

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON CULTIVATING EMPOWERING ATTRIBUTES  
THAT PROMOTE SUCCESSFUL LIVING IN GRADUATES OF A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL  
LEARNING PROGRAM

by

Diran Linta Cowell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal the empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community as described through the lived experiences of individuals who have completed a social-emotional learning program. The central research question, “What experiences in social-emotional learning impact the behaviors of individuals who have completed SEL programs?”, is developed to gather the lived experiences that describe how SEL influences the conduct of various people. This study is guided by Bandura’s social learning theory, which focuses on the significance of observing, emulating, and modeling attitudes and actions of others to impact human behavior. This concept relates to social-emotional learning through the SEL programs’ emphasis on promoting diversity, increasing skill in managing emotions, goal setting, and making responsible decisions. Various perceptions of the participants’ experiences will be collected in interviews, focus groups, and a document analysis. These descriptions will be assembled through a thematic analysis to determine the patterns and similarities of the individuals’ views and attitudes regarding their participation in social-emotional learning programs.

*Keywords:* self-reflection, social-awareness, observance, motivation, imitation, modeling

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### **Dedication**

I am dedicating this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without our Heavenly Father, this journey would be impossible to conquer. Also, I dedicate this to my lovely wife, Dr. Marquetta-Monique Cowell and our two beautiful daughters, True and Reign; to my mother, Valerie Cowell, who I forever desire to make proud through my diligence and accomplishments; and to my dad and my stepmother, Tiran and Glinner Wilson. To my beloved family and friends, you know who you are, and I sincerely thank you. Lastly, to my organization, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, we are continuing to exemplify the cardinal principles of manhood, scholarship, perseverance and uplift through sincere love, peace, and happiness.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Learning Theory (SLT)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)



## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

This transcendental phenomenological study is conducted to reveal the empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community for graduates who have completed a social-emotional learning program. This chapter includes an overview and background information providing relevant literature about the research problem's historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The problem and purpose statements are included to focus on the intentions of the study, which highlight SEL graduates' lived experiences that are linked to their life achievements. Furthermore, the significance of the study, research questions, and applicable terms are provided.

### **Background**

The background of this study consists of historical, social, and theoretical contexts that highlight empowering attributes that are fostered in SEL programs to promote successful living. Social-emotional learning programs have served as a series of measures that are utilized to empower youth and adults with effective coping strategies that enable them to increase their abilities to develop respectful learning environments (Beaty, 2018; Yeager, 2017). Creating positive situations based on responsible decision-making, managing emotions, and achieving goals epitomizes CASEL's (2021) focus on social and emotional growth. A plethora of research exists regarding the effectiveness and relative concerns of social-emotional learning, but there is limited evidence regarding the experience of social-emotional learning programs as described by individuals who have completed them. Yeager (2017) expressed that SEL programs that focus primarily on mindset and climate are productive, but how would individuals who have

participated in the rigorous activities of the program and proceeded until its end date narrate what they have encountered?

Diversity and inclusion have been promoted in social and emotional learning programs in schools and districts to ensure equity and fairness (CASEL, 2021; Rowe & Trickett, 2017) but there are other relative concerns that impact student achievement. Those students may face challenges such as poverty, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and other traumatic experiences which may develop into anger, undesirable behaviors, and issues with social and emotional development (CReducation.org, 2021; Tate, 2019). Students who participate in social-emotional programs can work with related services providers such as therapists, social workers, school, and clinical psychologist to reflect on their challenging behaviors and work on strengthening their skills in self-management, responsible decision making, and other areas to foster their growth and development (CASEL, 2021; Tate, 2019).

### **Historical Context**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) originated in 380 B.C. through Plato's *The Republic* (Beaty, 2018). Based on Plato's philosophy, character development is a necessity in education. Cultivating empathy, optimism, and self-sufficiency in students is paramount in human betterment and producing humane citizens (Bandura, 2019; Beaty, 2018). These notable characteristics contribute to student achievement by increasing dependence and self-belief of students. During the early 1990s, social-emotional learning surfaced from a meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute, which elaborated on the positive development of children (Beaty, 2018; Borowski, 2019). In 1994, social-emotional learning objectives were beginning to be implemented into classrooms to support students' success in core content and not to replace those subjects (CASEL, 2021). In 21st century education, social and emotional learning has been

considered the missing piece to ensure accountability toward meeting the learning needs of all students (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

To educate the whole student, explicit instruction in social-emotional learning has been embedded into both mainstream and inclusion classrooms to support the problematic behaviors of students (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). By the early 2000s, controversies had arisen because social-emotional learning was deemed to have a one size fits all approach, to which many experts and practitioners were in opposition (Bailey et al., 2019). When teachers can differentiate and tailor social-emotional learning assignments to what benefits their students, the curriculum is supported; this enables the monitoring process to be more meaningful (CASEL, 2021; Rowe & Trickett, 2017). Recently, it has been confirmed that social-emotional learning is not psychotherapy or a method of replacing parenting, but an emphasis on building and sustaining cooperative relationships with peers and authority figures at home, school and in the community (CASEL, 2021; Tate, 2019).

Based on Education Week's (2021) assessment, 74% of teachers, principals, and central office education administrators report that social-emotional learning is taught in their schools, and 26% admit that SEL is not being taught. It is acknowledged that students who attend effective SEL schools achieve more academically and are better prepared for life than moderately productive SEL schools (CASEL, 2021). This is evidence that SEL programs' focus on educating the whole student is paramount to promoting successful living at home, in school, and in the community.

### **Social Context**

Educating the whole child through social-emotional development has become popularized in education for various reasons (Tate, 2019). School-based and district wide social-

emotional learning programs are centered around promoting diversity to ensure educational and social justice to all students by supporting vital components outside the classroom that impact academic achievement (Haymovitz et al., 2017; Jagers et al, 2019; Stillman et al., 2017).

Engaging students, involving parents, and developing activities that are linked to the real lives of individuals and that cultivate an inclusive, action-oriented, and learner-centered classroom epitomizes the social-emotional learning approach (Stillman et al., 2017; Yang et.al., 2018).

Based on Brotto's (2018) study, students with challenging behaviors will encounter memorable experiences in SEL classrooms. Increasing the social-emotional growth of teachers, students, and parents has been acknowledged as an avenue toward increasing school wide assessments due to the sense of belongingness and inclusiveness that is cultivated in an SEL climate, which represents social-awareness (CASEL, 2021). In addition, cooperative learning, paired and grouped assignments, and other activities that encourage social engagement and teamwork support relationship-building and responsible decision-making skills because of the opportunity to solve problems and to identify challenges (CASEL, 2021; Olive et al., 2020).

In comparison to students who do not participate in social-emotional learning, students who attend SEL programs demonstrate positive results in social and emotional growth in skills, attitudes, academic achievement, and significantly reduced levels of emotional and behavior problems (Mahoney et al, 2018). The long-term effects of social-emotional learning are developed through positive change, which is linked to teaching strategies that contribute to resilience and address the meta-analyses of attitudes, emotional distresses, academic performances, and positive social behaviors (Mahoney et al., 2018). Social-emotional learning skills are inevitably linked to those combinations of adaptability that reduce many of the hindrances that impact student achievement. For instance, attention control is strengthened

through social-emotional learning activities such as tasks that relate to following directives and time management which prioritize self-discipline (McCormick et al, 2020; CASEL, 2021).

Within the population of students who possess behavior problems, other deficits such as poor executive functioning, hyperactivity and inattentiveness are addressed through reinforcement of self-management strategies that regulate impulse control and promote organization skills and self-discipline while participating in social-emotional learning (Alzahrani et al., 2019; CASEL, 2021).

### **Theoretical Context**

SEL programs focus on increasing the confidence of individuals to effectively implement relationship skills, responsible decision-making ability, self-management, social awareness, and self-awareness competency (CASEL, 2021). Exploring what empowers SEL graduates to successfully live academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community will enable SEL programs to focus on its cultivating attributes. People behave in the way that they do for various reasons that are explained and conceptualized (Bandura, 1969, 2019). Being motivated to observe and imitate to avoid modeling the undesirable behaviors of others, to better oneself or to acknowledge someone's actions by duplicating or demonstrating the behaviors, self-reflection and purposefulness are needed to promote positive changes in behavior (Bandura, 1977; Cherry, 2019; Kumar, 2018). Bandura (1977) commented on how observing others does not guarantee change in behavior, which is why mentoring and continuous involvement by teachers and other SEL practitioners is paramount for the individual student's experiences (Jagers et al., 2019). Various interventions consist of strategies that focus on improving conduct by altering behaviors and encouraging productive citizenship amongst individuals through social engagement and building relationships (CASEL, 2021; Mahoney et

al., 2018; Bandura, 1977, 2019). SEL programs' focus on self and social awareness empowers individuals to discern and modify their behaviors based on their observation and retention of constructive conduct, creating a routine to emulate those habits, and normalizing the demeanors (Bandura, 1971; CASEL, 2021). Students' lived experiences within social-emotional learning are contingent on practitioners' enthusiasm, consistency, and willingness to address misunderstandings (Houghton, 2004; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2019). This study discloses descriptions of social-emotional learning programs based on lived experiences of students and their observing, imitating, and modeling the behaviors of others to foster empowering attributes.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that there is little evidence revealed by SEL graduates regarding the empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, nor in the community (Steedle et al., 2019). According to Bailey et al. (2021), building from behaviors that are learned in SEL programs is paramount for acknowledging the validity of social-emotional learning. Yeh et al.'s (2022) study focused on gaining the perspectives of the students in SEL classrooms to discover the empowering attributes of social-emotional learning; therefore, gaining data on the inspirational characteristics that promote character development is essential. Descriptive evidence, based on individuals' lived experiences, is limited although there is literature available confirming that SEL programs contribute to student success through disrupting notable hindrances that impact social and emotional development (Rowe & Trickett, 2017, Shamnadh, 2019; Tate, 2019).

Social-emotional learning programs consist of teachers utilizing pedagogical strategies that empower students to increase their skills in self-management, responsible decision making, and other competencies that promote character development (Allbright et al., 2019; Brotto, 2018;

CASEL, 2021). The personal experiences of adults who have completed SEL programs are unidentified. The intent of social-emotional learning is to reduce anxiety, stress, and the likelihood of social withdrawal in all students (Mahoney et al., 2018), and this study will uncover the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs described by adult participants who have completed an SEL program.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community through graduates who have completed a social-emotional learning program. At this stage in the research, the empowering attributes being cultivated through social-emotional learning programs will be generally defined as skills that enable individuals to live successfully in society.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study entails various descriptions regarding the cultivating of empowering attributes that promote successful living in graduates of a social-emotional learning program. From a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective, their lived experiences are explained.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Through Bandura's (1977, 2019) social learning philosophy, the theoretical significance of this study is predicated on the idea that social-emotional learning makes a life-long difference in the lives of people through identifying, observing, emulating, and modeling appropriate behaviors and highlighting potential. SEL graduates will reveal the empowering attributes that promote their successful living at home, in school, and in the community, and which increase an

understanding of how social-emotional learning contributes to character development through effectively comprehending emotions, demonstrating empathy for others, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2021). SEL graduates also reveal how social-emotional learning has empowered them with self-assurance and the willingness to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. These characteristics contribute to the life-long differences that Bandura (1977) referenced regarding behavior change.

### **Empirical Significance**

Since the mission of SEL programs is to increase the social and emotional competence of individuals (CASEL, 2021), discovering the various perspectives of the participants is meaningful. Gagnon et al.'s (2022) recent study emphasized the serious behavior problems of incarcerated youth that deterrently impact their education. Like many SEL programs, Gagnon et al.'s study included clear behavioral expectations, praises, positive reinforcement, and cognitive behavior interventions. Discovering what empowers youth to function productively in academic settings will propel educational programs to embed meaningful techniques into their practices to promote academic, behavioral, and social success. Gage et al.'s (2019) research on behavior interventions and supports aligns with this study based on its mission to reduce the risk of students facing disciplinary action or dropping out of high school. SEL programs provide a restorative approach through promoting empathy, taking ownership of one's actions, and demonstrating gratitude (CASEL, 2021).

### **Practical Significance**

The practical significance of this study will provide SEL architects and educators with relevant data on the outcome of SEL programs that will support them in their role as practitioners. According to CASEL (2021), both youth and adults can benefit from social-



emotional learning. The five competencies of self-management, social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making ability may be improved within everyone's capacity. This study will unveil various ways that social-emotional learning nurtures the academic, behavior, and social success of individuals through the perspectives of SEL graduates, which may propel parents, community leaders, education professionals and other individuals in society to participate in social-emotional learning with the desire and commitment to increase their own self-confidence.

### **Research Questions**

Experiences in the social-emotional learning environment motivate staff and students to reflect on their values, attitudes, and intentions as well as to thoroughly process and discover behaviors to emulate through self-control and responsible decision making (Hunter et al., 2018; CASEL, 2021). Since change in conduct is not always guaranteed through observing, mimicking, and modeling productive behaviors (Bandura, 1977), interactive SEL activities such as role playing and problem solving may not promise a positive change in behavior from students with a history of demonstrating challenging behaviors (Trach et al., 2018; Kurt, 2020). Reducing undesirable behaviors through social-emotional learning requires a safe climate that includes frequent reinforcement from teachers, students, and parents (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Kuo et al., 2019). The phenomenon of individuals' experiences in social-emotional learning programs is illuminated by the research questions developed in this study.

#### **Central Research Question**

What experiences in social-emotional learning cultivate empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community?

**Sub-question One**

How were the experiences with observing behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

**Sub-question Two**

How were the experiences with imitating behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

**Sub-question Three**

How were the experiences with modeling behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

**Definitions**

1. *Character Development* - The fostering of patience, empathy, integrity, respect, unselfishness, understanding, loyalty, and humility (Character Strong, n.d.).
2. *Extrinsic Motivation* – An external encouragement to engage in a specific activity based on a punishment or reward (American Psychological Association, 2020).
3. *Intrinsic Reinforcement* – Obtaining a positive outcome from the performance of an action (American Psychological Association, 2020).
4. *Mentoring* - A collaborative voluntary relationship that encourages growth and development of someone being advised (Association for Talent Development, 2021).
5. *Observational Learning*- A method of learning predicated on observing and modeling another person's behaviors, attitudes, and emotional expressions (Bandura, 1977).
6. *Relationship Skills* - Developing positive relationships, conflict resolution and working in Teams (Dymnicki et al., 2013).
7. *Responsible Decision-Making* - Making constructive choices based on ethical standards,

- social norms and safety concerns (CASEL, 2021).
8. *Role Modeling* - Serving as an example of inspiring young people to live meaningful lives with integrity, empathy, enthusiasm, and hope (Price-Mitchell, 2022).
  9. *Self-Awareness* - Acknowledging one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and weaknesses (Dymnicki et al., 2013).
  10. *Self-Management* - Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve personal goals (Dymnicki et al., 2013).
  11. *Social-Awareness* - Demonstrating empathy for others, which includes individuals with diverse backgrounds, traditions, and cultures (CASEL, 2021).
  12. *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)* - Pedagogy that focuses on educational equity through authentic school-family-community partnerships (CASEL, 2021).
  13. *Social and Emotional Learning Program* - A set of activities that focuses on self-control, improving relationships, and goal setting. (Go Strengths, n.d.).

### **Summary**

In this study, individuals can describe their experiences in social-emotional learning programs by reporting their observations, emulations, and modeling of others' behaviors linked to empowering attributes that promote successful living. This investigation supports the purpose of the study by revealing the SEL graduates' academic, behavior, and social successes at home, in school, and in the community. The research questions are developed from social learning theory of how individuals engage in behaviors after observing, imitating, and modeling. The characteristics of the modeled behaviors are expressed to unveil how their program impacted the social and emotional development of these individuals.

Results from this study may provide positive, negative, or dispassionate descriptions about the effectiveness of social and emotional learning programs based on the experiences of individuals who have completed them. This dissertation consists of five chapters beginning with the introduction in Chapter One, a review of literature presented in Chapter Two, followed by the study's methodology in Chapter Three. Research findings are included in Chapter Four and the document concludes with recommendations for further research in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

A thorough literature review was conducted to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community for graduates of SEL programs. This chapter includes the theoretical framework the social learning theory's alignment with social-emotional learning programs. Related literature includes six sections pertaining to human betterment, self-efficacy, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. In addition, the five competencies of social-emotional learning are presented as a reflection of Bandura's (1977) observational learning, within the social learning theory, to examine specific skills that are measured to conclude the success of the SEL programs' initiative. A summary is provided to reiterate the purpose of the study and the relevance of the literature presented. These various studies and assessments are examined to discover research that supports the lived experiences of graduates from an SEL program.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is driven by Bandura's (1971) social learning theory which theorizes that individuals develop new behaviors through intrinsic reinforcement. Based on this concept, an individual's mannerisms linked to social and emotional development are influenced by the success and failure of others' modeled behaviors (Ahn et al., 2019; Bandura, 1971; Kumar, 2018). When identifying accomplishments and setbacks of peers and authority figures, students can evaluate circumstances and determine the best approaches to managing emotions and solving problems through self-discipline and making responsible decisions. SEL programs have been implemented in various schools and districts to cultivate self-confidence by improving social and emotional skills and applying knowledge to make better decisions and achieve goals (CASEL,

2021). Bandura's (2019) concept of human betterment compliments social learning since it is composed of functional properties that produce self-efficacy.

Self-belief is emphasized heavily in social-emotional learning programs by fostering strengths and acknowledging weaknesses of oneself to confirm an identity (CASEL, 2021; McCormick et al., 2020). Areas such as intelligence, motivation, feelings, and resolution methods entail a variety of strategies that individuals can access to ensure their behavioral improvement (Bandura, 2019). Social-emotional learning programs align with Social Cognitive Theory since they emphasize motivation, learning, and self-management, concepts which are supported by observing the habits of individuals and self-reflecting (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2019; CASEL, 2021). Additionally, an earlier study by Shechtman and Yaman (2012) concluded that discipline problems, academic achievement, and poor interpersonal relationships are areas that can be improved through the implementation of social-emotional learning, which increased the interest of an investigation.

Discerning the behaviors of peers and authority figures may encourage individuals to mimic coping strategies during moments of frustration and anger. If plans of action are viable or progressive, these individuals will model the behaviors until other opportunities to discover mentalities are explored, which may lead to self-reflection and discipline. Through an individual's experiences, occasions will occur and enable them to make decisions based on their knowledge. Learning by direct encounter consists of opportune occasions in which social-emotional curriculum exposes individuals to methods of addressing situations, reflecting on their responses, and implementing practical methods to better themselves. Bandura (1971) stressed how exploratory activities encourage individuals to utilize modes of behavior which may work detrimentally or in their best interest. When their behaviors result in consequences, individuals

can increase their self-awareness and decision-making skills through identifying the issues and setting goals. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory guides the conceptual framework of this study through vicarious reinforcement and punishment.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory guides this study through gaining perspectives on how human behavior is reinforced through social-emotional learning from the participants' personal experiences. Research questions shape this study through revealing lived experiences that pertain to observing, emulating, and modeling behaviors that cultivate empowering attributes and promote successful living for SEL program graduates.

In addition, the reporting results of this study are significant. Conducting a transcendental study contributes to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory through exploring the different trajectories that individuals have encountered in social-emotional learning programs, based on behaviors learned through perceiving, emulating, and exhibiting understanding of demeanors of authority figures and peers (Bandura, 1971; Moustakas, 1994). Sutton (2021) commented on how environment influences the learned behaviors of individuals through reinforcement, which may increase social and emotional development of students through reinforcing the strategies of managing feelings, establishing, and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2021). Based on Cherry's (2019) assessment of Bandura's social learning theory, individuals who have completed social-emotional learning programs are exposed to more opportunities to improve their behaviors since they are exposed to more than their own actions.

This study is inspired by the concept of intentionality since the internal experiences of individuals are explored. Moustakas (1994) referred to intentionality as a form of self-awareness which enables individuals to reflect on their experiences through their feelings. Social-emotional

learning promotes the betterment of human behavior through revisiting circumstances and addressing concerns (Bandura, 2019). The significance of observing the behaviors of others is highly emphasized in social-emotional learning programs, which expose individuals to remarkable experiences which they can describe regarding their social and emotional progress. The NASSP (2019) mentioned that student success is predicated on supportive interventions and consistency, which is provided in SEL programs to decrease issues with social and emotional growth that hinder academic achievement and self-confidence. These elements are examined thoroughly in this study.

### **Related Literature**

Social learning theory guides the theoretical framework through literature that supports how experiences in social-emotional learning programs may be described through individuals' observing, emulating, and modeling the behavior of others. Bandura (1969, 1971) reported the possibility that learning new behaviors may not result in permanent change. Stakeholders such as teachers, students, and parents must be willing to implement observed behaviors and remain devoted to changing their behaviors for the betterment of themselves. Practitioners who are involved with social-emotional learning programs are adamant about youth empowerment and student achievement (Beaty, 2018). The related literature provides an in-depth outlook at the diverse ideologies centered around social-emotional learning which are gathered from numerous experiences.

In addition to human betterment and self-efficacy, relevant literature on the four principles of Bandura's (1969, 1977) social learning theory is presented. The four principles of social learning are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, which are notable



characteristics for identifying behaviors that are learned in social-emotional learning programs which increase student achievement (Bandura, 1969; CASEL, 2021).

Bandura's (1969, 1977) assessments provide factors pertaining to the need to change behaviors, the process of altering demeanors, and what encourages individuals to represent new behaviors after strengthening their abilities in self and social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making skills, and their ability to build and maintain healthy relationships. Furthermore, CASEL's (2021) five competencies represent social and emotional growth and development through fostering positive home-school-community partnerships, which epitomizes societal progress. Changes in behavior are guided through the specific needs of individuals who require motivation and self-discipline. These actions are indicative of notable SEL skills such as self-evaluation and discipline and which are emphasized in CASEL's (2021) assessment.

### **Social-Emotional Learning Competencies**

Whether in a general or special education classroom setting, the purpose of social learning is to support students with challenging behaviors through promoting positive change (CASEL, 2021). Kumar (2018) explained how social learning leads learners towards excellence. The goal of social-emotional learning is to refrain from accusing the students of their disruptive behaviors but, instead, to cultivate a nurturing environment where behavior expectations are clear and consistently exemplified through intense instruction, therapy, and mentoring. Elias (2019) stated that high quality social-emotional learning focuses on the five competencies: social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. These abilities contribute to the development of confidence and self-discipline which foster equity, inclusion, and excellence in schools, homes, and communities.

CASEL (2021) expressed how social-emotional learning can be a powerful lever for developing healthy, trusting partnerships with both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders such as faculty, support staff, parents, and students will be empowered to work collaboratively with external stakeholders such as community leaders, mayors, and youth center directors to evaluate practices and policies to ensure positive outcomes (CASEL, 2021). SEL curricula and pedagogy focus heavily on community development by fostering equity and excellence through continuous engagement, empathy, connectedness, and lifelong learning. Normalizing the journey to excellence through constant self-reflection, teaching and learning to disrupt biases, apathy, and restrictions epitomizes the aim of learner-centered SEL classrooms. Lastly, according to CASEL (2021), holding oneself accountable through self-reflection is promoted through increasing self-awareness.

### **Self-Awareness**

Based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, an individual's motivation is contingent on their willingness to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses through constant self-evaluation. Gaining an accurate perception of oneself enables individuals to assess their personal biases and can disrupt any limitation that impacts their confidence. CASEL (2021) concluded that optimism is cultivated through self-awareness because emotions that are identified foster a growth mindset. In SEL programs, students can observe how their peers and teachers are reluctant to avoid challenges and view failure as an opportunity rather than a waste of time. Actions of determination are emulated when study skills are introduced along with positive behaviors such as asking for help and being patient rather than shutting down. Before behavior can change, observational learning must be developed, which triggers intrinsic reinforcement (Kumar, 2018). As students witness the productivity of determination and

understand the potential setbacks when demonstrating refusal behaviors, their appreciation for good grades, praises, and other rewards enables these students to embrace social influence and focus on improving their character.

Bailey's (2018) assessment concluded that effective educators are known for infusing grit, soft skills, and character education in their classroom, but encouraging well-grounded self-esteem by focusing on overcoming obstacles and embracing constructive criticism is the intent of social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021; Louick, 2021). Bandura (1977) mentioned how people's feelings, thoughts, and actions provide the foundation of their self-efficacy, which is essentially believing in yourself (Cherry, 2020). Having a sense of purpose is paramount because it encourages determination and character; this is why SEL practitioners focus on empowering adults and students to acknowledge their self-worth and solidify their dignity.

### **Self-Efficacy in Self-Awareness**

Social-emotional learning has been embraced by many school districts in the United States due to its focus on strengthening equity, diversity, and self-belief. A study by Blad (2015) elaborated on how social-emotional learning empowers teachers with the ability to foster a supportive learning environment by cultivating their students' confidence. Self-efficacy and identifying emotions are factors of self-awareness, which are taught in SEL programs to empower students to make positive decisions through identifying their strengths and emotions (CASEL, 2021). Essentially, self-efficacy is supported in social learning theory because these characteristics are necessary to be taught and mimicked by youth, which may alter undesirable behaviors (Bandura, 1971). Social injustice and inequality are often addressed in SEL classrooms to support students' ability to self-reflect, acknowledge their drawbacks, and cultivate self-worth.

Rogers et al. (2020) expressed that social-emotional learning impacts equality and social justice. CASEL (2021) stated that self-efficacy is based on a growth mindset, which encourages individuals to embrace challenges and demonstrate the ability to persevere. In social-emotional learning programs, SEL is deemed as a method of developing positive characteristics (CASEL, 2021). Notably, Shechtman and Yaman's (2012) earlier study highlighted how SEL programs intend to build confidence and are linked to positive classroom behaviors with academic success. Rogers et al. (2020) mentioned that SEL focuses on rehumanizing students through knowing their values, attitudes, beliefs, and respected family traditions which allows them to advocate for themselves, ensure fairness and nullify possible inferiority. Definitely, CASEL (2021) stresses the pertinence of long-lasting effects that promote the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals. Self-awareness is linked to social awareness because of the recognition of how one's biases or judgmental mentality may impact others. Social-emotional learning encourages empathy over apathy to promote diversity through the awareness of various cultures and values (CASEL, 2021). With noble aspirations of producing a program that fosters risk takers who are compassionate, resolute, and respectful, SEL practitioners enthusiastically model the framework which encourages students to implement these learned strategies with fidelity.

### **Social-Awareness**

Sincere apologies, humility, and the eagerness to learn about various cultures to avoid inadvertently offending others epitomizes a confident, compassionate, and respectful individual. Effective SEL programs emphasize the importance of demonstrating empathy and celebrating diversity by acknowledging the values and attitudes of others (CASEL, 2021). Students observe their peers and authority figures either appreciating or denigrating experiences relating to uniqueness of cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds (Cherry, 2021). In American public schools,

students are not currently required to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance or pray during the moment of silence as a way of perspective-taking. One should feel free to express their religious beliefs and values without feeling judged. SEL classrooms strive to provide a non-judgmental classroom where students can feel safe and empowered to share their traditions. Cherry shared how youth and adults are still able to learn about things with which they have limited to no experience. SEL programs provide opportunities for open class discussions as well as engaging activities in which students, who are socially aware through cultural competence, can highlight social injustices. Empathic listening and sensitive responses to matters are encouraged to clearly demonstrate awareness of what individuals of different cultures may experience based on their beliefs (CASEL, 2021; Cherry, 2021).

### **Culture Competence in Social Awareness**

According to CASEL District Resource Center (2022), embodying cultural competence is closely linked to social-emotional skills. The ability to respect others through acknowledging their cultures and backgrounds epitomizes social awareness, which promotes positive behaviors. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory on reproducing acceptable behaviors is predicated on reinforcing the vitality of multicultural supportive learning environments. For instance, if a teacher mistakenly mispronounces a student's name, a notable moment would be the students' observing the teacher demonstrating compassion by apologizing and being eager to correctly pronounce the student's name. Social-emotional learning programs address apathetic situations (CASEL, 2021) by taking a concerned approach and acknowledging possible circumstances such as poverty and other misfortunes. Deep learning is encouraged in social-emotional learning environments to address the authenticity of students' lives outside the classroom as well as what they may encounter during the school day.

Houghton's (2004) earlier assessment on deep learning concluded that lessons should link to real-life situations, which is like SEL's approach. The abilities to address injustices, cultural misunderstandings, and inequities are developed through empowering individuals to identify their strengths as well as the strengths of others (CASEL, 2021). From a social learning perspective, students in SEL programs can listen, learn, and model their understanding after being corrected (Kumar, 2018). In an inclusive classroom, students can have a positive experience and not feel insecure when asking unpopular questions and disagreeing with the perspective of others (Houghton, 2004). Moreover, fostering social awareness consists of sustaining an inclusive environment where constructive criticism exists, and teachers can consistently model gratitude and appreciate opportunity (CASEL, 2021). Some SEL experts agree that social-emotional learning will not occur without a culturally relevant start of self and social awareness (Torres, 2019), and culturally responsive teaching is paramount to the process.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Social Awareness**

In educational settings, students bring a plethora of knowledge and experience to the classroom (Western Governors University, 2021). Within their wealth of knowledge, a variety of cultures, backgrounds, and understandings are acknowledged and must be imbedded into lessons to sustain the attentiveness and engagement of these students. SEL practitioners aim to develop rapport with students and learn more about their cultures to build connections and foster compassion for their upbringing and current circumstances. Taking the perspectives of others and demonstrating respect contributes to a nonjudgmental approach, which encourages a safe learning environment where students and adults can develop confidence (CASEL, 2021). Torres (2019) explained how considering the backgrounds of students promotes effective and culturally responsive teaching when engaging in emotional conversations with students since barriers are

likely to be avoided. For instance, when introducing a lesson on the Holocaust, a facilitator needs to be mindful of students with Jewish and/or German descent who could possibly become offended and resent the lesson.

The goal of culturally responsive pedagogy in social-emotional learning is to encourage a sense of belongingness through engaging the students and solidifying their identity (Torres, 2019). Culturally responsive teaching in SEL classrooms fosters positive experiences where challenges are rarely avoided because the confidence and willingness of the authority figures and peers are observed. According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, if the SEL facilitator confidence and eagerness is captivating enough, the students will begin emulating their confidence by accepting challenging tasks more often and taking more initiative to consider the feelings of others (CASEL, 2021; Kumar, 2018). Modeling behaviors are contingent on the effectiveness of observational learning (Kumar, 2018), so students with challenging behaviors must understand the value of replacing their undesirable behaviors with actions that they have observed in others and would potentially emulate. Many SEL experts agree that managing emotions, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions are contingent on an individual's ability to demonstrate effective self-management skills based on CASEL's (2021) assessment and Bandura's (1977) study on attention and reproduction.

### **Self-Management**

CASEL's (2021) assessment of self-management regarding self-discipline and self-motivation is aligned with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory because of the motivation component, which is aspiring to learn behaviors. In social-emotional learning, promoting positive change is fostered through empowering individuals to utilize planning and organizational skills, to set goals, and to take initiative (CASEL, 2021). The growth mindset may

also be considered simply as maintaining a positive attitude while refraining from giving up (Effron, 2021). After observational learning, emulating, and modeling behaviors involves commitment, practice, which are ignited through self-discipline (Bandura, 1977; CASEL, 2021). Although Effron's study countered the meaning of the growth mindset, it concluded that individuals should engage in effective strategies that promote their success. For instance, learning and implementing methods of controlling feelings, thoughts, and actions are indicative of demonstrating self-control and use rational thinking during moments of frustration and anger. Impulse control is one of the skills that enables individuals to demonstrate self-management skills (CASEL, 2021). Impulsive behaviors such as being easily distracted, exhibiting aggressive behavior, restlessness, and interrupting others can be extremely detrimental (Cooper, 2019). Social-emotional learning aims to introduce effective methods of disrupting these behaviors by replacing them with positive strategies that encourage cautiousness rather than impulsivity (CASEL, 2021).

### **Controlling Impulsive Behaviors in Self-Management**

Based on CASEL's (2021) logic for controlling impulsive behavior, the ability to regulate thought, feelings, and behaviors coincides with self-motivation and determination to manage emotions and actions during moments of frustration and anger. Impulsivity may consist of behaviors that potentially worsen over time due to being normalized (Morin, 2020), so it is imperative to increase students' ability to use impulse control to accomplish academic and personal goals. Students who attend SEL programs can be socially influenced by learning newer strategies for constructively managing their temperaments by effectively addressing stressors. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory of observational learning empowers individuals to discern the appropriateness of converting from impulsive behavior to operating decisively. Morin



(2021) considered labeling feelings to be efficient since one's emotions are talked about rather than demonstrated. For instance, feeling scared, angry, apprehensive, or enthused may be expressed aggressively if individuals are uncertain of how to assertively address their emotions through open and private dialogue with peers and authority figures such as therapists and SEL practitioners.

Social learning theory encompasses why learning replacement behaviors are essential to growth and development. During moments of impulsivity, self-management skills play a huge role in enabling individuals to recognize positive and negative reinforcements, which are described by Lumen (2022) as something added or removed to increase the chances of behaviors occurring. SEL programs focus on controlling impulsivity through teaching viable stress management strategies to help regulate feelings that may lead to hurting others, which is linked to increasing relationship skills (CASEL, 2021).

### **Relationship Skills**

Kumar (2018) explained how the classroom implications of social learning such as role playing, topic debates, group test taking, and other forms of cooperative learning impact education through teachers and students learning from each other. Additionally, according to CASEL (2021), relationship skills consist of ongoing communication, teamwork, and social engagement. Relationship building is entailed in cooperative learning because students can agree to disagree on ideas, collaborate, and problem solve to meet the expectations of presented tasks or challenges. Furthermore, Valamis (2022) stated that students who enhance their communication skills, develop personal responsibility, and increase their confidence reap the benefits of cooperative learning, which may be emulated and demonstrated according to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. SEL programs strive to encourage individuals to model

great listening skills, clear dialogue, and the ability to cooperate with others to serve as an exemplar of individuals who are working towards positive change (CASEL, 2021). These various effects of an engaged social-emotional learning classroom contribute to increasing relationship skills through tasks that encourage exemplary behaviors by addressing undesirable manners.

Role playing activities are comprised of the opportunity to address social pressure. Many students who are enrolled in SEL programs struggle with dealing with peer pressure such as gang affiliation, being convinced to skip school, indulging in drugs and alcohol, or violent behavior (Morin, 2022). Introducing the ability to effectively deal with inappropriate social pressures and to seek help is entailed in social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021), by reinforcing the negative significance of illegal and risky behaviors, and positively peer pressuring others (Morin, 2022). According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, positive relationships are developed when positive role modeling occurs. As an influencer, the role modeler is respected by the observer, which fosters relationships through appreciation and attentiveness. CASEL's (2021) assessment supports this logic by stating how the establishment and sustainability of healthy relationships is gained through satisfaction, which explains the gratitude of individuals who can learn positive coping strategies from the behaviors of others.

### **Responsible Decision-Making**

In SEL programs, individuals who struggle with consistently demonstrating responsible decision-making skills can observe how others identify problems, evaluate circumstances, and solve those problems (CASEL, 2021). Based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, when students are extrinsically motivated to focus on behaviors that do not lead to reprimands, suspensions, or jail time, they are adamant about learning how others demonstrate responsible

decision-making skills. Positive reinforcements such as giving a thumbs up, fist bumps, and praises are essential in promoting positive behaviors Morin (2020), which is why SEL practitioners must address immoral actions. CASEL (2021) expresses how ethical responsibility is vital in parents, teachers, and other adults due to the impact that their behavior has on youth. For instance, if a teacher or parent is using profanity or encouraging cheating and other wrongdoing, they are not modeling their expectations. Ethical responsibility entails self-reflection CASEL (2021), which may enable adults to demonstrate humility by apologizing, admitting to being wrong in their actions, and disrupting their undesirable behaviors through setting goals to increase their responsible decision-making skills.

Effective SEL programs focus on building adults' competencies by extending outside the classroom and working collaboratively with parents and other authority figures to encourage them to reflect on their behaviors and work on necessary adjustments to serve as a positive role model to youth (Jones et al., 2018). We often hear the phrase, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," meaning that youth tend to demonstrate talents, attitudes, and behaviors that are associated with their parents. The purpose of social-emotional learning is to promote positive behavior by providing a supportive environment that encourages student success in the classrooms, homes, schools, and communities (CASEL, 2021). Bandura's (1977) theory on observational learning is linked to how apparently constructive choices such as avoiding profanity, respecting safety concerns, and being solution-driven (CASEL, 2021) are indicative of this framework within the focus of SEL programs on responsible decision-making skills.

### **Human Betterment in Responsible Decision-Making**

Bailey (2018) highlighted many factors in social-emotional learning that deterred individual progress in students, parents, and teachers. Human betterment is a vital priority in

education and Bandura (2019) stated how behaviors are influenced by the social networks and community settings. In addition, CASEL (2021) concurred that social-emotional learning is a fundamental part of cultivating a positive school-family-community partnership, but Bailey's (2018) mentioning of how SEL is ill-defined would be opposed. If social-emotional learning is a vehicle that forces students to reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and actions, that requirement could be considered compulsory, which may impact positive behavior change (Bailey, 2018). For instance, acknowledging and labeling their feelings, tracking their behavior changes, and recognizing how others have subscribed to their success is deemed performative rather than authentic. According to Bailey (2018), effective educators have always embedded social skills into their instruction, which encourages human betterment through guiding children to think and behave appropriately during challenging situations (Bandura, 2019). Since SEL is based on establishing relationships and cultivating positive learning environments through ongoing evaluations, it is possible for teachers, parents, and students to feel as if SEL is undesirably relentless even though its intent is to promote diversity and fairness. In this study, encouraging and discouraging elements from the experiences of individuals are reported and examined to determine the influences of the SEL programs.

CASEL (2021) emphasized social awareness, which epitomizes empathy and equity and promotes human betterment. Social-emotional learning originated through increasing competencies in goal setting, interpersonal skills, and demonstrating responsible behaviors at home, school, and in the community (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2021). Furthermore, human betterment focuses on those human strengths which contribute to progressive adolescent development as mentioned by Shek et Al. (2019). Peers and authority figures have a profound impact on youth development (CASEL, 2021; Telzer et Al., 2018). Hurd and Deutsch (2017)

emphasized how after school programs with an imbedded SEL focus offer self-expression, an exploration of students' talents with an opportunity to form relationships with supportive adults. After-school SEL programs develop partnerships with the community and schools to empower youth and adults to cultivate opportunities for positive change.

CASEL (2021) highlighted how developing healthy communities are predicated on recognizing the strengths of others and establishing healthy relationships to promote safe learning environments that foster growth mindsets. SEL programs provide structure, safety, and a sense of belongingness which contribute to self-actualization (Hurd & Duetsch, 2017). Self-actualization consists of reaching one's full potential through being inspired to make necessary changes when needed (Cherry, 2019). Bandura's (1977) social learning focuses on the ability to learn through witnessing the actions of others. Just as a child would learn how to change a tire from watching an auto mechanic service a vehicle, other desirable behaviors are promoted through observing. The impact of social-emotional learning is contingent on observational learning (Bandura, 1971), which is composed of four components: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Cherry, 2021).

### **Attention**

When cultivating an effective social-emotional learning environment, teachers must be devoted to continual self-reflecting and demonstrating a consistent level of respect towards their students through a compelling instructional approach that encourages attentiveness. According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, attention is necessary when observing the behaviors of others. Schonert-Reichl (2017) stated how teachers are the engine that drives SEL, so developing a safe classroom where students are at liberty to express their concerns and beliefs without being judged is paramount for their responsiveness. Social-emotional learning consists of open

discussions that enable students and teachers to engage in dynamic discourse that establishes relationships, respect, and the opportunity to critically think, to problem solve, and to constructively address situations. A learner-centered classroom contributes to successfully developing an active learning environment where students can work on demonstrating empathy and humility. According to CASEL (2021), identifying challenges, reflecting, and evaluating are characteristics that are exhibited by the teacher as exemplary actions that enable students to be vital towards developing that social-emotional learning environment.

Other factors such as keeping a bright and relaxed educational setting or a school climate in which everyone practices and normalizes the competencies of social-emotional learning are vital in fostering an SEL classroom. Pathways 2 Success (2018) expressed a variety of ways to integrate social-emotional learning into the classroom and to secure students' dedication and willingness. Increasing students' attentiveness in social-emotional learning classrooms entails daily greetings, class meetings, dialogue about the importance of managing emotions, and distributing responsibilities. Students can gain significant experience during class meetings; students are able to work on their self and social awareness skills by taking the perspectives of others and appreciating diversity. Students are also able to observe and demonstrate their ability to focus through emulating the actions of others to change and support their self-management skills (Bandura, 1977; CASEL, 2021).

Schonert-Reichl (2017) mentioned the context of learning in SEL classrooms, which entails a supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment where skill development persists with collaborating and positive partnerships. Involving parents and the community with ideas for instructional delivery is beneficial since they can share ideas with SEL practitioners that empower them to successfully engage students (CASEL, 2021). For instance, parents and youth

league coaches or mentors can introduce ideas to teachers that increase their understanding of students' particular situations and develop creative ways to build and sustain the teacher-student rapport. When teachers attend their students' extracurricular activities or are aware of some of the notable challenges that they are facing at home, these educators can empathetically proceed with an instructional design that supports the students' academic, social, and emotional well-being and safety. Jones and Kahn (2018) stressed how an SEL classroom elevates students to succeed in academics through high quality practices and interventions.

Western Governors University (2020) highlights how students are unable to sustain focus and learn from others when they are off task. Rigorous class projects, group work, and cooperative learning assignments provide the opportunity for students to work together, communicate, and compromise to achieve a mission or goal. Relationship skills involve the students' ability to listen empathically, avoid unnecessary social pressure, and take the initiative to offer help to peers when needed (CASEL, 2021). An effective SEL classroom is an active learning environment that is student-driven and enthusiastic. The teachers' willingness to meet the educational needs of their students through the most effective and inclusive instructional design propels the students to gain trust and to take initiatives and risks to meet teacher expectations, which leads to student achievement. Jones and Kahn (2018) expressed how social, emotional, and academic development is fostered through excellence, community engagement and innovation. In an SEL classroom, teachers grow socially and emotionally as well due to their investment and readiness to empower individuals. A social-emotional learning environment is an inclusive classroom where participants increase their credence, cultural competence, togetherness, and ownership (CASEL, 2021).

Principals and teachers play huge roles in assuring the safety, security, and belongingness of classrooms to promote teacher efficacy and student achievement. Fostering a social-emotional learning environment consists of steadfast patience, humility, and tenacity from the administration, since SEL programs require a significant amount of support from school leadership (CASEL, 2021). Hultshorn and Mulholland (2018) expressed that ensuring positive learning climates requires restorative practices along with the implementation of SEL; therefore, adequate training and professional development are required to support teacher efficacy. These professional developments for facilitating an SEL classroom emphasize the importance of relationship skills and avoiding holding grudges through understanding the perception of others and providing the benefit of the doubt during disputes or disagreements. According to Hultshorn and Mulholland (2018), disciplinary actions lessen due to the students' improved ability to manage anger and frustration, which epitomizes effective self-management skills. CASEL's (2021) notion of self-management is predicated on an individual's ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which contributes to restorative practices and classroom management. In addition to restorative practices, culturally responsive pedagogy plays a huge role in successfully implementing social-emotional learning in the classroom. CogniFit Research (2021) identified four types of attention that validate Bandura's (1977) social learning theory regarding attention and how it pertains to individuals' responsiveness and devotion contributing to learning behaviors. These types of attention -- that support Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and CASEL's (2021) SEL competencies -- are: focused, sustained, selective, and alternating.

### **Focused Attention**



In SEL environments, an interesting quality exists with positive change through addressing undesirable behaviors. Introducing effective ways of dealing with adversity, problem solving, and critical thinking techniques must appeal to the students to ensure their attention. Within the SEL curriculum, lessons and activities must consist of captivating events that engage the students. Identifying different cultures, values, beliefs, and traditions through role playing, reenactments, and class discussions enables the students to focus on the interesting components of positive behaviors through various lenses, which promotes social awareness (CASEL, 2021). Stimuli within these activities include learning the perspectives of others and confidently demonstrating empathy.

Desautels (2021) agreed that focused attention is derived through self-regulation, which involves creative strategies of enabling students to focus during instructional time; specifically, when observing the behaviors of authority and peers. In other words, focused attention is obtained by students keeping their eyes on the prize and avoiding possible distractions from earning the incentive. Movements and visualizations contribute to focused attention in active learning environments by stimulating the individual's brain and body through alertness (Desautels, 2021). The gradual release model theory consists of the teacher modeling an expectation, collaboratively demonstrating the expectation with the observer or student, and allowing the observing student an opportunity to independently emulate and model the expectation. According to an earlier assessment by ACPS Talent Development (2015), the *I Do, We Do, You Do* instructional strategy is the best practice for transferring responsibility from the instructor to the student. SEL programs implement this strategy as a method of transferring positive behaviors from teachers to observers in a learner-centered classroom where active learning occurs. CASEL (2021) states that social-emotional learning includes home-school

partnerships that engage the community to ensure societal progress. Focused attention stresses the importance of locking in on constructive approaches to replace undesirable behaviors with positive conduct to instill confidence in adults and children. Strategies such as fist pumping, frog breaths, any creative form of call and response are practical in social learning. As Bandura (1977) mentioned, behaviors are only learned when individuals are willing and determined to reproduce desirable manners.

### **Sustained Attention**

Sustained attention is based on the ability to remain attentive over a long period of time (CogFit Research, 2021). The objective of SEL programs is to develop ongoing partnerships with homes, schools, and communities to foster societal progress. An earlier study by Weare (2012) mentioned how impacting the well-being of young adults and children by reducing stress and anxiety through enhancing self-esteem, improving sleep, self-regulation, and self-awareness cultivates social-emotional growth. Social-emotional learning programs support diversity through empowering individuals to develop and sustain respect for other cultures, values, traditions, and norms through the ongoing expression of gratitude (CASEL, 2021). Sustaining the focus of authority figures in schools and communities through their commitment to modeling SEL competencies such as self-discipline, empathy, and relationship skills empowers students and other stakeholders. As teachers and parents exemplify willingness to disrupt their biases and appreciate different cultures, children will observe, emulate and demonstrate their understanding as outlined in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory.

Esterman and Rothlein's (2019) study concluded that, although attention is not constant, skills may be introduced to support an individual's ability to focus for extended periods of time through willingness and motivation. Perception and arousal are essential in social-emotional

learning, which is why SEL practitioners are vigilant with determining methods of introducing replacement behaviors that are compelling enough to empower adults and children to change habits, attitudes, and perspectives. Various models such as opportunity cost and control were also presented that, in Esterman and Rothlein's (2019) assessment, determined how individuals may be influenced by consistent engagement which fosters gratitude and respect between individuals who are impacted behaviorally and their influencers. In conclusion, sustained attention supports self-management due to the amount of intensive focus demonstrated over time that fosters self-control and direction.

### **Selective Attention**

Selective attention is the choice of a particular stimuli that is highlighted to focus upon. CogniFit Research (2021) stated that selective attention is the ability to focus on a specific interest by avoiding being distracted by other potential stimulating factors. Since SEL focuses on relationship skills, the teacher's job is to connect with students by recognizing their strengths, weaknesses, values, and interests. Cultivating positive change by replacing undesirable behaviors with responsible decisions and effective coping strategies is meaningful in social-emotional development (CASEL, 2021; Weare, 2012). Decisiveness, rather than impulsive behavior, is encouraged to build student confidence to make the best decisions. According to CASEL (2021), demonstrating problem solving skills by evaluating personal, interpersonal, and community impacts may encourage students to adequately select the best approaches toward mastering behavioral, social, and academic goals. When adults and children understand how their choices may affect them and their communities, showing compassion and taking the perspectives of others, as mentioned by CASEL (2021), helps to assure productivity in selective attention.

Morin (2020) commented on the different forms of selective attention, visual and auditory. In SEL programs, self-discipline is encouraged through eliminating distractions or factors that may be perceived as negative influences through focusing on positives, controlling impulses, carefully analyzing situations, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2021). In classrooms, students may observe behaviors such as meltdowns, tantrums, rebelling, and avoidance behaviors. Selective attentiveness may be beneficial to empower observers to focus on behaving appropriately by remaining on task, completing assignments, and meeting their teacher's expectations. Regarding expectations, teachers may ask students to repeat the directions back to them. On these occasions, selective auditory attention is reinforced Cherry (2020), which plays a huge role in fostering positive behaviors.

Selective visual attention is described through two models, spotlight and zoom lens (Cherry, 2020). The spotlight model, linked to Bandura's (1977) observational learning, holds that observers can learn directly from someone who clearly models an exemplary behavior. The zoom lens model is a more in-depth method of observing modeled behavior. For instance, in the spotlight model, the individual who can control his emotions during moments of frustration is observed. The zoom lens model, however, consists of observing what is spotlighted within increased focus. Rather than observing only how the exemplary individual manages their emotions when frustrated, specific gestures, body language, and nonverbal responses are observed and analyzed to gain an in-depth understanding of their behavior before appreciating and potentially emulating their actions.

### **Alternating Attention**

Alternating attention is changing between two or more stimuli or interest (CogniFit Research, 2021). For instance, when an SEL facilitator introduces an array of strategies that

enables them to problem-solve and become more decisive, their students will be able to make decisions based on a variety of favorable thoughts, beliefs, and judgements that attribute to their positive behavior change. Based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, behaviors are portrayed as observed mannerisms and preferential actions that one desires to emulate. SEL programs which are geared toward positive youth development aim to introduce appealing behaviors to students as a method of social influence, (Telzer et al., 2018).

Alternating attention requires mental flexibility (Ramos, 2021). When discontinuing a task and moving on to pursue another assignment, being able to adjust emotionally is paramount. Alternating attention is linked to observational learning due to the focus that occurs when one witnesses another's ability to transition from task to task. For instance, students with attention deficits or who have challenges with executive functioning may observe how others transition from one assignment to the next and their behaviors linked to time management and organization skills may be influenced. An earlier study from Clafferty and Beggs (2016) concluded that transitioning consists of the ability to positively navigate through personal circumstances; complex situations are indicative of managing change. SEL programs highlight alternating attention by teaching organizational skills, empathy for others' time, and goal setting (CASEL, 2021). Acknowledging the ability to evolve throughout the day at home, in school, and in the community involves self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. CASEL's emphasis on self-discipline, accepting constructive criticism, and consistently demonstrating desirable actions is paramount to impacting behavior. Although the intent is to SEL program is to ensure positive social influence, based on Bandura's (1977) assessment that behaviors are not always learned through observing others and Effron's (2021) conclusion that a growth mindset is not scientifically possible for some people, discouragement is possible.

## **Retention**

According to Newman (2020), warmth and support, encouraging grit and determination, and providing responsibility are recommended to ensure students' retention of details when participating in social-emotional learning programs. Western Governors University (2020) highlighted the importance of students internalizing information to recall lessons that encourage their change in behavior. Effective SEL practitioners realize that certain factors in SEL curriculum and pedagogy need to be memorable, which is why lessons should link to students' real-life situations with a deep learning approach (Houghton, 2004). Social-emotional learning practitioners promote diversity and inclusion through creating a safe learning environment where every student can thrive and confidently engage in lessons (CASEL, 2021). Bandura's (1977) concept of social learning defines retention as a method of collecting information from others through observing.

The descriptions of CASEL's (2021) philosophy of social awareness skills directly relates to the level of gratitude for diversity and cross-cultural connection, which SEL students must fully comprehend before modeling the expected behavior. Effective SEL educators preserve and embrace the uniqueness of each student through open-mindedness, which is appreciated and remembered by students. Retention is gained through the students' feeling of belongingness which reinforces their eagerness to retain learned behaviors (Kurt, 2020; Roundtable Learning, n.d.). In this study, examining the retention of individuals who have participated in SEL programs enables the researcher to understand how the impact of the teacher's respect and attentiveness towards them heightened or reduced their level of empathy and respect for others (Kurt, 2020).

Torres (2019) mentioned that effective teachers often set goals to tap into the identity of their students and to provide a family-oriented atmosphere where every student feels secure in their classroom. In social-emotional learning environments, students remember actions based on their feelings, which propels them to model self-management skills and other competencies exhibited by their respected SEL practitioners (CASEL, 2021). Retention may also occur during unfavorable moments. For instance, teachers and students may inadvertently offend one another during discussions, group activities, or other interactions, so showing empathy and humility are believable (CASEL, 2021; Kurt, 2020). Donahue-Keegan et al. 's (2019) assessment touched on social-emotional stamina and culturally responsive teaching being connected to managing emotions and dealing with conflict, which may result in creditable retention. Gaining a solid understanding of the influence of social-emotional learning programs will depend on the participants' recollection of experiences.

### **Reproduction**

Students will reproduce previous and present learned behaviors through compelling observations (Wheeler, 2022). When teachers implement deeper learning strategies in their instruction, they display personal interest in the subject, engage students in active learning, and meet behavior expectations (Houghton, 2004). Social-emotional learning is aligned with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory of reproduction because of its emphasis on impulse control and thinking before reacting (Cherry, 2019; Western Governors University, 2020). This principle contributes to the social and emotional development of students through observing pertinent skills needed to produce positive mannerisms that contribute to their academic and personal success (Bandura, 1977; Cherry, 2019).

Pijanowski (2018) stated that educators are motivated to gain their students' curiosity and responses. Presenting captivating content that relates to the real lives of students may encourage them to reach their goals (Houghton, 2004; Kurt, 2020). When teachers form dynamic relationships with parents, they can learn about notable situations at home and become a positive influence. As students observe their teachers' and other individuals' behaviors, they retain certain actions and will begin to reproduce skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Western Governors University, 2020; Wheeler, 2022). When modeled behavior is demonstrated with fidelity and eagerness, adequate motivation to replace undesired behaviors with desired actions will arise. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory described reproduction as an ability to reenact exhibited behaviors based on influences and willingness to imitate perceptions. The reproduction of behaviors is contingent on the individual students' motivation, a notable factor in social learning.

### **Motivation**

In SEL programs, all stakeholders are motivated to nurture their skills in self-management, responsible decision-making skills, and other competencies. Motivation is paramount in all three stages of social learning and requires encouragement and willingness from teachers, students, and parents (Kurt, 2020). Whether intrinsically or extrinsically, it is imperative that teachers empower students to become assertive and understand self-value and respect for the different ethnicities and backgrounds of others (Kurt, 2020; Wheeler, 2022). Ferreira et al. (2020) mentioned that fostering sustainable social-emotional learning is relationship-focused through motivation and eagerness. Based on the influence, students are motivated to avoid doing or proceeding with what they have observed, which is indicative of CASEL's (2021) responsible decision-making skills.



Through improving social-emotional competencies, behaviors can be adjusted and may reduce many detrimental factors that hinder student achievement. Schonert-Reichl (2019) reported how SEL students have academically outperformed non-SEL students by 11 percent. SEL students' performances are contingent on the motivation of their teachers to demonstrate commitment to academic achievement (Kurt, 2020). When individuals are acknowledged and rewarded for their achievements and progress, they are motivated to continue producing those desirable behaviors that afforded them accolades (Western Governors University, 2020). This form of motivation may alter behavior through increasing self-confidence (Bandura, 1977, 2019). In addition to intrinsic motivation --which is instrumental in social learning -- extrinsic motivation helps to determine the various levels of influences that impact social-emotional learning.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Jaques et al. (2019) concluded that intrinsic motivation is a social influence that ensures deep reinforcement learning. In SEL programs, students can communicate and build rapport with peers and authority figures at school and exercise opportunities to strengthen relationships at home and in the community. Deepening relationships consists of developing critical thinking, behavioral, and self-management skills (McKown, 2017), which are encouraged through the devotion of SEL practitioners who strive to provide a social influential learning environment in which students can develop their confidence. SEL activities such as tasks that enable students to understand growth mindset versus fixed mindset, class discussions, and motivational moments are acknowledged as methods of intrinsically inspiring students (Minero, 2017) which may lead to positive behavior change.

Growth mindset and intrinsic motivation coincide through cognitive and behavioral functions (Ng, 2017). From a neuroscience perspective, intrinsic values are supported through self-determination. CASEL (2021) elaborates on how SEL programs strive to develop the self-concept of youth and adults through acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses. Once areas of concern are highlighted, self-management is cultivated through planning, setting goals, and demonstrating courage to take initiative (CASEL, 2021). Self-motivation and willpower are demonstrated through embracing challenges and being inspired by the success of others. Social influence occurs when the presence of others impacts the feelings, beliefs, and motivations of a person (McLeod, 2021). SEL programs provide opportunities for students and staff to share their experiences through role play, reenactments, and intense therapy to address any misconceptions and to celebrate positive behaviors based on managing emotions, solving problems, and making responsible decisions. McKown (2017) mentioned how humans are a supremely social species, which aligns with the importance of nurturing SEL competencies to gain an adequate level of dignity. Intrinsic motivation entails choices, effort, and persistence (Ng, 2017), as opposed to factors of extrinsic motivation, such as grade reports and other forms of social recognition.

### **Extrinsic Motivation**

In contrast to gratifying feelings and actions within individuals, extrinsic motivation consists of external motivators such as learning a new skill or taking on a new challenge (Sennett, 2021). Negative reinforcements such as school suspension, expulsion, and serving jail time may also serve as extrinsic motivation since avoiding these experiences encourages one to make responsible decisions and demonstrate self-discipline. Social-emotional learning empowers individuals to demonstrate a solution-driven mentality and evaluate the potential consequences of their actions (CASEL, 2021). In SEL programs, individuals can share their accolades, get

feedback from others, and receive other external rewards that may potentially encourage alteration in behaviors. Commitment to modeling learned behavior consists of social influences and incentives that enable individuals to remain devoted to changing their demeanors (Bandura, 1977).

Additionally, avoiding punishments or receiving rewards epitomizes how intrinsic motivation is linked to extrinsic incentives. Sennett (2021) concluded that completing an assignment or demonstrating a behavior leads to success. When assignments are completed and submitted with accuracy, the likelihood of good grades rises. When positive coping strategies are implemented during moments of frustration and anger, consequences may be avoided. Deep self-reflection and recognizing how societal progress is promoted through one's action are examples of social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021) which are reinforced through extrinsic motivation.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community. What is currently known about SEL programs is how social-emotional learning contributes to student achievement through increasing confidence to effectively implement relationship skills, self and social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2021; Shamnadh, 2019; Tate, 2019).

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory coincides with a variety of literature regarding how social-emotional learning involves the assurance of students comprehending and applying expectations to become productive individuals (CASEL, 2021). There is limited data available about SEL graduates' lived experiences that describe these empowering attributes that foster successful living in the home, school, and the community (Steedle et al., 2019). This study

addresses gaps in the current literature by exposing SEL graduates' perspectives on how social-emotional learning has cultivated empowering attributes that promote their success by observing, emulating, and demonstrating these characteristics.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework guiding this investigation is Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which highlights that people may be impacted through the success and failure of other individuals' behaviors. Furthermore, observing, learning, and modeling notable behaviors to promote self-confidence, manage emotions, foster positive relationships, and make responsible decisions are intentionally advanced through social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021). Strengthening individuals' morale is the focal point of social-emotional learning as taught in schools and modeled by staff. As the five competencies -- self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making -- are embedded into lessons as well as taught and reinforced by teachers throughout the week, students can comprehend the content in school and demonstrate their skills at home and in the community.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote success living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community through the lived experiences of individuals who have completed an SEL program. This chapter consists of an introduction of the research design, research questions, and the researcher's rationale for selecting the setting and participants. Additionally, the procedures of the study and researcher's role are provided prior to data collection and analysis. Lastly, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study are followed by a summary.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is the preferred research method for this study since it involves collecting and analyzing descriptive evidence based on beliefs, experiences, feelings, and judgements of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because these individuals' descriptions regarding how social-emotional learning programs have influenced their demeanors are provided through their opinions, ideas, reflections, and memories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological study, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences through their structured consciousness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), implements this qualitative research. A phenomenological study is viable because it requires the researcher to investigate occurrences from a first-person point of view (Moustakas, 1994). Through their consciousness, participants are empowered to share their rationales and provide

descriptions of what happened as they participated in social-emotional learning programs (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study to adequately describe how social-emotional learning has impacted the behaviors of individuals who have completed SEL programs.

A transcendental phenomenological study is applicable because the participants' beliefs, thoughts and aspirations are thoroughly analyzed to understand how their behaviors were impacted by social-emotional learning (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl developed this strategy to bring more dimensions to research regarding the human experience by defining "noema" as not being the real object, but the real phenomenon and "noesis" as perfectly self-evident and the act of perceiving (Moustakas, 1994; Sheehan, 2014). These two elements of transcendental phenomenology are valid for this study because perceptions of the individuals' learned behaviors and influences of others who have completed the social-emotional programs are examined through their personal experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community through the lived experiences of individuals who have completed an SEL program. A central research question and three sub questions were developed to obtain a solid understanding of the phenomenon. The central and sub questions are developed through Bandura's (1977) three components of the social learning theory which consists of observing, emulating, and modeling behaviors.

#### **Central Research Question**

What experiences in social-emotional learning cultivate empowering attributes that promote success living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community?

### **Sub-question One**

How were the experiences of observing behaviors described by individuals who had completed a social-emotional learning program?

### **Sub-question Two**

How were the experiences with imitating behaviors described by individuals who had completed a social-emotional learning program?

### **Sub-question Three**

How were the experiences with modeling behaviors described by individuals who had completed a social-emotional learning program?

## **Setting and Participants**

The site is a school district in Virginia named Edison Light Public Schools (ELPS) (pseudonym). The Fresh Start Initiative functions as a separate entity within the Office of Speciation and has been incorporating social-emotional learning into their program for over a decade. The program consists of three SEL practitioners: the special education teacher, the school district's therapist, and an instructional assistant. Structurally, the Edison Light school board is at the top of the district's leadership organization chart. Directly under the school board is the superintendent who supervises the chief academic officer. The director of secondary special education, who reports to the chief academic officer, manages the supervisor of special education. The Fresh Start Initiative is considered an alternative education program and the supervisor of special education is its administrator. The social-emotional learning program is run

by the special education teacher and the therapist to ensure that the students' academic, social, and emotional needs are being met through counseling and that they are successfully accessing the general curriculum through adhering to their individualized education program.

### **Setting**

The setting is appropriate for this study because of the Fresh Start Initiative's reputation of positively impacting the social and emotional growth of students who participate in the SEL program. For over a decade, FSI's social-emotional learning program has helped create dynamic home-school-community partnerships which have empowered students to graduate and enroll into college or confidently enter the workforce. The SEL practitioners of FSI are well-known throughout the Edison Light school community for their ongoing support and intervention. All the participants in this study are adults who have completed the Fresh Start Initiative's SEL program during high school and are currently located in the Washington D.C., Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina areas of the United States.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study are high school graduates who have completed an SEL program. These individuals have completed the Fresh Start Initiative and are 18 years and older. FSI is a districtwide special education program that is considered a public separate day school. This program was created to serve students with serious emotional and behavioral challenges. Classroom size ranges from four to six students with disabilities, who are serving long-term suspensions and expulsions due to possession of drugs with the intent to distribute, possession of weapons, or physical assault to others. The SEL practitioners who work in this program are a special education teacher, an instructional assistant, and licensed clinical psychologist. The Fresh Start Initiative is considered the most restrictive environment to accommodate the social,



emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students in an alternative setting.

The participants of this study consist of adults who have gained memorable experiences in social-emotional learning programs which have empowered them with the skills to live successfully at home, in school, and in the community. During their high school years, these participants were suspended and expelled from their home schools due to having possession of drugs with the intent to sell or distribute, possession of weapons, assault, or bodily harm to others. Since these students have disabilities, manifestation determination reviews were conducted within ten days of their suspensions to discuss their change of placement. FSI is one of the alternative education programs in the district that has infused social-emotional learning into an educational setting to support the participants' character development by increasing skills in the five competencies of social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management (CASEL, 2021).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As an SEL practitioner who is driven to cultivate positive change in students, families, and in the community, I am eager to learn how the behaviors of individuals who have completed SEL programs have developed, regressed, or persisted. To gain in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences in SEL programs, social constructivism has been implemented as the interpretive framework to encourage detailed responses that validate any potential behavioral changes. Self-development and determination are factors in promoting change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This element supports Bandura's (1977) social learning theory of learning through perceiving behaviors. Since these participants are now working adults, college students, and parents, I am motivated to gather their examples of how social-emotional learning has cultivated behavior change. To identify the most precise understanding of how SEL programs have

influenced these individuals' behaviors, I am compelled to proceed with an ontological assumption to define one truth that will be confirmed through human perception.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework of social constructivism is applied in this study. To ensure a thorough investigation, the participants have been asked open-ended questions to gain descriptions of how social-emotional learning has impacted their behaviors. According to Creswell (2013), the researcher in a phenomenological study is seeking to gain access to the interpretations and nuances that influenced each of the participants' worlds. In this study, the individual's behaviors are the focal point of what has been impacted.

### **Ontological Assumptions**

Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to ontological assumptions as the nature of reality. This assumption must be constructed by the reality of multiple individuals. This study is based on an ontological framework because their engagement regarding the observations, copying, and representation of others' mannerisms is analyzed through the participants' productive and unfavorable experiences in social-emotional learning programs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Through my experiences, ontological circumstances link to the characteristics of its reality. For instance, CASEL's (2021) SEL competencies such as self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making skills are associated with ways of behaving. I am propelled to study the participants' descriptions of how their experiences in social-emotional learning programs have affected their behaviors to gain a complete understanding of the participants' reality based on their insights.

### **Epistemological Assumptions**

Epistemological assumptions refer to knowledge which is gained through an understanding of the participants' lived realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This philosophy focuses on describing the subjective lived experiences and perspectives of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The epistemological assumptions in this study consist of how social-emotional learning should impact individuals with challenging behaviors. As a researcher and SEL practitioner who works in an alternative education setting, it assumed that SEL programs operate to strengthen these individuals' ability to manage emotions, demonstrate self-control and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2021). The opportunity to observe, emulate, and demonstrate are supported in social-emotional learning, which validates Bandura's (1971) social theory of developing positive behaviors. With this degree of certainty, SEL programs operate with the intent to replace disruptive behaviors with constructive coping strategies that encourage individuals to demonstrate desirable mannerisms.

### **Axiological Assumptions**

Axiological assumptions are based on the role of values, which Creswell and Poth (2018) expressed as the researcher's biases, personal values, and intuition that play a role in interpreting data from the dialogue of social construction. The axiological assumptions of this study are predicated on my experiences as an SEL practitioner who has witnessed how social-emotional learning exposes the emerging skills of children and families. CASEL (2021) stated that the mission of SEL programs is to promote societal progress through home-school partnerships. Intuitively, it is believed that social-emotional learning strengthens character and confidence through effective ongoing mentoring as entailed in Bandura's (1977) rationale about social influence, which links to using peer pressure as a restorative approach. Gulbrandson (2018) agreed that both social-emotional learning and restorative practices are positive approaches in

behavior development. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), realism axiology is demonstrated as cultural experiences and upbringings validate the biased perspective about SEL programs' impact on behaviors.

### **Researcher's Role**

In my role as the researcher, I function as the human instrument, gathering and thoroughly transcribing the described experiences provided by the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure the most thorough approach in my role, I avoid being biased by not connecting with the participants as a special education teacher and SEL practitioner. Since I worked directly with the participants when they participated in the social-emotional learning program, I will focus on being consistently straightforward to secure the participants' trust throughout the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlighted the researcher's responsibility to remain sensitive to the vulnerability of study participants. In my role, confidence, respect, and humility must be exhibited when learning about the participants' internal perceptions to encourage authentic responses (Moustakas, 1994). Their readiness to provide their commentaries will result in an ample number of interesting descriptions regarding their encounters with social-emotional learning. Additionally, I intend to gather detailed qualitative pre-existing data that was reported on earlier progress reports regarding the participants' social-emotional growth while they were involved in the SEL program in high school. This evidence solidifies the information provided during interviews and focus groups.

## **Procedures**

The steps being used to conduct this study are provided in the permissions and recruitment sections. IRB approval, site permissions, and participants' consent documents are included with the data collection, analysis, and synthesis to provide a detailed description of the necessary elements to ensure a thorough triangulation.

### **Permissions**

Regarding permissions, the first step of recruitment was to gain consent to proceed with research through the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). Upon IRB approval, consent was gained by the director of special education to access the Edison Light School District's database and locate individuals who attended and completed the SEL program-- the Fresh Start Initiative -- over the last seven years. After finding and gaining contact information for those individuals, the third step was to reach them via phone call or email and gain their permission to participate in the study.

### **Recruitment Plan**

During the recruitment phase, I provided information about the study, expressed the relevance of the graduates' perspectives on the SEL program's effectiveness on cultivating attributes that contribute to their successful living, and asked them for permission to be interviewed, to be placed in focus groups, and to review any necessary documents pertaining to their lived experiences. After gaining consent from participants, they were interviewed individually to gain in-depth descriptions of their experiences. After each participant was interviewed, a focus group was assembled to learn the perspectives of these individuals in a group meeting. Interviews and focus groups occurred in-person, virtually, and through phone

calls. The interview questions are in Appendix E. and the focus group questions are found in Appendix F.

The participants selected are adult high school graduates who have successfully completed a social-emotional learning program. Each of the individuals volunteered to be interviewed and share their experiences. Purposeful sampling was implemented in this study to develop a solid understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling is supported because only these selected participants, former high school students with disabilities had served long term suspensions in an alternative setting that focused on social and emotional development through a rigorous SEL program, would be able to provide the best descriptive data about the phenomenon. Since these individuals were afforded the opportunity to recruit others who had also completed a social-emotional learning program, snowball sampling was utilized to ensure the data saturation is met. Instead of using their legal names, these participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the sample size of phenomenological studies should be five to twenty-five participants. To ensure a quality investigation that provided detailed descriptions of these individuals' lived experiences, ten participants was the minimum sample size in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). Since snowball sampling was utilized, which results in more participants being added, the sample size may increase. Mason (2010) confirmed that saturation is met when the phenomenon can no longer be explained. When new information provided does not describe lived experiences of how social-emotional learning impacts the behavior of these individuals who have completed SEL programs, saturation would be met. The recruited participants were informed about the procedures, in-person interviews and

focus groups being recorded on a Samsung 22 Ultra Android cellular device. After recording, the data would immediately be transcribed on a Word document.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Data collection for this study involved a strenuous procedure of engaging meetings and dialogues between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this transcendental phenomenological approach, it was imperative that the researcher purposefully sample this population and develop a solid rapport with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). This strategy followed Patton's data collection procedure (Patton, 2002), whose method of empathetic neutrality involved an approach to examine the participants' emotions and feelings through in-depth discussions and interactions. Data was primarily collected by interviewing each of the participants regarding notable descriptions of their experiences as to how observing, mimicking, and modeling the behaviors of others impacted their social and emotional development while attending the SEL program.

The second method of collecting data was creating focus groups; the purpose of this technique was to encourage participants' interaction through their shared experiences, comfortability, and familiar encounters (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gill et al., 2008). The last form of data assemblage was a document analysis examining information based on the judgements, feelings, and aspirations of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, documents consist of individualized education programs, behavior intervention plans, teacher narratives, and comments from progress and grade reports. These documents detail evidence of the individuals' behavioral progressions and regressions related to their participation in SEL programs.

### **Individual Interviews**

One on one interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon to provide thorough data collection (Ryan et al., 2013). The interviews were conducted via phone due to the participants' availability via phone rather than virtually or in-person. To ensure an ethical process with no transferable errors, these phone conversations were recorded and followed by a thorough transcriptive procedure. Rosenblum and Hughes (2017) highlighted how digital recording technologies support the importance of accurately recollecting the proof and specifics. Since this information is purely descriptive, a thorough approach to the data collection process was implemented. The inquiries consisted of open-ended questions that enabled the participants to expound on their beliefs, values and attitudes related to their experiences in social-emotional learning. Their responses were based on the following questions.

### **Individual Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself to me by mentioning your name, age, occupation, and grade you were in while attending the social-emotional learning program. CRQ
2. Please describe the time of your enrollment in the social-emotional learning program. CRQ
3. Please describe your experience with social emotional learning during your time in the SEL program. SQ1
4. Please describe your connection with the SEL facilitator? SQ1
5. Please describe what you recall about the five competencies of SEL? CRQ
6. Based on your experiences in SEL, describe your self-awareness skills during high school and nowadays as an adult. SQ2
7. Based on your experiences, describe your social awareness skills during high school and nowadays as an adult. SQ3



8. Based on your experiences, describe your self-management skills during high school and nowadays as an adult. SQ2
9. Expound on how the SEL program has impacted your relationship skills. SQ3
10. Expound on how the SEL program has impacted your decision-making skills. SQ3
11. Describe the activities or exercises in the SEL program that resonated with you the most? CRQ
12. How has social-emotional learning impacted your communication skills? SQ3
13. What were the notable behaviors from others that you observed and were motivated to mimic and model? Describe how they were desirable or undesirable behaviors. SQ3
14. How has social-emotional learning affected your empathy and compassion for others? SQ3
15. Please describe how social-emotional learning has impacted your self-confidence. CRQ
16. Please describe how social-emotional learning has impacted your behavior at home. CRQ
17. How did social-emotional learning influence your behavior in the community? CRQ
18. Please describe what you learned from observing, emulating, and demonstrating the behavior of others. Did their conduct encourage you positively or negatively? CRQ
19. Please describe the empowering attributes cultivated through social-emotional learning that promoted success in your life. CRQ
20. Thank you for your time and willingness to complete this interview. If you have any additional information regarding your experiences in a social-emotional learning program, please share. CRQ

Creswell and Poth's (2018) rationale for creating research questions was utilized with the intent to narrow the focus to a smaller number of inquiries to be addressed in the study. Question 1 is the participants' introduction of themselves. They stated their name, current age, and the

grade they were in when enrolled in their SEL Program. In Question 2, the participants provided the number of days, occasions, month(s), date(s), and year(s) they were involved in social and emotional learning. Questions 3 and 4 provided opportunities for the participants to elaborate on their notable experiences in their SEL programs as well as their relationship and connection with their teachers (Collie et al., 2012). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe how textural and structural descriptions are embedded within study participants' experiences to highlight conditions and glaring occurrences that will expose the phenomenon.

Questions 5 through 10 exhorted the participants to revisit and explore the five skills of SEL. CASEL (2021) stated that these competencies encourage social-emotional growth through learning the skills and applying understanding to students' experiences at home, school, and in the community. Students benefit from working on strengthening these skills with fidelity and ambition to grow socially and emotionally. Greenberg et al. (2017) expressed how SEL is vital for positive results. It is imperative that individuals who facilitate social and emotional learning remain encouraged to increase their instructional delivery and remain passionate about improving their community's welfare and safety through this educational vehicle.

Questions 11 through 13 were developed to enable the participants to elaborate more on how social-emotional learning supported or hindered their experiences as high school students as well as on the activities and expectations of the SEL Program that encouraged their character development. An earlier study from Wang et al. (2012) highlighted challenges in SEL which undermined efforts to strengthen the skills that contribute to successfully transitioning from high school to adulthood, whether students began college or careers. The participants of this study were also enabled to recall the three ways of communicating based on their involvement in social and emotional learning.

Questions 14 and 15 invited study participants to critique their social-emotional programs based on their experiences and what they may have witnessed in the social emotional learning programs. Question 16 focused on their opportunity to openly express their perspective on SEL's influence on job readiness and the importance of social responsibility. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell's (2004) study expressed how investing, influencing others constructively, and interconnecting encourages and supports the humanistic concept. SEL's curriculum is designed to support and nurture the potential value of people. The participants' descriptions will explain the extent of how SEL impacted their ability to work effectively in the workplace and build healthy collegial relationships amongst co-workers and supervisors.

Question 17 prompted the participants to share their feelings, beliefs, and opinions on any general alterations they would recommend for the SEL curriculum based on their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Through these individuals' participation in their SEL program, they have developed projections of what they perceive as an effective program that supports the social-emotional growth of students. This was their opportunity to describe their versions of a perfect SEL program.

Question 18 was an inquiry regarding how social-emotional learning has potentially strengthened or lessened the self-confidence of these individuals. According to CASEL (2021), increasing the self-confidence of individuals is the epitome of what social-emotional learning provides.

Questions 19 provided the opportunity for participants to share their understanding about how social-emotional learning has affected their home lives and community involvement. Martirano (2016) stated that aspects of transcendental phenomenology were based on connecting

the various actualities of the topics through the participants to gain a solid understanding of the events, happenings or incidents that occurred in the SEL program.

Question 20 empowered study participants to provide their perspective on learned behaviors through Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, which consists of three methods of engaging the behaviors of others. Creswell and Poth (2018) mentioned how phenomenology consists of deep learning and increased perceptiveness. Providing guidance to facilitators and students who are involved in social and emotional learning enables participants to share their viewpoints regarding the potential betterment of teachers' instructional delivery and student engagement. Question 21 was a closing question that presented the researcher's appreciation and provided the participants with the opportunity to share more descriptions about their experiences that were not mentioned earlier during the interview (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan**

A reflexive journal was utilized, keeping a written record of the participants' shared events which were analyzed to effectively categorize the data and remove partialities. Epoche was implemented to set aside any biases and preconceived notions that are presented from the interviews (Moustakas, 1994), followed by reducing and eliminating, which are entailed in phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). I received each of the participants' expressions, comments, or descriptive input regarding SEL with equal value to ensure Horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The textual description of their experiences was entirely explained and differentiated from most essential elements of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The last procedure in the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis is imaginative variation and an individual "structural" description was assembled to determine how the participants experienced social-emotional learning programs (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Focus Group**

During these gatherings, I was privileged to chat with and interact with multiple participants and learn about their experiences as they interacted with each other and openly shared their opinions and feelings. Patton (2002) stated that empathy and insight are derived from the feelings and worldview of others, so the focus groups produced an opportunity of enlightenment amongst peers. During this session, the participants expressed their viewpoints with empathy gathered from listening to the other participants' perspectives, which encouraged them to share more in-depth details about their own experiences. The focus group questions were developed to gather explicit information from various participants at the same time as well as to encourage discourse amongst the participants between responses and to promote a nonjudgmental atmosphere that enabled the students to feel safe and confident enough to share their valued perceptions of this educational phenomenon. The meetings were conducted via conference call to provide opportunity for the participants to respond and interact with others. Gibbs (1997) explained that focus groups consist of organized discussions that are generated through questions that highlight a shared understanding of social issues. The following questions were presented to ensure a specific form of group interview with the participants' cooperating and intermingling.

## **Focus Group Questions**

1. Please describe, what do you know about social-emotional learning? CRQ
2. What qualities do you think would make an effective SEL program for you? CRQ
3. What qualities do you believe would make an SEL program ineffective? CRQ
4. Describe the behaviors that you were most and least eager to emulate and model while participating in the social-emotional learning program.SQ2

5. If you were to tell a friend about your social-emotional learning program that you had participated in, what would you say? CRQ
6. Out of the five competencies of SEL (self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills), describe the behaviors that you were able to observe from others and were motivated to mimic and demonstrate. SQ2
7. Out of the five competencies of SEL (self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills), describe the behaviors that you were able to observe from others and were discouraged to mimic and demonstrate. SQ2
8. Please describe the behaviors that you had learned and still model today from your experience in the social-emotional learning program. SQ3
9. Please share how the social-emotional learning program has influenced your behavior.  
CRQ

The purpose of the focus group questions was to gather in-depth data in a social context where participants could reflect on their own perspectives and consider their own views in the context of others' perceptions (Patton, 2002). Questions 1 and 2 were developed to provide empathy and insight into the individuals, to gain a solid understanding of their feelings and reasons for agreeing to participate in our focus group, and to share their perceptions about social-emotional learning (Patton, 2002). Questions 3 and 4 pertained to the positive and negative effects that others' behaviors have on their change in mannerisms (Bandura, 1971, 2019). Question 5 empowered the participants to interact by sharing their recommendations and reflecting on their experiences (Gill et al., 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 6-9 enabled the participant to express what encouraged or did not support their change in behavior and social

and emotional development based on their experience in the social-emotional program (CASEL, 2021; Bandura, 1971, 2019).

### **Focus Group Data Analysis Plan**

Epoche was applied as a method of refraining from any prejudices, biases, or preconceived thoughts that would jeopardize the study (Moustakas, 1994). After abstaining from any possible predispositions and learning more about the participants during focus groups, a phenomenological reduction was utilized to explain the SEL graduates' experiences in a textual language (Moustakas, 1994). The described observations, emulations, and various forms of modeled behaviors reported by the participants were labeled and identified as evidence that should be or should not be eliminated from the data collection and repetitive expressions, overlapping, and vague comments were removed prior to the third step of clustering and thematizing (Moustakas, 1994). I proceeded with a final discernment of themes by checking the invariant constituents and examined their explicitness and compatibility for the possibility of further deletion (Moustakas, 1994). The textual description of their experiences was entirely explained and differentiated from most essential elements of the phenomenon, followed by imaginative variation, or determining possible meanings, various frame references, and oppositions related to the SEL graduates' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The individual structural description was composed of integrated qualities and themes in social-emotional learning programs such as the participants' respect, opposition, or doubtfulness towards their SEL facilitator and the overall program (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Documents**

Documents consisted of artifacts, which are evidence described through the participants' lived experiences in the SEL program. These artifacts such as essays, diplomas, grades,

individualized program accommodations, and college applications were gathered and analyzed. These documents were saved in a locked file cabinet and electronic copies were saved on a Google Drive which only I can access. The evidence from these documents provides relevant events that justify the participants' mental, social, physical, and emotional experiences in the SEL programs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These documents provide a means of monitoring the change in behavior (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This descriptive evidence provides a connection of data that ensures the credibility of pertinent information needed to conduct the study. Newman (2020) mentioned essential areas related to fostering compassionate relationships through intentional social and emotional learning. Safety and wellness, community relationships, and cultural competency are areas that the researcher gathers during the document analysis. This information is available in progress reports, individualized education programs, team meeting minutes, and emails from teachers and other stakeholders describing the students' notable behaviors and actions.

### **Document Data Analysis Plan**

During document data analysis, Epoche was implemented to abstain from any biases and prejudgments that may have arisen while evaluating the data (Moustakas, 1994). This approach encourages study participants to provide an array of detailed descriptions about their experiences in a social-emotional learning program. When ensuring a receptive presence, the first step consists of the various descriptions that are relevant to the lived experiences being listed and grouped. Biases and other prejudices are removed and followed by phenomenological reduction to describe the SEL graduates' experiences in a textual language based on these documents. The textual description of their experiences is entirely explained and differentiated from essential elements of the phenomenon. The next step consists of imaginative variation, which is



determining the possible meanings, various frame references, and oppositions related to the SEL graduates' experiences. Various interpretations were explored, and themes were developed based on the participants' descriptions regarding their observations, emulations, and modeling of others' behavior during the participants' involvement in social-emotional learning (Bandura, 1971; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Synthesis**

To ensure a comprehensive description of how the participants' behaviors were nurtured by social-emotional learning, the data collection and analysis process were fulfilled with high fidelity and eagerness. Qualitative evidence was collected using primary sources such as interviews and focus groups. During the probing sessions, I set aside all biases and relied on the participants' intuition and imagination (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation were implemented to thoroughly categorize the descriptive data by disqualifying, invalidating, and preventing any prior knowledge and experiences that may interfere with an effective data collection and produce a comprehensive synthesis (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Denham and Ownuegbuzie (2013), plenty of data exists beyond words. Using nonverbal information in a transcendental phenomenological study strengthens understanding of the individuals' experiences in social and emotional learning. I documented any recognizable emotion or feeling through the phone conversations to determine the overall experiences so that the participants' in-depth dialogue could be analyzed as evidence. Their lived experiences, such as periods of self-reflection and empathy for others, earning honor roll grades, developing organization skills, setting goals, and striving towards decisiveness by avoiding

impulsiveness, are examples of the relevant information needed to highlight positive and negative behavioral changes.

Martirano (2016) stated that preconceptions and bias contribute to a qualitative study by providing a background of circumstances based on one's attitude. Triangulation was ensured through a combination of interviews, focus groups, and descriptive data from artifacts. These study participants were willing to disclose what they had learned from social-emotional learning by demonstrating empathy, remorse, and ownership. This information was examined to acknowledge the experiences of these individuals who have completed social-emotional learning programs. The modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was applied in this data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

Multiple strategies of accurately collecting and analyzing data to ensure the integrity of the study were implemented; direct quotes from the participants and other forms of communication were dependable, creditable, and confirmed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The authenticity of this study was ensured through the participants' firsthand narratives, which solidifies the validity of investigating the descriptions of social-emotional learning programs (Elo et al., 2014).

### **Credibility**

The credibility of this study entails sound data representing the described experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et al, 2014). Interviews and focus groups were recorded to ensure that the most precise commentaries were archived. Direct quotes were reviewed, analyzed, and documented to reveal specific details communicated by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The trustworthiness of this study was ensured by the

researcher thoroughly decoding the responses, interjections, and other relevant information collected from the individuals who have completed a social-emotional learning program in high school. In addition to triangulation of data that contributed to the credibility of the study, my prolonged engagement with the participants was also a factor (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et. al., 2014).

### **Dependability**

The study's dependability was ensured through rich, thick descriptions of themes, member-checks of findings, and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A reflexive journal was kept recording the procedures and findings. Dependability was ensured through the consistency and eagerness of the researcher to sustain the quality of the methodology through implementing appropriate data collection processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) expressed that commitment to the extensive time required in the field, prolifically writing descriptive passages, and engaging in the complex and time-consuming data-examining process are obligatory for qualitative research. All research activities and conclusions were carefully documented as the research evolved.

### **Transferability**

The evidence that is gathered from participant interviews, focus groups, and artifacts possesses the potential to be transferable to other projects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et. al., 2014). Since comprehensive data about the descriptions of these participants' lived experiences was collected from various perspectives, the evidence would likely transfer to different projects and investigations pertaining to social learning theory and social-emotional learning programs (Moustakas, 1994). Rich, thick descriptions and discussion of the setting and participants will

improve transferability of this study by enabling it to be conducted in a similar setting reaching similar conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability of this study was verified by what Nassaji (2020) referred to as an audit trail. I recorded and thoroughly explained every step of this investigation regarding decisions, data coding, and evaluations so that further confirmations are available to other researchers. This form of confirmability establishes descriptive information that will enable others to affirm or disprove the findings, which may encourage further research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations begin with consent from the Institutional Review Board and consent from the participants. Accepting responsibility for actively pursuing the groundwork and managing any anticipated ethical matters are notable attributes that the researcher should consistently reinforce (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After rigorous investigation and collecting the pertinent experiences, hard copy data was stored in double-locked file cabinets. The information stored electronically has been saved in a file and stored under secured usernames and passcodes. To ensure confidentiality of the participants, the researcher has assigned them aliases and deleted transcriptions of the phone interviews and conference call focus groups after the information was documented and safely stored away in a secure.

### **Summary**

The methodology implemented in this study uncovered the life experiences of these individuals to understand the experiences that occurred while they were participating in the social-emotional learning program. Due to the researchers' desire to maintain the participants' confidentiality and trust, extreme caution was exemplified to secure a valid investigation that

highlights the notable events. Conducting a transcendental phenomenological study enables the researcher to gather an abundance of life experiences from adults who can clearly articulate their judgements (Moustakas, 1994). These explanations developed into a running record of notable information that encouraged the researcher to recognize and appreciate the descriptions of social-emotional learning from an array of perspectives.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

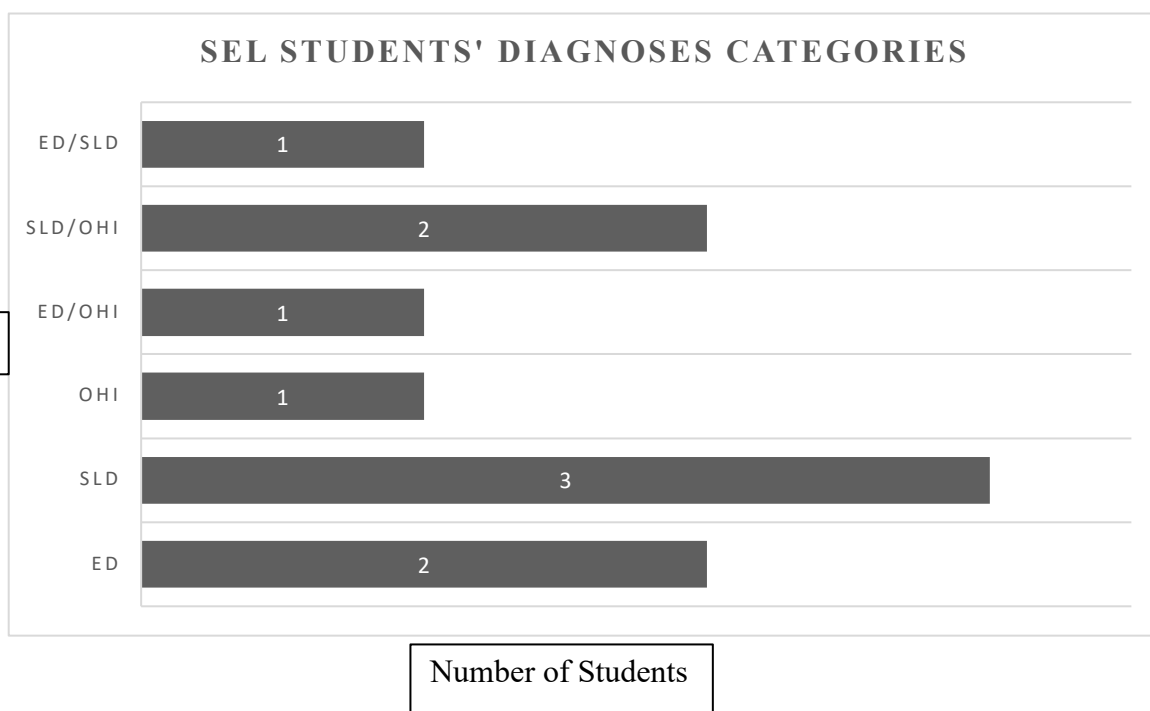
### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community for graduates who have completed a social-emotional learning program. In this chapter, the results of the data analysis are provided as findings. The chapter includes participant descriptions; the data, in the form of narrative themes, charts, graphs, tables, or models is presented by theme; outlier data; research question responses as level one headers; and a conclusion.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study are high school graduates who have completed an SEL program within the past seven years. These ten individuals, who have completed the Fresh Start Initiative, are males between the ages of 18 to 26. They all have been diagnosed with a specific learning disability, attention deficit disorder, an emotional disability, or other health impairments and have received services under an individualized education program in high school. Four of the students have been diagnosed with a primary and secondary disability; for instance, they have been diagnosed with emotional disability (ED) as the primary category of disability combined with a specific learning disability (SLD) as the secondary or emotional disability (ED) as the primary category and other health impairment (OHI) as the secondary or specific learning disability (SLD) as the primary and other health impairment (OHI) as the secondary. Figure 1 represents the categories of disability based on the participants' primary and secondary diagnoses.

Figure 1.



Most of the participants have received special education services in high school under the category of specific learning disability. In addition to those who have been diagnosed with emotional disability, the second largest group consisted of those students who have received services for specific learning disability along with other health impairment. Most of the SEL graduates were employed and presented artifacts such as a high school diploma, copy of grade report, college essay, a college application, or a college identification card. Two of these SEL graduates are college students, two are unemployed and two did not present an artifact.

Only one attended the SEL program during their sophomore year of high school. The other participants were juniors and seniors during their enrollment in the SEL program. In addition, there were two participants who attended and graduated from their SEL programs on two occasions. Table 1. represents the participants according to gender, employment or post-graduation status, artifact presented, and the year they were enrolled in the SEL program. To ensure their privacy, pseudonyms have been provided.

Table 1. SEL Graduate Participants

SEL Graduate	Gender	Class(es) when attended and graduated from a SEL Program.	Employment/ Post-graduate Status	Artifact Presented
Bryan	Male	Sophomore	College Student	College Essay about SEL Teacher
Greg	Male	Junior/Senior	Attended College/ Employed	Copy of College Application
Jack	Male	Junior/Senior	Unemployed	Copy of Report Card <i>(Honor roll)</i>
Tim	Male	Junior	Unemployed	Diploma
Andre	Male	Senior	Retail Manager	No Artifact
Terry	Male	Senior	College Student	College ID
Jimmy	Male	Senior	Personal Trainer	No Artifact
Jake	Male	Senior	Youth Counselor/ Life Coach	College Degree
Terrance	Male	Junior	Employed	No Artifact
Ben	Male	Junior	Entrepreneur	Diploma

The SEL graduate participants provided experiences and evidence that contributed to life-long changes, which epitomizes the mission of social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021). The artifacts retrieved during individual interviews served as confirmation of how the SEL program influenced these individuals' present and future academically, behaviorally, and socially. Bryan is a college student majoring in education due to the influence of his SEL teacher; he provided an essay from his freshman year about how his SEL teacher impacted his character development.



Greg provided his college application that, he reported, he had filled out during his enrollment in the SEL program. His teacher had assisted him with the application as well as helping him and his mother with the financial aid process. Attending college would not have been possible without improving his academic performance during his senior year of high school. Like others, Greg attributed his improved academic performance to his teacher. “I have never earned the honor roll until I enrolled in the SEL program,” said Jack. He provided a copy of his report card as a substantial artifact that confirmed how the SEL program cultivated positive attributes in his life. Tim, who is the first in his family to graduate with a high school diploma, provided a copy of his standard diploma as a notable document. He presented it with pride and a teary-eyed smile. In addition, Jake’s college degree, Ben’s high school diploma, and Terry’s college identification card represented examples of how they were able to learn from the SEL program, make responsible decisions, improve their academic performances, and master goals that were set.

## **Results**

This data collected from the participants’ lived experiences were organized thematically into five categories. These themes consist of the social-emotional learning competencies described by CASEL (2021). Subthemes are specific skills that were derived from the participants’ descriptions. Table 2 below displays specific themes and subthemes.

*Table 2. Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
<b>SEL Competencies</b>	<b>Specified Skills</b>
Self-Management	Demonstrating Impulse Control Increasing Self-Discipline

	Self-Motivation Goal Setting Organizational Skills
Self-Awareness	Recognizing One's Strengths Increasing Self-Confidence Building Self-Efficacy
Social-Awareness	Demonstrating Empathy Perspective-Taking Respect for Others
Relationship Skills	Communication Demonstrating Teamwork Relationship Building
Responsible Decision-Making	Ethical Responsibility Identifying and Solving Problems Analyzing Situations

### **Self-Management**

Self-management is a characteristic that each of the participants was inspired to develop. They enrolled in the SEL program having served long-term suspensions due to their lack of consistency in impulse control, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, and organizational skills. Cultivating self-management skills empowers individuals to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as well as increases their ability to effectively manage anger and stress (CASEL, 2021). The study participants reported on their willingness and enthusiasm to self-

motivate, self-regulate, and follow up with personal objectives to meet goals. Although their specified skills were various, impulse control is a notable ability that each of the SEL graduates elaborated on when sharing their experiences.

### **Demonstrating Impulse Control**

Out of the five participants who were diagnosed with attention deficit disorders, four of them shared how the SEL program helped to increase their ability to manage their actions through recognizing how thoughts control feelings and feelings control behavior. Jake concluded that the program had reinforced what he had already known, “I must give credit to my mom and aunt for encouraging me to think positive in order to do positive things. Jake was someone who rarely got into trouble prior to entering the program though he was an accomplice in a situation which led to a long-term suspension. He did not consider himself a troubled youth, but a youth who experienced trouble through his association with troublesome peers. Along with Jake, Terrance explained how peer influence contributed to his occasional loss of impulse control during high school. Bryan explained that, during counseling, he was reminded that his behaviors are controlled through his thoughts and emotions. “When I think about punching someone, I feel like it leads to potentially doing it,” said Bryan. In addition, Bryan expressed how his teacher was very level-headed and demonstrated behavioral expectations. As he observed his classmates’ disrespectful actions, Bryan consciously decided not to emulate those undesirable behaviors. He appreciated how the SEL facilitators would display strength and maintain professionalism during challenging moments with classmates. This is a form of rational detachment, which Crisis Prevention Institute’s (2013) earlier assessment described as not taking things personally to sustain control and calmness during crisis moments.

Bryan believed that his SEL teacher epitomized impulse control through a sense of humor and charisma. Tim and Jack agreed that they needed help with their impulsivity since they were involved in numerous altercations at home and in the community. Andre and Terrance's experiences were like Jimmy's during their time in the SEL program; they struggled with regulating their emotions during moments of frustration and anger. Greg highlighted, "I never really had anger issues to manage, but sometimes I would do stupid things without thinking about the consequences." He admitted that self-discipline was more of a challenge which he relied on the SEL program to assist with than impulse control. "I feel like I did not want to calm myself down when I became upset because I needed the attention," said Jimmy. Andre added, "I did not care about controlling my aggression, but I hated trouble. I still did whatever came to mind." The participants who were diagnosed with attention deficits raved about how the program assisted them with setting and mastering their behavior goals through utilizing coping strategies that fostered impulse control. "Breathing techniques, thinking before I spoke, and focusing on being assertive really helped me," said Terrance.

Ben and Greg expressed that the SEL program never contributed to their impulse control. Greg credited being involved in school sports as a reason why he was not as impulsive in school and Ben is adamant about thinking before he acts. "I had coaches and teammates who would remind me of what I was in jeopardy of losing, so I did not misbehave in school that much," said Greg. Tim and Jack stated that they simply did not care about the consequences until they were held accountable to their actions. "I remember watching the movie, *Life as a King*," said Ben. "Cuba Gooding Jr. playing Eugene Brown, an ex-convict who opened a chess club in Washington DC. He linked control with keeping calm by not panicking." This movie was shown to several of the participants during their time in the program, which served as a memorable

lesson on impulse control by thinking before acting. Being enrolled in the SEL program encouraged them to work on their impulse control through increasing self-discipline.

### **Increasing Self-Discipline**

The SEL program encouraged the students' increase in self-discipline by providing structure, rules, and expectations. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is linked to CASEL's (2021) theory on social-emotional learning through modeling the expectations to cultivate confidence with demonstrating notable behaviors. CASEL's (2021) social-emotional learning competencies are predicated on implementing effective de-escalation strategies to foster a warm learning environment where everyone can thrive. Andre, Jimmy, and Terrance each credited their teacher for being a great model of self-discipline. Each of them would test their teacher's authority by not following rules and being insensitive. "My teacher was one of the most patient people I have ever met, and it is because he was disciplined," said Jimmy. Andre recalled a time when the teacher kept positively reinforcing their expectations while another student disrespected him. "I learned what the meaning of restraint was after witnessing that moment and wanted to be that person," said Andre.

Terrance and Ben were impressed by the SEL program's continuous therapeutic environment. At times, they felt awkward that someone who did not know them had chosen a nonjudgmental approach instead of treating them like juvenile delinquents. Like other students, it took a while to adjust to the program's rules. "I remember we had to turn in our cell phones every day and complete homework assignments," said Jack. He, Tim, and Greg never completed homework or studied for upcoming assessments. "In the beginning, I felt like it was a set up to fail because I was not doing any homework," said Tim. He felt that he was not capable of meeting the expectations and was not motivated to work on his self-discipline initially. "Towards

the end of the day, I understood what I needed to do and began changing my behavior. I was tired of getting into trouble, so why not,” he said. Bryan stated that his self-discipline was horrible; he did whatever he wanted rather than whatever he needed. “I needed to work harder on my schoolwork and earn good grades in high school, but the program assisted me with motivation.”

According to CASEL (2021), self-discipline enables individuals to effectively manage oneself. “I did not care enough about managing myself because I felt like nobody cared about me,” said Jack. He felt the need to work harder on his self-discipline because of his teacher’s and counselor’s consistency. They were persistent with Jack by frequently assisting him with setting goals and raising the bar of expectation. “My grades did not improve until I buckled down and focused, which is discipline,” said Jack. Self-discipline is required to set goals, which is difficult without self-motivation.

### **Self-Motivation**

Each of the participants credited the SEL program for instilling self-motivation into them by describing the importance of controlling their emotions and behavior through recognizing their passions and interests. Bryan and Greg enjoyed athletics and their SEL facilitators celebrated these interests by helping them to acknowledge how their motivation can be driven through acknowledging how their passions and interests are impacted if self-discipline and impulse control are not consistently demonstrated. Tim explained, “My teacher and therapist had doctorates and were athletes in high school, so when they talked, I listened.” From an observational perspective, Jack felt similar. He shared, “My teacher was real and motivated. I may not have listened to everything he said, but I listened to most of what he would tell me.” Bandura (1977) stated how being compelled to do what is being observed increases the desire to

emulate and model the behavior. Terrance shared that his teacher was also an athletic coach who, he believed, could influence anyone to run through a brick wall. “In a short amount of time, my teacher and I developed a strong connection. I knew he was on my side, and I did not want to let him down,” said Terrance. According to CASEL (2021), relationships are critical in social-emotional growth. Remarkably, all the participants respected their SEL facilitators’ perspective on self-motivation, which enabled them to consider the importance of setting goals.

### **Goal Setting**

Since Greg and Tim had enrolled in a SEL program on multiple occasions, their perspective on goal setting was not as enthusiastic as Bryan’s and Jack’s assessment. Greg admitted, “I obviously did not reach my goal after leaving the program the first time, but I feel like things happened for a reason. I needed to return to the program and finish what I had started.” Greg was able to reach a major goal of graduating high school and participating in collegiate athletics. He credited his SEL facilitators with assisting him in completing his high school credits, earning a standard diploma, and applying to college. “When I needed my teacher, he sent over my IEP accommodations and services to the college. I am thankful because I needed it to successfully access my college courses,” stated Greg. He and Andre agreed that the SEL program contributed to their academic success. Similarly, Jack stated that he had earned honor roll grades while attending the SEL program. Jack said, “I went from failing almost every class to earning a B average.” Jack shared that it was difficult to set goals and achieve his potential, but the structure and intense involvement of the SEL staff empowered him to set goals and pursue them with enthusiasm. Jack commented, “My goal was to complete my classwork and earn As and Bs, and my teachers held me to it. I appreciate how they did not allow me to make

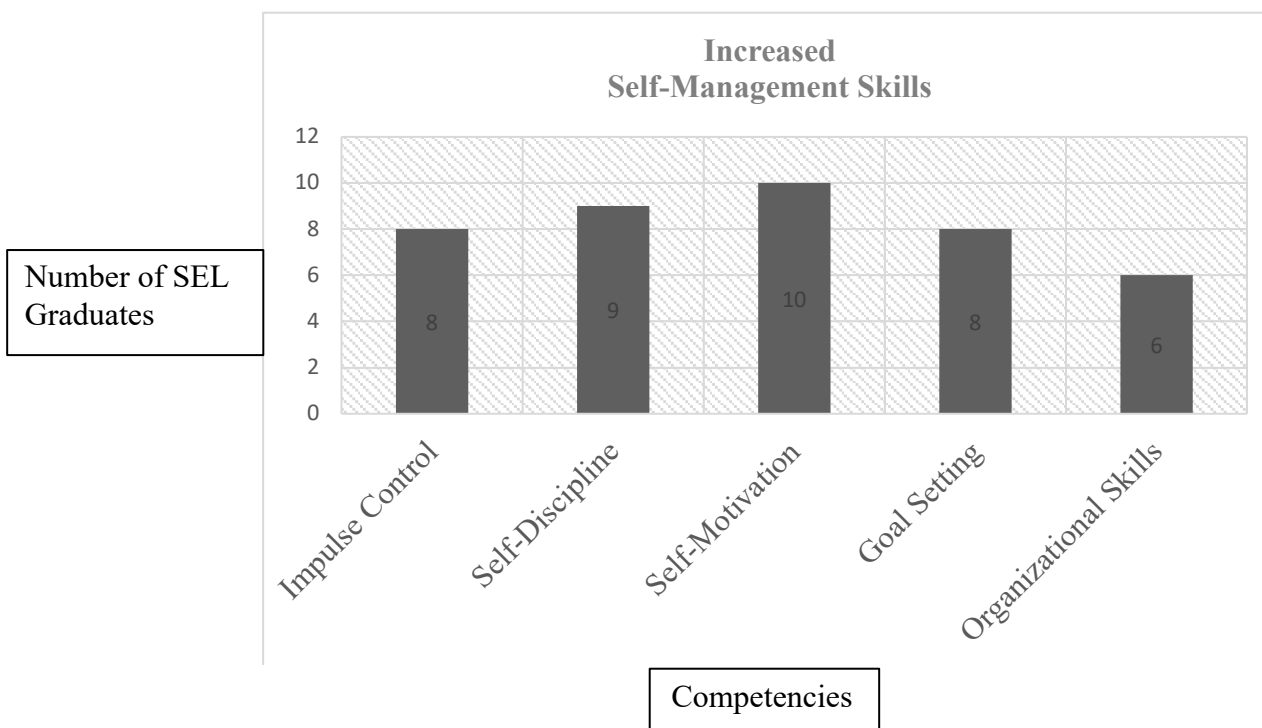
excuses.” Goal setting consists of developing and organizing objectives (CASEL, 2021). In addition to time management, demonstrating effective organizational skills is paramount.

### **Organizational Skills**

The participants with attention deficits struggled with time management and organizational skills. “I remember learning how to plan throughout the day by using an agenda and journal, but I never listened,” said Jake, who agreed that his organizational skills did not strengthen due to resistance. He and the other students who were diagnosed with attention deficit impairment admitted that they needed one-on-one support in organization. On the other hand, SEL graduates without attention deficits were able to thrive. Bryan had a history of occasionally studying for tests and completing homework assignments. “My parents would encourage me to take the time to focus on what I needed to get done, but it needed to be reinforced at school,” said Bryan. “I have to credit my teachers for providing a safe learning space where I can plan and execute.” Tim, Greg, and Jack highlighted how they refused to complete homework assignments, but if time was used wisely while attending the program, a lot of work could be completed. “I got a lot of work completed because that was all that I had to do,” said Tim. The SEL program was provided in an alternative setting that was restrictive, which helped the participants organize their tasks daily. Figure 2 depicts the number of SEL graduates who experienced an increase in specified competencies pertaining to self-management.

Figure 2.





Based on the participants' experiences, the SEL program contributed to strengthening their self-motivation. All ten of them became more eager to attend school, complete their assignments, participate in required therapy sessions, and increase their grade point averages. Jimmy and Ben reported how the program propelled them to prove themselves. Although it was difficult, they were frequently encouraged by their teacher to work on becoming the best version of themselves through cultivating self-discipline and motivation in their lifestyle, structuring their school day, and taking initiative. "Before entering the program, I never did homework, studied for tests, or volunteered to help others for extra credit," said Ben. "My teacher practiced what he had instructed me to accomplish. His ambition showed me how to set goals and master them," Jimmy added. "We had behavior sheets, assignment completion charts, and my teachers checked in every half hour to make sure that I remained on the track," said Jack. Greg commented on how the program forced him to evaluate himself every day. He was able to

organize his thoughts and highlight his academic, behavior, and social strengths and weaknesses, which link to CASEL's (2021) rationale on self-awareness.

### **Self-Awareness**

The SEL program influenced these graduates' self-awareness skills through instilling attributes that empowered them. Specific skills such as how the program facilitators esteemed them, focused on their behavioral strengths, and impacted their self-efficacy were revisited and confirmed. CASEL's (2021) description of promoting confidence epitomizes the importance of self-awareness through acknowledging strengths and constructively addressing weaknesses.

"When I entered the program, my first assignment was to set goals and develop my behavior chart based on the areas that I needed to work on," said Jack. Lacking confidence in areas enabled some of the SEL graduates to highlight their weaknesses to determine their strengths. Tim stated, "I needed to rule out my weaknesses in order to focus on my talents, which helped me really recognize strengths."

### **Recognizing One's Strengths**

Greg believed that recognizing his strengths was also a weakness because of his attitude. "I knew I was a great athlete, so when I went off to college, I had proved it," said Greg. His grit and determination were his strength. In high school, he struggled academically, and his confidence was impacted heavily. "I never cried in my life, but in the program during counseling, I could not hold back the tears," said Greg. He believed that his opportunity to attend college was overlooked, so he had to rely on his athletic ability to reach his goal. Bryan agreed that his behavior nearly got in his way but recognizing his ability to remain focused when motivated was a strength. Bryan said, "I would not have made it this far without my SEL teacher, who also influenced me to major in education and become a teacher one day." From Bandura's

(1977) social learning perspective, Bryan's situation is an example of how positive influence creates change. He was inspired by his teacher's ability to empower him, which motivated him to empower others by teaching and learning. Through Tim's experience, he began to believe in himself through knowing his strengths and gaining self-confidence.

### **Increasing Self-Confidence**

Tim, Bryan, and Jack elaborated on how social-emotional learning focused on increasing their confidence through respecting themselves and knowing their worth. Receiving special education services through an individualized educational program was never an issue for Bryan, but the other participants shared some level of resentment at the time due to their being insecure. "I never did well in school, so it was always a sensitive thing to talk about," said Greg. Tim mentioned, "I was always told that I was smart by my teachers and mom, but it never really clicked until later." These young men participated in activities that focused on self-esteem such as class discussions, role playing, and other tasks that re-established their self-belief and dignity. "I remember discussing how to deal with injustice and effectively advocating for fairness," said Jack. Bryan agreed that even though he was somewhat confident, the program helped to solidify his self-image. "I was confident in what I wanted to do with my life after leaving the program, and that felt good," said Bryan.

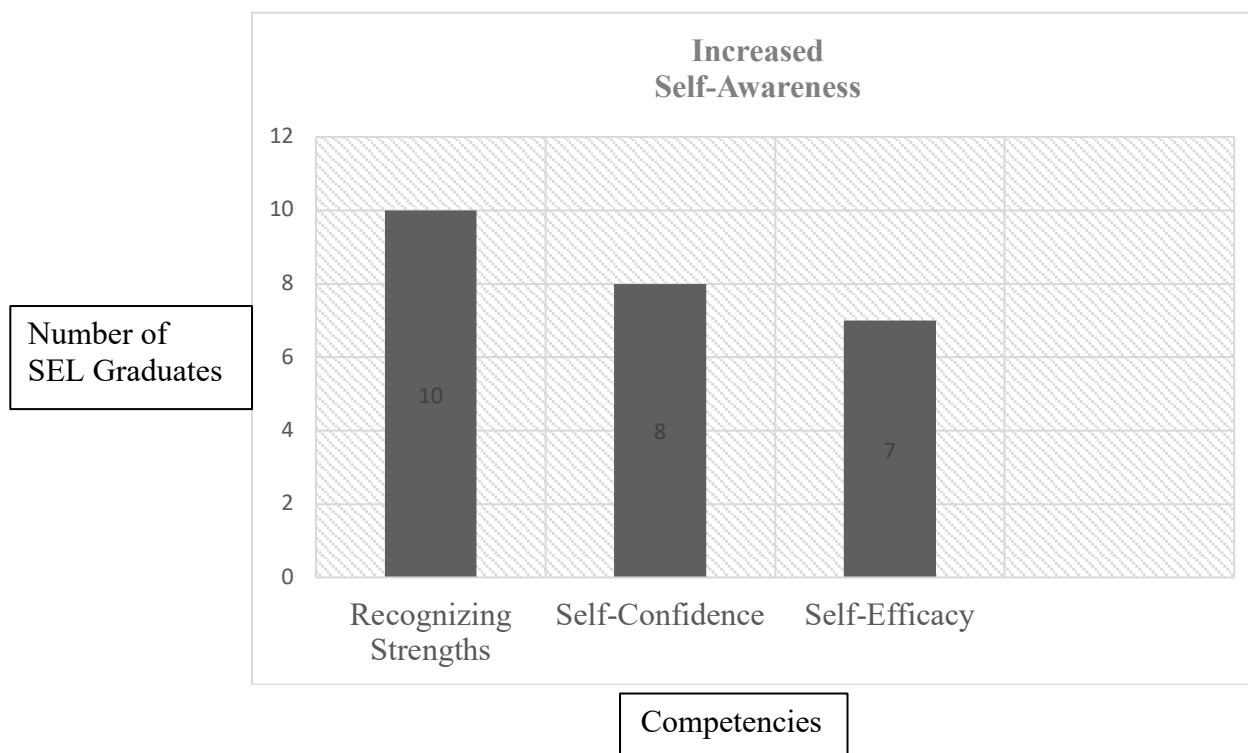
One of Jack's behavior goals in his individualized education program was self-advocacy. Knowing his self-worth enabled him to independently advocate for himself to authority figures. "I was taught to code switch, which meant being able to speak appropriately in certain environments," said Jack. He was constantly informed by his SEL teacher that he did not need to use profanity due to his impressive vocabulary level and wit, so he worked on speaking with

standard English while refraining from using vernacular. He began working on building his self-efficacy through the self-assurance that was introduced to him by SEL facilitators.

### **Building Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy enabled the SEL graduates to thrive at home, in school, and in the community. Knowing their self-value empowered them to speak up for themselves when they believed they had been treated unfairly or inferior to others. “I used to look for power struggles by disrespecting authority and boundaries, but I just focused on the reality of knowing what I deserved from anyone,” said Tim. Jack replied, “Yes, sir! I remember when my teacher said that I should know that nobody is better than me, but I should also believe that I am no better than anyone else.” Along with self-efficacy, they were taught humility which Greg believed to be a great combination of character. “I appreciated how my teacher was assertive but expressed how it is important to be willing to work hard like anyone else who is inspired to do great things,” said Greg. Bryan confirmed, “I remember being taught to be assertive and never aggressive when speaking up for myself.” Each of the participants had to work on being assertive through counseling that was required in the program. Dignity was important to these graduates, and it increased after transitioning out of the program and graduating on time. Greg, Jack, and Tim attended summer school to finish high school with their class. Bryan improved his academic performance and was admitted to the college of his choice. Through their journey, these SEL graduates learned how respecting peers and authority figures led to more opportunities to succeed. “As an adult, I have more patience and respect for others,” said Bryan. These attributes represent social awareness. Figure 3 depicts the number of SEL graduates who experienced an increase in specified competencies pertaining to self-awareness.

Figure 3.



### **Social-Awareness**

Social awareness empowers individuals to be community servants through compassion and willingness by disrupting personal biases and appreciating diversity (CASEL, 2021). Prior to enrolling in the SEL program, participants in this study had been either indifferent or insensitive to the feelings of others, which impacted their perspective-taking skills and ability to listen empathetically. Open discussions about current events involving social injustice and role-playing scenarios linked to their real-life situations influenced them to develop a growth mindset. Greg said, “I learned to take ownership and not blame others during moments of frustration because they could be having a bad day. My job is to not allow negativity to influence me.”

Demonstrating empathy became easier as the participants graduated from the SEL program, completed high school, and transitioned into adulthood.

### **Demonstrating Empathy**

Before entering the SEL program, the participants struggled with consistently showing compassion to others during moments of frustration and anger. Bryan stated, “As a high school kid, I have been known to lose my temper before considering the feelings of others. It is important for me to think about others and avoid overreacting.” Jack’s insensitive demeanor developed because of traumatic experiences with family and friends, and he struggled with gaining the desire to be empathetic. He said, “I feel like since nobody cared about me, why should I care about them? I trust no one.” Greg was very selective when he displayed empathy. “I did not care about them if they were not my mother, grandmother, siblings, close cousins, or close friends. I felt like it was not important to be concerned about their life”, said Greg. Fortunately, each of the participants reported that they are currently more willing to show empathy. CASEL (2021) presents empathy and perspective-taking in similar forms, which affirms the participants’ challenge with taking the perspective of others.

### **Perspective-Taking**

Taking the perspective of others consists of taking initiative to learn the strengths and challenges of others (CASEL, 2022). While attending the SEL program, the participants were encouraged to get involved within their home and school communities and to participate in leadership opportunities. Jack volunteered to read to preschool children. Bryan worked as a troop leader in Boy Scouts and Greg focused on mentoring some of his close friends who were incarcerated. The SEL program encouraged them to always be willing to help others through patience and willingness to understand their situations. “I understand why people make mistakes, but I never want them to go through what I have experienced,” said Greg. Bryan mentioned how playing school sports allowed him to be considerate of his teammates and coaches. “I respected the players and the staff, and I wanted them to count on me to do my job,” he said. Tim

elaborated on how taking the perspective of others requires having respect for them. “When I respect others, I will respect their feelings, and then I will consider their perspectives,” said Tim. Acknowledging the viewpoints of others demonstrates respect, which promotes confidence (CASEL, 2022). “My teachers respected me and my classmates, so I had to respect them,” said Jack. The SEL program focused on being exemplary, so these individuals were empowered to show their dignity by respecting others.

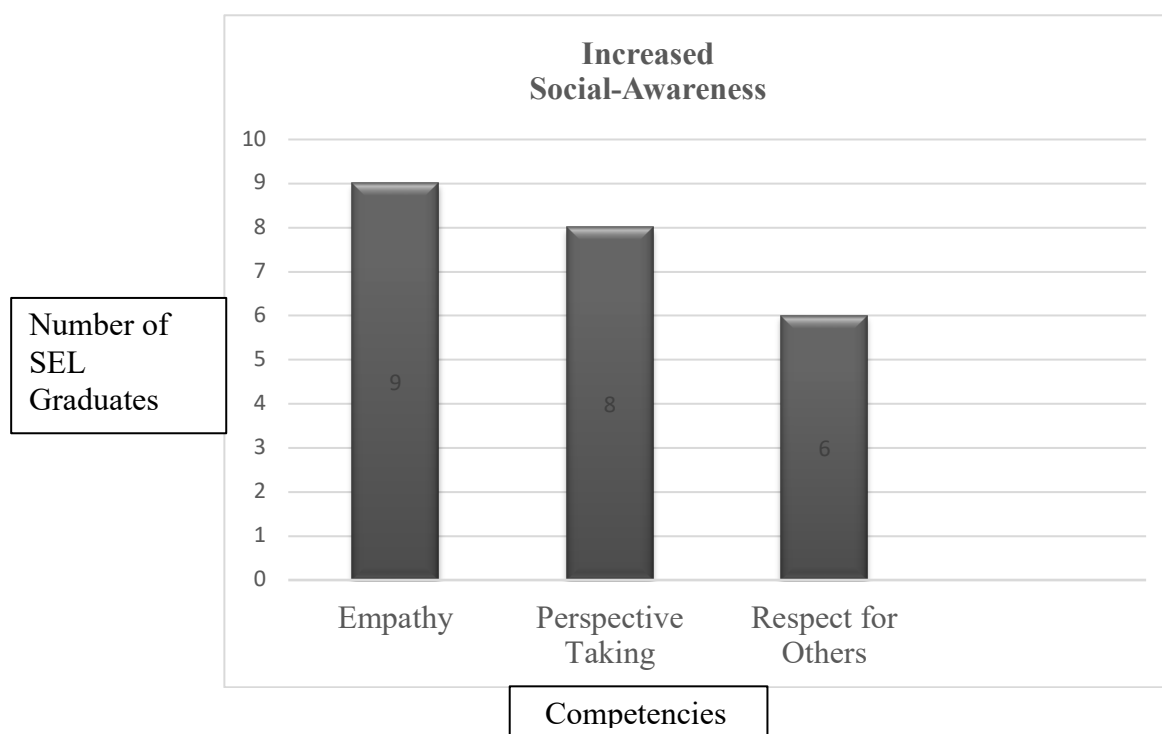
### **Respecting Others**

The SEL graduates understood the importance of respecting others by demonstrating empathy, appreciating diversity, and considering the viewpoint of others. Jack struggled with appreciating different cultures but became eager to demonstrate the willingness to respect various traditions and backgrounds. “My teacher always said that, as human beings, we have natural biases but what matters is the willingness to disrupt those opinions and judgements and respect people regardless of their race, sexuality, color, or religion,” said Tim. Courageous conversations about race, color, and culture were planned by the facilitators, but the students were able to initiate dialogue based on their feelings and circumstances. “My teacher would allow me to express what is on my mind. He said that my well-being is more important than any assignment. I was allowed to share whatever was on my mind before beginning my schoolwork,” said Greg. These open class discussions enabled participants to learn the perspectives of others, appreciate various mentalities, and build solid relationships. “I have one or two friendships that were developed while attending the program,” said Bryan. Relationships were established through valuing peers and appreciating authority figures. Jack said, “I keep in contact with my teacher because of the respect and bond that we have built.” The program encouraged participants to motivate each other and to avoid functioning in a dispirited manner; its mission

was to appreciate opportunity and promote behavior change. “I really grew to respect some of the students who attended the program with me,” said Tim. Demonstrated effective relationship skills are predicated on supporting others, which is linked to respecting them (CASEL, 2021).

Figure 4 depicts the number of SEL graduates who experienced an increase in specified competencies pertaining to social awareness.

Figure 4.



### Relationship Skills

Establishing and maintaining positive relationships is essential in fostering behavior change due to social influence (Bandura, 1977; CASEL, 2021). These graduates shared their perspectives regarding the program’s influence on their relationship skills by elaborating on communication, which included being assertive, passive aggression, and aggression. Other topics were teamwork and relationship building. “I would not consider myself to be shy. I was just selective about who I would talk to, but the program helped me communicate effectively,” said



Greg. The program implemented activities such as cooperative learning, team building, and comradeship. Positive influences are developed through communicating clearly, listening well, resisting negative social or peer pressure, and instinctively seeking and asking for help when needed (CASEL, 2021). “I am still working on my communication skills. I needed to stop cursing and offending people, and the program helped me focus on avoiding those habits,” said Jack.

### **Communication**

Each of the participants wanted to become better listeners and to handle social pressure more effectively. SEL facilitators reminded Tim and Greg about how they felt when they were listened to with undivided attention and the feeling of being ignored during conversations. Teachers would model empathetic listening by restating their participants’ concerns and apologize for misinterpreting their dialogue when needed. “When I was upset, I remember my teacher allowing me to vent while paying close attention to what I needed,” said Greg.

Communication consists of clear and concise dialoguing (CASEL, 2021). Tim said, “My teacher would keep it simple and get to the point, which I appreciated. I learned a lot through watching my teachers and other classmates who demonstrated good communication skills.” Jack recalled that, during class discussions, he and his classmates would work together to analyze moments when communication could have been more effective. “My classmates and I would work together to figure out how to speak out assertively during tough situations,” said Jack. Learning how to work together to achieve a common goal promotes teamwork, (CASEL, 2021).

### **Teamwork**

Bryan and Greg were involved in organized school sports and eventually experienced participating in college athletics. Jack and Tim had been involved in high school sports but

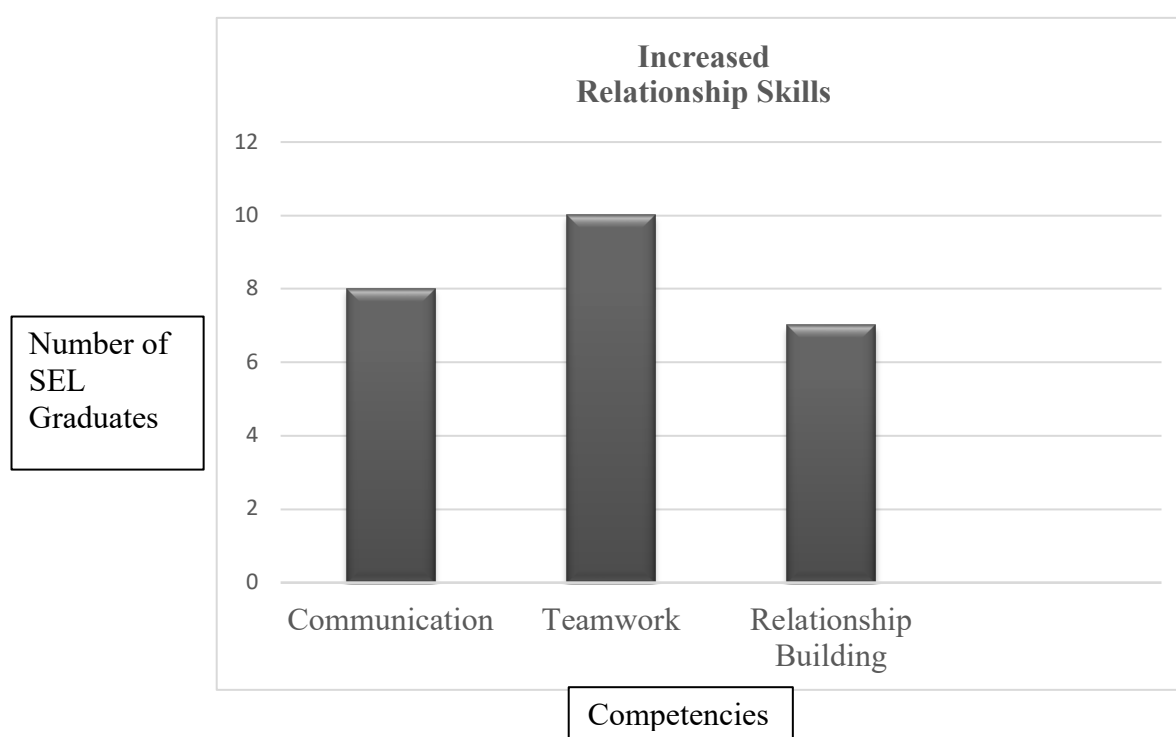
lacked commitment due to various circumstances. “I was a great athlete, but I kept getting into trouble. This was before I entered the program,” said Jack. He believed that the program would not have stopped him from getting into trouble, but he would have had a better chance of staying on the team. Bryan stated, “I love being on a team. I found purpose and was able to set goals.” Greg elaborated on relationship building. “Some of the best times were when we lost games, because we had to listen to coaches and pull together as a team,” said Greg. Pulling together consisted of motivating each other by acknowledging the strengths of others, respecting the coaches and players, and exhibiting transparency by communicating fluently. “My teacher played school sports and he used that connection with me to express the importance of relationship building with teammates and coaches,” said Greg. Personalizing these moments helped to strengthen the relationship between Greg and his teacher. Through that experience, Greg was able to determine the value of relationship building.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationship building is vital at home, in school, and in the community (CASEL, 2021). Although two of the participants were unemployed, they had experienced the importance of being reliable and honest in the workplace. “I never get along with my supervisors. The relationship starts out great and then it fades away,” said Jack. He stated that the SEL program encouraged him to take ownership of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with authority figures, but there was a lot of work that needed to be done to ensure Jack’s success. “I don’t mind taking ownership, but I believe those who offend me should take ownership too,” said Jack. Tim shared, “Whenever I was late to work, I would call my supervisor and apologize to my co-workers because I did not want to ruin any relationships.” Communication is paramount when building relationships (CASEL, 2021). “I think it is important to show how

important relationship building is to those who you want to develop a positive connection with,” said Bryan. His parents taught him about the value of relationship building, but the program reinforced the significance. Bryan said, “I appreciate how my teacher would follow up on things that my parents had taught me. I had no choice but to strengthen in that area.” Figure 5 depicts the number of SEL graduates who experienced an increase in competencies pertaining to relationship skills.

Figure 5.



### Responsible Decision-Making Skills

In addition to relationship building, the most popular SEL skill that was reinforced by the SEL facilitators, according to study participants, was responsible decision making. The participants admitted that their SEL teacher highlighted the importance of making responsible decisions whether people were present or not. Based on their experiences, ethical responsibility, identifying and solving problems, and analyzing situations were elaborated on the most. “Your

character is what you do when nobody is around,” said Greg. Tim shared that making responsible decisions did not initially register with him mentally, which led to consequences and missed opportunities. “I cared about making the right decisions, but I did not show it right away. It took me a while to demonstrate that understanding,” said Tim. The participants had issues with taking ownership during their time in the program and following rules. Jack said, “I probably would not have returned to the program for a second time if I had followed rules and taken ownership for my mistakes. Although I have a disability and am impulsive, there is no excuse.” Demonstrating a commitment to doing what is right requires an ethical mentality. The SEL program encouraged students to buy into and appreciate having morals and principles. “My teachers never acted perfect or fake, they just respected rules and praised the positively reinforced good decision-making skills,” said Tim.

### **Ethical Responsibility**

In the SEL program, participants were encouraged to think about being ethical. “I remember when my teacher chastised me about keeping it real. I was not a completely honest kid, but I am always striving to be a responsible adult,” said Jack. Being ethical involves respecting others and displaying character through assisting those individuals who need help. “I have decided to become an educator and operate from an ethical lens to help others,” said Bryan. The SEL program enabled the participants to focus on finding their purpose through their passion and ownership. “I am unemployed, but I know what I want to do with my life. It is my responsibility to work hard and not blame others for my mistakes,” said Jack. Observing someone who is considered a person with strong moral fiber justified why the participants wanted to emulate their teachers. “He was a good dude. He was not perfect, but I feel like he was more than decent,” said Tim. Individuals are willing to model the behaviors of captivating

figures who are deemed relatable (Bandura, 2019). Terrance mentioned that he had witnessed his teacher pray every morning, which led to him inquiring about what she had prayed about. “I remember her saying that she prayed for the strength to educate us as best as she could regardless of the challenge,” Terrance said. His teacher also stated that she was responsible for encouraging their success, which epitomized ethical responsibility. Andre mentioned how his teacher saw value in him and held him accountable. “My teacher’s pride in me helped me gain pride within myself,” said Andre who, at the time, considered himself to have low esteem. CASEL (2021) elaborated that esteeming students by celebrating when they take ownership of their actions and responsibilities is essential for social emotional growth.

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills were often the learning objectives of the SEL programs. “My teacher and counselor in the program encouraged me to think hard and make decisions when problem solving,” said Greg. Bryan stressed that maintaining certainty helped with being decisive during challenging circumstances. “My teacher would say that it takes a confident person to inquire without feeling insecure,” said Bryan. They were encouraged to make honorable decisions and to not be pressured to behave deceitfully. From an ethical perspective, Jack was encouraged to seek help when needed and refrain from avoiding challenges. “My teacher always said that seeking help was a form of refusing to give up and avoiding cheating yourself,” said Jack. On many occasions, that help consisted of acknowledging how to identify problems and solving them. These characteristic empowered participants to be solution-driven with a growth mindset.

### **Identifying and Solving Problems**

Occasionally, the SEL participants needed motivation to identify and solve problems more than knowing the issues and resolving situations. Jack said, “At one point, I felt like the

program was trying to change me. I did not feel like I needed to see my problems, but I was wrong.” Resilience and determination were often mentioned with problem solving, but the participants resisted and sometimes engaged in power struggles with their teacher. “I really feel like dealing with my problems sometimes, so I would shut down and refuse to cooperate. It was not a smart move,” said Jack. Tim agreed that it was in his control to be willing to problem solve, so he appreciated his teacher for not engaging in a power struggle with him. Instead, his teacher empowered him by encouraging Tim to operate according to his best interest. “My teacher would always tell me to decide rather than decide for me and I appreciated it,” said Tim. Bryan said, “I enjoyed having problem solving activities and discussing why decisions were made. I did not always agree with my classmates, but I respected their viewpoints.” Acknowledging how individuals with difficult cultures and backgrounds would view situations before deeming them as problems promoted an appreciation of diversity and teamwork. Greg said, “I learned that sometimes two heads are better than one when identifying and solving problems. I help my family and friends all the time and it does not make them stupid.” Each of the participants considered their SEL teachers as mentors who would often support them in evaluating circumstances. They trusted their teachers’ nonjudgmental and optimistic mentality, which enabled them to rely on their teachers’ assistance when analyzing tougher situations.

### **Analyzing Situations**

Participants were consistently uplifted and mentored to be courageous, confident, and diligent when analyzing situations. Greg said, “My teacher got on my nerves when I refused to analyze situations because, sometimes, I believe that looking at situations was thoughtless.” Like Greg, Tim and Jack wanted to independently evaluate their life situations and pushed back on their teacher’s desire to help. Tim said, “No offense to my teacher, but I needed to get through

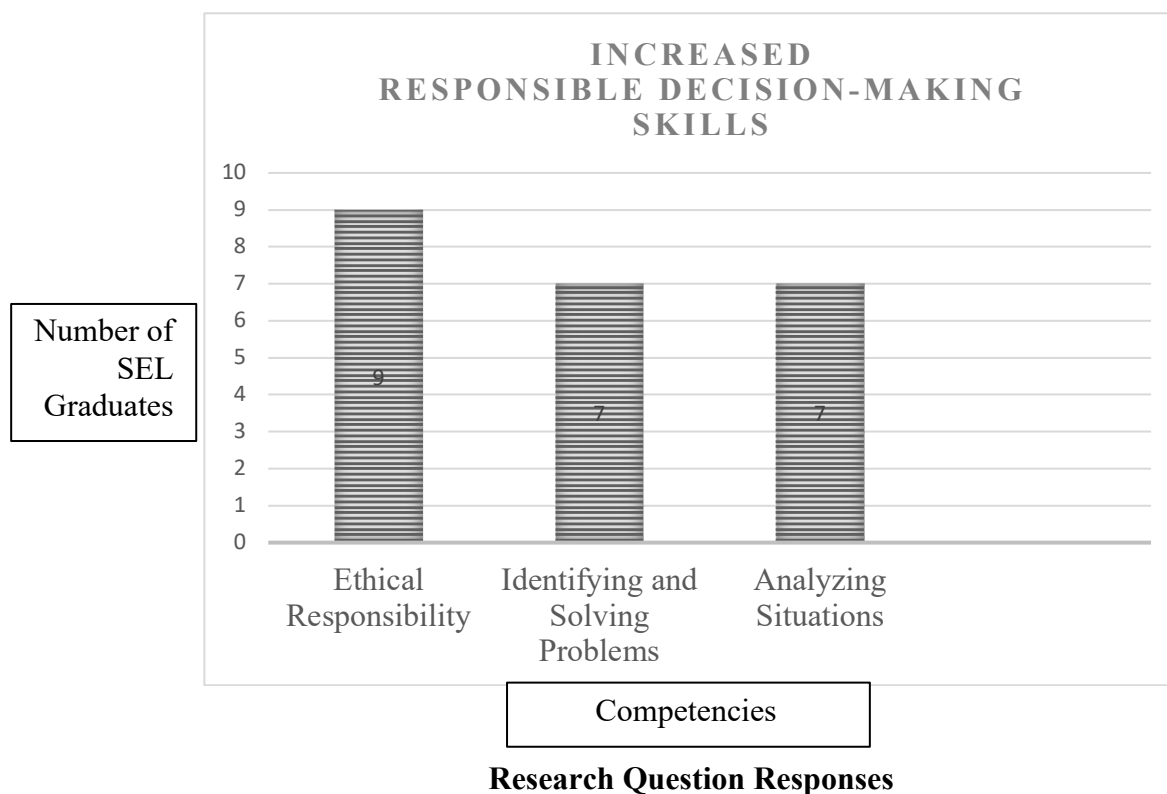
certain situations by myself. If I make a mistake, I will deal with it and maybe ask for help.” Jack stated that he learned best by analyzing situations independently and by making more attempts and learning directly from his mistakes. “As much as I respected my teacher, he was not living my life and I needed to figure out things alone sometimes,” said Jack. Greg, Tim, and Jack linked analyzing situations to having street sense.

They were proud of understanding how to survive in rough neighborhoods, which presented tougher situations. “Sometimes, I would forget that my teacher was from a tougher situation. He grew up poor and lived in a rough neighborhood like many of us. He was a real dude,” said Jack. “Yes! My teacher was educated but he has a lot of common sense and street knowledge, which is why we related to him,” said Tim. The participants’ teacher often related to them through implementing Houghton’s (2004) deep learning strategy by showing modesty through sharing personal experiences. Bryan said, “I understand why my teacher focused on considering every aspect linked to the situation, but some people were not ready to evaluate every circumstance.” When analyzing situations, a careful approach is vital to ensure safety and avoid consequences. Tim said, “Some of us need to learn the hard way and do not think about consequences. It is sad but true.”

Based on what the participants revealed, they were more confident analyzing situations after graduating high school and transitioning into adulthood. Andre credited the program for enabling him to acknowledge his choices during moments of distress. He and Ben expressed their gratitude for being able to evaluate circumstances, make responsible decisions, and stay out of trouble. Based on their shared experiences, their skills in ethical responsibility had increased more than their ability to identify, solve problems, and analyze situations. Figure 6 represents the

number of SEL graduates who experienced an increase in competencies linked to responsible decision-making skills.

Figure 6.



Participants provided in-depth responses that addressed the central research question and sub-questions of the study. Their lived experiences reflected occurrences during their time in the SEL program that cultivated empowering attributes that promote successful living in school, at home, and in the community.

### Central Research Question

What experiences in social-emotional learning cultivate empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community?



Participants observed behaviors from their classmates and SEL facilitators that were compelling, and which encouraged them to analyze how those attributes would impact their success by replacing undesirable behaviors with appropriate ones. Class activities, exposure to opportunities, mentoring, therapy, and notable interventions empowered them to emulate favorable mannerisms. Through selective simulating, participants accepted certain changes and began to model those behaviors at home, in school, and in the community. The participants appreciated the program's humanistic approach because it encouraged a learner-centered classroom. Six of the participants stated that their teacher had personalized matters, which motivated them to share their personal challenges through trust. Hanley et al. (2020) described humanistic theory as a method of supporting the emotional well-being of students. Each of the participants experienced positive teacher-student rapport while attending the SEL program, which encouraged them to strive toward becoming better students and community servants.

### **Sub-question One**

How were the experiences of observing behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

Bandura (1971) stated that replacing behaviors may consist of in-depth self-reflections when witnessing compelling demeanors. Overall, the study participants deemed these observations to be both influential and ineffectual, depending on the occasion. On occasions, they were empowered to model the behaviors, whereas other observed demeanors discouraged them from emulating those mannerisms due to personal beliefs. In addition, the experiences were described as life changing, groundbreaking, and appreciated. Observing their peers and authority figures enabled the participants to reflect on their behaviors, make comparisons, and set behavioral goals. When they or their peers were in distress or crisis, these participants were able

to observe how SEL facilitators avoided power struggles and remained focused on esteeming students. Their learning environment was described as “real”, “nonjudgmental” -- on most occasions --, and “dependable”. These SEL graduates pinpointed how the program focused on mending relationships through restorative approaches. When needed, the teachers would apologize, admit their wrongdoings, and show remorse, which empowered participants to replace certain undesirable behaviors with positive actions demonstrated by their teachers and peers. Hanley et al.’s (2020) emphasized how receiving a humanistic education is linked to developing teacher-student connections. According to study participants, positive relationships propelled them to observe their teachers and classmates’ behaviors and determine how they could change their attitudes and behaviors. The SEL program cultivated attributes such as acknowledging strengths and weaknesses in others and recognizing the valued outcomes of those positive behaviors. Intrinsic reinforcements, such as avoiding suspension, increasing self-discipline, and building good habits are examples that support Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory based on observing mannerisms.

### **Sub-question Two**

How were the experiences of imitating behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

CASEL (2021) states that SEL program curricula may consist of role-playing and student discourse to promote self and social awareness through a visual representation of reality. The participants’ experiences with imitating behaviors were described as “uncomfortable”, “empowering”, “dignifying”, and “unconvincing” in some situations. Although the participants learned how emulation contributed to development of positive behavioral outcomes, it was challenging. Bandura (1977) elaborated on how persistent mimicking of behavior may assist

with behavior change. As the participants imitated behaviors that interested them, significant insecurities and discomfort were exposed. These experiences often led to the participants' reflecting on these feelings and gaining the willingness to emulate positive behaviors and invest in change or, similarly, a reluctance to continue mimicking the behaviors of others who presented undesirable mannerisms. Imitating behaviors presented a level of self-fulfillment and occasional awkwardness.

Some of the SEL graduates felt discouraged during role playing activities due to the exercise's inherent lack of authenticity. However, if they were compelled to imitate a behavior, they would emulate the action based on interest and motivation to mimic compelling individuals. These individuals were striving to become more disciplined and to make better decisions. Many of the participants reported that emulating inappropriate behavior during role-playing activities had motivated them to focus on mimicking positive behaviors. Upon emulating behaviors, participants were able to self-reflect, analyze, and evaluate their circumstances, which is paramount in social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2021).

### **Sub-question Three**

How were the experiences with modeling behaviors described by individuals who completed a social-emotional learning program?

Based on Bandura's (1971) theory, willingness to demonstrate positive mannerisms is due to the appreciation of emulating behaviors of influencers with a committed mentality. The participants' experiences with modeling behaviors were described as "amusing", "empowering", "liberating", "initially ridiculous", and "challenging". Each of the participants agreed that they were impressionable and gravitated towards their teachers and classmates' behaviors, which motivated them to model those more acceptable actions. For instance, arriving at school late is

better than an absence, which helps students avoid truancy. Andre, Terrance, and Terry were motivated to improve their attendance because of the SEL program's warm nonjudgmental climate that enabled them to thrive. The participants were eager to exemplify how they did not want to disappoint their teacher and often demonstrated their appreciation by modeling behavior expectations, which led to them excelling socially and academically. Demonstrating the behaviors required change, which was described by the participants as "a tough experience that was not initially appreciated"; however, exhibiting appropriate mannerisms was later valued and respected. Six of the ten participants reported that they considered their SEL facilitators to be role models and cherished the experiences related to modeling positive actions.

Feeling validated and humored enabled some participants to appreciate demonstrating positive behaviors. However, other participants shared that demonstrating what their teacher modeled was irrelevant because of their understanding of what was expected from them. Whenever they demonstrated behaviors, it was due to their being compelled to model those positive behaviors by their parents or other trusted adults. The participants shared their gratitude about how their SEL teachers reinforced what they had already known and became motivated to better themselves by modeling humility, eagerness, and diligence. The SEL graduates were in awe when witnessing how their classmates would model positive replacement behaviors and confirmed the relevance of their motivation to become exemplary well-behaved individuals.

### **Summary**

Participants were willing to emulate and model behaviors related to self-motivation, recognizing strength, and teamwork more so than other specific SEL competencies. In general, these increasing SEL skills consisted of self-management, self-awareness, and social awareness, characteristics that promote successful living. In addition, their experiences with social-

emotional learning highlighted their development of self-discipline, goal setting, and becoming more decisive and analytical when making decisions. These young men described their persistence to replace undesired behaviors with appreciative actions that could empower them to avoid expulsion or school suspensions and to continue a focused life trajectory. They were able to observe their teachers' identifying emotions and recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, which empowered participants to emulate those behaviors. Some participants had stated that, occasionally, they subconsciously mimic these behaviors which have impacted their motivation to model social and self-awareness skills. Based on their experiences, it was challenging to model communication skills through role playing and through real-life situations because of their level of discomfort with those behaviors. Fortunately, their confidence increased due to the persistence and optimism of the SEL facilitators, and the participants were motivated to work on their communication and relationship-building skills. The Crisis Prevention Institute (2022) has emphasized the importance of rapport-building through consistent non-judgmental mannerism. Participants believed that they had a fresh start and felt supported during their time in the SEL program, which encouraged their success. Imitating and modeling of relationship skills was challenging but, the study participants reported, was also one of their most appreciated experiences.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community for graduates who have completed a social-emotional learning program. Chapter Five contains interpretations and ideas to refine the findings of this study and to interpret the data. Discussion subsections include: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The study's findings were developed into five themes based on the lived experiences of SEL graduates: self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. These social-emotional learning competencies are confirmed by CASEL (2021). Within the themes, there are three sub themes in each group, except for self-management, which contains five sub-categories. Bandura's (1977, 2019) social learning theory is linked to the participants' lived experiences regarding how the SEL program influenced their ability to increase desired behaviors or replace unacceptable demeanors and disrespectful habits with appropriate actions. Desired behaviors are notable attributes that contributed to fostering the success of these individuals at home, in school, and in the community while they attended the SEL program as well as after graduation.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Each of the participants concluded that their experiences in the SEL program focused on self-assurance, which encompasses CASEL's (2021) five competencies. An overwhelming

majority of the findings from this study are interpreted based on the participants' disclosure of relative concerns with poor self-management skills due to insufficient impulse control, inconsistent self-discipline, and lack of self-motivation that impacted their ability to set goals and independently follow through on objectives. Nine of the ten participants in this study agreed that their experiences in the SEL program led to a tremendous increase in their self-discipline and impulse control due to their teacher's ability to model expectations. One memorable instructional strategy was linking class discussions and lessons to students' personal experiences. Greg described how his teacher would personalize every learning objective by sharing life stories. "Our teacher was real and honest about her struggles in education, which helped me gain trust," said Greg. This humanistic learning approach is highlighted in Houghton's (2004) earlier assessment of deep learning, which aligns with Bandura's (1977, 2019) theory on social influence.

Compelling actions that are observed may encourage emulation of that behavior; once connection to the positive trait is identified by the individual, an opportunity to demonstrate the positive behavior is likely to be exercised (Bandura, 1977, 2019). Jack stated, "I used to really do things without caring, but my teacher's patience, calmness, and self-control helped me see how I needed to act."

Due to the discipline and consistent regimen provided in their SEL programs, participants also described goal setting and organizational skills as notable skills from their experience with social-emotional learning. "My teachers set higher expectations. I hated them at first, but I learned to appreciate it. I needed to do better with following rules and authority," said Tim. Each of the participants described self-motivation as their toughest characteristic to improve. Although the SEL graduates described their programs as a place that motivated them most of the time,

their self-motivation required steady and more intense intervention on some days. “I was motivated to graduate, but I could have done much better staying focused and disciplined,” said Greg.

In the area of self-awareness, the participants’ experiences were described as “appreciated” and “enlightening”. The students were influenced by their teachers’ motivational attributes. “I remember my teacher would always ask me to appreciate what I am gifted in doing because my strengths will help me identify my self-values,” said Bryan. Tim, Jack, and Terrance stated that they were adamant about not acknowledging their areas of improvement within their behaviors, but that their teachers inspired them to appreciate setting goals to strengthen those concerns and remain humble. “I really needed to check myself,” said Terrance. “Checking himself” meant recognizing his strengths and weaknesses academically, socially, behaviorally. “I hated studying, atoning for my mistakes, and accepting challenges,” said Andre. He, Terrance, and Terry expressed gratitude about how their SEL programs consistently cultivated self-effacement in their learning. Interestingly, social awareness was explained similarly by the participants.

The social-awareness findings of this study are evidence that validate the participants level of perspective-taking, ability to demonstrate compassion, and respect for others. Jack said, “I improved at putting myself in other peoples’ shoes.” His teacher and classmates’ frequent modeling of empathy encouraged Jack to look through the lens of others’ viewpoints and respectfully provide his own rationale. During moments of frustration and anger, Jack learned to behave more assertively than aggressively. He and Jimmy felt empowered to make better choices by not overreacting and confirming the negative expectations of others. Tim shared a similar experience. “My teacher would tell me that it is not just about me and that I needed to consider



the feelings of others,” he said. Tim was grateful for learning how to consider the backgrounds and traditions of others and to increase his empathy skills. “I wanted other people to respect me, so I need to demonstrate what I expect from others,” said Tim. The participants appreciated their programs’ development of responsible decision-making skills and the ability to develop and maintain positive rapport because those skills allowed them to understand and work with diverse individuals.

Improvement of relationship and responsible decision-making skills are evidence that the participants’ communication, teamwork, problem solving, and evaluating abilities were cultivated and have contributed to the success of their lives at home, in school, and in the community. Andre and Terrance commented on their teacher’s ability to create a nonjudgmental learning environment where their attitudes were welcomed and appreciated before being confronted. They each had the mentality that nobody could change their thinking, but consistent respect and willingness to esteem them cultivated their respect for authority. “I am here to help save your life, but we must communicate.’ That is what my teacher would say,” said Terry. He and his classmates would verbally disrespect his teacher, who praised them on communicating while encouraging them to engage in constructive dialogue to resolve their unfortunate circumstances. CASEL (2021) emphasized that creating an active learning environment where all students can thrive supports social-emotional learning. Greg and Bryan’s logic solidified how SEL programs operate through a learner-centered approach that consists of cooperative learning, team building activities, and restorative practices. They praised their teachers’ emphasis on the importance of mending relationships, avoiding holding grudges, and moving forward. Based on their descriptions, trying to maintain positive relationships with family, friends, and other authority figures is a responsible decision.

## **Summary of Thematic Findings**

The thematic findings from this study indicate that the SEL programs instilled significant values in the participants that enabled them to focus on increasing their social-emotional learning skills. The teachers and counselors in the program assisted the participants in setting behavioral goals and proceeded with a deep learning approach by linking class discussions, role playing activities, and other lessons to the participants' real lives. In addition to CASEL's (2021) social-emotional learning competencies, Houghton's (2004) ideology of deep learning was implemented to promote learner-centered environments that empowered the participants to work toward managing their emotions, communicating assertively, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. Examples of desired behaviors were frequently encouraged, demonstrated, and praised. Bandura's (1977, 2019) theory on social learning proceeded because the participants were able to observe and emulate preferred attitudes and demeanors from their teachers and classmates. After mimicking thought-provoking behaviors, they were able to connect, make necessary adjustments, and model the behaviors.

## **Breaking Bad Habits**

The participants' passionate responses provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges of breaking bad habits. According to the findings, the SEL programs' focus on acknowledging one's strengths, and self-reflecting contributes to breaking bad habits and building better ones.

The participants struggled with atoning for their inappropriate behaviors that led to school suspensions. Tim, Jack, and Andre were apologetic, yet awkward about making amends. Self-reflecting consists of taking ownership through humility to ensure genuine self-awareness (CASEL, 2021). Bryan admitted that he would inadvertently display sarcasm, which often led to

a misrepresentation of how he preferred to be perceived. “It’s fine if people do not appreciate who I am, but I want to make sure that I am displaying who I actually am as an individual,” said Bryan. The SEL program encouraged Bryan to display empathy and present an attitude that would not offend others and to replace sarcasm with a sense of humor. He noticed how his SEL teacher would be jovial yet serious during class, which prompted him to observe and acknowledge the teacher’s willingness to apologize and strive to not be offensive to others. It was a habit that Bryan began to appreciate working on and improved upon tremendously during his adulthood.

Prior to enrolling in the SEL program, Jack struggled with following most rules and directives, but his most notable challenges were refraining from using profanity and turning on his cellular phone when entering the classroom every day; “I still do not understand the point of giving my phone to the teacher when entering the program every morning.” Jack believed that, when following that rule, he needed to curse or say harsh words and disrespect staff. The SEL program consisted of higher expectations and demands, but pinpointed how empathy contributes to social awareness. To encourage respect for self and others and to avoid aggressive behavior, using profane language was prohibited. Jack was reluctant to follow that directive during moments of frustration. “Unless I became really upset, I did well with turning in my cell sometimes, but it was a problem for me to stop cursing,” said Jack. Bandura (1971, 2019) highlighted how persistence influences behavior change. When consistent behavior is observed and is deemed compelling, willingness to mimic or demonstrate those positive habits is more likely (Bandura, 1971). Jack shared that his SEL teacher was determined to cultivate positive change. “My teacher was encouraging. He rarely or never used bad words, which motivated me to at least try,” said Jack.

Tim appreciated how his teacher would personalize situations and express how he was not superior to him. “My teacher would always say that he was not better than me, just older. I did not understand it until later,” said Tim. Tim’s teacher reinforced how breaking a bad habit is always attainable yet continuously challenging. That perception encouraged Tim to mimic his teacher’s mentality by taking ownership of his mistakes and not making excuses to quit adjusting his attitude. This social influence empowered Tim and Jack to disrupt their bad habits by replacing inappropriate behaviors with acceptable habits.

### **Replacing Undesired Behaviors**

From an empathetic perspective, the findings revealed that the SEL program cultivated attributes of disrupting bad habits by replacing undesirable behaviors with welcomed ones that supported responsible decisions. Many of the participants had previously been expelled for incidents such as drug possession with the intent to distribute, possession of weapons, or physical assault with bodily harm. The SEL facilitators’ emphasis on responsible decision-making skills propelled these participants to analyze situations and implement effective coping strategies, using constructive responses to regulate their emotions and work toward resolving challenging circumstances. Jack stated, “Instead of cursing someone out when I was upset, I would walk away and count to 10.” Greg was able to successfully replace his time hanging out in the streets with studying his academics at home or after school. Specifically, he focused on preparing to pass standardized tests and to graduate. “I was out there doing dumb things to people in the community when I should have been working on myself,” said Greg. His consistent misbehavior within the community became a problem at school and at home. “It was embarrassing getting into trouble over the same thing, but I was not willing to change at the time,” he said. Greg decided to listen to his mother and his teacher, who agreed that he should get a job, commit to

studying to pass his standardized tests, and surround himself with positive people. By acknowledging his emotions, effectively communicating his feelings, and implementing constructive coping strategies during moments of frustration and anger, Greg replaced his passive aggressive attitude with an assertive demeanor.

### **From Fixed to Growth Mindset**

Each of the participants displayed either a skeptical, optimistic, or stubborn mentality when they initially enrolled in the SEL program. Accepting constructive criticism and embracing change were challenging, but the SEL program promoted the notion that continuously learning effective coping strategies and accepting responsibility cultivates character. “My teacher would always talk about having growth and development and always improving yourself,” said Bryan. Jack commented that we should not be afraid to grow through failure. After graduating from his SEL program, he became eager to face challenges and learn from his mistakes. “My teacher taught us that we are defined through how we deal with mistakes and solving our problems,” said Jack. Houghton’s (2004) study mentioned that confronting the misconceptions of students promotes deeper understanding, which Tim appreciated. “I remember my teacher mentioned that I should not be the same kid that I was two years ago because I should gain wisdom, courage, and confidence,” said Tim. These SEL graduates humbly elaborated on how they had developed from immature boys to young men who embraced their responsibilities. “I needed to grow up before I could fully appreciate how the SEL program helped me,” said Andre.

These participants’ experiences have been interpreted through observing the participants’ passion and appreciation for how social-emotional learning has affected their behavior. Terry mentioned that his SEL teacher influenced him to forgive, disrupt his biases, and avoid holding grudges with others. “I am still working on taking the perspectives of others and not holding on

to animosity,” said Terry, who was teary-eyed while expressing himself. Terry’s tears were interpreted as passion, respect, and appreciation for how the SEL program fostered his development into a wiser young man. After finishing the program, he grew more satisfied in himself and his increased dignity. Andre’s voice cracked when he mentioned how his SEL teacher attended his high school graduation ceremony. This was interpreted as a display of gratitude. Terrance paused three times while sharing his opinion of the SEL program he had attended. “Overall, I have nothing bad to say about my experiences in the program,” said Terrance. He smiled on occasion while also showing difficulty articulating his experiences; this was interpreted as an overwhelming form of appreciation. Each of these gentlemen stated that they wanted to help save someone’s life just as their SEL teacher had assisted in guiding them on a positive trajectory.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

Implications for policy consists of creating regulations and procedures in each district and state to require embedding social-emotional learning into schools and youth programs. The implication for practice involves measuring the social-emotional learning skills, behaviors, and mentalities of the students. Other student outcomes such as suspension rates, truancy, and school climate should be assessed to provide relevant data on how states should proceed with educating the whole child (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). Based on the mission to promote lifelong positive change, these implications constitute the purpose of social-emotional learning.

### **Implications for Policy**

Various school districts promote social-emotional learning to ensure positive school climates, which has propelled some states to consider mandating SEL. According to the Learning Policy Institute (2018), 16 states have added plans to evaluate school climate based on Every

Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Passed by Congress in 2015, ESSA encouraged districts to support SEL by reinforcing positive school climates. This study's implication for policy consists of mandating social-emotional learning in all districts to foster educating the whole child, promoting societal progress through parental and community involvement, and increasing teacher efficacy. CASEL (2021) emphasized that SEL supports equity, excellence, and inclusion through a meaningful curriculum; embedding state regulations that implement social-emotional learning will contribute to empowering cultivated attributes for succeeding at home, in school, and in the community.

### **Implications for Practice**

Through teacher observations, assessments, and reports, measuring students' habits, mindsets, and social-emotional learning competency would be notable practices (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). Implications for practice may also entail measuring school climate and developing cultures through relationships and learning opportunities. Student outcomes would be evaluated behaviorally, academically, and socially by assessing suspension rates, absenteeism, and supports (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). Through educating the whole child, teachers, parents, and other relevant stakeholders may benefit from their involvement in social-emotional learning. CASEL's (2021) emphasis on appreciating diversity, continuous self-reflection, and building positive relationships should be practical in teaching and learning. The act of empowering others epitomizes social-emotional learning through positive behaviors and can be practical, eagerly emulated, and demonstrated (Bandura, 1977; CASEL, 2021). Implementing SEL in school districts may cultivate empowering attributes to teachers, serving as a visual image of social influence to students.

### **Theoretical Implication**

Theoretically, if social-emotional learning is implemented at home, in school, and in the community, societal progress will occur through the growth and development of adults as well as youth. In addition to parents, if external stakeholders such as youth league coaches, police officers, and local business owners were to infuse social-emotional learning into their daily lives, positive behaviors would influence actions to promote positive change. According to Bandura's (1977, 2019) social learning theory, adults who are eager to improve their character may be as impressionable as children. Due to their higher level of humility and willingness to learn, these adults would accept change, which indicates a growth mindset. Social-emotional learning consists of lifelong learning through constant self-reflection and goal setting, indicative of everyone who accepts the opportunity to increase their skills in any of the five SEL competencies (CASEL District Resource Center, 2022). Appreciating diversity through cultural competency is vital in contemporary society. Social-emotional learning encourages people to reflect, acknowledge their biases, and disrupt those biases to help foster positive relationships. Theoretically, society would benefit as progressive connections developed through implementing social-emotional learning.

### **Empirical Implication**

An empirical implication of this study is that the various perspectives of the study's participants may contribute to the body of work on how social-emotional learning programs cultivate successful attributes to individuals by nurturing behavior changes in students and teachers. The shared experiences and artifacts from this study contribute to Houghton's (2004) assessment of deep learning and CASEL's (2004) mission of social emotional learning curricula. This study provides knowledge of how social-emotional learning fosters self-esteem, which leads to accepting challenges, recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses, and achieving personal



goals. The participants' lived experiences provide knowledge of how relevant experiences, such as graduation and other notable accomplishments, contribute to community development through SEL with an emphasis on positive behavior change through diligence, as emphasized by Bandura (1977). The social influence of SEL programs pertains to their participants being exposed to opportunities to learn and utilize effective communication skills, coping strategies, and other desired behaviors by observing their peers and authority figures who model the appropriate demeanors that support the five competencies of social-emotional learning. Empirically, this study complements CASEL's (2021) social-emotional learning by acquiring notable lived experiences from the lives of SEL graduates. These ten participants provided in-depth accounts of how their teachers and peers cultivated empowering attributes, such as empathetic listening skills, humility, diligence, and integrity by accessing SEL curriculum.

This study contributes to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory by acknowledging the potential influence and support of SEL programs. Bandura's (1977) behaviorist model elaborated on stimulus in an environment which propels the participants to observe actions they would eventually consider emulating. These SEL programs' influence adds to CASEL (2021) and Bandura's (1977) assessment of how social learning is refined into social-emotional learning as self-confidence is promoted through instilling self-management, social-awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the study are gender and ethnicity. The participants were all male. Seven of the SEL graduates were African American, one was Caucasian, and two were Latino. Although their perspectives were very detailed and provided a solid understanding of their experiences, gaining the viewpoint of a female participant would have provided another

perspective of the SEL program's influence on student lives. Cautious about contracting COVID-19, five participants preferred to be interviewed via phone and three shared their experiences on Microsoft Teams. They agreed that a phone call and remote video interview was best and verified their chosen artifact from a distance. There were only two interviews and one focus group conducted in-person; these factors represent weaknesses in this study due to the potential shortcomings based on the quality of the interview and focus group. Christiansen (2021) reported that capturing newer beliefs in qualitative research concludes any evolving feelings or beliefs. Being able to read the body language and nonverbal responses from each of the participants would have enabled me to be more versatile, adjust the interview questions, and gain a more in-depth perspective of their lived experiences. According to Christiansen (2021), versatility matters; this study would have gained more validity without that limitation.

### **Delimitations**

There are a variety of delimitations in this study based on purposeful decisions. These participants were all male SEL graduates, 18 years of age and older and have completed the program within the last seven years. Two of these individuals attended and graduated from the SEL program on two separate occasions. Six of the participants had graduated high school during the same year they completed the SEL program. The purpose of this study was to reveal lived experiences from recent graduates of social-emotional learning programs and understand how modern practices have cultivated empowering attributes to influence the success of these individuals. Focusing on the most recent SEL graduates created a barrier in the study because the lived experiences of SEL graduates who had completed programs earlier than seven years prior may provide comprehensive data that supports or counters Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and how CASEL's (2021) SEL competencies encourage and possibly dampen the success

of these individuals. In addition, there are SEL graduates under 18 years of age and are current high school students. Their shared experiences could be predicated on how the empowering attributes are currently affecting their social, behavioral, and academic success. In addition, individuals from kindergarten through eighth grade attend and complete social-emotional learning programs; if the students' willingness -- along with parental consent -- is granted, these individuals might potentially provide thorough descriptive data regarding their lived experiences that contributes to their academic, behavior, and social success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for further research entails examining the lived experiences of other notable populations. Investigating the lived experiences of adult females and minors who have graduated from SEL programs would provide relevant descriptive data. Individuals currently enrolled in SEL programs would also provide an interesting perspective, which may increase the validity of how SEL programs cultivate empowering attributes in diverse populations.

Conducting a case study on these individuals would be reasonable because they could be observed directly to learn how their behaviors are influenced by social-emotional learning. Gaille (2018) determined that opinions transition into facts during case studies, which may propel researchers to highlight specific incidents and produce thorough reports on these situations. I recommend conducting a case study on two participants. If these individuals are involved in extracurricular activities, they could be observed while participating in those activities as well as in the classroom and during non-instructional time throughout the day to gain a complete understanding of how SEL programs influenced their behavior in various environments.

Other recommendations include examining the involvement of caregivers and school staff. Exploring the lived experiences of parental guardians and teachers would provide an

understanding of their behavioral connection to social-emotional learning while their children participate in SEL programs. CASEL (2021) expressed the importance of the home-school partnerships that are developed with the SEL staff and caregivers. This teamwork may produce events within the lived experiences of their students that would provide relevant data supporting the effectiveness of SEL programs. It is beneficial for teachers and parents to invest in social-emotional learning through transparency and by maintaining positive relationships (CASEL District Resource Center, 2022). These attributes link to relationship skills. Based on Bandura's (1977; 2019) social learning theory, modeling behavior expectations increases the likelihood of change if children are encouraged to emulate behaviors when observing their caregivers and teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This study concluded that SEL programs cultivate empowering attributes for individuals through focusing on five core competencies: self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. According to CASEL (2021), the mission of SEL is to cultivate knowledge, skills, and attitudes across schools, districts, and states to ensure equitable learning environments, which was evident in this study. The artifacts that study participants submitted were documents that represented perseverance and academic success due to positive behavior change. The participants reported that they were not initially eager to focus on altering their attitudes while attending the SEL program, but that their teachers were relentless, nonjudgmental, accommodating, and often personalized situations to encourage them to reflect, set goals, and effectively manage their emotions. These individuals benefited from their teachers implementing a deep learning approach to confront misconceptions, to link lessons

to their real-life situations, to encourage their participation, and to remain academically motivated.

These participants appreciated safe learning environments that often consisted of interactive class discussions, role playing, and focus groups that enabled them to feel safe and willing to take risks. During the participants' enrollment in the program, their grades increased, and their attitudes adjusted, which helped to support their relationships with their parents or guardians. SEL staff such as the teachers, instructional assistants, administrators, and counselors often modeled desired behaviors with steadfast patience and reinforced CASEL's (2021) five competencies. Daily observations through intense mentoring encouraged these participants to adjust their attitudes toward becoming coachable and willing to learn. Significant changes in their mindsets motivated them to emulate the positive behaviors of their teachers and classmates. The participants commented on how the SEL program reinforced their parents' or guardians' behavioral expectations at home and expressed how their increased relationship skills helped to restore their rapport with their parents, authority figures, and other family members. These components of success are based on notable attributes fostered in social-emotional learning programs. Overall, Bandura's (1977, 2019) social learning theory has been proven through the lived experiences of these participants.

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## APPENDIX A: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY AND FRESH START INITIATIVE

### APPROVAL

Date: 6-4-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-13

Title: A Phenomenological Study on Cultivating Empowering Attributes that Promote Successful Living in Graduates of a Social-Emotional Learning Program

Creation Date: 7-3-2022

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Diran Cowell

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

#### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt
Submission Type	Modification	Review Type	Unassigned	Decision	

#### Key Study Contacts

Member	Patricia Ferrin	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Diran Cowell	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Diran Cowell	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	[REDACTED]



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August 24, 2022

Diran Cowell,

This letter is to inform you that you are approved to access students, with individualized education plans, who have attended and graduated from a social-emotional learning program and high school.

Sincerely,



## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear SEL Graduate:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of individuals who have completed a social-emotional learning program in high school.

If you are 18 years of age or older, completed a social-emotional learning program in high school, and are willing to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview either in person or via phone, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams and review transcripts of your interview to ensure certainty. You will need to bring a personal item that represents your experience as a graduate of an SEL program to the interview. Finally, you will take part in a focus group interview with other SEL graduates. It should take approximately two hours for you to complete these procedures. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED] for more information or to schedule an interview.

A consent form is attached. If you meet my study criteria, you will need to type your name and the date on the form and return it to me before or at the time of your interview. I truly appreciate your consideration to participate in this study, and I look forward to working with you and learning about your experience. Please feel free to forward this invitation to any individuals you know who may qualify and might be interested in participating in the study. If you have any questions before choosing to participate in the study, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Respectfully,

Diran L. Cowell, Doctoral Candidate



### APPENDIX C: SCREENING SURVEY

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of individuals who have successfully completed a social-emotional learning program. Social-emotional learning programs are developed to help students manage their emotions, establish, and maintain positive relationships, set, and achieve goals and make responsible decisions. This survey is designed to determine your eligibility to participate in the study.

1. Are you 18 or older? Yes/No
  
2. Did you complete a social-emotional learning program? Yes/No
  
3. Were you required to attend the social-emotional learning program due to being expelled or suspended? Yes/No
  
4. Would you like to participate in the research study about the experiences that encourage positive behavior changes through social and emotional development in SEL programs?  
Yes/No
  
5. Are you willing to participate in both an individual interview and a focus group and share your experiences that influenced your behavior after completing the social and emotional learning program? Yes/No
  
6. Contact phone number: \_\_\_\_\_.

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study on Cultivating Empowering Attributes that Promote Successful

Living in Graduates of a Social-Emotional Learning Program

Diran L. Cowell

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study concerning graduates of SEL programs. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older and you completed a social-emotional learning program. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Diran L. Cowell, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this research is to reveal the empowering attributes that promote successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community described through the lived experiences of graduates, who have completed a social-emotional learning program. The central research question that will guide this study is: What experiences in social-emotional learning cultivate empowering attributes that promotes successful living academically, behaviorally, and socially at home, in school, and in the community?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately one hour and will take place at a mutually agreeable time and location. The interview location may be conducted in-person or virtually. The interview will be audio and video recorded and transcribed.
2. Bring a personal item, artifact, or form of visual representation, to the individual interview. The personal item will represent your experience as a graduate of an SEL program.
3. Review and provide feedback to the researcher's findings to ensure the accuracy of the information. The review and feedback process will take approximately one hour.

**Risks:** There are risks involved in any research study. However, the risks involved in this study

are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that might be published, information that will make it possible to identify a participant will not be included. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants, the school district, and the social-emotional learning program will be assigned pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password protected external USB drive and will be deleted after three years per federal regulation.
- Interviews will be audio and video recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password protected external USB drive and will be deleted after three years. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, or the university/college you attended. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Diran L. Cowell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Ferrin, at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu). Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

- The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. Please introduce yourself to me by mentioning your name, age, occupation, and grade you were in while attending the social-emotional learning program.
2. Please describe the period of your enrollment in the social-emotional learning program.
3. Please describe your experience with social emotional learning during your time in the SEL program.
4. Please describe your connection with the SEL facilitator?
5. Please describe what you recall about the five competencies of SEL?
6. Based on your experiences in SEL, describe your self-awareness skills during high school and nowadays as an adult.
7. Based on your experiences, describe your social awareness skills during high school and nowadays as an adult.
8. Based on your experiences, describe your self-management skills during high school and nowadays as an adult.
9. Expound on how the SEL program has impacted your relationship skills.
10. Expound on how the SEL program has impacted your decision-making skills.
11. Describe the activities or exercises in the SEL program that resonated with you the most?
12. How has social-emotional learning impacted your communication skills?
13. What were the notable behaviors from others that you observed and were motivated to mimic and model? Describe how they were desirable or undesirable behaviors.

14. How has social-emotional learning affected your empathy and compassion for others?
15. Please describe how social-emotional learning has impacted your self-confidence.
16. Please describe how social-emotional learning has impacted your behavior at home.
17. How did social-emotional learning influence your behavior in the community?
18. Please describe what you learned from observing, emulating, and demonstrating the behavior of others. Did their conduct encourage you positively or negatively?
19. Please describe the empowering attributes cultivated through social-emotional learning that promoted success in your life.
20. Thank you for your time and willingness to complete this interview. If you have any additional information regarding your experiences in a social-emotional learning program, please share.

**APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. Please describe what do you know about social-emotional learning?
2. What qualities do you think would make an effective SEL program for you?
3. What qualities do you believe would make an SEL program ineffective?
4. Describe the behaviors that you were most and least eager to emulate and model while participating in the social-emotional learning program.
5. If you were to tell a friend about your social-emotional learning program that you had participated in, what would you say?
6. Out of the five competencies of SEL (self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills), describe the behaviors that you were able to observe from others and were motivated to mimic and demonstrate?
7. Out of the five competencies of SEL (self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills), describe the behaviors that you were able to observe from others and were discouraged to mimic and demonstrate?
8. Please describe the behaviors that you had learned and still model today from your experience in the social-emotional learning program.
9. Please share how the social-emotional learning program has influenced your behavior.