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USING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING TO SUPPORT ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19: A CASE STUDY WITHIN BOONE
COUNTY SCHOOLS

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PIM 79 IELR

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute at Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

December 15, 2021

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List of Abbreviations

BCS: Boone County Schools

NAS: Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

SES: Socio-Economic Status

ACE: Adverse Childhood Experience

SEL: Social-Emotional Learning

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

ABSTRACT

The state of West Virginia has one of the highest national rates of childhood poverty, with 25% of WV children living in poverty as of 2018, and 20% of WV households experiencing food insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Boone County Schools (BCS) is located in southern WV and serves many students who must overcome the academic barriers of poverty, food insecurity, adverse experiences, the lasting effects of a regional opioid epidemic, and now the social, emotional, and academic challenges stemming from COVID-19. Research suggests that helping students in these demographics develop emotional intelligence promotes their academic and even lifelong success through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

SEL is a well-researched concept that, when implemented well, empowers students with skills, knowledge and opportunities to enhance their self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Decades of research have proven SEL provides numerous short- and long-term social, emotional, and academic benefits. However, the social, emotional, and academic challenges that have arisen from COVID-19 have created additional challenges students and educators everywhere. Therefore, in this study, I used qualitative research methods to analyze the SEL programs in place at the elementary level within Boone County Schools (BCS), and then created a list of recommendations for BCS as to how they can strengthen their SEL offerings to support students in the wake of the social, emotional, and academic challenges stemming from COVID-19 and virtual learning.

To learn about the current SEL offerings, how they have been affected by COVID-19, and how they could be strengthened, I relied on qualitative research methods and analyzed responses from anonymous surveys made available to all BCS elementary educators, and semi-structured interviews with four administrators within BCS. I also employed secondary data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education to examine socio-demographic and academic achievement data regarding BCS students.

The findings derived from these research methods showed a lack of consistency among schoolwide SEL programs, which contributes to lack of equitable access to traditional SEL for BCS students. Findings showed that while the majority of BCS educators have a desire to integrate SEL, they currently lack the appropriate resources to do so. Fifty percent of surveyed educators felt their students do not have the social-emotional support they need to be academically successful, and findings also revealed a parallel between the percentage of low-SES students and the percentage of students not achieving proficiency on their summative reading assessments. Finally, interview data yielded the realization of a gap in the *Handle with Care* program, which requires a collaborative effort between community stakeholders.

Ultimately, these findings inform BCS on the current standing of their SEL offerings as understood by educators and administrators. When utilized, this information can be used to meet the growing needs of a vulnerable population who must overcome a multitude of barriers as they strive for academic success.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, COVID-19, academic achievement, emotional intelligence

Introduction

As a West Virginia native and a professional educator specializing in Early Childhood Education, I have worked with elementary school-age students from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. For the last five years, I worked exclusively with the students of Boone County Schools (BCS), who represented an array of vulnerable populations. During my time as an educator with BCS, I worked with many students who were socio-economically disadvantaged; students who were being raised in foster care; students who faced food insecurity; students who had Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, meaning they were exposed to opioid drugs while they were in utero; students with families dealing with the fallout of substance abuse; and students lacking basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter). All of these experiences qualify as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatizing events endured between birth and the age of 17 that can have “lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, and opportunity” (Centers for Disease Control, 2020, para. 7). An abundance of research shows that poverty influences every component of child development, including emotions, behaviors, attitudes, and cognitive capacity. In a report entitled *Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma*, the National Education Association (2020) points out that “poverty’s impact on the brain is especially seen in the student’s executive function skills: attentional skills, working memory, ability to prioritize, and ability to self-regulate” (p. 12). As if this isn’t challenging enough, students from low socio-economic households are also exposed to fewer vocabulary words, fewer words of encouragement, and consistently enter school with a significant readiness gap compared to their peers from higher-income households (National Education Association, 2020).

A growing body of research shows an effective way to intervene for these students is to help them develop emotional intelligence through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

experiences. Working with these students presents challenges and rewards for both students and educators and is done most effectively when the educator has the training, resources, and support systems in place to identify and assist students with their respective academic, behavioral, emotional, and mental needs.

At the time of this study, Boone County Schools employed a total of nine certified counselors to support the staff and students at all 13 BCS locations, with three of those counselors sharing the responsibility of the six BCS elementary schools at the time of data collection. However, due to the high levels of poverty and adversity experienced by the majority of BCS students, these counselors are often redirected from planned small or whole group SEL instruction to meet individually with students experiencing trauma. While this shift in priority is certainly necessary, it has also left a gap in social-emotional learning experiences and knowledge for the students of BCS. Many classroom teachers do not have the training or resources necessary to implement consistent, effective SEL for their students, and despite grade-level standards being identified in BCS policies, there are no district-wide requirements for SEL to be implemented, tracked, or evaluated at any point in the academic year. In this IPIC, I will analyze the implementation of social-emotional learning practices within the elementary sector of BCS. The research questions guiding this study were: How is social-emotional learning implemented at the elementary level of the BCS system? How can these social-emotional learning practices be strengthened and utilized to support academic achievement in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

In this paper, I will first provide the background information necessary to familiarize readers with Boone County Schools (BCS), followed by a review of current literature integrated with applicable child development theories that make up the framework of this study. Next, I will address the research design, followed by a presentation of findings, and then recommendations for BCS derived from these findings. The findings and

recommendations will then be summarized into key takeaway points, and I will close with practical applicability and recommendations for further research.

Background

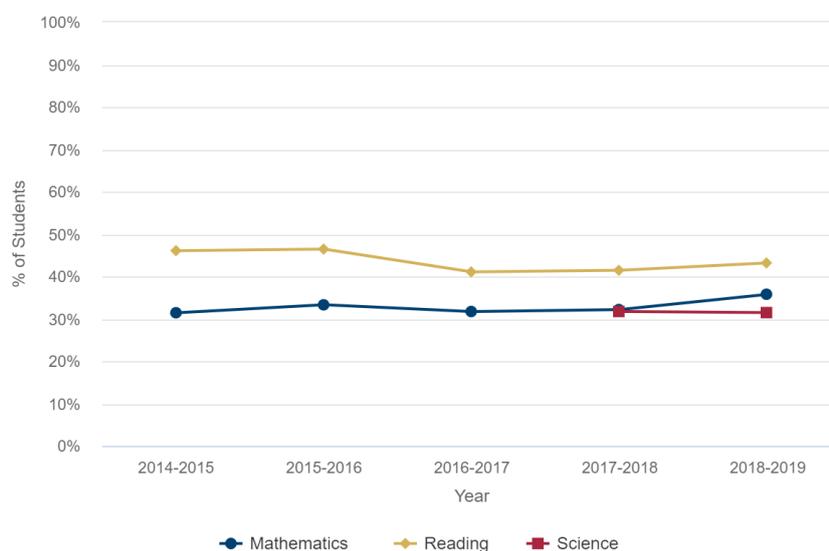
The state of West Virginia has some of the highest rates of childhood poverty in the United States, with 25% of children under the age of 18 living in poverty in 2018. Of those 86,713 children, 11%, or 9,538 children live in extreme poverty, meaning their household income is at no more than half of the poverty level (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). A closer examination of these statistics reveals that of the 25% of children living in poverty in West Virginia, 27% are under the age of six, 39% are Black, 22% are Hispanic, and 23% are White (Children's Defense Fund, 2020, p. 36). Additionally, a 2020 report from the Children's Defense Fund (2020) entitled *The State of America's Children* revealed that as of 2018, more than 20% of West Virginia households were food insecure, meaning they were "households with children that had difficulty meeting basic food needs for adults, children, or both" (p. 42). While no West Virginia school district can escape the challenges presented by poverty, some districts face these challenges more frequently than others due to their student demographics. Boone County Schools is one of these districts, as more than half of BCS students reside in low socio-economic status households. Currently, BCS serves 3,335 students, of which 98.6% are White, .005% are multi-racial, and .003% are Black or African American. Forty-seven percent of students are female, while 53% of students are male, and 18.6% of all students receive special education services. Most significant to this study is that 56% of BCS students reside in low socio-economic status homes (WV Department of Education, 2020).

Another challenge faced by BCS is the region's opioid epidemic, as it not only reinforces the poverty cycle, but burdens families, communities, and schools with short- and

long-term effects. A challenging condition of the opioid crisis in regards to the education system is the rise in the number of students entering the school system that have experienced Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), which is “a group of conditions caused when a baby withdraws from certain drugs (most often opioids) (s)he’s exposed to in the womb before birth” and can lead to “long-term health and development issues, including hearing and vision problems and problems with learning and behavior” (March of Dimes, 2020, para. 1). A 2017 report from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources identified the incidence rates of NAS in live births, of which Boone County had the fifth highest numbers in the state of West Virginia, with 7.24% of babies born with NAS in 2017.

The persistent socio-economic challenges facing BCS are reflected in the summative test scores of BCS students. In the 2014-2015 academic year 70% of BCS students did not achieve proficiency in Math, and 54% of BCS students did not achieve proficiency in Reading. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 64% of BCS students did not achieve proficiency in Math, and 57% of BCS students did not achieve proficiency in Reading. Science proficiency was measured for the first time in the 2017-2018 academic year and revealed 68% of BCS students were not proficient in Science. When Science proficiency was measured again in the 2018-2019, standardized academic achievement tests revealed 69% of BCS students had still not achieved proficiency (West Virginia Department Education, 2020).

Figure 1: BCS Summative Proficiency Score Trend



The percentage of students not achieving proficiency in core subjects is quite similar to the percentage of BCS students who are identified as low SES students. In 2014-2015, the percentage of low SES students enrolled in BCS skyrocketed from its previous percentage at 48% up to 100% of students. Currently, 56% of BCS students reside in households that live below the poverty line. While the decrease in the percentage of low-SES students is encouraging, WVDE data still shows a trend of more than half of all BCS students residing in low-SES homes.

Literature Review

Successful educators utilize pedagogy that is rooted in student development theories. There are a multitude of theories regarding how students learn, and how educators can use this knowledge to best serve their students. All state-approved teacher preparation programs in West Virginia require educators-in-training to complete courses focused on child development, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs is among the most studied. This will be the first theory discussed in this literature review to provide readers with a basic understanding of child development for elementary students. The second point of focus concerns the many effects of poverty on the education process, and the necessity of research-based pedagogical practices proven to successfully support students in poverty. Next, I will review literature that addresses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student development before introducing literature regarding social-emotional learning (SEL) and its many benefits.

Child Development

One cornerstone theory of child development is *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, a motivational psychology theory which was developed in 1943 by an American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow. In his work, Maslow identified and structured five categories of human

needs into a pyramid, in which “needs lower down must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up” (McLeod, 2020, para 2). Starting at the base of the pyramid and working up, Maslow identifies the following five categories: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Awareness of these needs and the order in which they should be met is a critical skill for educators, especially for educators working with students whose basic needs are not consistently met, as is the case with students in poverty. Maslow’s theory suggests that students who do not have basic (physiological) needs met such as shelter, clothing, warmth, food and drink, and adequate sleep will struggle to learn until those basic needs are met. Maslow considered physiological needs the most important, as the deprivation of these needs can negatively affect students’ academic performance, ability to concentrate, and can increase instances of behavior and discipline issues presented in the classroom setting (No Child Hungry, 2020).

Poverty and Cognitive Development

Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, and Pollack’s (2015) study investigated correlations between childhood poverty, brain development, and academic achievement by examining student scores on cognitive and academic achievement tests as well as scans of the brains of participants. The results of this study revealed that “poverty is tied to structural differences in several areas of the brain associated with school readiness skills, with the largest influence observed among children from the poorest households” (p. 823). The revelation of the physical changes made in the brain of a child in poverty is significant in the realm of child development, as it not only confirms the gap in cognitive abilities but offers one of the first explanations as to why this gap occurs.

Poverty and Academics

A vast number of studies identify a strong correlation between students in poverty and low academic achievement. Generally speaking, “standardized intelligence tests show a correlation between poverty and lower cognitive achievement, and low-SES kids often earn below-average scores in reading, math, and science and demonstrate poor writing skills” (Jenson, 2009, p. 32). In an effort to explore the exact correlations between poverty and academic achievement, a study by Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, and Pollack (2015) found that on average, “children from low-income households scored 4-7 points lower on standardized tests. As much as 20% of the gap in test scores could be explained by maturational lags in the frontal and temporal lobes” (p. 823).

Poverty and Mental Health

The Family Guidance Center for Behavioral Healthcare (2014) study revealed that “children who grow up at or below the poverty line are at triple the risk of developing a mental health disorder” (Family Guidance Center, 2014, para 1). The increased risk comes from an array of vulnerabilities that are associated with living in poverty: the lack of food, sleep, clothing, shelter, and safety during the developmental years of childhood can lead to physical, cognitive, and mental delays or struggles for children as they develop into adulthood. These vulnerabilities, when experienced, are often referred to as ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences. As a result of their economic circumstances, children in poverty are more likely to have these experiences in adversity, which can cause significant harm to the developing psyche of children (Family Guidance Center, 2014). Michelle Hughes and Whitney Tucker (2014) explore the connections between poverty and the occurrence of ACEs, and determine that “Being poor is associated with so many childhood adversities that it may be considered an ACE in itself, more pervasive and persistent than all others” (p. 124).

The National Center for Injury and Prevention and Control (2020) reminds readers that exposure, especially repeated exposure, to adverse experiences can lead to toxic stress, which “can change brain development and affect such things as attention, decision-making, learning, and response to stress” (para 9). Helping students navigate these circumstances and the resulting challenges requires a coordinated, purposeful implementation of strategically designed resources and support systems put and held in place by as many stakeholders as possible.

It should be considered that although many BCS students are directly affected by poverty, not all students come from households that exist in poverty. Though an argument could be made that these students are still indirectly affected by community and regional poverty, it is inarguable that something that has directly affected all BCS students is the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting school closures.

Effects of COVID-19

On Friday, March 13, 2020, at approximately 1:00 pm EST, West Virginia governor Jim Justice announced that all schools in West Virginia would be closed to students from Monday, March 18 until at least Friday, March 27, 2020, in an attempt to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The timing of this announcement gave most WV educators approximately 1.5-2 hours to make any possible preparations before the school day ended and students were sent home for the foreseeable future.

With in-person contact suddenly eliminated, “school” for elementary students now meant either completing a paper packet of assigned work or completing a digital checklist of activities designed to address the remaining academic standards for the year. Most BCS elementary students did not have their own electronic devices and required the assistance of their guardians to access and successfully complete their schoolwork. This education model

continued through the end of the 2020 – 2021 academic year. Statewide summative assessments were cancelled, given the inability to simultaneously create a secure testing environment and gather groups of students in a school building.

When school began in September 2020, students were welcomed back into BCS schools with new mask protocols, social distancing measures, desk shields, reduced class sizes, and a weekly schedule requiring 2 in-person learning days and 3 virtual learning days for all students. In BCS, students were divided into two groups (alphabetical by last name) and were permitted to attend school in-person only on certain days of the week. Group A attended school in-person on Mondays and Tuesdays, while Group B completed virtual learning. Both groups completed virtual learning on Wednesdays, which allowed the school building to be cleaned and sanitized before Group B arrived for in-person learning on Thursdays and Fridays (and Group A completed their virtual learning). This became known as the 2-1-2 schedule and remained in place until March 1, 2021.

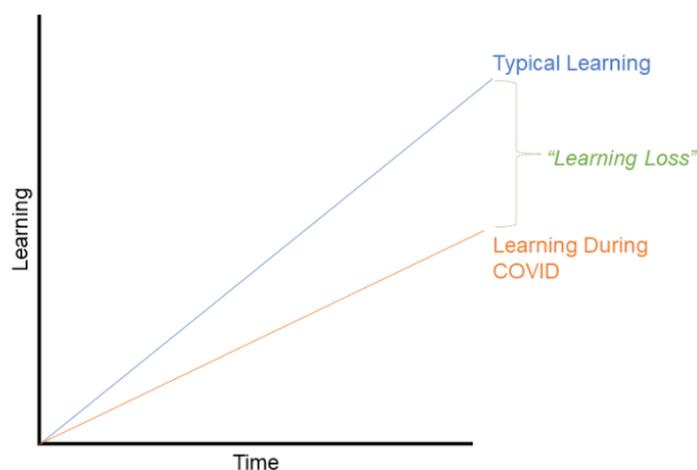
During this time period, BCS students and educators alike benefited from small class sizes, and simultaneously were restricted by the realities of virtual, or distance, learning. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual schooling for K-12 students was an educational niche in West Virginia, and was not among the choices of free, public education settings for students in BCS. After the emergence of COVID-19, virtual learning became the singular option for BCS students. The circumstances that led to this new method required an abrupt transition with little-to-no preparation or initial training for educators, students, and families alike. This new method of virtual learning highlighted an array of barriers challenging low-income students and their families, and how many personal and family needs are met simply by allowing students to attend school in an in-person setting. When learning from home, there were inequalities not only in access to technology, but in having access to someone capable of understanding the technology and how to use it to complete virtual learning. Most

elementary students required the assistance of a parent, guardian, or sibling in order to access and complete their required assignments, yet this assistance wasn't consistently available due to work schedules, childcare coverage, or lack thereof. Many BCS students were in households experiencing food insecurity, and while food was pre-packaged and made available, families now had to make plans for someone to retrieve the food within a designated time frame and location. While an effort was made to deliver meals to students, the new system still created new challenges for families who were not home during the day, or those who did not have the transportation or availability to retrieve their allotment of food. As these challenges began to stack up, it was no surprise to educators when at-risk students struggled the most with virtual learning. Once virtual learning became the primary method of schooling, students who were already struggling to keep up were now further behind in their academic progress.

A group of educational analysts and researchers in California have joined together to work with the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), a non-partisan research center that aims to “achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California’s education system” (PACE, 2021). When California schools closed due to COVID-19, a group of educational analysts, and a representative from California’s CORE Collaborative, in which summative data from across the state is tracked, joined together to identify evidence that could be used to inform decisions and policies on the re-opening of schools, as well as how to best execute virtual learning (Piers et al., 2021). An examination of the effects of virtual learning on students would not be complete without factoring in the conditions in which the learning was expected to occur. With this consideration in mind, education analysts Piers, Christian, Tymeson, and Meyer paired student demographic information with interim and summative academic assessment data collected during and after virtual learning to “examine how the rate of student learning from fall 2019 through winter

2020–21 differs from that of student learning before COVID-19” (Piers, Christian, Tymeson & Meyer, 2021, p. 4). Their study was among the first to acknowledge and define what is commonly referred to as ‘learning loss’, which the authors initially define as “the difference between what they [students] would have learned in a normal year and what they learned during the pandemic” (Piers et al., *PACE*, 2021). The researchers created the visual seen below to further demonstrate their definition of “learning loss.”

Figure 2: How to Think About 'Learning Loss'



In their published findings, the authors chose to use the term *learning lag* to reinforce the acknowledgement that students did make progress toward their academic goals during COVID-19, just not as much progress or as quickly as the progress was made in years prior to the pandemic. When summarizing the findings of their study, the authors identified an average learning lag of 2.6 months in ELA and 2.5 months in math for California students. However, when authors analyzed the results by student subgroups, they observed that “students who were economically disadvantaged, English learners, and LatinX experienced greater learning lag than did students who were not in those groups. In addition, we found that students who were previously low achieving experienced greater learning lag than students who were not previously low achieving” (Piers, Christian, Tymeson, & Meyer, 2021, p. 21). These results are significant, as they provide policymakers and education stakeholders with evidence that some student populations were more negatively affected than

others during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even identified which subsets of students experienced the largest learning lags. While BCS doesn't serve every subgroup listed in the findings of Piers, Christian, Tymeson, and Meyer, many BCS students are economically disadvantaged and previously low achieving, which is likely to have impacted their success or lack thereof during virtual learning.

Benefits of SEL

Social-Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies SEL as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

(CASEL, 2020)

The definition of SEL can vary slightly by organization, policy, or stakeholder, but within every definition offered SEL can be identified as a purposeful learning process that focuses on helping students progress in specific core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2021). Some programs address these skills as the "five core competencies" of SEL, while some researchers, including Dr. Stephanie Jones and her research team from the Harvard University School of Education, have condensed these skills into three main categories: cognitive regulation, emotion skills, and interpersonal skills (Shafer, 2016). However, a closer examination of the skills covered within each of the three categories revealed an alignment with the five core competencies of SEL as determined by CASEL.

Research has shown that as students develop their skills in the five core competencies of SEL, they experience short- and long-term benefits that support social, emotional, and mental wellness as well as academic success. Researchers at CASEL identify several significant benefits of integrating social and emotional learning into school and classroom content and culture. Some of these benefits are far-reaching and can be seen even as children exposed to SEL transition into adulthood. These benefits include “improved academic achievement, a reduction in poverty, improved mobility, and improved lifetime outcomes like decreased chances of living in public housing, receiving public assistance, or having any involvement with police before adulthood” (CASEL, 2020). The benefits of SEL are not exclusive to far-reaching benefits- more immediate outcomes can be measured before, during, and after students have exposure to quality SEL programs in order to gauge student progress and success. In a 2019 study, Durlak and Mahoney combined data from their own large-scale studies on the effectiveness of SEL to demonstrate that when students are given access to quality social-emotional learning programs, “27% of students improved in academic outcomes, 57% of students gained in developmentally appropriate skill levels, 24% of students showed improved social behaviors and lower levels of distress, 23% of students have improved attitudes, and 22% of students showed fewer conduct problems” (p. 2).

Social and emotional learning is a well-researched concept, and there are many evidence based SEL programs that have proven to be beneficial for all students, including those living in poverty. Components of quality SEL have also been proven to demonstrate “a decline in students’ anxiety, behavior problems, and substance abuse” (CASEL, 2020b, para. 2). With so many benefits, particularly for students in marginalized populations, SEL is becoming more embraced by schools and educators across the United States. In a 2021 follow-up from a 2018 study on SEL, McGraw-Hill, one of the largest curricula publishers in the United States, conducted a national survey of 700 educators, administrators, and parents

regarding “the importance of SEL, the impact of COVID-19 on student well-being, and how schools can best support students in the 2021-2022 school year” (McGraw Hill, 2021). Their findings show an increase in educator awareness of SEL from 83% in 2018 to 94% in 2021, and an increase in the percentage of schools administering a stand-alone SEL program from 16% in 2018 to 34% in 2021. The *2021 Social Emotional Learning Report* includes an inquiry on the impacts of COVID-19 on social emotional wellbeing, and found that 53% of educators felt the shift to remote learning “caused their students emotional distress and created attendance problems” (McGraw Hill, 2021, p. 2), while a blend of educators and administrators reported a drop in student confidence, attendance, and an increased number of students showing signs indicating depression, loneliness, and anxiety (McGraw Hill, 2021). Aligning with the findings of Piers, Christian, Tymeson and Myer, the McGraw-Hill also found “educators and administrators in low-income and urban school districts are more likely to report that student grades and test scores suffered during COVID-19” (McGraw-Hill, 2021, p. 2), and cited the lack of student-student connection the most damaging to student wellbeing, followed closely by the lack of student-educator connection that occurred during virtual learning. Now that schools have welcomed students back to in-person learning, educational stakeholders are working to identify and implement strategies and programs that promote student success. The *2021 Social Emotional Learning Report* found 56% of educators reported their school has implemented a SEL plan, and 91% of educators surveyed are “more knowledgeable about their school/district’s plan for teaching SEL skills today than they were in 2018 (77%)” (McGraw-Hill, 2021, p. 3).

While there are many ways to incorporate SEL into the schooling experience, a traditional model involves a single designee, often a school counselor, to teach a weekly, whole group lesson targeting a specific social skill (Shafer, 2016). In their five-year study of SEL programs and positive outcomes, Dr. Jones and the Harvard Graduate School of

Education researchers found that the effect sizes are smaller than expected, which “suggests that existing programs aren’t capitalizing on the potential to improve student outcomes. This could result from implementation challenges, or it could suggest that traditional SEL programs need a different approach” (Shafer, 2016). Dr. Jones and her research team developed an alternate approach, based on one key takeaway from their study: “SEL should exist everywhere at school, across the building — with every adult in the building on board. Educators should teach SEL through strategies, routines, and structures, as opposed to just through lessons and curricula” (Shafer, 2016, para 7).

In a publication entitled *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) & Why It Matters for Educators*, National University’s Sanford College of Education highlights the many ways SEL can be integrated into the daily classroom experience by educators. Some educators opt to dedicate a portion of the day to direct SEL instruction, and may have students participate in role-playing, group projects or discussions, or journaling to reflect on a particular SEL lesson or experience (National University, 2021). However, SEL can also be woven throughout academic curricula and experiences. For example, educators may create opportunities for students to role play as historical or literary figures, conduct interviews with each other or members of the community, work in groups with self-delegated roles and leadership, or work with teachers to create and work towards specific goals (National University, 2021, CASEL, 2020). These are just a few examples of the many ways learning experiences can be designed to give students the opportunity to utilize the prosocial, self-awareness and management, and decision-making skills rooted in the five core competencies of SEL.

West Virginia’s Policy 4373

To ensure all West Virginia schools provide a safe and supportive environment for students, the West Virginia Board of Education adopted *Expected Behaviors in Safe and Supportive Schools* (Policy 4373), which went into effect statewide on July 1, 2012, and required all school districts to create and submit their own policies outlining *Expected Behaviors in Safe and Supportive Schools*. In compliance with the state code, BCS created, adopted, and implemented the *Boone County Schools Manual for Expected Behavior in Safe and Supportive Schools (Policy 4373)* with overarching goals to “develop a preventative approach to providing a positive school climate/culture that fosters learning and personal-social development; to create, encourage and maintain a safe, drug-free, and fear-free school environment across all educational settings” (BCS, 2012, p. 3).

The *Boone County Schools Manual for Expected Behavior in Safe and Supportive Schools (Policy 4373)* is a 73-page document comprised of six chapters which, respectively, outline: Expected Student Dispositions, Student Rights and Responsibilities, Policy Implementation, Defining Inappropriate Behavior and Meaningful Interventions and Consequences, Procedures for Addressing Allegations of Inappropriate Behaviors, and Procedures for Taking Action on Substantiated Inappropriate Behaviors. Given the focus of this study on SEL offerings at the elementary level, I will focus on the Expected Student Dispositions (chapter one) for the purpose of this study.

Policy 4373 (2012) defines dispositions as the “values, commitments, and ethics that influence one’s behaviors toward others and affect learning, motivation, and development” (p. 4), and suggests the learning of these dispositions better prepares students to be active, principled citizens. The learning of these dispositions requires social and emotional instruction, learning, and development, which “shall be supported and promoted in all settings,” according to Policy 4373. Further, this policy defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills

they need in order to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging circumstances constructively.” *Policy 4373* also outlines School and Community Social Skills Standards which are based around three core areas identified in successful students: self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and interpersonal skills, and decision-making skills and responsible behaviors. These core areas directly echo the five core competencies of SEL as determined by CASEL: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (CASEL, 2020b). A high-quality SEL program should be theoretically-grounded, evidence-based, and the implementation tailored to meet the needs of the specific populations being served (CASEL, 2020c, Shafer, 2016). In an effort to best serve the students of BCS, I designed a study to analyze current SEL efforts, and to then provide recommendations specific to BCS as to how their SEL offerings can be strengthened to support elementary student achievement in the wake of COVID-19.

Research Design

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study to gain a better understanding of SEL implementation strategies from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. In order to gather the perspectives of educators and school administrators in a way that created comparable and meaningful data yet also encouraged participants to reflect upon and share their unique experiences, qualitative research methods such as surveys and interviews were utilized in this research study. Quantitative data from the West Virginia Department of Education regarding student demographics and academic achievement was also employed in this study.

Site, Participants, and Sampling

This research study focused exclusively on the Boone County Schools system located in Boone County, West Virginia in the United States of America. All 47 participants - teachers and school administrators – in this study were above the age of 18 and held at least a four-year college degree and/or a professional education certification. Participants were identified by their professional roles and responsibilities, as all participants were responsible for implementing and/or supervising SEL within BCS. Participants had unique responsibilities and experiences with BCS students, and each participant provided a valuable extension of knowledge and perspective to this study.

Participants of this study were identified using a mixed-purposeful sampling method, in which a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling was used. Purposive sampling was utilized because the study focused on a specific cultural domain and needed the perspective of knowledgeable experts from within (Tongco, 2007). Participants were identified purposively, as their professional responsibilities required them to be knowledgeable about current SEL efforts as well as the current needs of BCS students. Additionally, my own professional status as a BCS educator placed my fellow educators and the administrative team in a convenient sampling pool, as they were easily accessible and culturally familiar to the researcher. My familiarity with the participants and their professional responsibilities allowed me to recognize them as “people who can and [were] are willing to provide the information being sought in this study by virtue of knowledge or experience” (Bernard, 2002, Lewis & Sheppard, 2006 as cited in Tongco, 2007).

Methods of Data Collection

Survey

The perspectives of the educators of BCS were critical to this study, as educators can provide significant insight regarding SEL programs and practices occurring within their own classrooms and schools, as well as to the social and emotional needs they observe in their students. To gain these perspectives, a survey was made available to all 180 current BCS educators to complete anonymously at their convenience over a two-week time frame. The survey consisted of a total of 17 questions, with 14 closed-ended, multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions that prompted educators to reflect on their own understanding of the social-emotional needs of their students, and the SEL opportunities currently available to or desired by educators and the students in their respective classrooms. This design allowed for the collection of quantitatively comparable data but also gave participants a chance to reflect upon and share their own experiences, which provided diverse insights into the overall SEL practices of BCS. The survey received a total of 43 responses from BCS elementary educators.

Interviews

The opportunity to participate in the semi-structured interview regarding the implementation strategies of current SEL policies was extended to the following administrative stakeholders: elementary school principals, school counselors, the BCS psychologist, the BCS Director of Early Learning, and the BCS Assistant Superintendent. Following responses from four interested potential participants, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with two principals, one counselor, and one psychologist within BCS, with each interviewee completing a single, thirty- to forty-minute, semi-structured virtual interview via Microsoft Teams. The interview questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of BCS SEL policy, documentation of SEL outcomes, current and anticipated future implementation efforts, and resources that are currently available to the educators and students of BCS while also incorporating opportunities for interviewees to

expound on their own unique experiences implementing or overseeing SEL for BCS students at the elementary level. All interviewees received and approved a transcription of their recorded interview and received a digital copy of the results of the study.

Secondary Data

To further understand the needs of BCS students, the researcher utilized socio-demographic data made available by the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). All data shared by the WVDE was collected and reported by same on a publicly available website (*Zoom WV, 2021*). This website allows users to group and compare non-identifiable demographic and academic achievement information by state, school district, or individual school. In this case, demographic data concerning the percentage of low-SES students within BCS as well as academic achievement on summative statewide testing contributed to the findings of this study.

Data Management and Analysis

Survey data

The survey was accessible to participants for a two-week time frame and was conducted through Google Forms. This platform collected and organized survey responses and allowed the researcher – who has sole, password protected administrative access- to view the survey responses in multiple formats, included but not limited to charts, graphs, and percentages. A benefit of this platform is that data was automatically updated with each new response, allowing the researcher to view and consider the data through many lenses as it arrived in real time.

Once the two-week time frame ended and the survey closed, no additional responses were collected or recorded. The survey generated a total of 43 responses, and the researcher retains sole access to the Google forms survey and collected data. In addition to the data

being stored through Google Forms, the researcher downloaded and stored the data in a password protected Microsoft One Drive account, as well as on a password protected home computer. The researcher organized and stored survey data into a separate file for each question. An additional document was created (see Appendix A) that listed each question as well as the number and percentage of votes allotted to each multiple-choice option.

The researcher then created individual documents that organized the responses to each open-ended survey question. In order to code the responses to open-ended questions, the coding software Dedoose was utilized. Open-ended responses were copied and pasted from Google Forms into Dedoose and were then coded and organized by the researcher. The resulting parent-child codes can be viewed in Appendix E.

Interview data

After gaining permission from participants, interviews were recorded (audio only) through a recording application on the interviewer's phone. The recording option embedded within Microsoft Teams was available during each interview as a contingency option but was less preferable to participants because it records visual and audio data. I took notes during the interview and allotted at least ten minutes after the interview to record notes, reflections, and reactions to information obtained during the interview. Within twenty-four hours of the interview, I transcribed the audio recording into a file that was saved as a Microsoft Word document and e-mailed to the respective participant. The participant then had one week in which to review, clarify, approve, or request a change to the transcription. All transcriptions used in this study have been reviewed and approved by the respective participants, who have each been assigned a pseudonym to allow them to retain their anonymity.

The transcribed interview data from this study were then analyzed through the use of the coding software Dedoose, which assisted in identifying themes that emerged within the

survey and semi-structured interviews. All Dedoose codes were developed following inductive, deductive, and in-vivo approaches to indicate surprising, expected, and interesting or unusual data. These findings were categorized in a way that provided insight into the following categories: educator awareness of SEL expectations; current SEL implementation efforts in elementary schools; resources available to educators and students; challenges of SEL implementation; effects of COVID-19 on student learning, and resources desired by educators.

Researcher Positionality

As a current BCS employee and a West Virginia native with six years of education experience in the West Virginia public school system, I have worked almost exclusively with students in underserved communities and have observed how impactful the home lives of students can be in regard to academic achievement. My professional knowledge of early childhood education and childhood development are rooted in understanding of social and emotional development and its many benefits. I have acted as an advocate for SEL within my own professional environment and received professional acknowledgements and commendations from BCS administrators for my work integrating SEL into the early childhood curriculum and classroom culture. While these credentials speak to my knowledge of SEL, they also place me in favor of SEL, which creates a significant bias toward SEL explored in this study. To counter this bias, the wording of the research question, survey and interview questions were peer- and advisor-reviewed before being delivered to participants to ensure they were worded in a way that allows the researcher to learn more about the topic while also building relationships with participants by expressing the value of their unique and knowledgeable perspectives. To counter this bias during the data collection process, interview participants were asked to review and approve the data collected during their interview and were given the opportunity to clarify or request changes before their data was

used. I asked the leadership team at my home school, as well as a former BCS principal, to review the conclusions of the study, and the findings were in alignment with their own professional experiences as educators in leadership roles within BCS. The largest consideration of possible alternate explanations of unusual findings pointed primarily to circumstances created by COVID-19, which I discuss in the findings section.

The research design was structured in a way that allowed the researcher to benefit from being professionally embedded in the system of study: I had close and immediate access to potential participants, as well as personal and professional knowledge of some SEL practices within BCS. It is likely that my status as a BCS educator encouraged participants to be more open and candid than they might have been if the study was led by an unfamiliar researcher. While these circumstances were somewhat beneficial to the researcher, they also required counterweights to create a valid, credible study. The research question was carefully crafted in a way that would highlight the strengths and successes of SEL practices within BCS, while also providing a recommendation plan designed specifically for their district as they attempt to support students in the ‘learning recovery’ process in the wake of COVID-19.

Ethics

To ensure this study was conducted ethically, the research design was built upon the framework of trustworthiness, defined by Rallis and Rossman (2009) as “a set of standards that demonstrates that a research study has been conducted competently and ethically” (p. 264). In the pursuit of high ethical standards, this study was crafted to ensure the fundamental ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Following the first step of ethical research, all participants were provided with informed consent before participating in the study. Informed consent was made available to all participants electronically and in their native language (English) and encouraged potential

participants to ask questions about anything that may have been unclear. The informed consent document notified participants of the measures taken to protect their privacy, which is of utmost importance in ethical research. The privacy and anonymity of all participants were prioritized in every step of data collection, analysis, and the presentation of findings. Survey participants remained anonymous and were given the opportunity to opt out of any question they preferred not to answer with no penalty. The survey design did not require participants to include their names or job titles.

The above safeguards were in place to protect the privacy of interviewees. The informed consent page for interviewees included permission for the interviewer to record the virtual interview, with the assurance that the transcript of the interview would be sent to interviewees within one week of interview completion, at which time interviewees can confirm or dispute the accuracy of the transcription. Each interview started with a brief overview of the study, with reminders of the rights covered in the informed consent page. Then, interviewees gave verbal consent to be recorded before the recording began. Interviewees were asked for permission to be quoted directly and had the option to choose or be assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy for the purposes of this study. All participants, whether they participated in the survey or interview processes, received professional contact information for myself and for my academic advisor, Dr. Alla Korzh, in case they wished to obtain additional information about this study.

Credibility

To ensure credibility of this study's findings, I employed triangulation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social-emotional learning practices within BCS by collecting data from a variety of sources, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data of student demographics and academic achievement. Member-checking was

utilized through sharing of the interview transcripts with survey participants, which provided the opportunity for the participants to approve, dispute, or clarify any data collected from their interview before it was used in the study. Additionally, the results of the survey and interview were made available to all BCS elementary educators via email and Schoology. This data was made available to all BCS elementary educators since they were all offered the opportunity to participate in the study, and there was no tracking of which educators participated in the survey. Additionally, the researcher chose to share the data resulting from the survey in hopes that it may prompt additional reflection by educators regarding the social and emotional needs of their students, and which practices are, or could be, in place to support BCS students. Finally, peer-debriefing and critical reflexivity were used throughout the entirety of the study in the forms of peer-feedback, reflective writing, and discussions with cohort peers.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study was the lack of data obtained directly from BCS students, who represent an array of vulnerable populations and were not contacted for the purposes of this study. An additional limitation was the timing of data collection, which aligned with the reintegration of students into classrooms, COVID-19 vaccines for at-risk educators, and a slew of winter storms, which caused additional shifts in schedules and a lack of availability for interviews, resulting in fewer interviews than desired for the study.

An overarching contextual consideration of this study was that it occurred within the same time frame as COVID-19, which left public schools and their communities reeling with weekly changes to school schedules and routines. A primary challenge created by the rise of COVID-19 was the constantly changing availability of in-person instruction for students. Leading up to and during data collection for this study, students who were signed up for in-

person instruction were permitted to enter school facilities only when local COVID-19 cases in their school district were below a certain threshold. All education stakeholders, including educators, parents, and students had to await the release of a weekly map from the West Virginia Department of Education to determine if students would receive in-person or virtual instruction for the upcoming week. These circumstances were challenging and stressful for students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike, yet each group of stakeholders faced unique challenges. This pandemic highlighted the importance of physical health, but the inconsistent schooling options created by COVID-19 also highlighted the importance of social growth and connection for students. Communities within Boone county have been socially divided since the start of the 2020-2021 academic school year regarding the way public schools should handle COVID-19, and it is possible that this study triggered either enthusiastic support or enthusiastic resistance from various stakeholders, depending on the challenges participants had already encountered due to COVID-19.

Another consideration that needed to be made in the research design was the unique dynamic between BCS employees and administrators, which within the past four years has endured two teacher strikes, multiple lawsuits between employees and administration, and has most recently been rocked by a class-action settlement resulting in financial compensation for all BCS employees. This dynamic was given significant consideration in the construction of the wording of the surveys and interview questions used in the data collection process, as it was important to phrase questions in a way that did not imply blame or criticism towards any particular group of stakeholders. A key element to minimizing the effects of this unique dynamic was the anonymity of survey participants, whose individual responses were kept confidential through data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings.

Findings

To situate my findings of current SEL efforts within BCS, I will describe the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) policies outlining the expectations for SEL within West Virginia schools. As policy-based expectations are introduced, I will then discuss the findings from educator surveys and administrator interviews, which revealed numerous yet inconsistent SEL efforts in place at the district, schoolwide, and individual classroom levels. Responses from surveys and interviews revealed similarities in educator and administrator perspectives on the effects of COVID-19 and virtual learning on BCS elementary students. Through the use of quantitative socio-demographic data paired with academic indicators, I will demonstrate patterns that echo those found in the studies of Piers, Christian, Tymeson (2021) and Meyer as well as findings published by McGraw-Hill (2021) in which a direct parallel between SES and academic achievement for BCS students is revealed. I will close with a recommendation plan designed to guide BCS in strengthening its SEL offerings in ways that promote student success and academic achievement in the wake of COVID-19.

Lack of Consistent Schoolwide SEL Programs

Policy 4373 is designed to provide “the procedural guidance to assist schools in their efforts to create the climate/culture that supports development of the dispositions that are valued in our communities, state, nation and world” (Boone County Board of Education, 2012 p.3). Using *Policy 4373* as a guideline, I will identify the expectations of SEL as determined by the Boone County Board of Education and then compare these expectations to the current SEL offerings as revealed by survey and interview data.

Policy 4373 (2012) asserts “social and emotional learning will be addressed in Boone County Schools” (p. 5) and sets the expectation for each of its schools to develop a “systemic approach” to ensuring the embedded *School and Community Social Skills Standards* “serve as

a framework for school-wide student behavior expectations as determined by each school faculty” (p. 4). . However, when asked about the existence of schoolwide SEL programs, 17 survey participants reported “unsure,” 15 - “yes,” and 10 - “no.” However, when asked if a schoolwide program was implemented at their school, 16 participants answered “no,” 14 were “unsure,” and 13 answered “yes”. These responses point to either a lack of SEL program, lack of SEL implementation, or lack of educator awareness of schoolwide programs across the elementary sector of BCS.

Interviews with two BCS principals echo the findings of inconsistent schoolwide programs in BCS. One BCS elementary principal, identified in this study as B. Stanvos, utilizes a single schoolwide program known as “Green Lighters,” in which students qualify for an additional 30 minutes of additional playtime at the end of the week if they have met their academic and behavioral expectations for the week. These expectations vary by grade level and may include things like having a daily planner or agenda signed by a parent or guardian, completing assigned homework or tasks, modeling appropriate behaviors, et cetera. This program was initiated by a BCS counselor several years ago and is currently in place at two of the six BCS elementary schools. If a student loses their “Green Lighter” status, a form is filled out by the person revoking the privilege (a teacher or administrator), and then sent home to be signed by the student’s guardian. During the 30 minute “Green Lighters” time at the end of the week, students who do not qualify are given alternate assignments to complete and sent to a designated location to be supervised while the rest of the children who qualified go outside or have “green lighter” time in their classroom if there is inclement weather.

In contrast, another BCS principal interviewed named as L. Taylor discussed three separate schoolwide SEL initiatives that are used to create a positive school climate and promote social, emotional, and cognitive development and, by extension, academic success.

At Taylor’s BCS elementary school, all students and staff start their day with a schoolwide pledge – something intended to remind them that they are each an important member of a schoolwide community, which also sets the expectation for students to behave as such (L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

Not only are positive social behaviors and interactions expected at this particular elementary school, but they are rewarded. Taylor and his staff utilize a combination of the *Respect and Protect* program and *Brag Tags* to highlight, praise, and promote positive student behavior. The *Respect and Protect* program utilizes a behavior log in which students can lose points or earn them back based on their behavior choices. At the end of the nine weeks, students receive a grade on their report card indicating their current point standing for behavior. Simultaneously, when students are ‘caught’ doing something kind, or modeling a positive behavior, they receive what is known as a *Brag Tag*. At the beginning of the school year, each student receives a key ring they can place on the outside of their backpack, and as school personnel witness students modeling positive behaviors, students are awarded a *Brag Tag* highlighting their positive action. For example, a brag tag might say “Classroom Kindness Award”, “caught being kind”, “Hallway Hero” or another phrase that helps specify their positive action (L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

The third schoolwide initiative was the most thoroughly discussed, as it is unlike anything else currently implemented within BCS. This school features not one but two *Minds in Motion* labs, which are rooms dedicated to promoting cognitive development as students participate in activities designed to stimulate visual processing, auditory processing, and motor skills (Minds in Motion, 2021). The *Minds in Motion (MIM)* program is based on the development of the vestibular system, which is “the sensory system that provides the leading contributions to balance and spatial orientation for the purpose of coordinating movement” (Minds in Motion, 2021). The *MIM* program points out that poor balance and

coordination of the brain and body lead to a multitude of challenges that can negatively impact students' learning and academic progress, including but not limited to: ADD and ADHD symptoms, the ability to comprehend, pay attention, the development of successful hand-eye coordination, and poor eye focusing ability, which can lead to trouble tracking words and reading (Minds in Motion, 2021). If some of these deficits sound familiar, it's because many of them can be found listed in the previously discussed effects of poverty and trauma on students' brains and academic performance. These effects are not just theoretical and can be seen in many BCS students. When discussing the *Minds in Motion* initiative, Principal Taylor says people would be surprised by the number of children who lack hand-eye coordination, or who cannot track an object as it moves closer to their eyes or maintain balance to walk in a straight line or a predetermined path. As noted in the Minds in Motion, "The link between early physiological development and more complex cognitive abilities is one of the bedrock beliefs of Minds-in-Motion." Addressing these deficits, or barriers, from a physiological standpoint can be interpreted as an affirmation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – physiological needs are at the base of the pyramid because they provide the foundation for all future growth and development.

Minds in Motion has created MAZE, a program specifically for schools which "supports neural development through various exercises and protocols which form the basis of MAZE- a simple, proven program that addresses the physiological needs of today's learners" (Minds in Motion, 2021). According to Taylor, the *Minds in Motion* labs are rooms that have different stations to strengthen skills such as hand-eye coordination, tracking, balance, calisthenics, motor, or sensory skills. At Taylor's school, all students visit the *Minds in Motion* lab for thirty minutes each day, and the skills addressed in the lab change weekly. The activities are paired with symphonic music and interrupted by a bell at predetermined intervals. Students begin at their designated station, participate in the given activity while the

music plays, and then stop when the bell is heard. At the sound of the bell, students transition to the next station and begin the new challenge when the symphonic music resumes. This pattern continues until all students have completed each station in the *MIM* lab (L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

Although *Minds in Motion* is a research-based program, Taylor and the administrative stakeholders of this BCS elementary school decided to complete three data checkpoints to allow for data comparison at the end of the first year of implementation. Taylor stated that the *MIM* program came with data collection forms, but that over the years he and his staff have tailored these forms to meet the exact needs of their staff and students. Data are collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year, and then compared to academic achievement data. In the first year of implementation, Taylor had one teacher who was hesitant about participating in the *MIM* initiative, so he utilized her class as a control group, and they were the only class in the school that did not use the *MIM* labs in the 2016-2017 school year. While he admits he was hesitant to allow students to go a full year without using the lab, he suspected the data would provide strong evidence of growth – and he was right. At the end of the first year of implementation, data were analyzed according to how often students utilized the *MIM* lab, grade level, and academic achievement according to *STAR* assessments, which measure both reading and math skills for students nationally as well as within BCS. The findings were as follows:

First grade students who consistently participated in the *MIM* lab had an average reading score (Lexile) gain of 265, and a median math score gain of 60 compared to the Lexile gain reading level of 110, and the median math gain of 40 made by the control group who did not use the *MIM* lab at all. Third grade students were assessed using their scores from the end of year summative assessments. Of those who ‘highly used’ (3-5x / week) the *MIM* lab, 68% reached mastery or above in ELA, and 58%

reached mastery or above in Math. Of those who had minimal usage (1-2x/week) of the *MIM* labs, 37% achieved mastery or above in ELA, and 40% achieved mastery or above in math. The progress of fourth grade students was also measured with summative assessments, and also showed results with wide margins between those who had ‘highly’ and ‘minimally’ utilized the *MIM* lab. Of those who highly utilized the *MIM* lab, 64% achieved mastery or above in ELA, and 57% achieved mastery or above in math. Of those who minimally utilized the *MIM* lab, only 26% achieved mastery or above in ELA, and only 25% achieved mastery or above in math. (L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

When discussing the benefits of the *MIM* program, Taylor noted that in addition to the academic indicators, “behavior changes, too, because they are more balanced and more in control of their bodies. It becomes easier for them to stay focused, to pay attention, to comprehend and organize new information, all of which contributes to their academic success” (L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021). This initiative demonstrates a blend of theory-to-practice connections that emphasize the connection between physiological and cognitive development and academic success. This program addresses an array of physiological needs that, when developed, provide a solid foundation that promotes the lifelong success of students. It is my recommendation that this program be implemented at all six BCS elementary schools so that all BCS students can experience the benefits of this initiative. While the “green lighters” initiative discussed with B. Stanvos has some degree of effectiveness towards setting schoolwide expectations for behavior, the variety of schoolwide initiatives represented by L. Taylor provide students with learning that addresses the five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020b).

Inequitable Access to Traditional SEL

As discussed in the literature review, the traditional model of SEL involves a single designee – usually a school counselor or psychologist – visiting each classroom weekly to teach lessons from approved curricula targeting specific social skills (Jones, 2016). This model is common for elementary schools and has been the traditional SEL delivery system for BCS, which invests numerous resources into hiring counselors and equipping them with evidence-based programs. At the time of data collection, BCS employed four counselors for the elementary sector, including one counselor who was on medical leave for the foreseeable future (C. Daniels, personal communication, 2021, L. Taylor, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

BCS was able to utilize federal funding to purchase the *Second Step* SEL program, which was made available to each BCS elementary counselor. While this is a quality research-based program, it can only be effective when it is being implemented, and the limited number of counselors combined with the number of BCS students facing adverse circumstances has made the delivery of this curriculum via weekly whole group counseling lessons a challenging requirement to satisfy. When asked if their students had received weekly SEL instruction prior to COVID-19, 44% of educators surveyed answered ‘no’, 37 % answered ‘yes, and it was facilitated by a BCS counselor’, 11% answered ‘yes, and I facilitated the SEL instruction’, and 11% were unsure if their students received weekly SEL instruction.

The data for this study was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ‘remote learning’ time period in which students remained at home and utilized either paper packets, online instruction, or a combination of the two to progress through their academic expectations. While there was not an expectation of weekly SEL given to educators by BCS, educators were asked about the frequency of SEL instruction during remote learning. The

findings revealed a 10% increase in students not receiving weekly SEL from their instructor (?), and a 50% decrease in those receiving weekly SEL from a BCS counselor.

Table 1: Weekly SEL Prior To and During COVID-19

Did your students receive weekly SEL instruction?		
	Prior to COVID-19 / Remote learning	During COVID-19 / Remote learning
No	19 (44%)	23 (54%)
Yes, from a BCS counselor	16 (37%)	8 (19%)
Yes, from a BCS teacher	5 (12%)	2 (5%)

It is worth noting that these numbers do not necessarily reflect a lack of effort from BCS counselors. An important consideration of remote learning for elementary, and especially early childhood learners is that they require the direct assistance of an adult to participate in the virtual learning experiences designed by the child’s teacher. It is possible that SEL lessons and resources were made available by BCS counselors and educators, but not utilized by the student, or by the guardian assisting the student with remote learning. In this circumstance, a teacher and counselor could collaborate to provide weekly SEL opportunities during virtual learning, but the entire class may not have participated in it. As a BCS educator, I created weekly SEL activities for my class of 15 kindergarten students, and only three students participated in those activities over the course of six weeks. While these three students gained SEL knowledge, it means that 12 students progressed to first grade

without the same SEL knowledge and skills as the three who participated, not because the lessons weren't made available during remote learning, but because the students (or their guardians) did not choose to utilize them.

Educators' Capacity to Integrate SEL

There is currently not a documented expectation for BCS educators to integrate SEL into their classrooms, whether through classroom culture or through academic content. The BCS guiding document on required SEL, *Policy 4373*, specifically states that educators are not expected to integrate SEL into daily lesson plans. This holds true according to survey results, in which 37 (88%) participants confirmed they are not required by their school administration to document SEL experiences or student progress. Despite the lack of required documentation of SEL, survey findings revealed that 29 (67%) survey participants purposefully integrate SEL into their individual style of classroom instruction. This practice can take many forms, including but not limited to discipline style, communication style, personal pedagogy, situational leadership, 'teachable moments' and more, all of which can contribute to a positive classroom culture. Participants were not asked to specify *how* they integrate SEL into their individual style of instruction, only to indicate *if* SEL is something they have chosen to integrate.

The fact that two-thirds of survey participants chose to integrate SEL into their personal pedagogy, despite the lack of requirement to do so, is an affirmation that educators are aware of the many benefits of SEL and are motivated to provide SEL opportunities to their students, even though survey findings reveal these same participants may not be, or feel, adequately prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of their students. When asked if they had been offered professional development (PD) opportunities dedicated to SEL during their employment with BCS, 16 (38%) surveyed educators answered 'no', 13 (31%) indicated

“yes,” and they had participated in at least one PD, 2 (5%) participants indicated yes, and that they had participated in multiple PDs dedicated to SEL, 10 (24%) participants were unsure if they had been offered a PD dedicated to SEL, and 1 (2%) participant indicated they had been offered an opportunity for PD in SEL but they had declined to participate.

Additionally, survey findings revealed that BCS educators do not currently have adequate access to resources that guide SEL. When asked if SEL was incorporated into the academic curriculum provided by BCS, 20 (47%) survey participants answered ‘yes’, 14 (33%) answered ‘no’, and 9 (21%) were ‘unsure’. When asked about access to a curriculum or resource to guide SEL, 22 (54%) participants answered ‘no’, 10 (24%) participants were ‘unsure’, 6 (14%) participants cited access to a SEL resource they acquired independently, and 4 (10%) participants cited access to a SEL resource provided by BCS.

Findings also revealed that 18 (43%) survey participants did not feel prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of their students, 16 (38%) participants did feel prepared to meet these needs, and 8 (19%) participants were unsure. When asked if they felt their students were receiving the social-emotional support needed to succeed in school, (50%) participants answered ‘no’, 13 (31%) were unsure, 7 (17%) answered ‘yes’, and 1 (2%) participant preferred not to respond. This data suggest that while teachers are motivated to integrate SEL, they lack the necessary resources to guide their students through SEL.

The Handle with Care Program Implementation

Two of the four interviewees in this study referenced an initiative known as *Handle with Care (HWC)*, a program initiated in West Virginia in 2013 by the West Virginia Defending Childhood Initiative that aims to “prevent children’s exposure to trauma and violence, mitigate negative affects experienced by children’s exposure to trauma, and to increase knowledge and awareness of this issue” (Handle with Care, 2013). Further

examination determined *HWC* programs support children exposed to trauma and violence through improved communication and collaboration between law enforcement and schools (Handle with care, 2013).

The basic premise of *Handle with Care* is that when a law enforcement officer responds to a call and encounters a child, the officer learns where the child goes to school and then sends the school principal and/or counselor a confidential fax or email that says only “Handle (Student Name) with care.” This alerts the school that their student has been involved in a traumatic event, whether it be a car accident, domestic violence, witnessing someone being severely wounded, a drug raid, a meth lab explosion, or any number of circumstances requiring the assistance of law enforcement / emergency services. The *Handle with Care* program also encourages law enforcement to build positive relationships with students “by interacting on a regular basis. They can visit classrooms, stop by for lunch, or simply chat with students to help promote positive relationships and perceptions of officers” (Handle with Care, 2013, p. 2).

Once a law enforcement officer initiates the *Handle with Care* program, the school principal and/or counselor will alert the teachers who work with the identified student. Educators working in schools that participate in the *Handle with Care* program have had training on the effects trauma can have on learning. When BCS adopted the *Handle with Care* program in 2017, a BCS psychologist developed and delivered a training on *Trauma informed teaching*, meant to provide educators with strategies that support students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma-informed teaching relies partially on an educator’s ability to recognize when a symptom, such as a stomachache, or the inability to stay awake or concentrate, or unusual behavior is being caused by exposure to trauma. Recognizing these behaviors or

circumstances is the first step to trauma-informed teaching; once educators have identified that students' behavior or feelings are being brought on by exposure to trauma, the trauma-informed teaching approach allows educators to help the student obtain the support(s) needed, whether it be time to rest in the nurse's office, one-on-one time with a counselor, or simply the willingness of the educator to adjust instruction based on the needs of the student; maybe shifting focus, purposefully avoiding a subject that may be triggering, or incorporating social-emotional activities to meet the most immediate needs of the student experiencing trauma.

When interviewed, the psychologist acknowledged that trauma-informed training isn't mandated for BCS employees, "although it is important" (C. Daniels, personal communication, February 10, 2021), given the adverse experiences faced by many BCS students. As beneficial as trauma-informed teaching can be, it is most effective when the educator is made aware of the fact that his or her student has experienced a trauma. Though the *Handle with Care* program seeks to address this, several BCS stakeholders note a lag in information from the agencies responsible for initiating the *Handle with Care* process. When reflecting on *Handle with Care*, BCS psychologist C. Daniels states the lag of information from the agencies responsible for initiating the *Handle with Care* process stems from their concern over violating HIPPA laws. Whether it be state or local law enforcement, the ambulance authority, fire department, or CPS, "they are concerned that providing this information is a violation of HIPPA, even though they have been given specific information that states this is not a violation of HIPPA" (C. Daniels, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Daniels feels that although BCS and its employees have the resources and training to participate in the *Handle with Care* program, they cannot do so without the correct organizations initiating the process: "There is a disconnect, and I don't know how to solve it. We've tried suggestions but it doesn't seem to be helping, but that is a barrier, quite an

obstacle” (C. Daniels, personal communication, February 10, 2021). This disconnect can be seen in the lack of *Handle with Care* notices that are initiated by law enforcement. On the day of the interview, the BCS psychologist noted three separate *Handle with Care* notices had come in over the weekend, but all three were from counselors who found out about a separate incident through Facebook and social media. None of these incidents resulted in *Handle with Care* notices from the emergency authorities who responded to the incidents.

When BCS principal B. Stanvos was asked about the *Handle with Care* program, she noted that she had recently spoken at a conference where educators, doctors, judges, policy makers, and additional stakeholders gathered to address the ongoing opioid crisis in West Virginia. Stanvos spoke at the beginning of the conference about the need for additional support for BCS students, and someone in the audience brought up *Handle with Care*. She noted that a panel of doctors, judges, and stakeholders were present and touted *Handle with Care* as one of the top efforts being made within WV to assist students facing adverse experiences. She stated they were stunned when she informed them she was a principal in one of the most drug-ridden counties in the state, and had received only two *Handle with Care* notices in the three years since the program’s implementation (B. Stanvos, personal communication, February 11, 2021). She acknowledged a disconnect in the program, citing that the information does not make it to the schools. If this program were to be properly implemented, it would better serve the many BCS students facing adverse circumstances and exposure to trauma.

SES and Reading Proficiency

BCS students face a unique blend of adverse circumstances, and the effects of these ACES can be seen in the academic achievement indicators of BCS students. Inspired by the work of Piers, Christian, Tymeson, and Meyer (2021), I compared BCS student demographic

data with summative assessment results and discovered a correlation between SES and (lack of) reading proficiency. I began by reviewing enrollment data to determine the percentage rates of low-SES students within BCS. Currently (2020-2021 academic year) BCS serves a total of 3,335 students, with 1,880 (56.4%) of those students qualifying as low-SES. When compared with the academic achievement scores determined by the statewide summative assessment, prior to COVID-19 there was a three-year trending correlation between the percentage of low-SES students and the percentage of students who did not achieve proficiency (NP) on their summative reading assessments.

Table 2: SES and Reading Proficiency Scores

Year	% of low-SES students	% of students who scored N.P.	Subject
2014-2015	100%	53.94%	Reading
2015-2016	100%	53.56%	Reading
2016-2017	58%	58.93%	Reading
2017-2018	57%	58.56%	Reading
2018-2019	54%	56.84%	Reading
2019-2020	54%	Not Assessed	Not Assessed
2020-2021	56%	63.58%	Reading

When considering the possible explanations regarding the parallels between the percentage of low-SES students and the percentage of students not achieving proficiency on their summative reading assessment, several studies and theories can be applied. Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs seems to be clearly demonstrated, as students who live in low-SES households are often lacking basic (physiological) needs such as weather-appropriate clothing, food security, and a safe, warm place to get an adequate amount of sleep, which leaves students focusing on being cold, hungry, or tired rather than on academic learning at school; thus their academic achievement is limited until those needs can be met. The limit to academic achievement can be, at least partially, explained by the results of the study by Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, and Pollak (2015) in which they not only confirm the gap in cognitive abilities but offer one of the first explanations as to why this gap occurs- experiencing poverty as a child alters brain development, particularly in the area of the brain largely responsible for school readiness.

The parallel between low-SES BCS students and those not achieving proficiency in reading support Jensen's (2009) statement that "standardized intelligence tests show a correlation between poverty and lower cognitive achievement, and low-SES students often earn below-average scores in reading, math, and science and demonstrate poor writing skills" (p. 32). To explore correlation between poverty and academic achievement, Hanson, Hair, Wolfe, and Pollack's (2015) study that revealed changes in brain development due to exposure to poverty also found that on average, "children from low-income households scored 4-7 points lower on standardized tests. As much as 20% of the gap in test scores could be explained by maturational lags in the frontal and temporal lobes" (p. 823). While the gap between low- and high-SES test scores for BCS students is not measured in this study, it would be imperative to explore it in future research.

While many theories could be applied to explain the correlation between the percentage of low-SES students and the percentage of students not achieving proficiency in reading, it is arguable that the greatest focus should be on how to best help students within this demographic. As stakeholders in the BCS education system seek to effectively educate

students in a way that addresses the gaps created first by poverty and then exacerbated by virtual learning during the coronavirus pandemic, it cannot be ignored that the basic needs of many BCS students have not been consistently met. As BCS has successfully implemented and maintained programs that meet or assist with the most immediate, physiological student needs such as food and clothing, it is time to widen the lens used to examine student wellness to identify, strengthen, and support programs that promote the social, emotional, and cognitive well-being of BCS students, and in doing so, promote their academic success.

Utilizing Data to Promote Student Success

An abundance of research has connected the social, emotional, and cognitive development of students with academic success. In the wake of COVID-19, schools are struggling to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students who are working to recover their social, emotional, and academic learning loss from the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about the effects COVID-19 could have on the social-emotional wellbeing of students, BCS counselor S. Fitzgerald said she anticipates a regression in self-awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills (S. Fitzgerald, personal communication, February 1, 2021) simply because students have fewer exposures to peers and adults explicitly teaching and modeling these skills, as well as reduced opportunities to practice these skills. Given that these can quickly become barriers to academic success, educators and administrators will have to be prepared to encounter and satisfy these needs in students if they wish for them to access their full academic potential.

Educator surveys were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when students were in a period of remote learning, so educators were asked if any social-emotional needs had become more prevalent for their students during this time period. Educators shared a variety of needs and concerns for the emotional wellbeing of students, with regressed social

skills, difficulty expression emotion, students acting noticeably withdrawn, and adverse home experiences being the most frequently identified areas of concern. When educators were prompted to provide suggestions as to how to best support students with these needs, 14 survey participants recommended increased access to counselors and weekly SEL instruction; 10 requested support in integrating SEL through either professional development or a “cheat sheet” of tips for educators wishing to integrate SEL; six participants recommended daily time allotted to SEL; five requested an action plan to properly assist students struggling with SEL; and two participants requested that educators have access to a digital SEL curriculum.

Recommendations

Having analyzed the data collected for this study and theories supporting it, I offer the following recommendations to support BCS in their efforts to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their elementary students:

1. Assist all BCS schools in selecting and implementing a schoolwide SEL program.

Resources necessary for this endeavor may include additional copies of SEL curriculum so each school can have independent access to the curriculum and training for staff on understanding and implementing the selected curriculum, as well as guidelines on how to implement SEL and document student progress via a collaborative effort by the school counselor, leadership team, and administrators.

At the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, BCS received a federal grant that was used, in part, to purchase *Second Step*, a research based SEL curriculum (C. Daniels, personal communication, February 10, 2021). One copy of the curriculum was provided to each BCS elementary counselor to then be utilized by the counselors in each of their assigned schools. While the countywide support for a quality SEL program is encouraging, the current ratio of available copies of *Second Step* does not allow for effective, consistent implementation of the

program across all Boone County elementary schools. In an ideal scenario, every elementary teacher would have individual and immediate (digital) access to quality resources that guide developmentally appropriate SEL instruction. To accomplish this, BCS could either purchase hard and/or digital copies of an approved SEL curriculum for each classroom, each grade level, or at minimum one copy of the approved curriculum per school. Any of these options would increase the number of BCS educators with access to a quality, approved SEL curriculum. Given the demographic of the communities served by BCS and the recent increase in federal funding to support learning recovery post-COVID-19, it is likely that the cost of increasing access to the current SEL curriculum could be covered with a federal or local grant.

2. Implement *Minds in Motion* at all elementary schools within BCS

The *Minds in Motion* program promotes gross, fine motor, and cognitive development that empowers their social, emotional, and academic success. BCS has evidence of the program's success from Principal Taylor's school, and could foster collaborative efforts through monthly meetings of SEL facilitators and the implementation team at Principal Taylor's school to create equitable access to this program for all BCS elementary students.

3. Increase educator awareness of schoolwide initiatives through professional developments and collaborative trainings.

Research shows that quality SEL programs involve every education stakeholder, so full staff trainings on the selected SEL program and how it is integrated throughout daily school activities and interactions is recommended.

4. Increase SEL guidance within each school building.

In lieu of having a counselor at each school (which is ideal but has yet to become a reality), it would be prudent to create an extra-curricular position for an SEL specialist or

facilitator at each school. The BCS educators hired for these positions should already have a base knowledge of elementary SEL due to their professional responsibilities and can lead and facilitate district / schoolwide SEL initiatives within their respective schools. Schools have autonomy over their SEL practices (*Policy 4373*) and creating a facilitator position for BCS educators who are already familiar with the unique needs of their respective school community allows SEL initiatives to be selected and/or adjusted based on the approach that will best serve each school population, while still being supported and monitored as a county-wide effort.

5. Provide educators with annual professional developments dedicated to SEL and trauma-informed teaching.

My fourth recommendation is for BCS to provide increased access to professional developments (PDs) dedicated to SEL and / or trauma-informed teaching. These PDs could be integrated into the required annual trainings, offered as a stipend opportunity, or used towards the accumulation of professional certification hours, which educators can use to advance in salary after every 15 credit hours they complete beyond their bachelor's degree. Providing additional trainings would result in more knowledgeable and qualified educators and would infuse schools with additional knowledge-bearers and sharers regarding the social-emotional needs, behaviors, and progress of students.

BCS could strengthen educator knowledge of SEL by adopting curricula that integrate SEL and providing educators with trainings on its implementation; promoting monthly collaborative efforts between counselors and educators to guide the progression of SEL for BCS students; and increasing access to resources that provide guidance on SEL and trauma-informed teaching.

6. Strengthen the *Handle with Care* program

While it should not fall to BCS only to make the *HWC* program effective, it is a program that should be strengthened in order to best serve the students of BCS. BCS has already made recommendations and suggestions regarding the strengthening of this initiative, but they are limited as to how they can act since they cannot control if a responding officer chooses to initiate the process. The *HWC* program is supervised at the state level, and it is my recommendation that BCS contacts the state-level director to request increased communication of expectations to all expected participants within Boone County. Since a concern of violating HIPPA was mentioned, perhaps the state-level director could provide a universal *Handle with Care* notice that directs first responders which information to provide in such a way that no HIPPA violations occur. If this form is already available, it should be reviewed and presented to the appropriate stakeholders, along with a document providing updated contact information for those who are supposed to receive *Handle with Care* notices. Finally, I recommend *Handle with Care* data be collected, monitored, analyzed, and reported to the state-level director bi-annually or annually, at the director's discretion.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in an effort to assist BCS in meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of their elementary students at a time when educational stakeholders are battling the rippling effects of COVID-19. At the time of publication, more than half of all BCS students lived in low-SES households, and all BCS students and educators have been affected by COVID-19. Summative test scores prior to COVID-19 revealed a pattern of low achievement and a parallel between low-SES learners and those not achieving proficiency in reading. My professional experiences as a BCS educator alerted me to an array of social and emotional student needs, motivated educators, and inequitable student and educator access to resources that guide SEL. This research study was conducted to identify and compare the SEL expectations from West Virginia and BCS policies, and to then determine actual

practices and available resources before creating a list of recommendations specific to the needs of BCS students.

The findings of this study show that there are inconsistent SEL offerings across the elementary level of schooling at BCS, which leads to inequitable access to traditional SEL, particularly for the most vulnerable students. Additionally, the findings revealed both strengths and areas for improvement when it comes to SEL in BCS. There are robust programs in place that have the potential to be expanded, which would help close the SEL equity gap among BCS students. Despite two-thirds of surveyed educators choosing to integrate SEL into their personal pedagogy, 50% still feel their students are not receiving the social-emotional support they need to be successful in school. This finding indicates that educators need additional support, resources, and/or guidance to fully integrate quality SEL. Furthermore, the findings identified gaps stemming from emergency response teams in the implementation of the *Handle with Care* program, which should be brought to the attention of the statewide *HWC* director. Finally, a pattern of low reading proficiency scores from BCS students aligns with the multitude of theories that demonstrate low-SES students often struggle to achieve academic proficiency (CASEL, 2020c, Durlak and Mahoney, 2021, Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, and Pollack, 2015). As these studies suggest, making SEL a priority for BCS students will promote their overall social, emotional, and academic success.

Should this study be expanded, it would be beneficial to survey educators and administrators on the number of times they have received a *Handle with Care* notice and to integrate that data with the request for assistance from the *HWC* state director. Additionally, I would recommend that this study be repeated one year after the recommended changes are made by BCS, with the schoolwide SEL facilitators ensuring that each school faculty completes the survey so that data can be compared and analyzed to measure and evaluate program success and progress across BCS.

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Appendix A: Results from Educator Surveys

Findings from Educator Surveys

Made available to 180 educators for 10 consecutive days. Received 43 total responses, with the option to skip individual questions with no penalty.

1. Representation by grade cluster:

2-3: (16) 37.2%
4-5: (12) 27.9%
K-1: (9) 20.9%
Pre-k: (5) 11.6%
Prefer not to respond: (1) 2.3%

2. Does your school have a school-wide SEL program?

I'm not sure: (17) 40.5%
Yes: (15) 35.7%
No: (10) 23.8%

3. Does your school implement a school wide SEL program?

No: (16) 37.2%
I'm not sure: (14) 32.6%
Yes: (13) 30.2%

4. Do you feel SEL is integrated into any of your provided classroom curricula?

Yes: (20) 46.5%
No: (14) 32.6%
I'm not sure: (9) 20.9%

5. Do you purposefully integrate SEL opportunities into your individual style of classroom instruction?

Yes: (29) 67.4%
No: (7) 16.3%
I'm not sure: (6) 14%
I prefer not to respond: (1) 2.3%

6. Are you required by your school administration to document the SEL experiences or progress of your students?

No: (37) 88.1%
Yes, must be documented daily/weekly: (2) 4.8%
Yes, must be documented by nine weeks or semester: (2) 4.8%
I'm not sure: (1) 2.4%

7. During your time as a BCS educator, have you been offered professional development opportunities dedicated to SEL?

No: (16) 38.1%
Yes, and I participated in at least one PD: (13) 31%
I'm not sure: (10) 23.8%
Yes, and I have participated in multiple PDs dedicated to SEL: (2) 4.8%
Yes, but I chose not to attend: (1) 2.4%

8. Do you currently have access to a SEL curriculum or a resource to guide SEL instruction?

- No: (22) 52.4%
- I'm not sure: (10) 23.8%
- Yes, I acquired it myself: (6) 14.3%
- Yes, it was provided by BCS: (4) 9.5%

9. Prior to COVID-19 and remote learning, did your students receive weekly SEL instruction?

- No: (19) 44.2%
- Yes, it was facilitated by a BCS counselor: (16) 37.2%
- Yes, I facilitated the weekly SEL instruction: (5) 11.6%
- I'm not sure: (3) 7%

10. During COVID-19 and remote learning, have your students received weekly SEL instruction?

- No: (23) 53.5%
- I'm not sure: (10) 23.3%
- Yes, it was facilitated by a BCS counselor: (8) 18.6%
- Yes, I facilitated the weekly instruction: (2) 4.7%

11. Have any Social-Emotional needs become more prevalent for your students during COVID-19 and remote learning? If so, what are they?

General Category	Exact phrase	Frequency
Social skills	Regressed social skills	11
	Resolving conflicts	3
	Lack of communication skills	2
	Lack of respect	1
COVID-19	Adapting to COVID-19 safety measures	3
	Isolation / Remote learning	4
	Fear due to COVID-19	5
Lack of SEL instruction	Lack of weekly SEL instruction	2
	Lack of daily access to a counselor	4
Emotions	Withdrawn	8
	Emotionally down	1
	Dealing with loss	2
	Increased stress	1
	Increased concern for health of family members	4
	Trouble accepting constructive criticism	1
	Expressing emotion	10
	Lack of self confidence	3
	Lack of empathy	1
Lack of perseverance	1	
Home Life	Lack of family support during remote learning	9

	Food insecurity	5
	Adverse experiences	15
	Absenteeism	2

12. Which SEL resources do you and/or your students have access to?

- BCS Counselor: (38) 98.5%**
- BCS Psychologist: (15) 37.5%
- School wide curriculum / program: (8) 20%
- Classroom design with SEL: (8) 20%
- Digital curriculum or resources: (6) 15%
- Educators trained in SEL: (5) 12.5%
- Curriculum with integrated SEL: (4) 10%

13. Which resources do you not currently have access to that you feel would be beneficial to you / your students?

- Curriculum with integrated SEL: (22) 61.1%**
- Educators trained in SEL: (19) 52.8%
- School-wide curriculum / program: (17) 47.2%
- Classroom design / management that integrates SEL: (16) 44.4%
- Digital curriculum or resources: (15) 41.7%
- BCS Psychologist: (8) 22.2%
- BCS Counselor: (5) 13.9%

14. Do you feel your students are currently receiving the social and emotional support they need in order to be successful in school?

- No: (21) 50%**
- I'm not sure: (13) 31%
- Yes: (7) 16.7%
- I prefer not to answer: (1) 2.4%

15. Do you feel prepared to meet the social and emotional needs of your students?

- No: (18) 42.9%**
- Yes: (16) 38.1%
- I'm not sure: (8) 19%

16.

Educator Recommendations	Frequency
Consistent, weekly whole group counseling / Increased access to counselors	14
Access to SEL curriculum	2
PD aimed at SEL in low SES communities / Tips on how to integrate SEL	10
Action plan to properly assist students struggling with SEL	3
Daily time allotted exclusively to SEL / integrated in daily curricula	6
Mentor program for students (high school / elementary)	2

Appendix B: Informed Consent for Interview Participants

Interview Participant Informed Consent

Title of study: An Analysis of the Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning Policies in Boone County Schools

Researcher: Jessica Vowell

My name is Jessica Vowell and I am employed by Boone County Schools as a kindergarten teacher at Ashford-Rumble Elementary School. I am also pursuing my master’s degree in international education, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I have designed in order gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation efforts regarding social and emotional learning standards within Boone County Schools. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that may not be clear. If you decide to participate, please indicate your understanding of this form at the bottom of the page.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a single semi-structured interview which will last between 45 and 60 minutes. You may choose not to answer specific questions without penalty or consequence, and you have the right to terminate your participation and withdraw from the study at any time. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams or over the phone at a time of your choosing. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and you will have the opportunity to review, approve, or dispute the transcribed interview before it is used in the final paper of the study.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to completing this interview, and no consequences should you choose not to participate. All participants will be asked, at the bottom of this form, to indicate how they would like to be referred to in the final study. Participants can opt to be referred to by name, pseudonym, or job title. Data collected from the results will be stored in a password-protected location and will only be accessed by me for the purposes of this study. The data will be erased and/or discarded after a time period of five years from the completion of the study and will not be used for purposes other than this study.

Your participation is voluntary, and there are no consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits you are otherwise entitled to should you choose not to participate. This interview opportunity has been extended to you because of your proximity to the SEL policies and practices of Boone County Schools, and your perspective can help provide a more thorough understanding of the social and emotional learning opportunities currently extended to BCS students. If you wish to participate, please indicate your preference on how to be referred to in the final results before electronically signing the form.

“I have read the above and I understand its contents and agree to participate in this survey. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or above.”

_____ I wish to be identified by my own name

_____ I wish to be identified by a pseudonym

_____ I wish to be identified only by my job title

Participant Name: _____

Participant (electronic) Signature _____

Date:

If you have any questions about the content of this page or this study, you may contact Jessica Vowell at: Jessica.vowell@mail.sit.edu, or you can contact Jessica’s academic advisor, Dr. Alla Korzh, at Alla.Korzh@sit.edu

Appendix C: Informed consent for survey participants

Informed Consent for Survey Participants

Title of study: An Analysis of the Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning Policies in Boone County Schools

Researcher: Jessica Vowell

My name is Jessica Vowell and I am an employee of Boone County Schools. I am also pursuing my master's degree in international education, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I have designed in order gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation efforts regarding social and emotional learning (SEL) standards within Boone County Schools. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that may not be clear. If you decide to participate, please indicate your understanding of this form at the bottom of the page.

If you choose to complete the survey, it will take approximately fifteen minutes of your time. You may choose not to answer specific questions, and you have the right to end your participation at any time.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to completing this survey, and no consequences should you choose not to participate. You will not be asked to provide identifying information, and your participation in the survey will be anonymous. Data collected from the results will be stored in a password-protected location and will only be accessed by me. The data will be erased and/or discarded after a time period of five years from the completion of the study, and will only be used for the purpose of this research study.

Your participation is voluntary, and there are no consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits you are otherwise entitled to should you choose not to participate. This survey has been made available to you because of your proximity to the policies and practices of Boone County Schools, and your perspective can help provide a more thorough understanding of the social and emotional learning opportunities currently extended to BCS students. If you wish to participate, please acknowledge the statement below by clicking on the link to the survey, found at the bottom of this page.

“I have read the above and I understand its contents and agree to participate in this survey. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or above.”

[A Closer Look: Social Emotional Learning Survey](#)

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Objective: These questions contribute crucial knowledge to a study designed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of SEL policy implementation within Boone County Elementary Schools and to determine if current SEL practices are producing the outcomes identified in the policies. If these outcomes are being met, what resources and supports are contributing to the successful implementation of these policies? If students are not meeting the desired SEL outcomes, what changes can be made to the implementation of these policies to better educate the students of Boone County Elementary Schools?

1. What are your professional responsibilities within BCS?
2. What are your responsibilities regarding SEL within your school?
3. Are you familiar with the SEL policy in the *Boone County Schools Manual for Expected Behavior*?
 - a. Is student achievement of these standards being measured for students in your school? If so, how? If not, what barriers are preventing SEL from being measured?
 - b. The manual specifies that educators are not responsible for documenting SEL into lesson plans. Are your educators required or encouraged to track or document SEL for students?
4. What resources / programs have been put into place to promote SEL for students in your school?
 - a. Does your school implement a schoolwide SEL program?
 - b. Are teachers encouraged to incorporate SEL into classroom instruction?
 - c. How many BCS counselors do your students have access to?
 - d. How would you describe the professional responsibilities of a BCS counselor in your school?
 - e. Which program(s) would you name as most successful or beneficial to students? What stands out about this program?
 - f. Which program(s) could be improved upon?
5. What challenges have you observed regarding implementing SEL within your school?
6. Who is responsible for implementing SEL opportunities for students in your school?
7. What SEL resources are currently available to your school's:
 - a. Counselors
 - b. Educators
 - c. Administrators
 - d. Students
8. Are there resources your school doesn't currently have access to that you think would be beneficial?
9. During this school year, has your school received grant funds for SEL programs?
10. How do you think COVID-19 will impact the SEL needs of your students?
 - a. Are there plans in place to meet the anticipated needs? If so, what are they? If not, which stakeholders would you involve in the planning process?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding the efforts of your school or BCS regarding the implementation of SEL for elementary students?

Appendix E: Parent-Child Codes from Interview Data

