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**UTILIZATION OF EMPATHY AS A LEARNING TOOL AMONG EDUCATORS AT
KATE BOND ELEMENTARY**

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International Education

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

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Dedication

For my family, both chosen and biological, thank you for standing by me through every personal and professional milestone. This work is a byproduct of your support, and I am forever grateful to you all. To my cohort, with whom I've laughed and cried and read thousands of pages, this is for us, congratulations. To the incredible staff I have had the joy of teaching with, you all have been the greatest educators to learn from. And finally, to my students, I hope you never stop learning. You are entering into a world full of opportunities and I hope you find yourself brave enough to open the doors placed in front of you.

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explores the opinions and experiences of a group of six educators at Kate Bond Elementary in Memphis, Tennessee. This research examines how these educators utilize empathy as a teaching tool, how they choose to implement social-emotional learning into their classrooms, and how their own educational histories impact their current teaching practices. Data collection spanned four weeks and consisted of six interviews. The findings suggest that empathy not only plays a role in education but is, for this group of educators, inseparable from the academic learning they facilitate in their classrooms. The educators interviewed in this study called attention to the ways in which they are able to turn a challenging moment into a teachable opportunity, spoke about the relationships both they and their students have with guidance staff at the school, and acknowledged the lasting impacts that social-emotional learning has had on their students. This research provides insight into how teacher-student relationships guide education and the importance of utilizing a social-emotional learning curriculum.

Keywords: education, elementary educators, empathy, social-emotional learning

Terminology and Abbreviations

KBE - Kate Bond Elementary

The school site where this research is situated.

MLL - Multilingual Learner

A student who is multilingual.

PRIDE – Positive attitude, Respect for all, Integrity, Discipline, strive for Excellence

This school-based acronym and motto are used as a guiding phrase for student behavior. This is referred to throughout the research as the PRIDE principals, or PRIDE.

SEL - Social Emotional Learning

Learning that is specifically focused on growing a student's social and emotional skills. This learning is not standards-based.

SPED – Specialized Education

Students with physical or intellectual disabilities may receive specialized education services.

TCAP - Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program

Beginning in third grade, students take a series of annual TCAP exams. These tests are used as a statewide metric of academic readiness and achievement.

Introduction

Educators have the potential to greatly impact their students. This influence has the potential to touch all realms of a student's life including their social and academic growth. This research sought to obtain a deeper understanding of how educators impact their students, specifically how educators describe and experience the intersection of empathy and education. A key goal of this work was to understand how educators see this intersection at play in their classrooms and to reflect upon the ways they influence their students through daily interactions. Reflecting on how empathy is being used as a social and academic strategy may equip educators to be better stewards of education for their students. Tomlinson and Murphy (2018) lead their research with an overarching assumption that is important to maintain throughout this work - "Teachers seek to do well for the young people they teach". The goal of this investigation was not to call attention to pedagogical flaws, but to highlight the important role that educators play in the lives of students.

Elementary school is a large portion of compulsory education in the United States. Students spend six years between kindergarten and fifth grade learning how to read and write, how to be a part of society, how to manage stress alongside other emotions, and how to build social relationships. Students attend schools where they spend upwards of eight hours a day working and learning. People surrounding students, both peers and school staff, can greatly impact their lives. This study specifically explored the ways in which first-grade and third-grade educators at Kate Bond Elementary in Memphis, Tennessee, show empathy to students in their classrooms. This study explored whether educators see those interactions as having lasting impacts on classroom culture and student success.

The first step to creating a more equitable world is understanding the world as it currently exists. Through my current role as an elementary school teacher (4th grade ESL), I have observed a gap between the expectations set for students and the ways students are emotionally supported in schools. This school year (2023-2024) was my third year teaching in the Memphis Shelby County School system. In my three years working at Kate Bond Elementary, I taught a mix of fourth and fifth-grade students who qualified for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Understanding how educators view empathy within the classroom is key to understanding how to create more equitable, welcoming, and engaging learning environments.

Memphis Shelby County Schools is the largest school district in Tennessee and as of 2022 enrollment data, was among the largest in the United States (NCES, 2022). Gaining an understanding of the teaching practices currently being utilized by a small sample of its teachers may show trends among educators or highlight shared experiences educators have had with students. These themes may shed light on the ways intentionally incorporating empathy into the classroom has impacted students in positive or negative ways, ultimately adding to the larger conversation of how to provide quality foundational education while also supporting social-emotional learning. Knowing how school culture is impacted by student and educator use of empathy may shed light on the unique ways empathy plays a role in one community in Memphis, Tennessee.

Literature Review

Educators are tasked with many roles beyond their work educating students. Part of this extension of responsibilities is the responsibility of teaching students social-emotional skills and preparing them to be successful as humans outside of their academic capacity. Building social skills and utilizing empathy have been studied in many different settings that will be explored

here for the purpose of understanding how to best understand the implementation of SEL and utilization of empathy at one Tennessee elementary school. Here within, empathy will be defined and explored. Research will be investigated that is centered on understanding how the choices educators make influence their students. Taking into consideration the many ways that educators are trained will be a secondary focus of the literature review, as professional development opportunities may have lasting impacts on educators and the way they interact with students. Finally, understanding how educators impact their students is a key portion of this section. An exploration of empathy as a teaching and learning tool will bring a practical application to framing this study.

Understanding Empathy

It is important to clearly define empathy for the basis of this research, as that definition guided questions asked to research participants and did impacted the findings of this research. In the context of working toward more empathetic school settings, Tomlinson and Murphy (2018) define empathy as “seeking to both understand a person's condition from their perspective and understand the needs of others, with the aim of acting to make a difference in responding to those needs or building on the positives”. This definition works well within an education setting, as it takes into account the feelings and experiences of a single student while also accounting for others involved in the situation, may it be other students, staff, or family members related to the student. Furthermore, as noted by Leung et al. (2020) “empathy is a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses both cognitive and affective components” and should be assessed and understood as more than a solely emotional concept (p.149).

Classroom Culture

In a recent study centered on understanding how trauma-informed teacher training opportunities had lasting classroom impact, Anderson (et al., 2022) found that many educators who created safe and comfortable spaces in their classrooms saw students use these spaces to practice emotional self-regulation. Beyond the physical space, Anderson (et al., 2022) went on to report how "having a designated time each week for students to relax and reflect allowed them the opportunity to explore their internal worlds, so they could learn to respond differently to their external circumstances" (p.190).

In a mixed-methods study, researchers (Keyser et al., 2022) examined student responses to the different exercises and activities based on the pedagogy of "real talk". Although conducted on a collegiate level with students far beyond elementary age, there are parallels that might be able to speak to the environment an educator can create through honest and open communication with students, regardless of student age. Keyser et al. (2022) found that "students felt faculty had created a positive atmosphere, treated them with respect, had seen them as individuals, and cared about each individual as a person." and continued by saying, "what was true of the individual was also true of the group: students felt strongly that their peers were respected and that all voices could be heard. Moreover, strong and statistically significant correlations existed between these measurements of students' individual and collective experiences of the classroom and their sense that the learning environment was inclusive, while similar correlations existed between these measurements and the sense that they and their peers could express their ideas" (p.9). This data strongly suggests that how educators choose to interact with students does in fact impact a student's sense of personal belonging in the classroom and respect for their learning environment.

Empathy as a Goal and Tool

A 2018 study focused on 54 fifth-grade students in Korea, in schools where bullying and school violence had become pervasive issues. The researchers set out to understand what role an empathy-based learning model might play in terms of students' empathy for their peers and their academic achievement (Lee et. al., 2018). A major takeaway from this study was the positive impacts of intentionally including socio-emotional lessons in the school curriculum, specifically in a social studies classroom. Over the span of 12 classes, students in the classes where the empathy-based lessons were taught showed higher understandings of cognitive empathy with their peers and teachers, as scored by their post-test data. The teacher leading these lessons commented on how they observed the students having a greater ability to relate to historical people, as well as having empathy for their peers. This study (Lee et. al., 2018) highlighted the ability of students to grow their interpersonal skills and utilize empathy in both personal and academic ways.

In a quasi-experimental study involving 112 fifth and sixth-grade students from a selection of three private schools in Philadelphia, researchers Reid & Razza (2021) sought to understand how the practice of yoga may be used to grow empathy and perspective among adolescents. The implementation of a mindful yoga program was used to examine the socioemotional competence and overall resilience of students. Although the intervention of yoga did not show large differences in levels of students' understanding and use of empathy, the study did find that promoting conversations and intentional focus on empathy may have led students to be more aware of their actions and impacts on others (Reid & Razza, 2021).

Educator Influence on Students

A 2022 article entitled *Creating Safe Classroom Learning Spaces for Students Living in Urban Areas of Poverty* highlighted the impact of trauma-informed professional development for teachers in an urban, K–8, Title I public schools. One major takeaway was that “as teachers came to understand the external factors affecting their students’ actions and reactions in the classroom, they began to respond in a more trauma-sensitive manner. They gained insight into how their responses could lessen or exacerbate student stress” (Anderson et al., 2022, p.191). This study focused on the teachers and their interactions with students after receiving these trainings. Many of the teachers reported during interviews that they felt “more empathetic towards the students” (p.189), and noticed how many students are “putting all this stuff on their little shoulders”. One educator called attention to safe spaces they had created in their classroom, highlighting how important “a place to think about some of their feelings” (p.190) was for many students. The study goes on to highlight other tools like breathing exercises as ways to help create better environments for students and emphasizes how the educators ultimately felt more connected to their students after providing these spaces.

Recent research (Irvin et al., 2011) suggests that in many low-income schools, the most influential factors linked to student motivation and achievement were their school and their teacher. Furthermore, Miller et al. (2005) found that students who attended low-income schools can greatly benefit from an emotionally focused curriculum. The research of Miller et al. highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and teaching these skills as early as kindergarten, as the findings highlighted student’s ability to recognize and name a wide range of emotions. The study found that “emotion knowledge was related to children’s peer social status and self-reported negative experiences with peers in school” (p.645) and “that emotion

knowledge skills are related to more effective social functioning in this low-income population” (p.647). Students who were explicitly taught how to recognize and name emotions were then more socially successful in those academic settings (Miller et al., 2005).

Implementation of Social-Emotional Curriculum Practices

A study (Jomma et al, 2023) based in Ontario, Canada explored teachers’ perceptions of SEL curriculum as their perceptions of the SEL content related to their willingness and ability to deliver the content effectively. Participants in this study expressed strong needs for schoolwide support when SEL programs were school-mandated. Support of school administration helped to promote SEL practices in both academic and non-academic ways. The study explained that the educators providing SEL lessons all believed the content they were teaching had positive impacts on students (Jomma et al, 2023). This study specifically highlights the connection between student-teacher relationships, and a student’s willingness to make mistakes in front of that teacher. Two teachers from the study reported that their students “were not afraid of making mistakes in front of peers and the teacher” and three teachers then went on to report their shared belief that “a basic condition for the teaching of SEL in the classroom involved establishing a strong student-teacher relationship, which improves when trust is built and support is provided by the teacher” (Jomma et al., 2023, p. 24).

Kaspar and Massey (2022) reviewed a series of research and journal articles to gain an understanding of the current implementation practices of SEL education for the purpose of being able to make recommendations for improved practice strategies. In their analysis, Kaspar and Massey (2022) highlighted the reality of SEL in the United States and how reliant educators are on organizations outside of their schools to provide resources focused specifically on social-

emotional learning. Kaspar and Massey also speak to the importance of the role school administrators play in implementing SEL on a school campus.

Theoretical Framework

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the manners through which students gain social, emotional, and behavioral skills. SEL is the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes that help us to understand ourselves, connect with others, achieve our goals, and support our communities (CASEL n.d.a).

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL n.d.a) developed five areas of competence for healthy self-development on a personal and community level. These five core competencies of SEL are laid out as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These five pillars of SEL are key to creating a lasting understanding of personal and social growth. The CASEL framework explains that SEL can be taught both directly and indirectly.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that learning is an active process occurring in a social context. Bandura goes on to explain how people are influenced by their environment and that learning often occurs as a series of observations of those around us. Bandura rejected notions that humans are agents of free will, and instead sought to understand the origins of human actions and interactions (Bandura, 1977). Social Learning Theory proposes that human behavior is made up of a series of reflections and internalizations of the actions and patterns people see around themselves. This connects directly to this research due to the implication of teacher modeling and influence over students. Social Learning Theory explains that teachers may be a guiding influence over their students due to their time spent with students and their leadership role in the classroom. In his book *Social Foundations of Thought and*

Action: A Social Cognitive Theory (1986), Bandura explains how humans respond to a plethora of visual, verbal, and social cues to formulate their own behavior patterns. Children experience an array of cues and assess the situation to formulate their behavior.

Research Design

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to researcher interest in the experiences of educators and their students, qualitative research methods were utilized in this study. A phenomenological approach was determined to be best suited for this study because of the core focus of understanding the experiences of participants in this specific school location. Phenomenological research allowed for a deep understanding of participants' experiences through interviews and storytelling. This line of inquiry was best for this research due to the vast differences in personal and professional experiences that were present among the participant group of educators. Stolz (2022) noted how "there has been a notable increase in the use of phenomenology as a research method, particularly in educational research" and attributed this to the particular ways in which phenomenology allows unique and individualized responses to be captured as part of a larger research narrative. Each participant had unique answers to the prompts regarding empathy and education and an interview allowed for the most detailed responses and allowed for them to be captured in a casual and conversational manner. There was a narrative element to the research, as well, due to the nature of the interview guide (Appendix A). Many of the interview questions provided opportunities for participants to share stories and expand on their answers when and if they felt comfortable.

Each member of the current first-grade and third-grade teaching staff at Kate Bond Elementary, including the two grade-level ESL teachers, were invited to participate in the study.

Of the thirteen people invited to participate, six educators chose to participate in the study. Each consenting participant was then invited to a one-on-one interview using the questions outlined in Appendix A. The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software. Then, Dedoose was utilized to code the collected interview data by identifying themes across interviewees' responses.

The purpose of the interview was for the researcher to gain an understanding of the educator's views on empathy and how they incorporate and utilize empathy in their classrooms. The interview questions in Appendix A were intentionally written in an open-ended format "as to not limit the views of participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.133). Interviews had an average length of fifteen minutes. The brevity of the interviews was not intentional but did have many positive impacts on data collection. Educators stayed on topic, focusing solely on empathy rather than exploring other themes they may feel passionate about as well. The topic of the interview was clear, and all slated questions were asked and answered.

Ethical Considerations and Participant Recruitment

Throughout the research process, ethical integrity was maintained in many ways. First and foremost, clear communication with all participants throughout the entirety of the research was a key component. As the current 4th grade ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher at the school, I needed to be aware of the friendships and professional relationships I had within the school and how these relationships may have impacted the validity of my research. At the time of this research, I worked most closely with the fourth and fifth-grade teams, due to my role as a service provider for those students. During the 2023 – 2024 academic year, I worked directly with the fourth-grade team to plan lessons, address parent concerns, and manage behavior issues. In previous years at the school, I worked closely with the fifth-grade team in similar ways. Due

to close physical proximity to my classroom, I saw the second-grade team teachers multiple times a day. As a result, I had formed relationships with these grade-level teams that reached beyond a solely professional relationship. For these reasons, I decided not to include second-, fourth-, or fifth-grade team members in this research and instead chose to invite the first and third-grade level teams to participate. These teams are made up of staff members with whom I was familiar but have very limited professional or personal interactions.

Upon consent, participants were prompted to sign an authorized consent form. All participants were then provided pseudonyms to be used in the findings reports of the research to protect the identities of the participants.

Participants

Study Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Years Teaching	Current Grade Level
Teacher 1	43	17 years	First Grade
Teacher 2	29	7 years	Third Grade
Teacher 3	52	30 years	Third Grade
Teacher 4	28	1 year	Third Grade
Teacher 5	52	31 years	Third Grade
Teacher 6	25	3 years	Third Grade

Five of the six educators were part of the third-grade teaching team; the other participant was part of the first-grade team. The participants had a wide variation in years of experience and age, as noted in the table above. Although gender is not noted nor used as an identifying factor for any educators in this survey, she/her pronouns have been utilized throughout the findings report to address all six teachers, regardless of the true gender of the participant.

Credibility of Data

Many efforts to maintain credibility were used throughout the research process. Detailed records of all participant communications were stored in an online document within the School for International Training (SIT) Office 360 cloud server. All documents pertaining to this work were stored similarly including audio recordings of interviews, transcriptions of interviews, participant consent forms, and ultimately all writing related to the findings of the research. Participants were provided with transcripts of their interviews within five business days of recording so that they were able to approve or edit them, depending on their personal preference. This process of member checking helped to ensure that participants felt as though their responses and intentions were portrayed accurately. Participants were notified both verbally and in writing that they had complete autonomy over their transcripts and were allowed to strike comments from the record, should they feel it necessary. Participants were given three business days to approve their transcripts. Any modifications were met with a 24-hour return.

Limitations

Interviewing a small subset of teachers may produce themes or trends that were not generalizable to the whole school, or comparable to any other group of teachers. This is solely a snapshot of first-grade and third-grade teachers at Kate Bond Elementary during the 2023 - 2024 school year.

It is important to address the general school climate during the spring semester of 2024 at Kate Bond Elementary. In March, a staff member unexpectedly passed away. The death of this colleague impacted many people at the school. This and other school site events contributed to a culture shift that may account for participants' lack of interest in the study which led to a shift from a potential of 13 participants to a final 6 participants.

Researcher Positionality

As a fourth-grade English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at Kate Bond Elementary during the time of this research, I had a vested interest in the success and happiness of students at the school and the overall well-being of the school. This may bias me toward wanting to show the school in a positive light, although I worked to craft an unbiased interview guide that would allow educators a chance to speak openly about their past and current experiences in education and their personal lives.

As someone who did not grow up in Memphis and who has only lived in the region for three years, it is important to note that there may have been regional cultural differences I was unaware of in terms of education and student-teacher relationships. The internal social roles of a school can greatly impact what someone is willing to share and for that reason, I aimed to approach these interviews as an unbiased person, not searching for any causal relationship but only documenting and analyzing the observations of educators as told via their experiences and stories.

Findings

The six educators interviewed span decades of professional experience; the newest teacher is in her first year of teaching while the most experienced educator is in her thirty-first year of teaching. Every year of teaching brings with it a plethora of new relationships, situations, relationships, and lessons learned. Many themes arose across the six interviewees that highlight each of these interpersonal aspects of education. Educators spoke about the emotional influence they felt they had on their students, memories from their time in elementary school, and expressed a desire for increased support from their school community when providing SEL education. All six of the teachers interviewed identified multiple ways through which they

incorporate SEL content into the day-to-day lives of their classrooms. Every teacher felt passionate about the inseparability of emotional learning from academic learning. Three teachers expressed feeling a lack of support from their schools' administration when utilizing time to effectively teach SEL content. Every teacher was able to identify a moment when their personal feelings directly impacted a student and felt comfortable sharing those moments for the purpose of this research. Four major themes were identified across all six interviews. Teachers provided examples of their ability to turn a moment of chaos into a teachable moment for their students, addressed the indivisible nature of empathy and education, spoke to the support or lack thereof they felt from internal school administration, and finally, each educator spoke to SEL content leaving a lasting positive impact on their students.

Utilization of Chaos and Empathy: Opportunity for Behavior Modeling

A theme that arose across four of the interviews was the idea of a teachable moment. Educators reported that what they found most effective in terms of teaching SEL content, were moments of disruption in the classroom where they were able to model behaviors. While talking about her students and how they are always paying attention to what is going on around them Teacher 2 explained how her students are observing her at all times, “they're watching and listening to everything we say everything we do, how we communicate with other students, how we talk to our coworkers and peers” (Teacher 2, 2024). These teacher observations align with the work of Bandura (1977) who emphasized the influence actions have over people and especially children. As Bandura suggested, the students are being influenced by adult behavior and are copying many aspects of what they are seeing.

Teacher 2 went on to describe her students playing at recess – a commonality addressed by three other teachers, - explaining how occasionally, students will get into verbal disputes over

a game of soccer. She explained how her students will utilize ‘I feel’ statements they’ve learned from SEL lessons. Teacher 2 went on to express how her students copy her interactions with other staff, explaining how “they definitely see how we talk to one another and are playful and I think you know, certain situations, they are copying what they see”. Teacher 4 echoed this sentiment, saying how her students “pick up on all of our behaviors”.

Teacher 5 spoke about a year where she had one student with specified behavioral needs and how this impacted her class. This student would often have outbursts in front of other students. These interactions allowed the educator to explain empathy to her students while modeling calm conflict resolution and stress management to her class.

For example, last year, I had a particular student who was on a behavior plan, and who had outbursts and threw desks. And eventually, like, that's when I definitely had to talk about empathy with my kids, because they had to realize that the way this child was behaving wasn't exactly normal compared to the average third grader. And so a lot of times, you have to use experiences in your room to just use that as a teaching moment. And so I had to use that as a teaching moment a lot with my students. And it was hard sometimes especially ... Look, we know that, you know, this child is behaving this way, we're not sure what goes on at home with this child. (Teacher 5, 2024).

Explaining external circumstances students are experiencing was a helpful tool for teacher 1, as well. Teacher 1 recalled a specific interaction between two of her students, one of whom was a multilingual learner (MLL) working to learn English, and the other was a student fluent in English. The Spanish-speaking student was shy and closed off due to lacking English language fluency. Teacher 1 explained how the English-speaking student would go out of her way to include the Spanish-speaking child and speak to him slowly so he may better understand

–“he's able to hear that and model the language. And I think when students see you being kind and understanding to friends like I have a friend that doesn't speak English, and I think they get so excited, they're like, you know, this student understood everything I was saying on the playground, and they get so excited.” Teacher 1 explained how this interaction was just an example of one moment in her classroom that exemplifies a positive culture; “And so I just love that there is that, you know, understanding and just excitement when our friends are learning, and when our friends are understanding”.

Classrooms are spaces for academic learning, but all six teachers interviewed were able to identify specific moments where, intentionally or not, social-emotional learning took a leading role in the classroom. Being able to take a challenging or frustrating moment and model behaviors for students was a shared point of strength among these six educators.

Empathy and Education

When asked to describe the intersection of empathy and education as they see it in their classroom, every educator interviewed expressed an inseparable bond between the two. All six educators at Kate Bond agreed that it was impossible to separate the academic and emotional needs of students and that effective classrooms incorporated both emotional and academic learning. Teacher 2 expressed how, for many students, safety and learning, go hand in hand; “if they're not feeling safe, and they're not knowing how to, you know, express, or communicate that or even just to talk to you or a friend, then they're really not focused on learning.” Teacher 3 provided a clear and concise answer that sums up the sentiments of all participants, saying “I feel like that you can't educate without empathy.” Education and empathy are indivisible from one another.

Teacher 5 addressed students copying behaviors they've learned outside of the classroom and how those impact classroom culture. Speaking specifically to a trend she saw among some students of speaking negatively to each other, she said "because for a lot of them, I feel like they that's the norm sometimes they, they see people cutting people down and they see it on TV, and they see it done at home. And then so that's all they know. And I think that that's okay" and went on to attribute this modeling to a rise in the usage of technology and access to cell phones at a young age.

Teacher 1 saw the overlap of education and empathy manifest most tangibly in vocabulary-building exercises she does with her students. Teacher 1 explained how she works to intentionally model social-emotional language in class, encouraging her students to "use other words other than happy" when expressing their feelings or needs. Teacher 1 explained further how the relationships she has built with her students have had lasting impacts throughout the school year – "if you're a hard worker, and you go above and beyond for your students, your kids will go above and beyond for you" (Teacher 1, 2024).

Teacher 6 described empathy and education as going "hand in hand" because "if I don't have empathy towards them, they won't want to respond in class because they won't they feel like they can make mistakes. They need to feel like they can make mistakes." (Teacher 6). Students being able to make mistakes in front of their teachers was also a key takeaway found by a team of researchers in 2023, (Jomma et al.) who studied teachers' perceptions of SEL curriculum and the impacts those SEL lessons had on their students. For students, being able to actively participate in the learning cycle of practicing, failing, trying again, and ultimately working toward success is crucial. All six of the teachers interviewed spoke to the necessary nature of forming relationships with students.

Teachers at Kate Bond Elementary are prescribed a series of academic and social-emotional curricula to utilize throughout the year, based on the content they are expected to deliver. The truth that these interviews highlight is that education is not only enhanced by empathy but that when the two are utilized together, lasting positive impacts are seen among the students. These six educators at Kate Bond seems to agree that education is enriched when it is practiced in tandem with empathy.

School Support, Administration, and Guidance Staff

Multiple educators at Kate Bond Elementary expressed concerns about their students' access to guidance counselors and other emotional support staff at the school. Five teachers reported that their students had visited the guidance counselor fewer than three times throughout the year. Teacher 5 reported her students have only visited their guidance counselor once this year and went on to explain her feelings toward the lack of relationship between guidance staff and the students - "I'm surprised that they even know the guidance counselor's name, they definitely don't have a relationship with her. And she definitely does not provide SEL lessons for them at all, and that's a missed opportunity". This theme of frustration was reinforced by Teacher 5 who spoke to her students' interactions with the guidance counselor explaining how her students enjoy going to guidance but lack frequent opportunities to do so.

They enjoy going to guidance classes, but they don't happen very often because our guidance counselors are so swamped and so busy, but the kids really like going to guidance, and I feel like in guidance is when they can touch more and bounce off of these SEL lessons sometimes better than we can because that's their expertise, you know. And so I almost wish that there will be more opportunities for them to go to guidance than

there are but I get it because we have so many meetings and stuff but anyway, that's just my two cents. (Teacher 5, 2024)

Teacher 5 continued and spoke about the efficiency and impact guidance staff at the school has had on her students, saying that her students “enjoy guidance classes” and that “in guidance is when they can touch more and bounce off of these SEL lessons sometimes better than we can because that's their expertise” (Teacher 5, 2024).

At Kate Bond Elementary, two guidance counselors serve the entire student body and this may account for the infrequent appearances. This research did not explore the professional roles or limitations of the guidance staff.

Positive Lasting Impact of SEL

Teachers across the board expressed how SEL lessons have had lasting positive impacts in their classrooms. Three teachers reported students using specific techniques learned within lessons, such as positive self-talk, encouraging peers, and conflict resolution.

Teacher 2 spoke about her experience with students and their hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954), explaining that “you can't come to school, and learn if you haven't had a breakfast, or if you are upset about what's going on at home, because your mind is not on knowing fractions” or learning in general, but that being able “build that relationship with kids” is crucial “so when you when they come in, you know, something's off” and the students feel safe enough to share with the teacher.

The CASEL framework that influences many SEL curriculums focuses on providing students with the skills they need to develop and maintain self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL 2023). The

teachers interviewed at Kate Bond Elementary were able to identify moments of growth for their students in many of the core competencies CASEL focuses on.

Conclusions

Understanding that educators want and need more support when it comes to emotionally educating their students can help to influence future curriculum design, educational practices, and student outcomes. Schools may be able to successfully implement SEL curriculum, but teachers may feel overwhelmed by the added responsibility. Showing educator support for SEL content and lessons but being realistic about time constraints and other barriers to delivery may create opportunities for new support roles within the school. At Kate Bond specifically, this data may support the expansion of the guidance staff or may influence a higher frequency in scheduled visits to the guidance staff for the students.

A certain level of intentionality seems to be required in every student-facing moment, and while this may seem obvious, remembering the power of modeling stress management and conflict resolution may be helpful for educators. The data collected from this survey may be further utilized as a snapshot of how educators are feeling supported by school staff and may generate improvements to school culture and teacher workload.

Future research could take place on a much larger scale, perhaps over a longer period of time. Tracking the opinions of teachers throughout the school year may better capture the effectiveness of a certain SEL curriculum. Providing educators with spaces like staff meetings or monthly check-in meetings to solely focus on SEL content and student perception of the topics being discussed may help to promote a school culture fully present in and focused on SEL learning.

Educators at Kate Bond Elementary agree on the importance of teaching non-academic skills to their students. All six of the teachers interviewed highlighted this importance. Knowing that teachers value the implementation and utilization of empathy and other SEL skills is key to building better SEL curriculum in the future. Knowing that these educators see empathy as a tool for creating more equitable, kind, and smoothly run classrooms shows that students are learning much more than solely academics at school and that educators are playing a key role in social-emotional development of their students. Education has evolved and now encompasses teaching much more than strictly academic lessons. Students are, and perhaps have always been, copying the behaviors their teachers exhibit. Utilizing these interactions through an SEL curriculum may help to give students social skills that would be beneficial for a lifetime.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Personal Background

1. Please state your name, age, and current professional role.
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Have you taught a grade other than third? If so, would you briefly expand on your previous teaching experience?
4. Have you participated in any professional development or other trainings that have focused on empathy or building student relationships? If yes, please explain.

Education and Empathy

5. Outside of core curriculum instruction, what are some of the non-academic skills you think it is important for students to learn while part of your classroom?
6. For this research, empathy is defined as “seeking to both understand a person's condition from their perspective and understand the needs of others, with the aim of acting to make a difference in responding to those needs or building on the positives,” as laid out in Tomlinson and Murphy (2018). Do you agree with this definition? How would you personally define empathy?
7. Outside of the once-weekly Social Emotional Lessons (SEL) mandated by the school district, what other SEL content do you incorporate into your classroom, if any? If you’re able, please provide an example of a specific lesson or teaching tool you’ve utilized recently.
8. Please describe an instance where you feel as though your personal mood or feelings impacted a student.
9. To what extent do you believe educators have the ability to influence their students through empathy and emotional regulation?

10. If you've modeled any of the behaviors or tools you've taught during SEL lessons, do you see students treat each other using those techniques or phrases you've used? In other words, do students treat each other the way they see you treat them?
11. Is there a specific memory from your time in elementary where a teacher either did or did not show empathy for you that has stuck with you? If so, please elaborate to the extent you feel comfortable.

How would you describe the intersection of empathy and education as you see it in your classroom?