaders should offer ongoing opportunities for support and training, build stronger lines of communication with teachers, and gather input and feedback regarding their understanding of SEL. They should also have teachers and staff members evaluate their SEL skills to ensure their

ability to model the SEL skills behavior for students effectively and incorporate said skills in their daily lives (Ibarra, 2023). When teachers, school leaders, and administrators collaborate, shared leadership and decision-making support students' academic achievement and social, emotional, and career development (Khan et al., 2021).

Strategies Teachers are Utilizing

One strategy that teachers were utilizing was mindfulness. It involves being intentional or paying attention to the present. Mindfulness can assist in supporting and encouraging students to foster social awareness of their peers, self-management, and self-awareness (Henriksen & Gruber, 2024). Teachers teach students calming techniques like mindfulness when upset to improve their mental well-being (Sapthiang et al., 2019). Mindfulness activities may include coloring, taking a walk using their five senses, or listening to music to assist students in collecting their thoughts and feelings and self-regulating (Henriksen & Gruber, 2024). Also, teaching mindfulness will help students focus and reduce disruptive behavior, aggression, and anxiety (Phan et al., 2022).

Teachers have modified their learning environment and teaching strategies to include the students actively. Some used cartoons and videos and even had the students lead the lessons to get motivated and to have student-student interactions (Jackaria, 2022). Teachers asked students what they wanted to learn, and by doing so, the students' voices were heard. Teachers actively invited the students to participate in the teaching and learning process. By actively communicating with students, teachers were building caring and supportive relationships and trustworthiness (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Teachers also had to set clear expectations and alter/adjust the rules for appropriate behavior in the classroom (Gee, 2023).

Another strategy teachers had been implementing was morning/evening meetings that would effectively assist in building a strong and caring community (Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). These meetings will be beneficial for learning social awareness and relationship skills (Kriete & Davis, 2014). For example, role-playing can address a conflict on the playground or in the lunchroom (Kriete & Davis, 2014). Leadership skills can be practiced in these settings as well.

During the morning meeting, which was held in a circle, the teacher and students greeted one another by saying good morning and addressing each other by name (Cornett & Quinn, 2022), followed by asking, “How are you feeling today?” With this morning greeting, students felt that they belonged and that their classmates cared about them and their feelings. When classmates converse by asking how they are feeling, based on their demeanor response, the teacher can perceive whether a student was emotionally unprepared or not feeling up to par to face the day. It was within the classroom that students began to form a foundation of trust (Holzer & Daumiller, 2025).

A third strategy teachers used was sharing and telling stories; students became acquainted with their classmates, grew familiar with one another, and realized they had something in common, which helped to build a positive classroom culture (Ibarra, 2023). Students shared stories about their families, culture, and customs. Storytelling falls into three SEL competencies: (a) relationship skills, (b) social awareness, and (c) self-awareness. By developing these skills, students will be better prepared to form and maintain healthy, supportive, and positive relationships with others (Ahmed et al., 2020).

They will also show concern and empathy for their peers and be able to identify their own emotions (Ibarra, 2023). Adding journaling to storytelling time can increase students' awareness

of themselves (Levine et al., 2023). Some students were better at writing their thoughts rather than speaking out loud. For the younger students, it would be more beneficial for the teachers to have them draw a picture to express their feelings.

SEL and Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted children's social development, resulting in noticeable deficits in their social skills (Ward, 2022), as well as a rise in classroom behavioral challenges (Patnaik et al., 2022). However, the impact was not experienced uniformly across all student populations (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022). It is important for school leaders and educators to focus intentionally on diversity, equity, and inclusion to address the decline of social skills and manage behavioral concerns in post-pandemic classrooms (Kennedy, 2019).

Integrating diverse perspectives and experiences into the SEL curriculum and providing differentiated support can encourage students to rebuild essential social skills.

Equity encourages and advocates for unbiased treatment and fairness to all. Equity considers the unusual conditions of an individual and adjusts treatment accordingly so that the result will be equal (Ballin, 2022). Diversity is the existence of differences that include race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, and age (Espelage et al., 2022).

Inclusion is the result of diverse individuals feeling accepted and welcomed (Owens & Browne, 2021). Teaching SEL skills and providing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) tools to children will be beneficial to them. Once educators learn the DEI tools, they can educate/instruct the children to apply them in the classroom (Mak & Therriault, 2021). When SEL and DEI are implemented effectively, they help create a more inclusive and supportive environment where inequalities are actively addressed and eliminated (Mak & Therriault, 2021).

Learning Disability

Children suffering from a learning disorder struggle in one or more areas of learning, even when their psychological capacity is not affected or impeded. They may have difficulty completing simple tasks, using their hands, writing letters backward, understanding what is read, or understanding simple math problems (Visser et al., 2022). A student who would sometimes get distraught and flip desks and chairs over in the classroom would benefit from learning SEL skills; the skills that would be taught: (a) Self-awareness, which is how to identify one's emotions. (b) Self-management: to help manage the student's emotions. (c) Social awareness would teach the student to be empathetic with teachers and classmates and acknowledge them as a support system (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Over time, as students acquire the necessary SEL competencies, teachers may observe a decline in behavioral issues and an increase in prosocial behaviors, enabling students to overcome various challenges (Low et al., 2019). Specific instructions and strategies will be helpful/ necessary for the student to be successful in the classroom and at home. One negative aspect of receiving the necessary support is that the student may become angry, depressed, and defensive, comparing themselves to classmates who do not receive similar attention. SEL skills can help to lower negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression (Hagarty & Morgan, 2020).

Obesity

In the United States, obesity rates have tripled for children in the last 40 years (Schultz & Rosen, 2022). It is believed that obese children suffer from low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, and struggle socially and emotionally (Harrist et al., 2016). Due to these children's eating habits and lack of exercise, they might be labeled "different." The SEL skills that can support this

group include: (a) relationship skills: By learning these skills, the students can develop positive relationships and seek help from teachers or peers when needed. (b) Self-awareness: Students who suffer from obesity may develop other interests to find confidence and a sense of purpose if they find a friend. (c) Self-management: Learning these skills will develop self-control, motivation, and discipline.

Socioeconomic Status

Students in this category can be susceptible/vulnerable to emotional and behavioral issues (Kim et al., 2023). They may also be stressed because of their constant need for essentials that will enable them to survive. The five core SEL competencies can be utilized with this group. (a) Social awareness: Students will be able to recognize resources and accept support. (b) Relationship skills: may develop positive relationships and ask for help. (c) In responsible decision-making, the student may consider or contemplate their role in promoting personal and family well-being. (d) Self-management skills will help students alleviate stress, manage their emotions, and set goals. (e) Self-awareness will aid the student's growth mindset (Mahoney et al., 2021), displaying and demonstrating honesty.

Teachers should utilize SEL skills to elicit and build on students' strengths to promote understanding and learning. They should listen and be appreciative of each student's experience and personal stories. Teaching SEL skills and providing EDI tools to students will be beneficial to them (Varner, 2022). Establishing healthy positive relationships will also benefit students with a learning disability (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2020; Lombardi et al., 2016), obesity, and socioeconomic groups. These groups are perfect candidates for social-emotional learning skills. When in school, these diverse individuals want and should be included in the classroom and outdoor activities. School may be the only place they can be themselves.

Problems and Challenges in School

If school leaders fail to support or train educators, the students may not receive the much-needed assistance required to succeed (Stickle et al., 2019). The lack of adequate teacher training presents a challenge for effective SEL implementation (Oliveira et al., 2021). Teachers with adequate training can implement the SEL programs effectively in their classrooms.

Teachers' acceptance of a SEL program was crucial to successful implementations (Humphries et al., 2018). Preschool teachers may struggle with students and need an all-inclusive SEL program that develops social skills, manages emotions, and problem-solving (Steed et al., 2022). School leaders should understand preschool education and the necessity to include SEL for early childhood; there may be less teacher turnover (Steed et al., 2022).

Another challenge would be teachers needing additional time (Hunter et al., 2022) for SEL implementation. Teachers are responsible for delivering core subjects instruction daily (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). They face significant pressure to ensure students acquire basic knowledge in core subjects such as ELA, math, science, and social studies (Dyson et al., 2023). For the SEL program to be successful, teachers need adequate training, resources, and support from school leaders (Steed et al., 2022).

SEL is a critical component for a young child (Stefan et al., 2022). It helps to build a positive relationship with teachers and peers and encourages problem-solving. Practicing SEL school-wide provides the students with an outlet to use their learned skills, for example, in the playground and lunchroom (Steed et al., 2022). If teachers did not receive adequate training (Jones et al., 2017), that would be a challenge for schools. Teachers lacking training would not be able to teach or demonstrate to students what SEL skills entail (Duane et al., 2025).

They would be unqualified to teach students how to control their emotions; the students would continue to be disruptive in class.

A further concern was teachers' difficulty in integrating SEL lessons into the traditional core subjects (Jones et al., 2017). Teachers are stressed, burned out (Pietarinen et al., 2021), and unwilling to learn new concepts; hours spent creating lesson plans on core subjects, and creating lesson plans for SEL would be an additional burden in their limited timetable. They feel unsupported (Duane et al., 2025) by school leaders due to insufficient curricular materials and instructional resources.

Students who have not mastered SEL skills may not want to collaborate with peers in the classroom and may be unable to manage their emotions (Khalid & Pope, 2024), identify emotions, or develop stress management skills. These students may also be disruptive in class because of their challenging behavior and inability to empathize with their classmates. SEL not taught in the classroom may decrease academic performance (Ibarra, 2023).

Federal Policies

Per CASEL (2017), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015, advocates for school leaders to develop plans to assist and address school climate. ESSA also allows schools to create policies to strengthen students' motivation and allow them to remain connected with the school (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Schools can now create a positive learning environment to assist students in feeling comfortable, supported emotionally, academically, and physically (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

ESSA requires each state to develop and maintain a reliable system that encourages SEL, school climate, and student academic achievement (Eklund et al., 2018). SEL outcomes can be used to indicate student success if implemented successfully. Title IV in the ESSA supports SEL.

Even though Title IV is non-academic, it does support activities that can assist students in building supportive and healthy relationships, having a growth mindset, managing their emotions, learning to make responsible decisions, and showing concern for others (Richerme, 2021).

State Policies

The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) supports CASEL's development of SEL and is committed to promoting SEL in its schools from Pre-K to 12 (DDOE, 2017). Delaware's climate policies include (a) the use of funding resources to promote a safe and healthy school environment, (b) partnering with communities to promote anti-bullying awareness, and (c) providing state-wide professional development opportunities. Due to the federal (ESSA) flexibility, Delaware can create and design the educational outcomes it deems successful for all students. They believe that all schools benefit from continuous improvement, which includes SEL. Delaware has long-term goals that remain aggressive but attainable by all students.

One of the most important goals is for all students to succeed academically; students may be from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English learners, or with disabilities (DDOE, 2017). The state has decided on a new set of core standards to assist all students in succeeding. Another goal for Delaware is to have productive and meaningful family engagement guidelines in and out of school. When school staff and families collaborate, they reinforce the students' SEL (CASEL, 2023). Communication between teachers and families will help build better partnerships, allowing teachers to be aware of cultural differences and examine any prejudices and biases.

Ethical Assurances

Prior to data collection, National University Institutional Review Board approved the research. There were no risks to the participants. The study followed the principles outlined in

The Belmont Report (1979). The researcher adhered to the core ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons (informed consent) - participants were given adequate information about the study, including any risks and benefits, and consent must be voluntary. Beneficence (risk-benefit assessment) – I mitigated harm and maximized potential benefits. Justice- (fair subject selection), participants were selected fairly, and no vulnerable subjects (children, economically disadvantaged, or institutionalized individuals) were included. Their information was kept confidential and protected. I continually reflected on my thoughts and feelings while journaling to ensure there were no biases and that positionality did not influence me when working with the participants.

Summary

In summary, the goal of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine the challenges and strategies teachers face in the wake of the pandemic, including the loss of social-emotional learning skills and the increase in behavioral issues in schools. This section reviewed pertinent/relevant studies to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's social-emotional learning and behavior. This section defined social-emotional learning (SEL) and discussed its impact on children. This section also described the five core competencies of SEL and the conceptual framework utilized to organize and guide the research. Social-emotional learning encompasses a range of skills, including self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). SEL enhances students' learning capacity, fosters a positive attitude, and promotes prosocial behaviors while alleviating emotional distress (Steed et al., 2021).

The literature review also addressed children's social and emotional development. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted children's social and emotional development,

leading to a noticeable decline in social-emotional learning skills at home and school (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Research shows that extended periods of remote learning and limited peer interaction contributed to setbacks in students' ability to regulate emotions, resolve conflicts, and build positive relationships (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). Educators reported that children were unable to communicate effectively, self-regulate, practice teamwork, and demonstrate curiosity (Günindi, 2022).

The benefits of SEL include helping children manage stress and overcome challenges by regulating emotions (Weissberg et al., 2015). Other benefits include students and teachers creating healthy, supportive relationships in the classroom and students seeking help when necessary (Humphries et al., 2018). For students to flourish, they need to be educated with the essential skills that will enable them to develop socially and emotionally (Dyson et al., 2023). Social-emotional learning plays a crucial role in children's development. School-aged children who obtain SEL skills are more likely to lead fulfilled lives.

Section 2: Methodology and Design

The problem addressed in this study was the growing challenge that teachers in the K-12 classrooms were experiencing in response to students' loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they experienced resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on how educators supported children in acquiring SEL skills within the northeastern region of Delaware. This study aimed to address the loss of social and emotional skills following the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1:

How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic?

RQ2:

How are teachers addressing the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom environment?

RQ3:

What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic?

This section outlines the methodology and research design employed to address the three research questions, along with the justification for selecting a qualitative descriptive design. The discussion also includes the population and sample, the materials/instrumentation used, the

procedures for data collection and analysis, and concludes with the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. A description of the semi-structured interview guide will be given.

The results supported school districts in developing and formalizing strategies that assisted educators in minimizing challenges and addressing the lack of social-emotional skills and the increased behavioral issues. Implementing SEL programs significantly minimized students' emotional and behavioral issues and maximized their social and emotional skills, positive behavior, mental well-being, and academic achievement (Bergin et al., 2024).

Design and Method

The methodology used for this study was a qualitative descriptive case study. Qualitative methodology was chosen because it helped gain in-depth perspectives and a deeper understanding of real-world occurrences through detailed stories shared by participants about the social phenomenon (Yin, 2017). It provided a reflection of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of their experiences (Rogo, 2024). The case study provided a more descriptive and detailed account of a specific group or situation and answers “why, what, and how” (Bloomberg, 2023; Stake, 2009).

Qualitative research does not measure experiences numerically; instead, it relies on language to investigate and examine participants' viewpoints, emotions, perspectives, and opinions. The researcher will listen to the participants' voices and watch their facial expressions and body language (Bloomberg, 2023). Quantitative research relies on numerical data and seeks to answer questions such as “how much, how many/often, and what?” (Chalmers & Cowdell, 2021). The location or site of qualitative research is commonly situated in the natural surroundings of the participants (Salkind, 2010).

Utilizing a descriptive case study design allowed participants to provide detailed accounts of their real-life experiences (Bloomberg, 2023). The methods used to collect the data were (a) interviews and (b) a focus group. A case study approach is particularly suited for fields such as education, social services, and health care (Yin, 2017), where in-depth data can offer valuable insights to inform and enhance professional practice (Bloomberg, 2023).

Case studies fall into four categories: (a) descriptive, which allows the researcher to examine a phenomenon experienced by the participants. (b) Exploratory, this type of study assists in formulation and refining questions when little is known about the topic (Yin, 2017); (c) intrinsic; used when there are no predefined expectations, and the researcher's goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the case (Bloomberg, 2023); and (d) instrumental, case study aimed to inform understanding of a broader issue, using the selected case as a means to gain deeper insights into the broader topic (Bloomberg, 2023).

In case study research, data collection methods depend on interactions between the researcher and participants, which are collected in real time (Crowe et al., 2011). This study utilized a descriptive case study design, which allowed the collection of data through various qualitative methods until saturation was achieved. Data for a case study may be taken from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and documents (Bloomberg, 2023).

There are several types of qualitative research designs that would not be acceptable or appropriate for answering the research questions. First is phenomenology, which focuses on individuals who have lived the experience that is being studied to better understand the core or common meaning of their experiences (Bloomberg, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss

of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another design that would not be appropriate is Ethnography, as it describes, examines, and explains a culture's customs, routines, and behavior patterns (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). Finally, action research seeks to solve issues within a family, community, or work lives of the participants, who actively collaborate with the researcher to promote positive changes (Bloomberg, 2023).

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of elementary and secondary teachers (K-12th) grades employed in multiple public schools in the northeast region of Delaware. These schools are located in three school districts: Brandywine, Christiana, and Red Clay. Teachers who were selected were those who interacted directly with students and who had experienced significant disruptions in social-emotional development during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on this population, the study aimed to explore how teachers perceive, address, and support students' social-emotional needs while balancing the demands of academic instruction. This population was particularly relevant to the study because these educators worked closely with students daily and were responsible for implementing social-emotional learning practices in their classrooms. Their experiences and perspectives provided critical insight into the challenges and strategies supporting students' social-emotional development in post-pandemic classrooms (CASEL, 2023).

The inclusion criteria for participating in this study were as follows: teachers (a) who taught 2 years before and 2 years after the pandemic; (b) employed in a Delaware school district and an elementary or secondary school teacher; and (c) who have implemented SEL interventions or strategies in their classrooms. The exclusion criteria include teachers who have not received SEL training or who did not meet the other inclusion criteria. If participants did not

meet these criteria, appropriate alternatives to the inclusion and exclusion criteria were considered (Vai et al., 2023).

The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) has been endorsing SEL to help address students' social and emotional challenges and behavioral needs. They offer schools SEL toolkits that include resources to improve students' social-emotional and behavioral health (DDOE, 2025). That said, it was imperative to identify the SEL strategies that were most effective in helping students in the K-12 environment (Greenberg, 2023).

From this larger population, a purposeful sample of 8-10 teachers was recruited to participate in the study. Participants included educators from both elementary and secondary schools, with varying teaching experiences and years of service. Purposeful sampling determined the specific attributes/characteristics the researcher sought (Henry, 2008). The other sampling methods for this research were non-probability snowball and convenience sampling: Participants were selected based on availability or convenience (Daniel, 2012). Data gathered from participants provided rich, detailed content and an in-depth understanding of where the participants have experienced the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In qualitative research, data saturation typically occurs when the information collected is sufficient to allow replication of the study and no additional themes or insights emerge from further data collection (Bloomberg, 2023; Guest et al., 2006). The sample size for this study was determined based on the needs of a qualitative descriptive case study design and the timeframe for the study. The sample included teachers across grade levels to ensure diverse perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By incorporating variation among participants, the study captured a broad range of teachers' experiences (Koslouski et al., 2024).

Materials/Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this qualitative study consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit stories, in-depth, unique, vivid answers, and opinions from participants (Bloomberg, 2023; Kallio et al., 2016). Questions were structured to capture teachers' perspectives on the loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, their challenges in addressing these gaps, and the strategies they employed to integrate SEL into classroom instruction. There were follow-up questions if necessary. Asking follow-up questions would provide in-depth explanations and meanings (Yin, 2017) and acquire valid and pertinent information (Kallio et al., 2016). Interview questions were aligned with the research questions. Before the interviews were conducted, a field study was conducted with 3-5 experts to ensure the questions were valid and clear (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were recorded to accurately represent participants' responses, and there was an opportunity for member checking (Ahmed, 2024).

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and for engaging with participants through interviews, observations, and direct interaction to gain an understanding of their experiences (Bloomberg, 2023). As instruments, researchers will be cautious about their position in the research, which may lead to positionality. A researcher's positionality may influence and shape the research process and findings (Goundar, 2025).

The interview guide was organized into three sections. The first section included demographic questions to collect background information about participants. The second section consisted of 10 questions specifically designed to address the study's research questions. The third section included questions aimed at exploring the strategies and interventions that teachers employed in their classrooms to mitigate students' loss of social skills.

Positionality refers to a person's social identities, such as race, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and how they view the world (Bloomberg, 2023; Holmes, 2020). Awareness of biases, perceptions, and assumptions was maintained throughout the research process; This reflects reflexivity, an ongoing process of examining and acknowledging potential bias and recognizing how they may impact the research (Bloomberg, 2023). A journal was maintained from the inception of the research to record all questions, thoughts, perceptions, and points of view (Bloomberg, 2023).

Through interviews, detailed information, perspectives, feelings, and thoughts were gathered from participants in their own words, while rapport was simultaneously developed (Ahmed, 2024). Participants may be more inclined to share their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and points of view when a respectful, safe, and comfortable environment is established before and during the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

This study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews and a focus group to collect information, thoughts, perspectives, and feelings from elementary and secondary school teachers who have utilized SEL strategies and interventions in their classrooms. In the semi-structured interview, questions were broad and open-ended (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), related to the study's research questions, but not necessarily predetermined. Questions were asked based on the tone and direction of the conversation with the participants (Bloomberg, 2023).

Data Collection and Analysis

Before data collection began, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB's role was to ensure that all research involving human participants complies with ethical guidelines and protects the rights and well-being of all participants (Sonne et al., 2018). After approval was granted, participant recruitment began. Educators were contacted via email to

seek their participation in a semi-structured interview to be conducted via Zoom. An email explaining the study and an informed consent form were sent for teachers to review. Teachers were selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and their willingness to participate. This process continued until the sample size was reached.

One of the most frequently used and popular approaches in qualitative research is the use of the interview for gathering rich, descriptive data (Bloomberg, 2023). In qualitative research, interviews are categorized into three formats/protocols: (a) structured protocols, a set of questions prepared in advance and administered to each participant. This protocol minimizes the interaction between the researcher and the participant. (b) Unstructured protocols: questions that are not planned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and (c) semi-structured protocols: questions that are related to the research but not necessarily predetermined (Kallio et al., 2016), allowing the researcher to explore topics that may surface during the interview process. Questions fall between structured and unstructured protocols and allow some flexibility (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data were collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Using multiple methods to collect data ensures data saturation and triangulation (Bloomberg, 2023). Interviewing is important when a researcher is unable to observe the feelings and behavior of participants in action. It is necessary for a researcher to interview since they are interested in past events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Triangulation refers to a strategy that incorporates multiple methods and sources to examine and explore the researcher's questions, which will strengthen the credibility of the findings (Bloomberg, 2023). By using multiple methods and sources to substantiate findings, the researcher may minimize the risk of bias from any single source (Ahmed, 2024). In this study,

triangulation was used to corroborate findings and assess the validity of the data (Amankwaa, 2016). The data sources that were triangulated were the one-on-one semi-structured interviews, from the purposeful sampling of teachers, and a focus group.

A safe and comfortable environment was intentionally created before, during, and after the interview (Bloomberg, 2023). The purpose of the interview was defined for the participant, and participants were asked if there were any questions or concerns before the interview started (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Ethical guidelines were followed to protect participants from harm.

Data analysis organized all valuable information collected from participants, offering readers a clear understanding of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data analysis strategy used in this research was the thematic analysis (TA). In (TA), the data were scrutinized to identify recurring themes and patterns, which were then highlighted (Bloomberg, 2023). The themes were then coded manually, and with the assistance of a software program.

In 2006, Braun and Clarke reawakened interest in thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke established a structured six-step method for conducting thematic analysis. The six steps in the thematic process include: (a) being familiar with the data, (b) identifying initial codes, (c) developing thematic patterns, (d) evaluating potential themes, (e) recognizing and labelling themes, and (f) creating the final report (Byrne, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021). Utilizing thematic analysis will provide: (a) a framework for managing and organizing large amounts of data, and (b) enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data, recognizing patterns, and extracting detailed information (Bloomberg, 2023).

The coding process involves three phases/stages: (a) Open coding, the initial analysis stage, in which data were broken into smaller, more manageable sections to identify themes or patterns. Open coding was based on participants' responses and was free of researcher bias

(Blair, 2015; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). (b) Axial coding focuses on exploring and identifying relationships between the different codes. (c) The third and final phase was selective coding, which entails integrating all the categories created by refining all essential codes. This phase distinguishes between the codes and identifies a key category (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Open coding identifies initial concepts or themes within the data; axial coding explores the relationships among these categories; and selective coding refines the findings until a central theme is identified (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Throughout the study, the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were preserved. No personally identifiable information will be included in the results (Bloomberg, 2023), as confidentiality was essential to protecting participants' rights (Cheah & Piasecki, 2020). To ensure anonymity, all data were coded, and teachers' names were replaced with unique codes used consistently throughout the interview process. The data collected was securely stored in a password-protected electronic file accessible only to me. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Both manual and software-assisted coding methods were utilized to analyze the collected data. NVivo 15, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, allows the import and upload of data from multiple sources, which may include audio and video recordings, text documents, and images (Xie et al., 2024). NVivo assisted in organizing and managing data and the coding process by categorizing and identifying themes and patterns from the data (Xie et al., 2024). Manual coding, conducted entirely by hand, involves transcribing the interview data and highlighting any recurring themes/patterns, or codes (Bloomberg, 2023). The study sample of

teachers were recruited through school websites that include K-12 educators who taught in the 2 years preceding the pandemic and in the 2 years following.

Assumptions

This study was based on several assumptions. First, it was assumed that the participants, elementary and secondary school teachers, would respond honestly to the interview questions. Second, it was assumed that participants had provided authentic accounts of their experiences rather than embellishing the success of their implementation strategies to demonstrate effectiveness. However, it was acknowledged that some teachers may enhance their descriptions of students' SEL outcomes to portray their approaches more favorably. Third, it was assumed that teachers openly shared their experiences regarding the implementation of SEL strategies in their classrooms. Finally, it was assumed that the semi-structured interview questions were appropriately designed to elicit information relevant to the challenges that teachers in K–12 classrooms faced in response to the loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills among students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

Limitations refer to the aspects of a research study that the researcher cannot influence, and they may affect the study's outcome (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One limitation of this study was the small sample of educators willing to participate in the research. Teachers are extremely busy and sometimes overwhelmed with their jobs (Oo et al., 2021). To mitigate this limitation, the participants were provided with the interview questions in advance to help them prepare their responses and reduce potential anxiety associated with the interview process.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries or conscious decisions that the researcher sets (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The delimitations of this study included the sample size, the time frame for data collection, and the decision to limit participation to three school districts. Only teachers currently employed in a Delaware school district who were willing to participate and had implemented at least one SEL strategy since COVID-19 were included. Additionally, the study population consisted of elementary and secondary teachers who had been actively teaching for two years before and two years following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

This section described the research design and method, the population and sample, data collection, and the analysis that were used to answer the three research questions. A qualitative descriptive case study was used. The study focused on challenges teachers were experiencing with the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The population of this study consisted of elementary and secondary teachers from school districts in the northeastern region of Delaware. Data collection did not begin until the IRB approval was received. Finally, the section concluded with a discussion of the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic not only altered students' learning globally by switching to online learning but also affected their Social and Emotional Learning. The problem addressed in this qualitative study was the growing challenge that teachers in the K-12 classroom were experiencing in response to students' loss of social-emotional learning skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). It was imperative to investigate whether teachers had observed changes in students' social skills upon their return to in-person learning after the pandemic (Brockmeier et al., 2024), as well as to examine how they perceived and compared students' interactions across the pre- and post-pandemic periods. Furthermore, it was necessary to examine the availability and implementation of school-wide initiatives designed to support teachers in addressing the loss of social-emotional learning within the classroom environment. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in the K-12 classroom to support the restoration of SEL competencies among children and address the loss of social and emotional skills.

This section includes a discussion of the study's findings and the participants' demographic information. This section also addresses the four criteria for trustworthiness and provides an evaluation of the study's outcome. Additionally, implications of the findings, recommendations for further research, and the conclusion are presented.

Limitations

Research limitations refer to the weaknesses of a study that are beyond the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018) and may influence the interpretation and validity of the findings. There were two limitations to this research. The first limitation pertains to the time frame in which the data collection occurred. Given that six years have passed since the onset of

the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' perceptions may have shifted, potentially diverging from those that would have emerged had the study been conducted closer to the event. The second limitation was the relatively small sample size compared to the number of teachers affected by the pandemic worldwide. As a result of this limitation, achieving data saturation required a participant's range of 9 to 16 individuals (Hennink et al., 2017).

Limitations for this study included a small sample size of 12 educators from respective school districts in Delaware. Participation was open to elementary and secondary school teachers who were currently employed at specific locations. Participation was voluntary, and participants who volunteered needed to be available for an in-depth interview. The recruitment process was conducted between October 15th and December 9th. Prior to the scheduled interviews, participants were provided with the interview questions to review. This enabled them to prepare their responses in advance.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies and interventions utilized by K-12 teachers to address students' loss of social-emotional learning skills. The findings addressed the growing challenges that teachers face in the classroom due to the decline of SEL skills. Findings revealed that although social-emotional learning difficulties were present before the pandemic, participants perceived a substantial decline in students' social skills, accompanied by an increase in behavioral challenges. Participants described utilizing a range of traditional and emerging strategies and interventions to address students' diminished or underdeveloped social skills. The findings and themes that emerged from the data were supported by the participants' perspectives and illustrative excerpts and were aligned with the

CASEL conceptual framework. The findings are organized according to the study’s three research questions.

Participant Demographics

The study consisted of 12 educators, comprising 9 elementary and 3 secondary educators. The participants were from several different schools in Delaware, and their teaching years ranged from 6 to 40 years. Nine participants took part in the individual semi-structured interviews, and three participated in the focus groups. Table 1 displays participant demographics and the pseudonyms assigned to protect participants’ anonymity. Color identifiers were used to distinguish individual participants, and the focus group was labeled as “FG” with a corresponding color code. The study participants represented a diverse range of races and ethnicities.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Total years teaching	Subject (s) taught	Grade (s) taught
Gray	8	English, math, science, social studies	2 nd
Burgandy	24	English Language Arts (ELA)	9 th -12 th
Purple	20	SPED math/reading/social science/foundational skills	3 rd - 4 th
Red	10	English, math, science, social studies	3 rd
Blue	23	English, math, science, social studies	Kinder
Rainbow	6	English Language Arts	K-8 th
Orange	16	ELA, reading, writing, math, science, social studies, SEL	2 nd
Pink	17	English, math, science, social studies	5 th
Royal Blue	40	SPED ELA	9 th
FG Purple	20	Bible, ELA, math, science, social studies	6 th -7 th
FG Navy Blue	8	Bible, ELA, math, science, social studies	1 st
FG Green	25	Bible, ELA, math, science, social studies	Pre-K – 5 th

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants via email from several schools in the northeastern region of Delaware to participate in the interview. Fifteen educators who met the criteria were contacted to participate in the semi-structured interview; however, of the 15 who were contacted, only 9 agreed to participate. All participants received a consent letter via email to sign and return. After receiving the consent letter, participants were asked about their availability for an interview.

Zoom interviews were scheduled. On the day of each interview, the consent form was reviewed with each participant, and verbal consent was obtained. All interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. Transcripts were shared with participants for review to ensure accuracy; however, only five of the nine participants provided feedback.

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2025. Each interview followed a similar interview protocol (see Appendix D). Each participant was given a chance to answer the questions without interruption. Participants who participated in the semi-structured interview responded to 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix E). Each question was read as written to ensure consistency across participants (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022). Consistent with a semi-structured interview approach, follow-up and probing questions were utilized as needed to clarify responses and encourage participants to elaborate on their perspectives (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The interviews lasted between 18 and 49 minutes. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

The focus group took place in December 2025 and consisted of three participants, following a similar protocol to the interviews. The group was asked to respond to 11 open-ended

questions (see Appendix F). The session lasted 54 minutes. Table 2 shows the recording time, transcript length of each interview, and the focus group:

Table 2

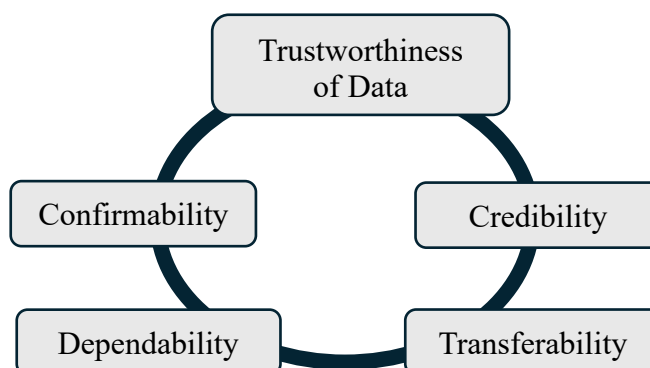
Interview and Focus Group Transcript Information

Participant	Length of Interview (mins)	Number of pages in Transcript
Gray	48:49	15
Burgandy	27:22	10
Purple	25:47	11
Red	25:37	12
Blue	24:19	13
Rainbow	18:45	10
Orange	20:38	12
Pink	19:54	10
Royal Blue	41:19	27
Focus Group	54:00	20

Each transcript was saved as an individual Word document, resulting in a total of 140 pages of data. The transcripts were carefully examined through repeated, line-by-line readings (Blair, 2015; Bloomberg, 2023; Chenail, 2012) to become thoroughly familiar with the data prior to analysis. Following this familiarization phase, open coding and axial coding were conducted using a combination of manual coding procedures and NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software.

Figure 2

Trustworthiness of the Data



In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the certainty that the findings authentically represent participants' experiences and were not shaped by the researchers' biases. There are four criteria of trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020): credibility, which can be described as the accuracy of the findings. Did the researcher accurately represent the participants' experiences? (Amankwaa, 2016; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). Dependability refers to the reliability of the results in different conditions. Can the findings be replicated? (Bloomberg, 2023).

Confirmability ensures that the findings reflect participants' perspectives rather than being influenced by the researcher's bias (Amankwaa, 2016; Bloomberg, 2023). Lastly, transferability addresses whether the findings can be applied or be applicable in other settings (Amankwaa, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Various strategies may be implemented to strengthen the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings to reflect on their responses (Amankwaa, 2016). Trustworthiness was an integral part of the research process.

Credibility

Credibility reflects the accuracy of the findings and the extent to which participants' perspectives and experiences were accurately represented by the researcher (Amankwaa, 2016; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). Prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking were utilized to enhance the credibility of the findings. Spending extended time with participants helped build trust, allowing for a clearer understanding of their perspectives, feelings, and beliefs through active listening and open communication (Ahmed, 2024). Member checking was conducted by providing participants with the transcript of their interviews to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations, ensuring that their perspectives were represented authentically (Ahmed, 2024; Bloomberg, 2023).

The process was completed via email. Within two days of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their responses and make any necessary corrections. Five of the nine participants responded that everything looked good. Credibility was further strengthened through data triangulation, achieved by using multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews and a focus group. The repeated collection and analysis of data from varied sources supported the identification of consistent patterns and themes (Stahl & King, 2020).

Transferability

One strategy utilized to enhance transferability was thick description, which provided detailed and descriptive information from the interviews to capture participants' perspectives and offer insight into the impact of students' social-emotional learning loss following the COVID-19 pandemic. Open-ended questions that encouraged detailed responses were asked, and thick description allowed the identification of themes from these responses (Amankwaa, 2016; Bloomberg, 2023). Transferability refers to the extent to which researchers in similar situations may apply the study's procedures and obtain comparable findings (Ahmed, 2024). Thick descriptions allow the researcher to tell a story; therefore, one-word answers from participants would not suffice (Amankwaa, 2016). Providing the necessary details in a research paper will give readers the information necessary to help them understand the research process.

Dependability

One strategy that may have been utilized to support dependability was an audit trail (Ahmed, 2024). An audit trail maintains a record of all the research analyses, challenges, changes, decisions, findings, and questions that have been recorded since the inception of the research process. The audit trail provides transparency throughout the research process and was continuous; if another researcher wishes to replicate the research, they can follow the outline in

the audit trail (Bloomberg, 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure dependability and enhance the credibility of the study, a field test was conducted (Kallio et al., 2016) of the interview questions prior to data collection. Feedback from the field test was incorporated into the final version of the interview protocol to minimize potential researcher bias. These steps helped to establish the reliability and consistency of the data collection process.

Confirmability

One strategy for confirmability was reflexive journaling, which should begin at the start of the research project. Journaling should include all the questions, feelings, expectations, doubts, biases, highlights, challenges, analyses, reflections, and themes (Amankwaa, 2016). Maintaining a journal helps to monitor evolving thoughts. This strategy provides the perception of the researcher's judgments that will contribute to the confirmability of the findings. This study used triangulation in data collection and incorporated member checking of interview transcripts to strengthen the accuracy and credibility of its findings. For research to be credible, the findings, conclusions, and analysis should be based on the data provided, not the consequences of the researcher's biases (Ahmed, 2024).

Presentations of the Findings

After receiving approval from National University IRB on October 13th, 2025, this qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and a focus group. The primary sources of data were interviews and a focus group, which were used to collect participants' perspectives on the strategies and resources they used in the classroom to address the loss of social skills following the pandemic. An interview protocol served as the format for both the individual interviews and the focus group. There were 10 questions for the individual interviews.

The first three questions focused on changes in students' well-being following the pandemic, exploring teachers' perceptions of changes in students' social skills and interactions after returning to in-person learning, including comparisons to pre-pandemic behaviors. The remaining seven questions focused on instructional strategies, interventions, and systems of support for addressing SEL needs. They examined the challenges teachers face in developing students' social-emotional skills, the implementation of school-wide programs, the effectiveness of various approaches, teachers' recommendations for ideal SEL support systems, and behavioral difficulties observed in students.

The focus group interview consisted of 11 questions and three focus areas: changes in students' social-emotional skills, instructional strategies and support systems, and recommendations for enhancing SEL support. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach, Braun and Clarke's six-step process. The six steps were familiarization, developing initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, labeling themes, and creating a report (Byrne, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

In the first step, the interview transcripts were read, reviewed, and revisited multiple times to become familiar with the data prior to coding (Bloomberg, 2023). During this phase, key passages in the transcripts were highlighted and underlined, and margin notes were recorded to capture initial observations, reflections, and potential patterns. Open codes were then created and applied using a line-by-line coding process (Blair, 2015).

In the second step, initial coding (open coding) began with a large volume of data related to the interview questions. This process involved breaking the data into smaller, more manageable units to identify meaningful patterns and ideas (Bloomberg, 2023). Open, inductive

coding was derived directly from participants' responses, ensuring the analysis reflected their perspectives. The coding process was conducted without bias (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019), contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Both manual and software-assisted coding methods were used to develop and refine codes. Each code was assigned a brief description and then organized into preliminary categories aligned with the three research questions.

In the third step, the coded data were examined to identify similarities and relationships among codes. Codes with related meanings were grouped to form potential themes, allowing broader patterns to emerge across participants' responses. The fourth step involved reviewing and refining the preliminary themes to ensure accuracy and represented both the coded data and the overall dataset. Themes were evaluated for consistency and uniqueness, and adjustments were made to ensure strong alignment with the research questions. In the fifth step, themes were carefully defined and named, with descriptions refined to articulate the meaning and significance of participants' experiences clearly.

The final step involved integrating the findings into a well-structured summary, with themes supported by representative data excerpts that reflected participants' perspectives and substantiated their responses to the research questions. Table 3 illustrates the alignment of themes with research questions. The semi-structured interviews and the focus group were two sources that were utilized to develop themes.

The emerging themes reflected a focus on the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) within the K-12 classroom. Six themes emerged in response to three research questions. Direct quotes from the participants support each of the themes. By reading the transcripts, words and phrases repeated by multiple participants were highlighted.

Table 3*Alignment of Themes with Research Question*

Research Question	Theme(s) used to address the question
RQ1. How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic?	Theme 1. Disruption in Social Interaction and Peer Engagement. Theme 2. Increased Emotional Difficulties and Challenges with Self-Regulation.
RQ2. How are teachers addressing the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom environment?	Theme 3. Intentional School-Wide and Classroom-Based Supports for SEL. Theme 4. Relationship Centered Classroom Practices.
RQ3. What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic?	Theme 5. Relational and Hands-On SEL Activities. Theme 6. Collaborative Support to Rebuild Social Emotional Skills.

Presentation of Findings**Research Question 1**

How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic? After participants' responses were coded and categorized, two themes emerged to address this research question.

Theme 1. Disruption in Social Interaction and Peer Engagement.

Teachers described the challenges they faced with students who were reluctant to engage in face-to-face interactions, because students were increasingly dependent on their devices. Overall, these disruptions suggest that extended periods of isolation and virtual learning contributed to a decline in students' interpersonal skills and social competence, requiring intentional support to rebuild healthy social interactions in the classroom. Participant Rainbow states, "Students are more isolated after the pandemic, some form of social anxiety, and a lot of

redirecting and encouragement. Before the pandemic, they were seeking peer relationships and connections.” Red: “Now they do not know how to have a conversation – have huge meltdowns.” Purple: “Students are still struggling with not being able to work with each other, conflict resolution, interacting with each other, they are more connected to social media- devices- are not playing with each other.” Burgundy: “Students were still disconnected. Always on their devices, and now saying I can do it by myself, withdrawal, no big crowds, no joining of clubs, sports, or organizations.” Royal Blue stated: “Students were self-absorbed, do not want to talk to other people, and are always on their devices. They were very angry.”

Gray: “After the pandemic, they no longer liked the close proximity.” Orange: “There was a lack of empathy, I think, because everyone's wrapped up in what they want and how they feel. Kids are so inattentive or dysregulated that they cannot access what I am trying to show them or teach them.” FG Purple: “They do not want to mingle with certain students; they do not want to have a relationship with certain students.: They just want to keep themselves apart and work independently. There was more anxiety, more stress, more selfishness.”

Teachers observed that many students were reluctant to engage in face-to-face interactions and increasingly relied on their devices for social interaction. Participants highlighted signs of social withdrawal, self-absorption, and emotional distress, including anxiety and frustration. For example, one teacher noted that students previously sought peer connections but now required frequent encouragement and redirection, while others described students avoiding crowds and clubs, hence struggling to interact appropriately with peers. These observations suggest a need for intentional support to rebuild healthy social interactions and peer engagement in the classroom.

Theme 2. Increased Emotional Difficulties and Challenges with Self-Regulation.

Teachers observed that many students exhibited increased frustration, anger, and anxiety, along with a low tolerance for delays, changes in routine, or unmet expectations. These emotional challenges were often evident in behaviors such as aggression, withdrawal, difficulty sustaining attention, and struggles with self-management in the classroom. Overall, these observations suggest that students' ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors was diminished, highlighting the need for targeted strategies and support to strengthen emotional self-regulation and coping skills.

Blue commented, "They were not able to manage their behaviors of getting in line, or any transitions, or sitting on the carpet, just moving from their desk to the carpet. It was always a struggle, a push, a fight, you are in my spot. Lots of screaming and lots of tantrums, wanting to be first, wanting to have something now." Rainbow said, "Students had a hard time processing and navigating their emotions." Red: "I see a lot of meltdowns; students do not have the ability to express how they feel. Stomping, banging on desks, crying, I am not talking, like, little sniffle crying, I am talking about, uncontrollable, inconsolable, crying, and yelling."

Purple: "My kids already have dysregulation issues, low tolerance, having to wait, not getting their own way. Upset if not helped right away, or changes in the schedule." FG Green: "They will make a comment about something, and they do not shift it through their brains first, or their mind first, they will just blurt it out to get a reaction." FG Purple agrees with FG Green and comments: "They are not able to control impulses, like they impulsively say something, and they do not care for the reaction of the other student; they are only thinking about themselves."

Together, these themes demonstrate that the social and emotional challenges students were experiencing were deeply interconnected, affecting both peer engagement and emotional

regulation. The findings highlight the crucial need for targeted classroom strategies, school-wide support, and intentional interventions to help students rebuild their social competencies and manage emotions effectively. Addressing these challenges was essential for fostering a positive learning environment and promoting overall student well-being.

Research Question 2

How are teachers addressing the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom environment? Following the analysis of participants' responses, two themes emerged that address this research question and are discussed below.

Theme 3. Intentional School-Wide and Classroom-Based Supports for Social Emotional Learning

To address the loss of social-emotional learning skills following the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described relying on a combination of classroom-based instruction and school-wide supports, including collaboration with school counselors and student support services. Participants emphasized that these school-wide supports played a critical role in reinforcing SEL practices and addressing students' emotional and behavioral needs. Together, these efforts allowed teachers to address gaps resulting from pandemic-related disruptions and strengthen students' social-emotional development.

Gray stated, "We have a special each week called PLS (Personal Life Skills) that teaches SEL skills. It teaches the students how to navigate the different emotions, unpack some things that are in their lives, and conflict resolutions." Royal Blue: "There is behavioral assistance when needed/necessary. Counseling with counselors. We have PD and are given resources that will help students."

Pink: “We started implementing restorative practices, classroom agreements, teacher to student, student to teacher, students to students, student to classroom. If the students notice that I am not doing what I promised to do. They can say, Mrs. Pink, you said you would do this, but you did not do this, and I could be the one to apologize, and I never have a problem apologizing to my students or showing them that I made an error, because I want them to know that it is okay to make an error.” Burgundy: “Once a month, we address social-emotional needs with lessons from Character Strong. They are targeted where we address bullying, or maybe relationships.”

Participants reported implementing classroom-based support, including morning meetings, restorative conversations, reflective activities, and clearly established expectations. Red: “During our morning meeting, we do a lot of relationship building and restorative practices proactively and reactively as well.” Pink: “I definitely agree with continuing the restorative practices, and in my classroom, I do journals. So, every single morning, there is a different social-emotionally driven journal. They cannot get it wrong; it is their own opinion.”

FG Purple: “So we kind of do a reflective journaling each day.” Royal Blue: “One of the strategies that I do is establishing clear expectations.” Purple: “We go over the agenda, we set the tone for the day, what the expectations are, if there are any changes in the schedule, I let them know then so that they know what to expect for the day.” Students were also requesting a restorative circle. Pink: “They will say, can we do a restorative circle?”

Two of the nine participants reported that teachers may need an occasional “reset” as a form of self-regulation. Participants described these moments as allowing educators to pause, manage their emotional responses, before responding to students or classroom situations. These practices were described as strategies that participants had utilized in their own classrooms and would recommend to other teachers. Participants indicated that this approach involved teachers

acknowledging their own emotions and demonstrating self-regulation strategies in real-time. Rainbow stated, “I would encourage the teacher to do a reset themselves when overwhelmed or frustrated, because I think teachers also have SEL concerns.” Red similarly shared, “I modeled that for them, because I’ll tell you, Ms. Red is frustrated—I need a minute in a calm-down corner myself.”

In addition to direct instruction, participants highlighted the importance of building and maintaining a supportive classroom environment through relationship-building. They described how intentional interactions, such as checking in with students and responding to their individual needs, helped create trust. Relationship-centered practices supported students’ social and emotional growth, reinforced positive behaviors, and enhanced engagement, emphasizing the value of ongoing, relationship-focused classroom efforts.

Theme 4. Relationship Centered Classroom Practices

Teachers intentionally implemented strategies to build trust, respect, and positive connections with students, creating a supportive and safe classroom environment that fosters social-emotional growth. Relationship-centered practices included restorative conversations, structured interactions, and consistent communication, all designed to strengthen teacher–student relationships and create a classroom culture where students feel valued and supported. These practices also provided a foundation for students’ social-emotional development, including the ability to manage emotions and interact positively with peers and adults.

Participants, including those in the focus group, emphasized that building positive relationships with students was a primary priority in their work. Teachers described relationship-building as essential for fostering trust, engaging students authentically, and supporting their

social-emotional and academic development. Participant Red stated, “Relationship building builds trust, your authentic self, trumps curriculum, and know your students (demographic).”

Another participant, Burgundy, reflected, “I think it is the relationship building that relational capacity piece of it. Like, trying to engage students, helping them understand that the teacher-student relationship is real.” Other participants shared similar perspectives. Pink said, “Children have the same type of feelings that we do, so you have to build the relationships in order to reach the goal that you are looking for.” Royal Blue: “I establish that it is my routine, then I build a positive relationship with the students. I do a one-on-one with the kids, group projects, and I actually play games with my kids, Monopoly, and Connect.”

Focus group participants reinforced this priority, with statements such as FG Green: “Relationship skills are probably the top one for me.” And FG Navy Blue: “My number one is building healthy relationships.” FG Purple: “Their self-management is what I think is more important, and also relationship skills.” Two participants also noted the connection between strong relationships and academic success, explaining that students need emotional support to engage effectively in learning.

Burgundy: “In our building, we particularly look at relationship building over academics first, even if a kid is failing, it is about, where are they emotionally? Because if they are not there emotionally, they will not be able to perform academically.” Rainbow emphasized, “Academics are important, but it does not matter how well your system is set up for academics. If the SEL component is missing, you are never going to get to the academics, because you are always going to have behavioral and emotional challenges that are getting in the way.” Overall, participants highlighted that relationship-centered practices were foundational for creating

classrooms where students feel valued, supported, and able to grow both socially and academically.

In summary, themes 3 and 4 highlighted teachers' intentional approaches to supporting students' social-emotional development. Educators implemented both school-wide and classroom-based supports to teach SEL competencies, while simultaneously fostering relationship-centered practices and emotion regulation strategies. Daily routines, calm-down spaces, brain breaks, reflective activities, morning meetings, and consistent expectations were among the strategies used to promote self-awareness, self-management, and positive teacher–student relationships. Collectively, these efforts created safe and supportive classroom environments that fostered social-emotional growth, enabling students to develop the skills necessary to navigate their emotions and interactions effectively.

Research Question 3

What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic?

Theme 5. Relational and Hands-On SEL Activities

Participants reported that relational and hands-on SEL activities emphasized active engagement and learning through social interactions, reinforcing relationship skills in the classroom. In alignment with Delaware state mandates requiring SEL instruction, teachers noted that school districts provided multiple resources to support implementation efforts. Participants referenced the use of district-adopted frameworks, strategies, and programs, as well as locally developed supports. Within this context, teachers described implementing relational and hands-on SEL practices such as individualized one-on-one interactions, small-group instruction, and

collaborative learning experiences to support the development of relationship skills, self-awareness, and communication.

Participants described a variety of strategies and programs used in their classrooms to support social-emotional learning. Orange referenced school-wide language and tiered Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) support: Orange: “Second Step, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), tier 1 (a set of expectations) common school-wide language 3 to be (responsible, respectful, and safe).” Rainbow emphasized the importance of the strategies she implemented, describing their role in supporting students across multiple levels of need:

Rainbow: “MTSS, Check-in, Check-out person, having a mentor, an adult with whom the child has a relationship, and one-on-one counseling. SOLER – for students on the spectrum. Different tiers to help the students, meet them where they are.”

Purple described the use of district and community supports: Purple: “Second Step and Center for Child Development (CCD). The 2nd Step has a curriculum by grade, which deals with SEL. The lessons are diverse, encompassing conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and decision-making. CCD is a counseling organization; if students need additional counseling, parents give their consent so that their child can see these outside counselors.” Blue shared classroom-level strategies focused on both teacher and student regulation: Blue: “2nd Step, Spot of feelings for Kinders. Mindfulness practices, brain breaks, Responsive Classroom, and a cool-down corner, for when the teacher and students are feeling upset.”

Red described specific programs and restorative practices used in her classroom: Red: “Second step geared towards SEL (growth mindset, how the brain works, problem solving) – Restorative practices.” Pink emphasized relational and peer-focused practices: “Circles, huddles, and class conversation. A teacher or trusted adult will help in settling their differences if a student

calls for a circle.” Gray noted counseling supports provided by school staff: Gray: “We also have a school counselor who does one-on-one sessions with students.”

Two participants from the focus group described strategies they utilized to support students’ social-emotional skills. FG Purple explained a combination of games, journaling, and partner activities: FG Purple: “There’s a game called Would You Rather, so that is the game that we play, would you rather do this or that? We are doing journaling on how they feel, what their emotions are that day, and doing a group activity with a partner.” Navy Blue described strategies focused on gratitude and peer encouragement: Navy Blue: “Giving post-it notes and having them write little encouragement notes, and give them to each other, as well as write down things that we were thankful for. At least once or twice a week.”

Theme 6. Collaborative Support to Rebuild Social Emotional Skills

Participants described an ideal SEL support system as one that was relationship-focused, embedded in the classroom, and supported by schools, families, and the broader community. They emphasized that SEL should not be separate from academics but rather be integrated into daily classroom practices, with clear guidance and resources provided for teachers. Many participants highlighted the importance of trusted adults, SEL coaches, and organized frameworks to provide consistent support for students’ social-emotional growth. Family engagement and community involvement were also considered essential. Participants suggested workshops, family nights, and community-based programs to reinforce SEL strategies at home and in safe social environments.

Participants suggested that if they could design an ideal SEL support system, this is what it would look like: Gray: “Create or design a rubric by grade of what students should learn by stages about SEL. The rubric will help us determine where we want the children to be and how to

support those who are struggling. Prioritize mental health.” Orange: “Every building should have an SEL coach at the local level, someone who understands the building's needs.” Burgundy: “Start off with something fun. Connection before content. Meeting kids where they are, building a relationship.” Red: “It would not be curriculum-based. It would serve as a guide for teachers to implement in the classroom, connected to academic content. Coaching for teachers.”

Blue: “It would look like the 2nd Step, Responsive Classroom, until Maslow’s basic needs are met. Executive function skills are necessary for the future (self-control, time-management, and regulating emotions) & focus.” Pink: “Every student in a school has a trusted adult to whom they can talk. Even if it's just to say good morning and give a side hug. Touch base.” Purple: “It would focus on the person as part of the community, emphasizing their role as a citizen. How can it be applied to the bigger picture?” Rainbow: “Positive behavior intervention. A token economy – giving rewards incrementally, demonstrating certain skills.” Royal Blue: “My classroom would be set up like my home. Everyone would be welcomed in, and it would be warm. You would be loved 100%. You would be fed, clothed, and safe.”

Participants also emphasized that parental involvement was critical for reinforcing SEL and social skill development: Gray: “If parents have the same buy-in of how conflict resolution is helpful. If a child sees their parents modeling what they learn in school, that may solidify how they should navigate the world. Offer workshops for parents who need to speak with a therapist.” Red: “Parent engagement and involvement – better supports and resources tailored towards specific demographics. Support from the administration for teachers and staff.” Orange: “Community nights with families, explaining the 2nd Step curriculum. The school should talk to families and explain that what is being done in school can be done in the home.”

Burgundy: “Parents are not 100% involved; that is something that needs improvement.” Blue: “Being consistent, parents have changed. In the past, the school counselors would conduct the Love and Logic program. After the pandemic, parents have given up, and children have become more needy.” Pink: “Parents and school need to be true partners in education. Teachers got the parents back; now the parents need to have the teachers back.” Rainbow: “If parents implement strategies at home, and there is collaboration between home and school, we would see a lot more progress with students.” Royal Blue: “Family gathering at least once a month. More family-oriented programs. Togetherness, family needs to be more involved – engaged.”

In summary, Themes 5 and 6 highlighted the effective strategies that teachers used to help rebuild students’ social skills disrupted by the pandemic. Participants described a range of classroom- and school-based activities, interventions, and approaches designed to support social-emotional learning. Hands-on SEL strategies included collaborative and reflective exercises, as well as peer-to-peer engagement. Participants also emphasized that support beyond the school setting was essential, noting that collaboration with families and community resources was critical to strengthening students’ social and emotional development.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The conceptual framework that was utilized for this qualitative descriptive case study was social and emotional learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) established this framework, which was crucial to the research and provided the lens for examining social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL consists

of five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023; Kasper & Massey, 2023).

This discussion was organized around the study's research questions. For each question, the findings—represented by the identified themes—were analyzed in relation to the study's problem and purpose. Relevant literature was incorporated to connect the findings to prior research and to compare them with the themes associated with each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on how teachers described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skills development. The findings used to address this question highlighted participants' observations of significant disruptions in students' social interactions, relationship skills, self-awareness, and self-management. These challenges emerged as a result of extended periods of social isolation and changes in the learning environment.

There was a decrease in social skills among children without technology, who had no interactions with their peers, could not complete their schoolwork, and had no extracurricular activities (Hernandez & Jabbari, 2022). Some changes teachers observed in their students were that students forgot how to communicate effectively, work with others, and be empathetic (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Also, students behaved in disrespectful ways by frequently talking during class time, moving around the classroom without permission, and throwing objects (Ashraf et al., 2024). Children ages 4-8 (Pre-K to 2nd grade) who were isolated and unable to interact with peers struggled to develop healthy relationships, identify and manage emotions, work in teams, and demonstrate curiosity (Timmons et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted children's social development, resulting in noticeable deficits in their social skills (Ward, 2022), as well as a rise in classroom

behavioral challenges (Patnaik et al., 2022). Decreased peer interaction and isolation disrupted social development, contributing to socio-emotional challenges (Espinoza & Hernandez, 2021). This aligns with the existing literature, which indicates that upon the children's return to school, teachers realized that some lacked social and emotional skills (Aksoy, 2020).

The findings addressed the study's problem and purpose by exploring teachers' descriptions of the post-COVID-19 pandemic's impact on students' social-emotional skill development. The findings in this study were consistent with the research, and participants' responses indicated that there was an impact on students' social skills development post-pandemic. As a result of the pandemic and the decreased time spent in school and a social environment, children were unable to connect with peers, which contributed to developmental delays, especially in managing their emotions and cognitive development (Spronz et al., 2024). Teachers encountered students who were socially unprepared (Jackaria, 2022).

As a result, many students experienced considerable challenges with social interactions and self-regulation (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Per Gee (2023), there was a significant impact on students' behavior, the lack of engagement, and motivation. Participants shared the changes that they saw in their students when they returned to in-person learning after the pandemic.

Findings confirmed the relevant literature regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development after the pandemic. The closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many students experiencing disruptions in social skill development, which teachers are now addressing in their classrooms (Robbins & Cipollone, 2023). The pandemic had a significant negative impact on children's social skill development, academic progress, and behavior (Jackaria, 2022).

Participants noted significant changes in students' behavior, as well as reduced levels of engagement. Also, increased behavioral issues substantially impacted these children's learning and social-emotional development (Egan et al., 2021; Marlina et al., 2022). Blue stated, “Students are unable to manage their emotions, behavior – fighting, pushing.” Rainbow commented, “They have to unlearn the not-so-productive behaviors.” Royal Blue “Students had behavior issues because they were embarrassed.” The findings aligned with existing literature and were supported by participants who agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted students, highlighting the need for continued work on students’ SEL skills.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on how teachers were addressing the loss of social skills within the classroom environment. Findings related to this question highlighted the strategies and interventions educators were utilizing to support students’ social-emotional development, including intentional school-wide and classroom-based SEL supports. Relationship-centered classroom practices were essential, with teachers emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with students and peers to promote collaboration, engagement, and emotional growth. Teachers used cartoons and videos and even had the students lead the lessons to get motivated and to have student-student interactions (Jackaria, 2022). Peer interactions offer opportunities for children to deepen their social knowledge, learn and follow norms essential for effective interaction, and communicate respectfully (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021).

The findings used to address this research question focused on the approaches teachers were using in the classroom to assist students in rebuilding their SEL growth. The findings addressed the study’s problem and purpose by providing insights from the teachers into the

strategies being implemented in classroom settings. These strategies will help students to regulate and manage their emotions, build positive and lasting relationships with teachers and peers, as well as to enhance their social awareness. When teachers implemented SEL skills in the classroom, students were more likely to feel positive and confident about themselves and emotionally supported (Gee, 2023). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emphasizes preventative strategies by helping students develop self-awareness, regulate their emotions, and build positive relationships, thereby reducing the likelihood of behavioral issues (CASEL, 2023).

Participants provided feedback on the approaches that have worked well in their classrooms and or schools for building relationships and regulating emotions. Building peer relationships in her classroom, Rainbow commented: “icebreaker or small activities, playing games with kids who they did not know.” To build a positive relationship with students, one participant, Royal Blue, commented: “I do a one-on-one with the kids, and I do group projects.” SEL was critical in enabling teachers to build positive, supportive relationships with students, and also plays a significant role in preventing disciplinary incidents and conflicts (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). SEL was crucial in developing a strong relationship between adults and students, thereby promoting a supportive learning environment that facilitates academic achievement and personal growth beyond the classroom (Conner et al., 2023).

In addition, Royal Blue stated that games are used in her classroom to assist students in communicating with one another and to develop their thinking skills. Royal Blue: “We play games, and it gets them to communicate and learn how to talk to each other.” She also stated, “When you are playing a game, it makes you think. I have taught my kids how to play backgammon.” Given the importance of SEL, it was imperative that students in the K-12 environment acquire the skills to develop healthy, positive relationships (Mahoney et al., 2021),

communicate effectively (An et al., 2021), and manage and identify their emotions (Durlak et al., 2022).

Research Question 3

The third research question focuses on the strategies that teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills following the pandemic. Findings related to this question highlighted multiple strategies teachers were implementing in the classroom to support social-emotional development and strengthen students' relationship skills, self-management, social awareness, as well as to promote teachers' well-being. The findings addressed the study's problem and purpose by revealing that participants' classrooms and schools were equipped with multiple resources and curricula to facilitate the restoration of students' social skills affected by the pandemic.

Implementing SEL programs can significantly minimize students' emotional and behavioral issues, thereby maximizing their social and emotional skills, positive behavior, mental well-being, and academic achievement (Bergin et al., 2024). It was imperative to identify SEL strategies that were most effective in helping students in the K-12 environment (Greenberg, 2023). When implemented as designed, SEL programs are considered highly effective in promoting positive outcomes for children across various areas of development, including academic achievement, emotional regulation, and social competence (Calhoun et al., 2020).

The findings demonstrated that participants' strategies were effective in helping students develop social-emotional skills. Seven participants were regular education teachers, and two were special education teachers; their strategies varied, but they all wanted to help their students. Red (regular ed.) reported that one strategy that has worked well for her was morning meetings.

Red: “We do have morning meetings; we are required to implement 2nd step lessons that are geared towards social-emotional learning.”

Participant responses align with the previous literature. One strategy teachers have been implementing was morning/evening meetings that will effectively help in building a strong and caring community (Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). These meetings will be beneficial for learning social awareness and relationship skills (Kriete & Davis, 2014). Two participants, both general education teachers identified as Orange and Blue, reported incorporating mindfulness into their classroom strategies. Orange stated, “Alone, peaceful time, mindfulness—those kinds of things—so we have to give kids breaks.”

Similarly, Blue shared, “We do mindfulness practices and a lot of brain breaks.” These participants’ responses align with previous literature, indicating that mindfulness was a commonly used strategy among teachers, often used intentionally or to pay attention to the present. Teaching mindfulness will help students focus and reduce disruptive behavior, aggression, and anxiety (Phan et al., 2022). In addition, mindfulness can assist in supporting and encouraging students to foster social awareness of their peers, self-management, and self-awareness (Henriksen & Gruber, 2024). Teachers teach students calming techniques, such as mindfulness, when upset to improve their mental well-being (Sapthiang et al., 2019).

Pink identified the use of a teacher reset as an effective strategy, aligning with findings in previous literature. Teachers should address their own socioemotional needs in order to provide students with adequate support (Lyons et al., 2020). A coaching approach was designed and developed to assist teachers in increasing their use of SEL for their students as well as themselves. This coaching model helped teachers become more aware of their emotions, offered support, and enhanced their well-being (Stickle et al., 2019).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

For this study, four key implications were identified. The first emerged from the analysis of the conclusions drawn for each research question. The second relates to the limitations associated with the interpretation of the study's results. The third implication concerns the overall significance of the study. The fourth and final implication focuses on the findings and their practical application in educational settings.

The first research question asked: How do teachers describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social skill development following the pandemic? Findings from interviews with nine participants and a focus group consisting of three participants indicated consistently that teachers observed significant declines in students' social skills following the temporary school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants reported that students struggled with appropriate social interactions, emotional regulation, and communication, displayed lower levels of maturity, and were often averse to close physical proximity.

They further noted that many students were frequently on their devices, appeared socially disconnected, experienced intense emotional outbursts, increased anxiety, and demonstrated selfish behaviors. Challenging behaviors may originate from underdeveloped social skills. An early introduction of social skills has important implications, as it supports CASEL competencies, particularly relationship skills and self-management. Emphasizing these skills in early childhood settings can strengthen students' social-emotional foundations and promote positive classroom behavior, such as sharing, effective communication, following instructions, and taking turns (Aksoy, 2020).

The second research question was: How are teachers addressing the loss of social-emotional learning skills in the classroom environment? The main findings indicated that six of the nine participants and the focus group stated that, in their schools, structured, hands-on SEL programs have been beneficial for their students. One of the nine interview participants and all members of the focus group responded positively when discussing their SEL program, Harmony Academy, often smiling as they described its impact. Participants reported that, through the program, students were learning social-emotional skills, conflict-resolution strategies, and positive behavior skills, facilitated by the school counselor.

Seven of the nine participants, along with all members of the focus group, indicated that relationship-centered classroom practices were essential in addressing the loss of social skills, as they provide students with ongoing opportunities to strengthen communication, emotional regulation, and peer interaction skills. These practices align with the CASEL framework, particularly the competencies of relationship skills, self-management, and social awareness, which support students in rebuilding social-emotional competencies disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. All nine participants and the focus group emphasized that consistent parental engagement was crucial for students' success. They stressed that effective collaboration between parents and schools was essential to ensuring meaningful progress for students.

The third research question asked: What strategies do teachers find most effective in helping students rebuild social and interpersonal skills post-pandemic? Educators implemented a variety of intentional social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies to help students rebuild social skills, regulate emotions, and strengthen relationships. Findings revealed that all participants identified at least one effective strategy they would recommend to other teachers.

Participants consistently reported that effective strategies were grounded in intentional relationship-building, emphasizing that students' social and emotional growth depends on feeling safe, supported, and connected to adults and peers. Three participants reported that restorative and reflective practices, such as restorative circles, peace tables, and end-of-day reflections with opportunities for apologies, effectively fostered accountability, empathy, and relationship repair when implemented. Three participants highlighted emotional regulation supports, including calm-down corners, reset spaces, and check-in/check-out programs, combined with teacher modeling, as being effective for helping students manage emotions and reengage in learning and peer interactions.

Finally, three participants implemented strategies that prioritized student voice, engagement, and belonging, including buddy classrooms, daily morning greetings, and a consistent, positive adult presence, promoting strong classroom communities and supporting social-emotional development. Some strategies, such as restorative practices, brain breaks, and whole-group lessons, were effective for certain teachers but not for others. Because each student's needs are unique, teachers emphasized the importance of meeting students where they are.

Recommendations for Practice

The first recommendation was for teachers and parents to actively collaborate to support students' social and emotional learning (SEL). Parents and teachers play an important role in implementing SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). Schools should provide parents with strategies that can be implemented at home to reinforce SEL skills. This framework will enable parents and teachers to implement evidence-based SEL strategies that are most pertinent in the home and classroom (Greenberg et al., 2019).

Participants and the focus group also recommended increasing family engagement activities to encourage parental involvement and hosting community nights to explain the SEL curriculum, thereby helping parents support the development of their children's social and emotional skills at home. Another goal for Delaware is to have productive and meaningful family engagement guidelines in and out of schools. When school staff and families collaborate, they reinforce the students' SEL (CASEL, 2023).

The second recommendation was for schools to develop/design a framework to ensure that all students, staff, families, and volunteers use consistent social-emotional learning terminology throughout the school environment and at home. The framework would include coaching and mentoring programs for teachers and administrators. Participants noted that a structured guide or rubric could help support students who are struggling, and that administrators modeling consistent classroom practices would reinforce these strategies. By using shared language and aligned approaches across all settings, staff will be able to address students' needs more effectively, ensuring consistency whether challenges arise in or out of the classroom. This consistency can foster a positive school climate, enhance staff collaboration, and strengthen family engagement in supporting students' social-emotional development.

The third recommendation would be for school leaders to provide adequate training for teachers who may encounter students struggling with social issues and to hire additional school counselors. Participants suggested that teachers should undergo mandatory SEL training and be held more accountable. If school leaders fail to support or train educators, the students may not receive the much-needed assistance required to succeed (Stickle et al., 2019).

The lack of adequate teacher training presents a challenge for effective SEL implementation (Oliveira et al., 2021). Participants reported that repeatedly addressing student

behavior disrupts academic instruction and reduces the time available for teaching. Teachers are responsible for delivering instruction in core subjects daily (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). They are under significant pressure to ensure that students acquire basic knowledge in core subjects such as ELA, math, science, and social studies (Dyson et al., 2023). For the SEL program to be successful, teachers need adequate training, resources, and support from school leaders (Steed et al., 2022).

The fourth recommendation was for administrators to encourage teachers and staff to examine their personal biases and evaluate their own social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies. By strengthening their SEL skills, educators will be better equipped to model appropriate behaviors, enabling students to effectively incorporate these skills into their daily lives (Ibarra, 2023). Participants have identified the need for teachers to examine their biases and stereotypes. Other participants perceived that teachers in their building were not proactive in building relationships with their students. Building positive relationships with students fosters trust and supports the development of CASEL-aligned relationship skills, which are essential for social-emotional learning and academic success. By actively communicating with students, teachers are building caring and supportive relationships and trustworthiness (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research were proposed to further explore strategies for strengthening students' social-emotional learning. Future studies should include a larger sample and incorporate parents as participants to gain insight into the challenges they faced after the pandemic, particularly regarding students' loss of

social skills. Including family perspectives can offer valuable insights into the role of school–family partnerships in supporting students’ social-emotional development.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine and explore the strategies and interventions teachers were utilizing in K-12 classrooms due to the challenges they were experiencing resulting from the loss of students' social-emotional learning skills caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although several strategies were found to improve students’ social-emotional and behavioral outcomes, additional research may be needed to determine which approaches were most effective for strengthening SEL skills among elementary and secondary students. Understanding the most impactful strategies can help educators prioritize interventions that promote meaningful growth.

Future studies should use a longitudinal design with pre- and post-data collection to examine changes in students’ social-emotional learning over time and identify strategies that support sustained growth. This approach can provide insight into the long-term effects of SEL interventions on behavior, engagement, and academic outcomes.

Conclusions

The problem addressed in this qualitative descriptive case study was the growing challenge that teachers in the K-12 classrooms were experiencing in response to students’ loss of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study addressed the research problems, purpose, and questions by examining the strategies elementary and secondary teachers use in their classrooms to effectively address students’ loss of social skills in the post-pandemic period. Findings from this study confirm that teachers face ongoing challenges that are likely to persist if students’ social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, particularly CASEL-aligned

competencies such as relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, are not intentionally developed and supported through consistent classroom strategies.

On a daily basis, teachers implement SEL strategies to support students who are experiencing challenges with social interactions and relationships. Skura & Wheeler (2024) indicated that teachers are encountering higher rates of behavioral challenges, reduced student engagement, and difficulty maintaining positive classroom environments. Addressing this issue was essential for promoting healthy classroom communities and supporting students' holistic development in the post-pandemic era (van Rensburg et al., 2024).

The overall findings of this study suggest that teachers are using SEL strategies to help students rebuild social skills that were lost during the pandemic. It was also necessary for teachers to reflect on their own biases and evaluate their SEL competencies to ensure they are effectively supporting students. Collaboration between teachers and parents was essential for student success, and parents should be more engaged in their children's social-emotional development and learn SEL skills to reinforce growth at home. Additionally, school leaders should provide teachers with adequate SEL training that will allow them to model the five core competencies of SEL in the classroom, ultimately promoting students' overall development, well-being, and readiness to engage positively with peers.

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