Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School

Transition: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Student transition from one school to another is considered a major life event. Transition to middle school is further complicated by the onset of puberty at this developmental stage. The problem is middle school students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the transition to middle school. A gap exists in identifying the perceptions of educators who are most closely connected with students transitioning to middle school. Schlossberg's transition theory and democratic leadership theory provided the theoretical framework for the study. The research questions addressed the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators at a suburban middle school in Georgia on student socio-emotional preparedness and the strategies used to prepare students socio-emotionally for transition to middle school. Through a basic qualitative study 13 fifth-grade teachers, 13 sixth-grade teachers, 9 administrators, and 6 counselors were purposively selected from a population of 138 educators to complete questionnaires. A subsample of 16 of the 41 educators completing questionnaires participated in interviews. Questionnaire and interview responses were analyzed through a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six phases of data collection. Results indicated educators perceive students who have developed a strong sense of self are more successful at forming and maintaining relationships and better prepared socio-emotionally for middle school. Educators also perceived their ability to support students socio-emotionally during the transition to middle school was influenced by internal and external factors. Recommendations include a need for educational leaders and policymakers to support the integration of SEL best practices and teacher training.

Keywords: social-emotional, transition, educator perceptions, middle school, adolescence, basic qualitative

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Ruth, and my parents Conrad and Marion, three of the most inspirational and impactful educators in my life. Ruth's support has been a constant in my doctoral journey and never wavered throughout the many challenges. She has been by my side through each of my degrees. My parents have been my lifelong cheerleaders, encouraging me to believe in my abilities and reach for the stars. My successes in life are thanks to the love, support, encouragement, and values I have acquired from each of them.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The transition from elementary school to middle school is a challenging time for students from a social-emotional standpoint (Butler & Pregont, 2021). Students move from a school environment with a strong sense of belonging to a larger setting perceived as more impersonal (Bailey et al., 2019). This basic qualitative study was designed to investigate the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning from elementary school to middle school. Substantial amount of research on this topic has been conducted on children in the United States using quantitative survey-based designs. A need exists to study the phenomenon of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to middle school using qualitative methods to produce accurate and more significant findings than are currently available (Bagnall et al., 2019).

A national emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) has produced a variety of programs available for implementation and educational leaders are prepared to implement new strategies. This study was designed to identify contributing factors leading to transition difficulties and a gap in current research regarding educators' perceptions about social-emotional transitional preparedness was evident. The following section addresses the background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, definition of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations.

Background of the Problem

Teachers, counselors, and administrators recognize a need for supports to prepare students before, during, and after the transition from elementary school to middle school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Butler & Pregont, 2021). Transitioning from one school to another is

considered a major life event for students, and the experience is further complicated for

adolescents by the onset of puberty (Bagnall et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2018) found twenty-nine

percent of newly transitioned middle school students demonstrated a lack of social-emotional

preparedness leading to struggles during the transition process and resulting in high levels of

depressive symptoms and academic performance difficulties. A review of current research

concerning student transition from elementary school to middle school focuses primarily on

social adjustment and academic performance (Bagnall et al., 2019). Four themes are evident in

the literature under review: (a) middle school transition experience, (b) the impact of

adolescence, (c) the evolution of SEL, and (d) SEL and character development (CD) programs.

The contributing factors supporting student social-emotional preparedness for middle school are

unknown.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is middle school students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the

transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018). A variety of views exist on approaches to prepare

students for the transition to middle school. Jarman et al. (2021) found peer influences, a need

for a sense of belonging, and the search for the self and identity, characterize adolescents.

Adolescence represents one of life's most significant periods of transformation and is a time of

rapid physiological development. As puberty begins, brain development experiences a gradual

increase in cognitive function and social-emotional response contributing to the challenge of

transitioning to middle school (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

Complexities of the physical change in school settings produce an assortment of

challenges for these students (Fite et al., 2018; Wandmacher, 2019). The fit between student

developmental needs and the middle school structure is often not aligned, presenting additional

challenges (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). A gap exists in identifying the perceptions of educators who are most closely connected with students transitioning to middle school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Booker, 2018). The study was developed to fill the gap by exploring the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade teachers, school counselors, and administrators on student preparedness for transition to middle school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of fifth and sixth grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. Participants in this study included teachers, school counselors, and administrators who work with students in grade five or grade six. A basic qualitative study was necessary to identify the areas which need further exploration to support the social-emotional needs of students transitioning to middle school, from the perspective of educators. The open-ended nature of basic qualitative research provides authentic responses to support a study (Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). A cross section of educators was used in the study to gain a broader sample of educators who have a direct connection with students involved in the transition from elementary school to middle school. The participants were interviewed and received questionnaires using open-ended questions to discover information and insights related to the study (Bakker et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

This basic qualitative study had significance to support elementary school and middle school students' socio-emotional learning. The focus of the study was to discover any inconsistencies or agreements among educators which could result in reevaluating how students are prepared for the middle school transition. Physical, social, and emotional complexities of

students transitioning from grade five to grade six require a greater understanding of the socio-emotional capabilities to align education with the students' developmental stage (Fite et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Wallender et al., 2020).

All stakeholders could benefit from this research. Students could benefit as the study may identify program changes to prepare learners more effectively for the middle school transition. Results of this study could inform programming and strategies which could effectively reduce student anxiety, increase a sense of belonging, and positively affect student outcomes. The study could result in a decrease in the need for interventions by school counselors and administrators. Teachers may see an increase in positive student outcomes as students are better prepared for the socio-emotional demands of the middle school transition. The focus of the study may bring attention to student socio-emotional needs which historically have not drawn the same level of attention as academic preparation (Bagnall et al., 2019).

Research Questions

Research questions were designed to explore the complex phenomena of educator perceptions which are essential to this basic qualitative study. The study was designed to consider the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding the social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to middle school. Two research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the socio-emotional student preparedness for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the strategies used to socio-emotionally prepare students for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's transition theory (TT; Schlossberg, 1981) and democratic leadership theory (DLT; Lewin & Lippitt, 1938) were combined to develop the theoretical framework for the study. TT defined transition as any event or non-event resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Students progress through the stages of transition when moving from elementary school to middle school. Changes in peer-group structures and concerns about social acceptance are prevalent during times of school transitions (Longaretti, 2020). The middle school experience occurs at a time when students are also transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Dahl et al., 2018). Physiological changes associated with the onset of puberty also result in social and emotional transitions (Dahl et al., 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

The democratic leadership theory (DLT) supports the study concurrently with the TT. Democratic leadership involves a leader providing guidance to support shared decision-making throughout the organization with a goal of collective input from all members (Purwanto et al., 2019). DLT often referred to as participative leadership theory (PLT), has also been attributed to the work of many notable researchers such as Maslow, McGregor, and Likert. The body of research illustrated the dynamics of exposing groups to autocratic and democratic styles of leadership. Researchers consistently observed increases in group morale and productivity among subordinate group members when exposed to democratic leadership (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938; Likert, 1961; Maslow, 1962; McGregor, 1960). Democratic leadership style has been linked to the development of a positive organizational climate (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018). When educators allow students and staff to participate in the development of the school culture, these stakeholders become empowered and more invested in the school experience (Booker, 2018).

TT and DLT work together to support the study. Transition from elementary school to middle school is a major life event and is the most difficult in a student's educational journey (Bagnall et al., 2019). The DLT supports students having a voice in the development of the school culture (Caetano et al., 2020). When students are allowed to be active participants in the development of the school culture, a sense of belonging is more easily achieved. Outcomes associated with an individual's transition often include both positive and negative aspects (Schlossberg, 1981). The dimensions of TT and DLT support the purpose of this qualitative study. A review of existing research illustrates a need to support student transition through a participative style of leadership which provides students active roles in the transition. Knowledge gained from this study adds to the body of research by considering the perceptions of elementary and middle grades educators regarding how they approach students through the transition to middle school. Research findings should guide educational leaders toward best practices in preparing students for the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018; Wallender et al., 2020).

Definitions of Terms

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as "traumatic childhood events occurring within one's family (intrafamilial) before the age of 18, which can include physical, sexual and emotional abuse, emotional and physical neglect, and dysfunctional household conditions [for example] separation/divorce, witnessing violent treatment of mother, household substance abuse, household mental illness, incarcerated household member" (Kovács-Tóth et al., 2021, p.2).

Executive function skills are defined as "the use of (higher) cognitive processes to engage, direct, or coordinate other (lower) cognitive processes, typically in the service of goals" (Doebel, 2020, p. 942).

Major life events are defined as "the loss of a loved one, grief, which corresponds to the cognitive, affective and behavioral response to that loss, and mourning, which refers to the process of adaptation to the loss, a dynamic process that is strongly influenced by sociocultural norms." (Revet et al., 2020, p.3).

Positive psychology is defined as "scientifically-based interventions that focus on strengthening positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors through activities that can be easily implemented in daily routines and have proven their usefulness in promoting well-being and reducing distress in the school setting" (Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020, p.1944).

Prosocial reasoning is defined as "reasoning which enables adolescents to think critically and deeply about their role within the larger community. (Napolitano et al., 2021, p.7).

Social-emotional competencies are defined as "the CASEL five competencies were designed around self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (CASEL, 2020, p.1).

Soft skills are defined as socio-emotional skills that are essential both at work and in personal life and that are associated with success in life. They not only help in appropriately comprehending, expressing, and regulating one's own feelings, but also in managing relationships with others, communicating and solving conflicts. Therefore, learning and improving them is crucial to ensure our own well-being and to develop positive relationships with others. (Portela-Pino et al., 2021, p.1).

Assumptions

Assumptions must be considered and acknowledged when conducting research to support an ethical study (Cascio & Racine, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first assumption is educators participating in the study want their students to have the socio-emotional

supports to thrive. Another assumption is the educators provided honest and thoughtful responses to the questionnaire and interview questions. Careful consideration from the study participants, while accessing the research instruments, support accurate findings. Another assumption is the analysis of data was conducted without undue bias. All questions were vetted through subject matter experts to eliminate researcher bias in the questionnaire and interviews. Personal bias was recognized before beginning data analysis. Avoiding researcher bias is an essential element in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mir, 2018).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the research study included fifth and sixth grade teachers, school counselors, and administrators from a large suburban school district in the state of Georgia. Schools involved in the study include two elementary schools and a middle school. The two elementary schools both represent the entirety of the feeder pattern for the middle school involved in the study. A primary objective of the study was to answer the research questions based on perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding student socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school.

A delimitation of the study was the decision to conduct research in three schools as opposed to a larger grouping of schools. This decision was made based on the time allotted for the study and convenience of access to the study participants. A purposive sample of participants was derived from the study population of 138 educators. The outcomes of the research are potentially transferable as the study provided thick, rich descriptions of data to share results which allow the reader to determine whether the content is transferable to other contexts.

Limitations

The limitations of a study include potential difficulties or restraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Common limitations found in qualitative studies include participant attrition, incomplete responses from study participants, and sample size concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mir, 2018). Limitation concerns for this study include the small number of schools involved in the research. The study involved two elementary schools and one middle school with a limited population of fifth and sixth grade teachers to include as participants. Participation was voluntary and could have created a need to expand the study to include additional schools to support research design, transferability, and dependability. Limitations were mitigated by planning the format, settings, and time required of the participants who completed the questionnaire and interviews.

Another limitation researchers must be aware of when conducting qualitative research is the potential for researcher bias when collecting and analyzing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mir, 2018). A researcher should be aware of potential personal biases and presumptions before and throughout the study to help eliminate the opportunity for bias to negatively impact outcomes. To best support time limitations, close attention must be given to support a timely start and conclusion of the data collection portion of the study. Care must be taken with the development of clear and concise instruments, as well as the directions participants receive related to time and response expectations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Chapter Summary

The transition from elementary school to middle school is a challenging time for students from a social-emotional standpoint (Butler & Pregont, 2021). This basic qualitative study was designed to investigate the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators regarding components

of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning from elementary school to middle

school. The purpose, significance, and design of this study was to advance the body of

knowledge related to educator perceptions of student social-emotional preparedness for the

transition to middle school. Through the framework of TT and DLT, the perceptions of educators

were analyzed to understand how to better prepare students for the transition from elementary

school to middle school. A comprehensive review of literature, including a detailed theoretical

framework for the study, related research, and specifics gaps in the literature are included in

Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A major life event for students is the transition from one school to another. Transition to middle school is further complicated for adolescents by the onset of puberty (Bagnall et al., 2019). The problem is students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of fifth and sixth grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. Fite et al. (2018) found 29% of newly transitioned middle school students demonstrated a lack of social-emotional preparedness leading to struggles during the transition process and resulting in high levels of depressive symptoms and academic performance difficulties. Theories to support this study include Schlossberg's transition theory (TT; Schlossberg, 1981) and the democratic leadership theory (DLT; Lewin & Lippitt, 1938). Educators' perceptions of students' ability to adjust and integrate into the middle school environment were explored through this qualitative study.

Literature relevant to the research problem was reviewed. Current research involving the transition from elementary school to middle school has focused primarily on students' social adjustment and academic performance (Bagnall et al., 2019). A gap in the literature exists regarding the perceptions of educators who are most closely connected with students transitioning to middle school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Booker, 2018). The key sections of the literature review consist of the following: an overview of the literature search strategy, criteria for the selection of studies reviewed, and a theoretical framework describing theorists, researchers, and concepts relevant to the research problem. A summary is provided, detailing

potential research to be conducted and gaps in the literature which were developed to support the study.

Literature Search Strategy

The gathering of scholarly documents to support the literature review consisted of systematic searches focused on peer-reviewed research published primarily between 2018 and 2021. While searching for seminal studies, parameters were expanded to the early 1900s. Databases available through the American College of Education (ACE) library were accessed as follows: EBSCOhost, ProQuest Education Database, and ERIC. A variety of search engines were also utilized to broaden the discovery of supporting data which was then located using one of the databases noted. The search engines used included Google, Bing, and Semantic Scholar. Search phrases ranged from broad to specific and are listed below by the categories of topic-specific and theory-specific.

The topic-specific search phrases included; *elementary to middle school transition, adolescent changes, educating adolescents, adolescent development, preparing for middle school, character development, social-emotional development and adolescents, middle school transition programs, social-emotional needs of middle school students, teacher perceptions of middle school transition, educator perceptions of middle school transition, student perceptions of middle school transition, positive behavior programs and middle school.* Theory-specific search phrases *included transition theory, participative leadership theory, participative leadership, democratic leadership theory, Kurt Lewin, Nancy Schlossberg.*

Literature reviewed considered the most recently published articles to support the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework. The resources searched and reviewed provided efficient explanations of the TT and DLT. Older, empirical studies were sought to

support key elements of the research, and recent reports were referenced to support connected

methodologies and findings.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's transition theory (TT; Schlossberg, 1981) and democratic leadership theory

(DLT; Lewin & Lippitt, 1938) were combined to develop the theoretical framework for the

proposed study. TT defined transition as any event or non-event resulting in changed

relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Students progress through the stages of transition

when moving from elementary school to middle school. Changes in peer group structures and

concerns about social acceptance are prevalent during times of school transitions (Longaretti,

2020). The middle school experience occurs at a time when students are also transitioning from

childhood to adulthood (Dahl et al., 2018). Adolescents begin puberty between the age of 10 to

12 years. Puberty involves changes in the brain, triggering a series of rapid transformations to the

adolescent body. Physiological changes associated with the onset of puberty also result in social

and emotional transitions (Dahl et al., 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

The transition from elementary to middle school, coupled with the physiological changes

of adolescence, makes students more susceptible to low self-esteem and can trigger a decline in

academic performance (Longaretti, 2020). Social acceptance, decision-making, and executive

function are areas students can find challenging (Gasser-Haas et al., 2021). The sense of

belonging is a primary human need to be satisfied before other needs are fulfilled (Maslow,

1962). Newly transitioned middle school students must learn to navigate the new environment,

adjust to new social structures, and integrate the responsibilities and demands of middle school

while they adapt to a different setting (Fite et al., 2018). Establishing a sense of belonging, or

connectedness can make a significant difference in a student's ability to acclimate successfully (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020; MacDonnell et al., 2021).

The DLT supports the study concurrently with the TT. Democratic leadership involves a leader providing guidance to support shared decision-making throughout the organization with a goal of collective input from all members (Purwanto et al., 2019). DLT often referred to as participative leadership theory (PLT), has also been attributed to the work of many notable researchers such as Maslow, McGregor, and Likert. The research described the dynamics of exposing groups to autocratic and democratic styles of leadership. Researchers consistently observed increases in group morale and productivity among subordinate group members when exposed to democratic leadership (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938; Likert, 1961; Maslow, 1962; McGregor, 1960). Democratic leadership style has been linked to the development of a positive organizational climate (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018). When educators allow students and staff to participate in the development of the school culture, these stakeholders become empowered and more invested in the school experience (Booker, 2018).

Together, TT and DLT support this study. The transition from elementary school to middle school is a major life event and is the most difficult in a student's educational journey (Bagnall et al., 2019). DLT supports students having a voice in the development of the school culture (Caetano et al., 2020). When students are allowed to be active participants in the development of the school culture, a sense of belonging is more easily achieved. Outcomes associated with an individual's transition often include both positive and negative aspects (Schlossberg, 1981). The dimensions of TT and DLT support the purpose of this qualitative study. A review of existing research illustrated a need to support student transition through a participative style of leadership which provided students active roles in the transition.

Knowledge gained from this study added to the body of research by considering the perceptions of elementary and middle grades educators regarding how they approach students through the transition to middle school. Research findings should guide educational leaders toward best practices in preparing students for the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018; Wallender et al., 2020).

Research Literature Review

The review of literature for this qualitative study identified scholarly literature pertaining to the social and emotional preparedness of students during the transition from elementary school to middle school. Four themes were the focus of this literature review and included: (a) middle school transition experience, (b) the impact of adolescence, (c) the evolution of SEL, and (d) SEL and CD programs.

Theme 1 emphasizes the elements connected with the student experience during the middle school transition. Identifying the elements of middle school transition builds toward the subsequent sections of the literature review by developing a comprehensive overview of students' growth, malleability, and tribulations. Schlossberg's TT was evident with the first theme as the literature provided support for the many changes students experience during the transition to middle school.

Theme 2 focuses on the impact of adolescence. The significant physiological changes associated with adolescence, including the onset of puberty, are addressed. Students all experience the rapid growth and development associated with adolescence; however, the age of onset varies (Blakemore, 2018; Dahl et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Changes highlighted in the literature surrounding the impact of adolescence related to TT and mark a

significant time in human development where changes can impact relationships and roles (Schlossberg, 1981).

Evolution of SEL was the focus of theme 3. Across historical contexts, the importance of SEL instruction to support student well-being is described (MacDonnell et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). The significance of SEL on providing a student-centered approach to supporting adolescents through the middle school transition was vital to the study. DLT correlates with the literature reviewed in this section which supported the importance of involving students and staff in the development of elements which positively impact school climate and culture (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938).

Theme 4 identifies programs supporting student transition to middle school. A variety of programs were reviewed including SEL models and CD. Other programs include systems based on positive behavior, counseling models, and hybrid systems which incorporate a mixture of programs. Both TT and DLT are supported through the literature connected within this theme. A review of formal, or explicit programs, as well as specific school and district developed practices are described in this section. TT is evident, as the supports provided students with scaffolds to successfully adjust to the many changes associated with the transition to middle school. DLT emerges as the literature reveals the importance of providing adolescents an active role in their school.

Twenty-nine percent of students transitioning to middle school have a lack of social and emotional readiness causing difficulties during the transition phase and resulting in elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and difficulties with academic performance (Fite et al., 2018). The literature reviewed focused on: factors related to students' ability to adjust and integrate successfully, minimizing social and emotional stress, and academic difficulties during the middle

school transition. Support is required from home and school as students negotiate the many

factors impacting the elementary school to middle school transition (Bagnall et al., 2019; Onetti

et al., 2019).

Middle School Transition Experience

The journey from elementary school to middle school involves a series of factors

potentially impacting a student's transition. Students must learn to navigate a new building

surrounded by unfamiliar educators, new peers, and older adolescents (Fite et al., 2018). While

seeking acceptance and a sense of belonging in the new setting, students face social challenges

(Dawes et al., 2019; Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2020). Self-esteem and self-concept are elements of

student emotional wellbeing which are also tested during the middle school transition (Coelho et

al., 2020; Onetti et al., 2019). Students experience a longer school day in a middle school setting

and require more teacher-centered instructional strategies (Bagnall et al., 2019; Fite et al., 2018).

These factors can present various levels of stress for students when making the transition from

elementary school to middle school and are deeply connected with Schlossberg's TT.

Physical Setting Factors

There are numerous differences between elementary school and middle school settings.

Students encounter larger classrooms and buildings, more teacher-centered instruction, and the

need for increased independence in a more complex setting (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

Students perceive the middle school setting as more impersonal than what was experienced at the

elementary school level. The organizational challenges students must face include learning

complex schedules, navigating unfamiliar hallways to change classrooms after each class period,

and managing student lockers for the first time (Fite et al., 2018). An additional challenge known

to increase students' anxiety levels is learning to manage time during class transitions (Fite et al., 2018; Wandmacher, 2019).

While there are many sources of stress associated with the changes in students' physical environment during the transition to middle school, there are elements students appreciate. Fite et al., (2018) found students responded positively to increased social independence associated with the transition to middle school. The increased options in school activities, both with class choice and extra-curricular activities, are also perceived by students as positive factors in middle school. Observable and hands-on experiences were also shown to support students through the transition period. Anxiety among fifth-grade students was reduced after participating in middle school orientations and exploring lockers before the start of sixth grade (Fite et al., 2018; Wandmacher, 2019).

Social Factors of Transition

The middle school transition requires students to adapt to many social changes. Students interact with a greater number of teachers each day, typically far greater than the experience at the elementary level. The student-teacher relationship at the middle school level can become less personal than the elementary experience (Dawes et al., 2019; Fite et al., 2018). Changes in peer groups are another significant social change as multiple elementary groups merge to become classmates at the middle school. A significant increase in autonomy is needed when considering the middle school class schedule. Students must navigate classroom transitions, restroom breaks, locker rooms, and cafeterias in a far more independent manner than required during the elementary school experience. The rise in the number of classes presents increased organizational demands and can test students' executive function skills (Longaretti, 2020; Onetti et al., 2019).

Emotional Factors of Transition

During adolescence, students have an increased reliance on peer groups and a need to feel accepted (Oberle, 2018). Anxiety increases and further drives the need to make connections as new middle school students assimilate into unfamiliar settings (Coelho et al., 2017). Maslow suggested a sense of belonging is a primary human need which must be satisfied before other needs are fulfilled (Maslow, 1962). London and Ingram (2018) found school connectedness influences student motivation, behavior, and academic performance. Student self-esteem and self-concept are fragile during the transition, and a fear of being bullied or not accepted is prevalent. Impulsivity is also a characteristic associated with early adolescence and a lack of control can contribute to difficulties associated with the middle school transition (Fite et al., 2018; Onetti et al., 2019).

Kopelman-Rubin et al. (2020) found more participation in school activities led to students having a stronger sense of belonging. Educators play an important role in supporting positive interactions and experiences among students. Classroom climate and the management of the learning setting are ultimately set by the teacher. A classroom where students feel respected, supported, and valued will provide students a greater opportunity to develop positive emotional responses and an increased sense of belonging (Dawes et al., 2019).

Educational Factors of Transition

The educational demands on students shift significantly from elementary school to middle school. While the elementary years afford students the ability to become increasingly independent, the newfound freedoms and shift in academic demands of middle school involve more autonomy (Bagnall et al., 2019; Fite et al., 2018). Students engage in academics through affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains (Booker, 2018). If students have not developed a

sense of belonging, affective engagement is negatively impacted. Both teacher support and strong peer relationships are critical to this aspect of student learning.

Social problems associated with the transition to middle school can impact student behavior, as well as academic and social self-concept (Onetti et al., 2019). Students who are less prepared for the transition demonstrate behaviors which can lead to academic difficulties. Behaviors may include disruptive episodes and withdrawal. Strong family support plays a significant role in helping students demonstrate appropriate behavior (Pendergast et al., 2018). Family connectedness and open communication are associated with a decrease in misbehavior. Students' perceptions of peer acceptance and friends are also identified as important factors affecting the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018; Wandmacher, 2019)

Considerations for Student Subgroups

The transition to middle school is a major life event for all students new to the setting, and certain student groups may be more adversely affected (Bagnall et al., 2019; Monachino et al., 2021). Subgroups, such as students with disabilities, students in ethnic or racial minority populations, and students with marginalized identities of sexual orientation and gender identity may be more susceptible to peer victimization (Monachino et al., 2021; Turunen et al., 2021). Pendergast et al. (2018) suggested students with marginalized identities experience more difficulty establishing a sense of belonging. A lack of connectedness within the new school setting was shown to impact academic performance, mental health, and increase disruptive behavior (London & Ingram, 2018).

A study conducted by Monachino et al. (2021), found victimization in student subgroups was shown to increase in verbal and social forms during the middle school transition. Physical forms of victimization by peers decreased from upper elementary school through the middle

school transition. The development of cognitive function and problem-solving strategies was attributed to the noted decreases. In contrast, Turunen et al. (2021) explained students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) were more likely to commit acts of bullying. Students with SLD, who struggled in reading fluency and comprehension, indicated higher levels of bullying behavior, but did not report higher levels of victimization. The study supports the notion academic difficulties may trigger frustration and antisocial behavior (Turunen et al., 2021)**.**

Childhood Transition to Middle School

Globally, the transition from elementary to middle school happens at various ages and grade levels. Coelho et al. (2020) analyzed students in Portugal who advanced to middle school after fourth grade. The difficulties associated with transitioning to middle school were consistent whether students entered after grade four, five, or six. Self-concept and self-esteem were both shown to be impacted during the middle school transition in Portugal. The study provided evidence to support the transition to middle school. Despite the younger age of the Portuguese students, the stress points experienced during the transition to middle school were like those exhibited when older students enter middle school (Coelho et al., 2020).

Bagnall et al. (2019) concluded students in the United Kingdom who transitioned to middle school in grade seven demonstrated similar levels of anxiety and apprehension consistent with those displayed by the rising fifth-grade students in the findings of Coelho et al. (2020). A significant difference noted with students transitioning to middle school at an older age is the onset of puberty (Bagnall et al., 2019). Positive school climate was noted as an important factor for all students transitioning to middle school as a sense of belonging was more easily established (Bagnall et al., 2019; Coelho et al., 2020).

Impact of Adolescence

Adolescence is viewed as a period of turmoil and challenges. Scientists began to identify adolescents as a resource in need of development instead of a problem to be mitigated in the 1990s (Dawes et al., 2019; Shoshani & Slone, 2012). The advent of the positive psychology concept emerged in the 1990s (Seligman, 2002). Positive psychology focuses on the strengths and virtues individuals and communities must possess to flourish. A natural progression of positive psychology supported the morally valued character traits and virtues connected with well-adjusted adolescents. The development of these interpersonal skills was shown to vary among adolescents transitioning to the middle school setting (Guyer et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Shoshani & Slone, 2012). TT (Schlossberg, 1981) supports the need to analyze variations of differences evident in students' social-emotional skills during the transition to middle school.

The structure of the K-12 education system involves yearly transitions from one grade level to the next. Transition years which also include a change of schools involve additional student adjustments beyond learning new teachers, classmates, routines, and curricula. The middle school transition comes at a critical physiological stage in a student's life. Adolescence represents a period of rapid growth resulting in significant changes to the brain (Guyer et al., 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Advances in brain imaging technology and continued scholarly research in adolescent development challenge the historical knowledge base on adolescent identity, prompting a fresh look at academic approaches (Blakemore, 2018; Dahl et al., 2018). The onset of puberty in early adolescence is a time when students experience many physical and psychological changes (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020; Wandmacher, 2019). Because the adolescent

brain is malleable and experiencing rapid change, the time is ideal for introducing SEL

interventions (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

Physiological Changes

The onset of adolescence is well known as a time of change for young men and women.

Adolescence represents one of life's most significant periods of transformation and is a time of

rapid physiological development. Infancy is the only period of development involving faster

physical change. New advances in science support the recognition of adolescence as a period of

rapid physical change, like the rate of growth associated with early childhood development (Dahl

et al., 2018). The adolescent brain is experiencing distinct maturational changes, supporting a

new readiness for foundational learning. Adequate sleep, physical activity, nutrition, and social

connection are critical for adolescents to offset the effects of stress and improve well-being.

These factors were shown to improve emotional regulation, reasoning, understanding, decision

making, and overall welfare (Blakemore, 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

A series of preconditions are important to support healthy brain development during this

time of rapid growth. Sound social, emotional, cognitive, and physical health provide a solid

foundation to support the neurological demands on the adolescent body (Dahl et al., 2018).

Sleep, nutrition, and environments inclusive of space to move and participate in forms of aerobic

exercise also support healthy adolescent brain development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). The

stage of development known as puberty begins during early adolescence. Regions of the

adolescent brain connected with cognitive function begin to mature gradually. Emotional centers

of the brain are overly sensitive at the start of puberty and hormonal changes complicate

responses and reactions (Blakemore, 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

As puberty begins, brain development experiences a gradual increase in cognitive

function and social-emotional response (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Students transition to middle

school at different grade levels globally. In the United States, most public-school students transition to middle school following fifth grade. The middle school transition occurs as early as the conclusion of fourth grade, or as late as the end of grade seven in other countries. Early adolescence is also a time for another significant transition of a physiological nature. The onset of puberty begins in the latter years of elementary school for many students, while others enter this developmental stage during middle school (Coelho et al., 2020; Gniewosz & Gniewosz, 2019).

Hormonal and social changes during early adolescence, combined with increased brain development in regions associated with emotion and reward, can manifest in difficulty with emotional control (Guyer et al., 2018). Student self-concept and self-esteem are particularly vulnerable during the transition from childhood to adolescence (Onetti et al., 2019). Hormonal changes in both boys and girls result in sexual maturation. Transformation in the adolescent body and brain further influences self-image and perceptions of peer reactions (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2019; Dahl et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Despite the potential negative social and emotional impacts of adolescent development during puberty, a student's brain is prepared for learning. Adolescent cognitive development is primed for planning and decision-making (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Educators' understanding of the middle grade learner's stage of emotional development can help to support students and strengthen the student-teacher relationship (Booker, 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

Students transitioning to middle school experience varying levels of stress across a myriad of scenarios from school to home environments. The hormone cortisol, which is released by the adrenal glands and connected with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA), serves to support social-emotional competencies and peer acceptance (Oberle, 2018). Lower levels of

cortisol are connected to a variety of social conflicts in adolescents (Oberle, 2018). A study

conducted by Oberle (2018) linked increases in aggression and social isolation to lower cortisol

levels in early adolescents. Well-being, resilience, and accomplishment in the classroom and

outside of school are related to the degree students feel accepted by peers in early adolescence

(Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Oberle, 2018). Students who experience maltreatment, or adverse

childhood experiences (ACEs), are more susceptible to physiological responses which can

negatively impact peer acceptance and social-emotional competencies (Kovács-Tóth et al.,

2021). Healthy physiological development and social-emotional response are interrelated in early

adolescence (Oberle, 2018). Stress is an inevitable factor of early adolescence, and students who

respond well, exercise regularly, and develop positive peer relationships have better outcomes.

Students who are exposed to ACEs, or other significant stress are more susceptible to act

impulsively and participate in risk-taking behaviors (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Kovács-Tóth

et al., 2021).

Behavioral Changes

Adolescence is a significant period in a person's life which marks the transition from

childhood to adulthood (Wandmacher, 2019). The structural and functional changes in the brain

are reflected in behavior. Mood swings, emotional instability, and a reduction in impulse control

are all results of brain development during adolescence (Onetti et al., 2019). Teachers must be

sensitive to the innate physical changes responsible for characteristically adolescent behaviors

(Booker, 2018). Middle school students' emotional instability presents itself in heightened

sensitivity to criticism (Booker, 2018). Adolescents' disproportional response to criticism may

create a wedge among peers at a time when self-image is vulnerable. The student-teacher

relationship can be damaged when a teacher corrects a student in front of peers (Booker, 2018).

Impulse regulation improves gradually throughout adolescence as the ability to resist temptation is not fully developed until late adolescence (Napolitano et al., 2021). Students with newfound freedoms such as transitioning independently between classes or not being supervised after school have more opportunities to act on impulses (Onetti et al., 2019). Impulsive behaviors are often viewed as negative manifestations of adolescence. However, researchers are developing alternative ideologies about impulse control in adolescents and the maturation process from early to late adolescence (Napolitano et al., 2021).

Increased autonomy, peer influence, and heightened sensitivity lead adolescents to participate in more sensation seeking and risk-taking behaviors (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Dahl et al. (2018), suggested that researchers increasingly view risk-taking behaviors as adaptive and contributing toward learning. Educators can capitalize on the developmental phenomenon of risk-taking by providing opportunities for safe and appropriate exploration (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Academic risk-taking is encouraged when supportive learning environments are developed where mistakes are viewed as an important part of the learning process. Simulations or problem-based learning scenarios produce opportunities for risk-taking in a controlled environment (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

Academic Changes

The malleability of the adolescent brain provides opportunities for increased connectivity not only within areas of the brain but across areas of the brain (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Jansen and Kiefer (2020) showed an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the developing brain of adolescents can provide educators with awareness to support students more effectively. Increases in neural synapses support more complex and abstract thinking. Students graduate from being self-centered, concrete thinkers to becoming more accepting of thoughts of others and conceptual ideas (Napolitano et al., 2021). The ability

to see other points of view leads to more complex moral reasoning and relational thinking. Capacity to see relationships and alternative perspectives results in a deeper understanding of academic content (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

The shift from concrete to more abstract thought allows for increased future orientation (Napolitano et al., 2021). Young adolescents are at the perfect age for teaching self-regulated learning skills (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Adolescents begin engaging in long-term planning instead of simply thinking of the immediate future. Advanced planning results in self-management capabilities and the acceptance of delayed gratification (Guyer et al., 2018). When a student creates a test preparation schedule, upholds the schedule, and reaps the benefits of time sacrificed in the form of successful test performance, future oriented thinking has been applied (Napolitano et al., 2021).

Middle school provides the first opportunity in which students make personal decisions about the education experience. A student's ability to think into the future guides decision-making about elective coursework, academic tracts, and extracurricular activities that are new options in middle school and a chance to express personal choice (Mehta & Fine, 2020; Napolitano et al., 2021). Educators who allow students to display independence and decision-making skills show a willingness to mold the academic environment to the needs of the students (Booker, 2018).

Social Changes

At the onset of adolescence, the brain experiences changes resulting in the gradual improvement of cognitive and social-emotional functioning (Blakemore, 2018). The brain is shaped by social interactions throughout the lifespan. However, the critical periods for SEL are those where the brain is most actively changing (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Quality social interactions during adolescence strengthen positive neuro-connections and brain function

(Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Similarly, adolescents who experience persistent adverse social interactions strengthen neuro-connections associated with aggression and anxiety (Wagner et al., 2020). The influences of social experiences during adolescence when the brain is actively forming new connections and synthesizing information can affect a student's social-emotional trajectory later in life (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

Adolescents experience a change in social context primarily due to the transition to middle school (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2019). Middle school presents novel situations and greater autonomy for students. At the same time, the need for peer acceptance is paramount and fear of social rejection motivates students to establish a social circle of support. A study conducted by Onetti et al. (2019) showed adolescents experience a decrease in social self-concept when entering an unfamiliar middle school environment. Adolescents identified the helpfulness of individuals: peers, teachers, and parents, more than any school-based programs for having the most supportive influence throughout the transition (Fite et al., 2018).

Peer Relationships

The peer group begins to take more prominence in the life of middle school students as placement in a new social hierarchy evolves (Booker, 2018). Bagnall et al. (2019) found peer affiliations were motivated by the fear of being lonely. Adolescent relationships were motivated by the fear of being lonely and comradery with peers sharing the same experiences (Bagnall et al., 2019). Jansen and Kiefer (2020) identified the peer group as the most powerful influence on adolescent decision-making. Abstract thinking and the development of moral reasoning enable adolescents to think critically about playing a role in the larger community. Adolescents develop the ability for prosocial reasoning, which can lead to civic engagement and altruism (Napolitano et al., 2021). Civic engagement strengthens social bonds and guides the social-emotional trajectory toward positive outcomes (Dahl et al., 2018; Napolitano et al., 2021).

The middle school provides a larger peer pool from which to choose friends, however, Jansen and Kiefer (2020) maintain, close relationships are critical for the basic need of a sense of belonging. Escribano et al. (2021) conducted specific research on the evolution of social circles during the first year of middle school. In the study, middle school students had fewer total relationships, but the majority were intense. Middle school students reported a higher number of peer acquaintances but a smaller proportion of close relationships.

Gender differences have been identified in the study of adolescent relationships. Portela-Pino et al. (2021) found girls had greater relationship management skills and tend to put more energy and investment into relationships. The same study supported stronger self-management in the male participants. Escribano et al. (2021) found friendship circles are balanced between genders during elementary school, however, middle school friendships favored same-gender relationships.

Family Dynamics

Bagnall et al. (2019), Fite et al. (2018), and Onetti et al. (2019), children who report healthy relationships with parents express fewer adjustment difficulties during the middle school transition. Adolescence is a period when social support networks are restructured (Bagnall et al., 2019). Adolescents have more autonomy to self-direct behaviors and choose the nature of peer and family associations (Napolitano et al., 2021). As the adolescent's role changes within the family, parents too experience similar shifts as they navigate ways to provide support, allowing for the adolescent's autonomy (Bagnall et al., 2019). Bagnall et al. (2019) shared, parents learn to ask questions differently to optimize communication with their children. As communication channels shift between the school and home, the child is more responsible for the relay of information to the parent (Bagnall et al., 2019).

Fite et al. (2018) found more than 92% of adolescent participants named parents as a critical source of support during the middle school transition. The study by Fite et al. (2018) further suggested, best practices for schools would be to provide education and resources to parents as they have more influence on their children than school-based programs during middle school transition. Bagnall et al. (2019) identified the support and influence of older siblings who have experienced the transition as an important resource for setting realistic expectations for middle school.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Students perceive primary school teachers as easier to talk to than middle school teachers (Bagnall et al., 2019). In the primary school, students may have had one or two teachers and often see six or seven middle school teachers in a single day. Logistics like class size and the bell schedule in a middle school environment make it more difficult for students to make meaningful connections with teachers (Fite et al., 2018; Onetti et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2018) showed 70% of students named teachers as playing a supportive role in the school transition. Adolescents are sensitive to social surroundings and are heavily influenced by teacher relations (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

Middle school teachers must be cognizant of the social-emotional needs of students to develop healthy relationships. Teachers should praise publicly and correct privately so that experiences which are perceived as embarrassing do not damage a student's sense of belonging (Booker, 2018). Students' emotional regulation is supported by teachers who display empathy, respect and avoid authoritarian interactions (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Teachers who allow students to take ownership of learning through choice, persuasive argument, and collaboration with peers understand the developmental need of adolescents for social engagement. (Booker, 2018).

The Evolution of SEL

SEL is a familiar concept with today's educators. The premise of SEL is to support the

development of fundamental life skills in students (CASEL, 2020). SEL lessons support students

in the development of self-care skills on how to manage emotions, develop positive

relationships, and how to effectively approach the academic demands of being organized, and

facing moral challenges (MacDonnell et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). Closely connected to

SEL is the concept of CD. The aim of CD should be fostering the development of character in

five competencies: positive psychological characteristics, identity, moral growth, holistic growth,

and the development of practical wisdom (Lickona, 2018). A study conducted by Shubert et al.

(2018) suggested students who actively participated in school activities, including student

government, class meetings, and community service projects, displayed enhanced prosocial

behaviors and CD. The DLT was evident through the positive behavioral gains reported when

students were offered opportunities to become actively involved in the school and community.

An overview of the evolution of SEL and CD follows to support the framework which is deeply

embedded in the needs of the middle grades learners as they transition to middle school.

History of SEL and CD

SEL is a relatively new term, however, the concepts within SEL have been found in

education for over a century. John Dewey promoted a student-centered approach to education

focused on the development of the whole child in the early 20th century (Aidman & Price, 2018).

SEL was created when scholars from multiple disciplines came together in 1994 to identify key

skills and competencies students need to successfully engage in school and life (CASEL, 2020).

The scholarly endeavor formed the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning

(CASEL). Professionals from the fields of emotional intelligence, child development, prevention

science, and bullying prevention created an umbrella framework to end a disjointed approach to

social and emotional problems students face (CASEL, 2020). Creation of a common

understanding and goal for student development was developed at the first CASEL conference

(Aidman & Price, 2018; Ross & Tolan, 2018). The scholars, working in a collective effort to

support the connection between research, policy, and practice for student social and emotional

development, produced a social and emotional framework.

CD, like SEL, involves key skills to support moral growth in students. The initial design

of public education in the United States involved the teaching of moral education or virtues. CD,

through the early days of public education, involved using the Bible as an instructional tool to

support stories of virtues (Lickona, 1993). Americans began to question the teaching of religion

in schools in the early 1800s (Lickona, 1993). The twentieth century saw the American public

reject religious and values education in the school setting. In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court

removed prayer from American schools. Educators began avoiding moral instruction as many

felt character education was better left to the church and family and could be confused with

teaching religion (Lickona, 1993). CD programs should target the enhancement of character as a

whole and be distinguished from skills-based programs (Lickona, 2018).

Current SEL and CD Approaches

In the 21st century, educators have selected a more inclusive approach to educate the

whole child, focusing on noncognitive elements and programs to support SEL (Portela-Pino et

al., 2021). Citing research showing strong correlations between social-emotional competencies

and academic success, advocates argue character education will translate to higher academic

success and productive citizenship (MacDonnell et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). Since the

introduction of SEL, schools worldwide have implemented many connected programs. The

efficacy of SEL programs has been supported by research. Many school systems have created

SEL departments and developed SEL coaches within schools (Wallender et al., 2020). Teacher

preparation programs have added SEL components, and a variety of education initiatives have been developed to support student social and emotional development. SEL is a movement that has a long history rooted in multiple disciplines and is now being recognized as a critical ingredient for student success in school, work, and life (CASEL, 2020).

SEL and CD Programs

Success of students in the twenty-first century is contingent on more than simply mastering instructional content. Students must also develop social-emotional competencies and work toward becoming productive citizens who will contribute positively to society (Wallender et al., 2020). Social-emotional competencies, also known as soft skills, refer to a set of aptitudes an individual needs to navigate relationships, education, employment, and productive citizenship (Portela-Pino et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). The realization of the need for developing the whole child led to the emergence of a variety of SEL and CD programs. These programs can be delivered to the whole class or target a specific sub-group of students. SEL and CD programs can be commercially produced curriculum or developed at a local level to support specific district or classroom needs (Aidman & Price, 2018; MacDonnell et al., 2021).

Explicit SEL and CD Instruction

A common component of many SEL and CD programs is the presence of explicit curriculum and instruction (Aidman & Price, 2018). Whether schools and districts select to design a program or purchase a curriculum, many use the CASEL five competencies as the framework. CASEL's five competencies were designed around self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). The following describes the results of studies conducted within four formalized SEL programs.

The Positive Transition Program

Coelho et al. (2017) presented the Positive Transition program as an explicit SEL program designed to support middle school students transitioning from a rural elementary setting to a large middle school. Students entering middle school are susceptible to lower self-concept and self-esteem (London & Ingram, 2018). The students received 20 lessons, 50 minutes each, delivered by a psychologist. Students received instruction in 15 of the lessons before the transition to middle school, while 5 lessons were delivered after the transition. The pre-transition instruction focused primarily on logistical lessons, such as organization, navigating to the new school, and managing lockers. Post-transition classes offered lessons on difficulties students were experiencing and coping strategies. The study produced no significant differences between the control and intervention groups. All students involved demonstrated lower self-esteem and self-concept after the transition.

Strong Kids Program

The Strong Kids program, presented by Neth et al. (2019), is an SEL program with twelve 50-minute lessons. Strong Kids targeted a group of students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders in middle school. Students who exhibit challenging behaviors are at greater risk for experiencing lower levels of connectivity with peers and teachers (Pendergast et al., 2018). The Strong Kids program was delivered by the general education teachers and included lessons on goal setting, feeling empathy, and problem-solving. A small sample of 8 students participated in the program. The findings indicated the program was effective at improving social-emotional knowledge and internalizing symptoms.

MOSAIC Program

MacDonnell et al. (2021) provided an overview of the program Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC). Virtues or character strengths are an essential part of the

development of positive youth (Shubert et al., 2018). The program was designed around seven

virtues: constructive creativity, helpful generosity, optimistic future mindedness, responsible

diligence, compassionate gratitude, compassionate forgiveness, and positive purpose. MOSAIC

was designed using the CASEL five competencies and delivered by homeroom teachers for 15

minutes daily. Participants included 255 students from two low-income middle schools. The

program results indicated students who grasped any singular component of the program: student-

level charter virtues, social-emotional character development (SECD) skills, or positive

perceptions of school climate, demonstrated positive outcomes.

Second Steps Program

Second Steps, a formalized curriculum program, was delivered to a group of 124

elementary students (grades K-5) from a rural elementary school, and 61 middle school students

(grades 6-8) in the same district. School counselors delivered two lessons per month to the

students in the study. No significant changes were noted in self-regulation, social skills, and

problem-solving in any of the participants. The Second Steps program has been formally

reviewed by a research consortium, including CASEL, and is based on CASEL's five

competencies of SEL (CASEL, 2020; Wallender et al., 2020).

Schools embedding purposeful, daily instruction, and strategies for students to practice

SEL competencies enhanced the schools' culture (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Integrating smaller,

but regular components of SEL or CD may be more effective than formal lessons (Aidman &

Price, 2018). The formalized programs can be cost prohibitive and while they can be effective,

purposeful, evidence-based, low-cost approaches can be just as impactful on student behavior,

self-control, and emotional regulation (Bailey et al., 2019; Wallender et al., 2020). Fite et al.

(2018) suggested explicit programs were not as effective at preparing students as the general

practice of building relationships and a positive school climate. Lickona (2018) corroborated

Fite, by challenging the term character education, implying a school responsibility as opposed to CD, suggesting a communal responsibility.

Integrated Approach

The integrated approach to SEL or CD does not involve reliance on an explicit program, although elements of a defined curriculum can be utilized. Allbright and Hough (2020) determined an integrated SEL approach was found to positively impact school culture and climate. The integrated approach involved teachers providing SEL or CD support in daily practices promoting healthy relationships. Successful integration is accomplished when all classrooms and student spaces throughout the school address the common language and purposeful practices (Dawes et al., 2019; Lickona, 2018). Strategies to promote positive school culture and community building also involve elements of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system and restorative practices. Dawes et al. (2019) suggested the use of an integrated approach provided teachers with strategies for classroom management to develop supportive environments for students and staff.

The Behavioral, Academic, and Social Engagement (BASE) classroom management model was used to prepare teachers to better support students through the middle school transition (Dawes et al., 2019). Teachers trained in the BASE model implemented three consistent components to support academic engagement, positive behavior management, and social dynamic supports. BASE is not an explicit program, but rather a framework to guide the purposeful SEL practices to support positive culture and climate (Dawes et al., 2019). Similarly, Lickona (2018) acknowledged the importance of implementing broad principles of character education (CE) with fidelity rather than through a formal program. Providing CE systematically serves to positively change relationships, work ethic, and school culture. A multi-layered CE implementation, including collaborative learning, democratic class meetings, literature rich in

character principles, schoolwide emphasis on community, and parent engagement have a long-lasting impact on students (Lickona, 2018). Lickona presented the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education, introduced in 1995 by the Character Education Partnership, now Character.org, as an example of a multi-layered approach to CE. Prosocial behaviors and attitudes of students were positively affected by this type of CE implementation in the elementary grade levels and lasted well into the middle school years (Lickona, 2018).

Research indicated daily integration of purposeful SEL practices with or without explicit instruction, developed students who displayed SEL competencies in all aspects of life, both inside and outside of school (Domitrovich et al., 2017). The involvement of students in the development of elements of school culture and climate (Lickona, 2018), as supported through DLT, serves to produce students who are more connected with the school environment. Embedding SEL or CD programs in the middle school transition is supported by the TT which identifies the importance of providing scaffolds to positively change behaviors and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981). Through the review of literature, research was primarily focused on student social adjustment and academic performance (Bagnall et al., 2019). The gap exists in identifying perceptions of educators who are most closely connected with students transitioning to middle school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Booker, 2018).

Chapter Summary

Schlossberg's TT (Schlossberg, 1981) as applied to the ascent of elementary students to middle school and the DLT (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938) as applied to joint decision-making in educational best practices, form the framework of the qualitative study. The transition to middle school marks the most common major stressor in a child's life (Bagnall et al., 2019; Monachino et al., 2021). Behavioral, social, and emotional challenges resulting from the physical transition

to a larger school with new rules and expectations are complicated by the simultaneous physiological changes adolescents experience. The challenge for educators is to identify the best way to support students through the multi-faceted transition.

The literature review showed a shift has occurred from intervention strategies to preparatory strategies to support students through the transition because of a greater understanding of the malleability of brain connectivity during the adolescent window (Fite et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Wallender et al., 2020). Taking advantage of opportunities to strengthen students' self-concept, relationship skills, and decision-making abilities set the trajectory for future successes and positive citizenship (Portela-Pino et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). Educational institutions relied on both formal SEL and CD curriculums and less structured, cross-curricular integration of social-emotional competencies and principles to achieve soft skills goals (Portela-Pino et al., 2021; Wallender et al., 2020). Both approaches proved valid when done with fidelity. Each district, school, and classroom are charged with the responsibility of determining the specific needs of the student population through stakeholder input and employing democratic leadership to put best practices in place. The methodology described in Chapter 3 addresses the form and processes of data collection and analysis utilized to support the study. Included in the methodology section are the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, research procedures, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The elementary school to middle school transition is challenging for students from a social-emotional perspective (Butler & Pregont, 2021). Students matriculate from a school setting with a secure sense of belonging to a larger school environment which can seem more impersonal (Bailey et al., 2019). A considerable amount of research has been conducted on this topic with students in the United States using quantitative survey-based designs. There exists a need to study the phenomenon of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to middle school using qualitative methods to produce accurate and more significant findings than what is currently available (Bagnall et al., 2019). Schools across the United States have placed an increased focus on SEL in recent years. A wide variety of programs are available for implementation and educational leaders are prepared to implement new SEL interventions. Currently, a gap exists in research regarding educators' perceptions about social-emotional transitional preparedness. The study identified factors influencing student transition difficulties to middle school.

The problem is middle school students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of fifth and sixth grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia.

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the socio-emotional student preparedness for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the strategies used to socio-emotionally prepare students for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?

Research methodology, design, and rationale used to support this basic qualitative study is presented in the following section. The role of the researcher is detailed followed by the research procedures. Procedures for the research including population and sample selection, instrumentation, validation, and data collection are described next. Finally, data analysis procedures, reliability and validity, and ethical procedures are shared.

Research Methodology, Design, and Rationale

The basic qualitative study is used to explore the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade teachers, counselors, and administrators regarding the social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. Beneficial qualitative instruments for researchers include questionnaires and interviews (Bakker et al., 2020). The educators were interviewed and received questionnaires using open-ended questioning to discover information and insights related to the study (Bakker et al., 2020).

Qualitative Methodology

A significant amount of quantitative, survey-based research has been performed on the topic of social-emotional preparedness on children in the United States transitioning to middle school. Research conducted through qualitative methods produces accurate and more significant findings than is currently available regarding stakeholder perceptions of the middle school transition. The qualitative research methodology provided an advantage for the study as the approach supports inquiries seeking to explore the perceptions of subjects using open-ended questioning through a questionnaire and interviews. Qualitative research, using questionnaires

and interviews, produces detailed descriptions of participants' opinions, feelings, and experience, and it interprets the meaning of participant actions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Basic Qualitative Design

A basic qualitative research design was used for the study as the approach supports inquiries seeking to explore the perceptions of subjects (Percy et al., 2015). Kahlke (2014) found the basic or generic qualitative design combines recognized methodological approaches to develop a new approach. Investigation of fifth- and sixth-grade educators' perceptions of student socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school provided an understanding of SEL supports to better prepare students for the middle school transition. The basic qualitative research design supports the study of a small sample of educators and abides by the time and resource constraints of the investigation.

Role of the Researcher

Data were gathered from the participants through a questionnaire and interviews. In qualitative research designs, the researcher attempts to access the thoughts and feelings of the study participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). I am a retired principal from the school system where the study took place. I have no perceived authority over any of the participants. For the qualitative investigation, I took on the role of the researcher, including administering questionnaires and interviewing educators from two elementary schools and one middle school. Study participants were assured of confidentiality through signed informed consent. The three schools played a significant role in relation to each other as the two elementary schools are the feeder schools to the middle school. No incentives were offered to the participants to avoid any workplace conflicts of interest between myself and the participants.

Research Procedures

Participant perceptions regarding the socio-emotional preparedness of students

transitioning to middle school are explored by using a qualitative research model. A basic

qualitative research design was selected as the methodology supports inquiries seeking to explore

the perceptions of subjects (Percy et al., 2015). A detailed description of the research procedures

used in the study appears in the following subsections. The population, sample, instrumentation,

and data collection procedures are explained comprehensively.

Population and Sample Selection

Site permission was sought from the ▮▮▮▮▮ County School District (CCSD). A letter

requesting permission to conduct research was first sent to the Superintendent of Schools (see

Appendix A). CCSD required the completion of a District Request for Permission to Conduct

Research form, which was obtained and completed. The approval of the principals of the schools

selected for the study was requested through an e-mail and obtained on the CCSD Request for

Permission to Conduct Research form (see Appendix B). After receiving approval from the

Institutional Review Board and the CCSD to conduct research, participant recruitment and

selection commenced.

Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants with expertise which

supports the research questions (Johnson et al., 2020). From two elementary schools and the

middle school where the elementary students matriculated, a total sample population of 138

educators was identified. Sample selection criteria stipulated participants have either direct or

indirect experience with fifth- or sixth-grade students. A purposive sample of 66 participants

were invited to participate, including teachers, counselors, and administrators from each of the

three schools.

Invitations to participate were sent by e-mail (see Appendix C). Informed consent agreements were provided to protect the rights of study participants (see Appendix D). The agreement included a written explanation of the research design, objectives, procedures, benefits, and the rights of research participants. Signed consent was obtained from 41 candidates, creating the study sample. Participants consisted of 13 fifth-grade teachers from the elementary schools, 13 sixth-grade teachers from the middle school, nine administrators and six counselors which represented each of the three schools. Data collected for a basic qualitative research design includes samples representative of the larger population and supports a broad range of perceptions (Percy et al., 2015).

Questionnaire

Qualitative instruments appropriate for basic qualitative studies include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questionnaires and interviews used in basic qualitative research use open-ended questions to collect educators' perceptions (Bakker et al., 2020). The initial instrument used in the study was a questionnaire.

When participants submitted the electronic signed consent form, a link to the questionnaire, administered through Microsoft Forms, was provided with a requested completion date (see Appendix E). The questionnaire, 15-30 minutes in length, was designed with open-ended questions developed to align with the purpose of the study and the study research questions as shown in Table 1. Qualitative researchers often design questionnaires or surveys as opposed to using those created by other researchers to allow for questions which better support the study and participant group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The 11-question instrument collected data on participant demographics and information related to both research questions.

Table 1

Relationship of Research Questions to Participant Questionnaire

Research question	Questionnaire questions	Question rationale
1. What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the socio-emotional student preparedness for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?	4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school? 5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school? 6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?	Participants share perceptions of student socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school. Participants share the socio-emotional skills students possess as they leave elementary school and begin middle school. Participants share the socio-emotional skills students are lacking as they begin middle school.
2. What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators on the strategies used to socio-emotionally prepare students for transition to a suburban middle school in Georgia?	7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school? 8. What, if any, explicit program(s) are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program(s) is used? 9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used? 10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness? 11. Do you feel prepared as an educator to support student social-emotional learning? Why or why not?	Participants share strategies used to support social-emotional development in students. Participants share programs, practices, and other factors which support social-emotional learning.

Interview Protocol

For clarification and triangulation purposes, interviews were used as an additional instrument. Open-ended interview questions better support open discovery within the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview questions were developed in alignment with the study's two research questions, as shown in Table 2 (see Appendix F). Following the administration of the questionnaire, 16 of the 41 participants were selected using purposive sampling to participate in an interview. Interview participants received an email with a link to a Microsoft Bookings calendar to schedule interviews at a date and time that was convenient. Interviews were semi-structured, 45-60 minutes in length, and conducted individually through Microsoft Teams. The ability to record and transcribe recordings is a feature of Microsoft Team. Participants were provided with the transcript from their interview to member check for review and confirmation of accuracy. If a participant identified errors in the transcript, appropriate changes were made to support the interviewee's account of the interview.

Table 2

Relationship of Research Questions to Participant Interview Questions

Research question	Interview questions	Question rationale
1. What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade teachers at a suburban middle school in Georgia on socio-emotional student preparedness for transition to middle school?	4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?	Participants share perceptions of student socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school.
	5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?	Participants share the socio-emotional skills students possess as they leave elementary school and begin middle school.
	6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?	Participants share the socio-emotional skills students are lacking as they begin middle school.

Research question	Interview questions	Question rationale
2. What are the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade teachers at a suburban middle school in Georgia on the strategies used to socio-emotionally prepare students for transition to middle school?	7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school?	Participants share strategies used to support social-emotional development in students.
	8. What, if any, explicit program(s) are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program(s) is used?	Participants share programs, practices, and other factors which support social-emotional learning.
	9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used?	
	10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?	
	11. Do you feel prepared as an educator to support student social-emotional learning? Why or why not?	

Field Testing

To support the validation of the selected instruments, subject matter experts play a vital

role (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Field testing was conducted with SME before finalizing the

interview questions. Five SME were contacted and asked to review the data collection

instruments and provide feedback for each instrument (see Appendix G). The SME are all

doctoral level, certified educators comprised of administrators, student support specialists, a

social-emotional coordinator and a retired educator serving as State Coordinator on Character

Education. Feedback from the SME was reviewed to confirm the SME suggestions supported

content validity and maintained alignment with the purpose of the study and research questions.

The instruments were revised as necessary.

Data Collection

Participants from two elementary schools and one middle school were screened to ensure each was currently involved professionally with fifth- or sixth-grade students, either directly or indirectly. The superintendent's office and the school administrators were contacted to gain permission to conduct research in the schools and for permission to contact the educators. Once district and school level permissions were received in writing, the American College of Education's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols to request and achieve IRB approval were followed. Once IRB approval was secured, the school administration was consulted to determine the best time to contact the study participants.

Participants were contacted through email and assigned to participate in the questionnaire with a portion also assigned to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling. The email contained information describing the study, the informed consent form, and a link to an optional Microsoft Teams meeting to learn more about the study. The informed consent could be signed electronically and collected digitally using Google Forms. Once the informed consent forms were received, 41 study participants were confirmed. Participants received a link to the questionnaire with a requested completion date. The questionnaire, 15-30 minutes in length, was designed using Microsoft Forms. Following the administration of the questionnaire, 16 of the 41 participants were selected using purposive sampling to participate in an interview. Interview participants received an email with a link to a Microsoft Bookings calendar to schedule interviews at a time and date to support participant convenience. Interviews were semi-structured, 45-60 minutes in length, and conducted individually through Microsoft Teams.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data was collected using Microsoft Forms and interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software. Microsoft Teams includes a feature which provides transcriptions of all recordings. Participants were provided with the transcript from their interview to member check for review and confirmation of accuracy. If a participant identified errors in the transcript, appropriate changes were made to support the interviewee's account of the interview.

Confidentiality and privacy of participants was protected using aliases on the report and non-disclosure of the information shared during any part of the research data collection. Codes were designed to allow for comparison among sub-groups of professionals. Table 3 shows how participant codes were assigned.

Table 3

Participant Codes

School – Job Type	Identifier
School 1-elementary	ES1
Teacher	ES1-T#
Counselor	ES1-C#
Administrator	ES1-A#
School 2-elementary	ES2
Teacher	ES2-T#
Counselor	ES2-C#
Administrator	ES2-A#
School 3-middle	MS
Teacher	MS-T#
Counselor	MS-C#
Administrator	MS-A#

The analysis of data involved a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six phases of data collection. When conducting research using a thematic analysis approach, researchers must

be aware of the broad spectrum of approaches existing in this category (Kahlke, 2014). The six-phase process is especially useful in identifying patterns or themes within a basic qualitative study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's phases include being familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report.

Familiarization with the Data

The data collected through the questionnaire and interviews was reviewed multiple times, transcribed (interviews), and notations were made. A clear understanding of the data collected was established before moving to the next phase. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) recommended keeping anecdotal notes to develop early impressions of the participant's responses (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Generating Initial Codes

A systematic approach to the coding of the interesting features of the questionnaire and interview data was utilized. Data was collated as it related to each code. The Max Weber Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA) coding software, designed for thematic analysis, was used to code the collected data. The initial coding reduced the data into more manageable and meaningful groupings.

Searching for Themes

The collation of codes led to the development of themes. All coded data was reviewed and accounted for in the theme selection process. Tables and other visualizations were created to place data into descriptive themes. Multiple reviews of the table and other visual aids were conducted to ensure the themes and coded data aligned correctly with the study's purpose and research questions.

Reviewing Themes

The preliminary themes (Level 1) identified in step 3 and the entire data set (Level 2) were checked to confirm coherency with the coded extracts. Development of a thematic map followed this analysis. The qualitative data software MAXQDA was used at this juncture to support the organization of the coding into the themes.

Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was reviewed, and the details were refined to support the overall analysis. Each theme was named and defined within this phase. At this stage, sub-themes emerged. Sub-themes provide structure to a larger, more complex theme and support the hierarchy of meaning contained in the data. A thematic map was created to clearly illustrate the relationships between themes and sub-themes.

Producing the Analysis

Writing up the findings of the thematic analysis involved a comprehensive review of the supporting data. The analysis was representative of the data and related to the research questions and the literature reviewed. A narrative was developed which describes the themes uncovered through the research and connections among the themes. The analysis serves to provide empirical evidence as it relates to the study's research questions. A clearly written and illustrated thematic analysis convincingly represents the study data to support the worth and validity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kahlke, 2014).

Reliability and Validity

The design and methodologies of the basic qualitative study were developed to produce reliable and valid outcomes. To support credibility and dependability in the study, multiple strategies were incorporated. The study involved a questionnaire and interviews of different

groups of elementary and middle school educators. Participants included teachers, school counselors, and administrators who work either directly or indirectly with students in grades five or six.

The triangulation of data method was utilized to review data using multiple instruments (Fusch et al., 2018; Zairul, 2021). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and member checks of interview transcripts were provided to allow participants to verify the accuracy of responses and further support trustworthiness and credibility. Participants were encouraged to share any corrections. Questionnaire results and semi-structured interview transcripts were reviewed for triangulation. Questionnaire and interview data was coded using MAXQDA. An additional form of triangulation is the use of multiple groups of individuals (Carminati, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the study, teachers, school counselors, and administrators were included as distinct groups.

Transferability is the process of transferring the study results to similar settings, populations, or phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcripts include rich, thick precise descriptions of the participants' perceptions from open-ended questions. Theoretical triangulation was utilized as the study involves two theories, Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and democratic leadership theory (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938). The theoretical triangulation was used to analyze different perspectives and potential contradictions to further support the reliability and validity of the study.

Awareness of potential bias was maintained throughout the study to support trustworthiness. All questions were vetted through subject matter experts to eliminate researcher bias in the questionnaire and interviews. Personal bias was recognized before beginning data analysis.

Ethical Procedures

The school district of the participating schools was contacted to obtain site permission from district leadership. Once site permission was received (see Appendix H), permission to conduct research was requested through the American College of Education Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB ensured the research plan was fully developed and was supportive of all study participants. A focus on the three Belmont Report principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice was ensured in the study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Respect for persons was ensured. Participants were treated as autonomous agents and the participants' opinions and choices were always supported. No participant with limited autonomy was a part of the study. Participants had the right to exit the study at any time.

The beneficence of all subjects was guaranteed throughout the study. Participant well-being was paramount throughout the. No inherent dangers were encountered as participants completed online questionnaires and virtual interviews. Observed or perceived safety concerns on behalf of the participants were considered.

All participants throughout the study were provided justice. Every participant was an educator in the CCSD. Participants were treated as equals throughout study participation. The ability for participants to withdraw from the study, at any time, was maintained.

Following IRB committee approval, permission to conduct research was finalized with the CCSD. Once district approval was confirmed, all identified participants were contacted individually using a college-assigned email account. Individual contacts using the college email account supported privacy. All participants who agreed to be part of the research were required to sign letters of informed consent before participating in the questionnaire or interviews. To

support confidentiality, all anecdotal notes, transcripts, questionnaires, and documents included

pseudonyms to protect participant identity. Records of information and data will be kept in a

locked file cabinet (physical records) and password protected digital storage (electronic records)

for three years and then destroyed.

Trustworthiness was ensured by considering potential researcher bias during data

collection and analysis. Preconceptions and personal bias were considered preceding data

collection to lessen the potential for bias in the study. SME were used to help safeguard against

researcher bias in the data instruments. Identifying any personal bias before data analysis

avoided tainting the study and maintained rigor.

Chapter Summary

Students experience transitioning from elementary to middle school can be a source of

anxiety impacting their social-emotional wellbeing (Bagnall et al., 2019). The problem is middle

school students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the transition to middle school (Fite

et al., 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of

fifth and sixth grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of

students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia.

Studies involving the opinions and perceptions of subjects are best supported through a

qualitative research methodology (Bakker et al., 2020). The subjective nature of opinions and

perceptions is not easily measured through quantitative measures or more focused qualitative

methods (Percy et al., 2015). Therefore, the use of a generic, or basic qualitative approach is

most appropriate. This study was designed to investigate the perceptions of educators on student

socio-emotional preparedness for the middle school transition and the basic qualitative

methodology aligned with the purpose of the study and the research questions. The research

findings and results of the data analysis are described in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

The transition to a new school setting is considered a major life event for a student and becomes more complex from elementary to middle school due to the onset of puberty (Bagnall et al., 2019). A need to provide supports for students approaching and transitioning to middle school has been recognized by educators (Bagnall et al., 2019; Butler & Pregont, 2021). Fite et al. (2018) found 29% of newly transitioned middle school students demonstrated a lack of social-emotional preparedness leading to struggles during the transition process and resulting in high levels of depressive symptoms and academic performance difficulties. The problem is middle school students are not prepared socially and emotionally for the transition to middle school (Fite et al., 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and democratic leadership theory (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938) provided the theoretical framework for the study.

Data collection, data analysis, and results are discussed in the following section. The reliability and validity of the study, including principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are then addressed. A summary reviews the findings to the research questions and provides a transition to the final chapter of this study.

Data Collection

Following the American College of Education's Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval in July of 2022, a copy of the IRB approval (see Appendix I) was presented to the ▮▮▮▮▮ County School District (CCSD) to fulfill the district requirement to conduct research. After receiving the CCSD final approval, the three school site principals were contacted via email to coordinate the release of the invitation to participate to select staff members. The

invitation to participate, which included a link to the informed consent, was emailed to 66

potential participants who met the participant criteria. Participants were all educators who

worked as either teachers, counselors, or administrators with experience supporting grade five or

grade six students.

The goal of the study was to collect questionnaire data from a target population of 39

participants: teachers, counselors, and administrators from two elementary schools and one

middle school. A total of 45 educators completed the informed consent, with 41 completing the

questionnaire. The study also included interviews with 15 educators from the group completing

questionnaires. A total of 19 participants received invitations to participate in an interview with

16 participants completing an interview. Table 4 illustrates the characteristics of the study

sample.

At the request of the site principals, recruitment began at the start of the new school year

when teachers and counselors were back on campus for a week of pre-planning. The three

schools had 138 faculty members of which 66 met the study criteria of having worked with either

fifth- or sixth-grade students. All 66 potential participants received the invitation to participate

via email and 45 informed consents (68%) were completed in a period of 9 days. Of the 45

participants who completed the informed consent, 41 (91%) completed the questionnaire within

nine days. Microsoft Forms was used to facilitate the online questionnaire. Participants took an

average of 19 minutes and 29 seconds to complete the questionnaire. The 41 participants

included 13 teachers with sixth-grade experience, 13 teachers with fifth-grade experience, six

counselors and nine administrators, representative of the three schools in the study (see Table 4).

Table 4

Characteristics of the Study Sample

Characteristic	Questionnaire *n*	Interview *n*
Job type		
Administrator	9	3
Counselor	6	3
Teacher – grade 5	13	5
Teacher – grade 6	13	5
Years of experience		
0-4 years	1	0
5-9 years	4	3
10-19 years	18	6
20 or more years	18	7
School		
School 1-elementary	13	5
School 2-elementary	10	4
School 3-middle	18	7

Note. Questionnaire Sample – 41, Interview Sample – 16

In addition to data collection through the questionnaire, the study was designed to interview a representative sample of educators from each of the schools in the study who have either direct or indirect experience working with fifth- or sixth-grade students. Interviews provide robust, precise descriptions of the participants' perceptions in response to open-ended questions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The participants interviewed were selected from the sample of 41 participants using purposive sampling. A total of 19 invitations to interview were sent out via email with 16 participants (84%) agreeing to be interviewed. The interview group included five fifth- and five sixth-grade teachers, three counselors, and three administrators representative of each of the three schools in the study. Interviews were scheduled using Microsoft Bookings and conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams provided transcripts which were shared with participants to validate the record of the interview before using the data for coding purposes. Interviews ranged in time from 22-74 minutes and were completed over an 18-day period.

The original plan to collect informed consent was to provide potential participants a form attached to the email invitation to participate. Educators would have to open the document, complete the form, and return it by email. To support ease of participant completion, potential participants were provided a link to an online version of the informed consent within the invitation to participate. The informed consent was to be constructed in Microsoft Forms to provide consistency for the potential participants who were familiar with the Microsoft program through their district accounts. It was determined that Microsoft Forms was not an appropriate platform for the informed consent. Google Forms served to support the informed consent narrative for user readability and effective collection of participant consent. No other deviations from the initial data collection plan occurred.

There were two notable situations which arose in the data collection process. First, one of the three middle school counselors was unavailable due to a personal matter requiring them to take a leave of absence. The other situation involved a malfunction in Microsoft Teams which disabled the ability to record and transcribe during the interview of one of the participants. It was necessary to manually take notes during the interview to create a transcript. The manually created transcript was shared with the participant via email to acquire amendments and final approval.

Data Analysis and Results

Qualitative research provided an advantage for the study as the approach supports exploring the perceptions of subjects using open-ended inquiries through a questionnaire and interviews. This research was conducted to investigate the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. A basic qualitative research design, using

questionnaires and interviews was conducted to produce detailed descriptions of participants'

opinions, feelings, and experiences, and the interpretation of the meaning of participant actions.

Questionnaire responses from all 41 participants were collected electronically through

Microsoft Forms. Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, which allowed for

recording and simultaneous transcription. Responses from the participant's questionnaire were

shared during the interview to allow the interviewee an opportunity to expand on their

perspectives. All transcripts were reviewed with the corresponding recording following each

interview to ensure accuracy prior to member checking. Any irregularities or inaccuracies in the

transcription were corrected through the review process. The initial review of the transcripts also

allowed familiarization with the data to begin. Following my review of the transcripts,

interviewees were provided with their transcription for member checking and confirmation of an

accurate account of the interview. Transcripts were sent via email to each interviewee. No

interviewees requested changes in their transcript.

The data were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis framework. Thematic

analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes within qualitative data (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis was appropriate to support this study as it allowed the

systematic analysis of a variety of information to interpret and understand participants'

perceptions, feelings, and experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) provided the following six

phases for thematic analysis of qualitative data:

1. Step one is becoming familiar with the data.

2. Step two is generating initial codes.

3. Step three is searching for themes.

4. Step four is reviewing themes.

5. Step five is defining and naming themes.

6. Step six is producing the report.

Familiarization with the data (phase one) began with the collation of participant responses from the questionnaires and the initial review of interview transcripts. Initial ideas were recorded in the form of anecdotal notes while manually reviewing participant responses. A student academic license to MAXQDA software was purchased and used to begin phase two, the generation of initial codes for the data set. The data were then reviewed manually, and initial codes from MAXQDA were expanded and collapsed to generate codes and subcodes. Excel spreadsheets of questionnaire responses were created and compared with interview transcripts to further support the refinement of codes and the development of themes in phase three (see Table 5). The manual review of data, along with the development of initial codes using MAXQDA, helped to provide high frequency word counts. Themes began to emerge at this stage of the thematic analysis. This approach aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and collation of codes into potential themes.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis – Phase 3 Theme Development - Organizing Coded Data

Major Theme	Subtheme	Related Text Segments
Students' sense of self	Self-management	Not being able to regulate their emotions as self-regulation and knowing how to control their emotions.
		Lessons are based around self-awareness and the ability to understand one's own emotions and

Major Theme	Subtheme	Related Text Segments
		thoughts and that's where the foundation of SEL comes from.
		I think that a lot of kids struggle with that, with being able to manage stress, tolerate it.
	Self-awareness	Those students who have a more difficult time with the self-awareness and peer resistance skills tend to be less prepared for the social-emotional demands of middle school
		Being aware of their self though has to come before students can understand the point of view of others.
		They feel like they can advocate for themselves,
	Self-confidence	But the ones that are most ready for middle school, they just have a solid foundation, and you know they're confident within their friend groups.
		The resiliency piece comes along with that because they have a difficult time facing challenges
		We expect them to be a little bit more independent.

Disaggregation of data allowed a deeper look at the entirety of participant responses including by subcategories, such as by school, role, and experience. A thematic map of the analysis was developed (phase 4) to support the process of reviewing coded extracts and refining themes (see Figure 1). According to Byrne (2021), the aim of phase four is to produce a thematic map representative of the most significant elements of the data in relation to the research questions.

Figure 1

Thematic Map
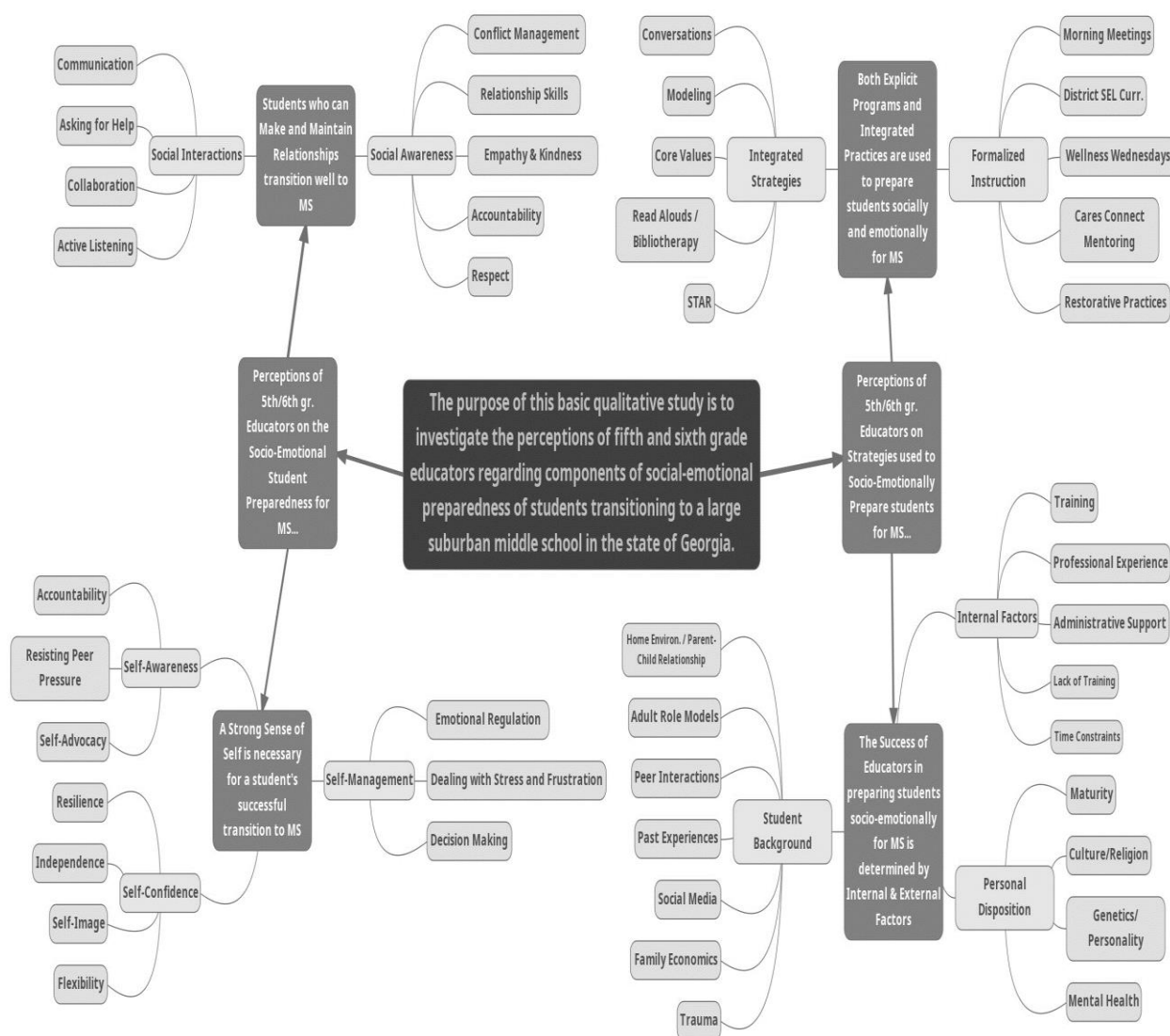
The development of the thematic map led to the final two phases of the thematic analysis. Phase five began with reviewing, defining, and final naming of the themes and subthemes. Braun and Clarke (2006) point to the importance of being flexible at this stage of analysis as the refinement of themes often leads to subthemes which provide structure to larger, more complex themes. Ensuring each theme and subtheme could uniquely support the data was essential at this phase (Byrne, 2021). The process of producing the report was refined in phase six, however, the

development of the report is interwoven into the entirety of the thematic analysis. Four

overarching themes were named and defined: A strong sense of self is necessary for a student's

successful transition to middle school, students who can make and maintain relationships

transition well to middle school, both explicit programs and integrated practices are used to

prepare students socially and emotionally for middle school, and the success of educators in

preparing students socio-emotionally for middle school is determined by internal and external

factors. Findings from the questionnaire and the interview transcripts were triangulated to

support validity. These four themes and associated subthemes were developed from the data

analysis of the participant's responses found in the questionnaire and interview transcript review.

Theme 1: A strong sense of self is necessary for a student's successful transition to middle

school.

An objective of the research was to identify educator perceptions of the socio-emotional

preparedness of students transitioning to middle school. One theme which emerged from the data

was the necessity for a strong sense of self for a student's successful transition to middle school.

Table 6 depicts how theme 1 is supported by three subthemes and corresponding key phrases

(codes).

Table 6

Major Theme 1, Subthemes, Key Phrases

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
A strong sense of self is necessary for a student's successful transition to middle school.	Self-management	Emotional regulation (27) Dealing with stress/frustration (15) Decision making (13)
	Self-awareness	Accountability (12) Resisting peer pressure (11) Self-advocacy (6)

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
	Self-confidence	Resilience (11)
		Independence (7)
		Self-image (5)
		Flexibility (4)

Note. ( ) indicates the number of participant responses

Self-management

Participants were asked to identify the social-emotional skills necessary for a student to successfully transition to middle school. The subtheme of self-management was the most prominent among the responses. Analysis of participant responses found 27 of 41 participants (65%) identified emotional regulation as a foundational skill to support student transition to middle school. Participant MS-T5, in responding to what social-emotional skills well-adjusted students possess, stated, "I feel like their strengths are self-awareness and social awareness. They at least know their emotions, their thoughts, and they can sometimes read the room." How students deal with stress and frustration (37%), as well as decision making skills (32%) were also notable in educator perceptions.

Self-awareness

Twenty-eight (68%) of the 41participants referenced terms considered to be self-awareness skills. The most significant responses noted accountability (29%) and resisting peer-pressure (26%) as skills necessary for a successful transition to middle school. Participant ES2-C2 shared, "those students who have a more difficult time with the self-awareness and peer-resistance skills, tend to be less prepared for the social-emotional demands of middle school".

Self-confidence

Self-confidence emerged as the final subtheme connected with the theme sense of self. Participants noted the skills of resilience (26%) and independence (17%) as significant for

students' successful transition to middle school. Resilience was noted as a necessary skill by four of the six counselors (66%), representing each of the schools in the study. ES1-T6 remarked, "…very often students this age (rising sixth-grade students) are lacking in self-confidence. In my opinion, this is huge. As students transition to middle school, self-confidence is vital."

Theme 2: Students who can make and maintain relationships transition well to middle school.

Study participants were asked to share their perceptions of the social-emotional skills which are needed for a student to successfully transition into middle school. The ability to make and maintain relationships developed as a theme from the coded data. Theme 2 is supported by two subthemes and corresponding key phrases (codes) which are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Major Theme 2, Subthemes, Key Phrases

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
Students who can make and maintain relationships transition well to middle school.	Social awareness	Conflict management (22) Relationship skills (21) Empathy/kindness (18) Accountability (12) Respect (5)
	Social interaction	Communication (17) Asking for help (4) Collaboration (3) Active listening (2)

Note. ( ) indicates the number of participant responses

Social Awareness

Social awareness emerged as a subtheme of making and maintaining relationships. The most noted skill by respondents was conflict management, with 53% of participants citing its importance. Relationship skills were of equal significance, mentioned by 51% of participants.

Educators also placed high importance on empathy and kindness with 18 of the 41 participants (43%) referencing this skill. Participant ES1-T3 stated, "I think those relationships are so important because it relieves the stress, it gives a comfort zone, it's developing a family, it's meeting their needs socially and emotionally."

Social Interaction

The second most frequently coded category of responses formed the subtheme of social interaction. Communication was the skill identified by 17 of 41 educators (41%) as important to support a student's positive transition to middle school. Participant ES1-T3 shared, "In a morning meeting you're developing the skill of eye-to-eye contact, one person talking at a time, greeting each other, and that's the basis of communication…".

Theme 3: Both explicit programs and integrated practices are used to prepare students socially and emotionally for middle school.

Participant perceptions revealed a variety of approaches being used to support student social-emotional development. Educators described many explicit programs which were being utilized at their schools. The 41 participants also shared 25 unique practices integrated into the school environments. Table 8 depicts how theme 3 is supported by two subthemes and corresponding key phrases (codes).

Table 8

Major Theme 3, Subthemes, Key Phrases

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
Both explicit programs and integrated practices are used to prepare students socially and emotionally for middle school.	Formalized instruction	Morning meetings (18) District SEL curriculum (17) Wellness Wednesdays (12) Cares Connect mentoring (7) Restorative practices (4)

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
	Integrated strategies	Conversations (7)
		STAR (7)
		Modeling (6)
		Core values (6)
		Read-alouds/bibliotherapy (4)

Note. ( ) indicates the number of participant responses

Formalized Instruction

Coding of participant responses regarding the use of explicit programs and integrated practices revealed the subtheme of formalized instruction. The use of morning meetings, a program used exclusively by the elementary schools, was noted by 78% of the elementary educators. Wellness Wednesdays, a weekly social-emotional program at the middle school, was cited by 12 of the 18 middle school educators (66%). ES1-T3 stated, "I believe in developing relationships before looking at test scores, and I think that is because the Responsive Classroom training was such a game changer in my classroom management".

Integrated Strategies

Seven of the middle school educators referenced a strategy created by the school principal known as the STAR. The five points of the STAR represent spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and social being, or in the words of MS-A3, "This is who you are. Everything involved in your life fits into all of these pieces. When there is one part that is not doing well… your STAR is off." The administration first trains the faculty, followed by all students on the STAR. Educators then use a common, intentional (STAR) language with students to reference points of the STAR where a student may be struggling. The significance of this strategy was teacher perceptions were very positive. Those who discussed the STAR through interviews were clearly invested in the strategy.

The coding of participant responses identified 25 other unique integrated strategies to aid student social-emotional development. While participant responses were relatively low on each of the practices shared, the significance was the number of strategies coded. ES2-A2 shared "It's just trying to be strategic and take advantage of every moment, even if it's not a formalized class meeting, or it's not built into the curriculum. It is just the overall culture that we have tried to build and establish…"

Theme 4: The success of educators in preparing students socio-emotionally for middle school is determined by internal and external factors.

Coded responses of the 41 questionnaires and 16 interview transcripts generated the major theme of internal and external forces impacting the success of educators in preparing students socio-emotionally for middle school. The subtheme of internal forces, or those factors within the school, emerged from the coded data. Internal forces were represented by both limitations and opportunities to influence students, socio-emotionally. Factors outside of the school system, including student background and personal disposition, represented the external factors and the final two subthemes of theme four. Theme 4 along with four related subthemes and corresponding key phrases (codes) are illustrated below in Table 9.

Table 9

Major Theme 4, Subthemes, Key Phrases

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
The success of educators in preparing students socio-emotionally for middle school is determined by internal and external factors.	Internal factors	SEL training (10) Professional experience (6) Administrative support (5) Lack of training (3) Time constraints (3)
	Student background	Home environment/Parent-child relationship (34) Adult role models (8)

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key phrases
		Peer interactions (8)
		Social Media (8)
		Experiences (7)
		Family economics (5)
		Trauma (4)
	Personal dispositions	Maturity (8)
		Culture/religion (4)
		Genetics/personality (4)
		Mental health (3)

Note. ( ) indicates the number of participant responses

Internal Factors

Participant responses related to the major theme included the subtheme of internal factors. Educators expressed both positive and negative factors which contributed to their ability to prepare students socio-emotionally. Key phrases connected with positive internal factors included: SEL training (10), professional experience (6), and administrative support (5). ES2-C2 responded, "As a counselor, we are provided plenty of support and trainings from Student Support Services. We also have professional learning communities with other counselors." Those educators who shared negative internal factors listed lack of training (3) and time constraints (3). ES1-T1 shared, "I got a degree in education curriculum and all of my course work was curriculum. It wasn't SEL. So, we learn things along the way, but I do feel like I would benefit from more training and SEL strategies".

Student Background

Participant responses indicated a subtheme surrounding student backgrounds. Educators from all three schools involved in the study specified the home environment as influential in student preparedness for middle school. A total of 34 of the 41 participants (83%) shared home environment as an external factor impacting students. ES1-T1 shared, "Kids' home environments

are not necessarily what they were when I was a child. I just see that those broken homes really

break the children too." While ES2-T3 felt, "Those laws of regulation that they learn from their

home environment play a role in who you get in the classroom and how they think something

should be managed." Finally, MS-T5 elaborated, "By the time they get to middle school that

home life and that family support is critical. I feel like, without that, there is only so much we

can do within the eight hours of the school day."

While home environment was the most frequently coded category of responses within the

subtheme of student background, several other prominent responses were coded. Participant

responses including adult role models (8), peer interactions (8), social media (8), experiences (7),

family economic status (5), and trauma (4) were also notable in the coding. A review of coded

data connected with student background revealed 40 of the 41 educators (98%) cited at least one

external factor connected with this subtheme.

Personal Dispositions

Data from the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts identified 39% of

educators (16 of 41) perceived a student's disposition as an external factor either supporting or

hindering their socio-emotional preparedness for middle school. Eight of the respondents listed

maturity as a contributing factor to a student's ability to transition well into the middle school

environment. ES1-T3 shared, "Developmentally, these children are just not developing at the

same rate. You know, each child is an individual, and to say that we need students to be self-

aware, or empathetic, or have those communication skills, or the ability to solve conflict, that

comes with maturity".

Findings Related to Research Question One

Through the data collected and analyzed on educator perceptions of the socio-emotional

preparedness of students for the transition to middle school, participants referenced a strong

sense of self as a critical skill. Many participants identified self-awareness as a primary skill necessary before self-management and social awareness develop. As a student becomes self-aware, the skills of emotional regulation and decision making develop. A progression of self-management skills leads to a student's increasing level of self-confidence, supporting the strong sense of self necessary for a student to thrive in middle school (Onetti et al., 2019).

Teachers, counselors, and administrators expressed opinions that a strong sense of self is a precursor to students making and maintaining relationships. Participants perceived, as students become more socially aware, conflict management and relationship skills also improve. Respondents also reported, kindness is routinely encouraged and discussed among elementary students; however, empathy is a more advanced skill that students grow into at different rates. ES1-T1 stated, "… it takes maturity to be empathetic." The importance of positive social interactions was also a skill participants perceived as important to the development of a student who can make and maintain relationships. While social awareness is increasing, students can communicate more effectively, becoming active listeners who can participate more successfully in collaborative groups and work through conflict.

Educator perceptions regarding the socio-emotional preparedness of students for middle school were further supported through the following interview remarks. Participant MS-A3 expressed "… if you don't understand yourself, you can't understand others." MS-T5 supports the findings by stating "Students need an understanding and grasp of the five main social-emotional skills to transition to middle school. The vast discrepancy among those skills in different students is blaringly apparent during major transitions like the one to middle school. Self-awareness and social awareness are probably the top two necessities."

Findings Related to Research Question Two

The data analysis of participant responses on educator perceptions of the strategies used to socio-emotionally prepare students for the transition to middle school included a wide variety of programs and practices. Participant responses revealed some explicit programs were mandated by the district and commonly practiced at each school. Educator responses disclosed programming was designed differently at the elementary and middle school level to meet the developmental needs of the students. Participants also identified 25 integrated strategies and practices throughout the three schools being utilized by different educators. The number and variety of practices indicated the educators were seeking to implement and test strategies they believed could positively impact student socio-emotional development. Educator responses clearly supported their desire to provide strategies in their classroom beyond what was provided by the district programs.

The study was further supported by asking educators to identify the factors which influence student socio-emotional preparedness. Participants indicated a variety of internal and external factors which could either positively or negatively impact a student's socio-emotional development. The internal factor which educators reported most frequently was the district SEL program training. Counselors reported the training as regular and useful, while teachers reported that no training occurred. ES1-T1 indicated, "…none, no training on (district) SEL lessons. They (SEL lessons) were rolled out and we were told to do them, so that's what we did." Participants also reported a willingness to participate in voluntary training to further improve the ability to support student social-emotional needs.

The subtheme of student background was the most prevalent external factor reported by participants. Eighty-three percent of educators reported the home environment as an influence

impacting their ability to support a student's socio-emotional preparedness for middle school.

Participants shared both positive and negative elements of the home environment with ES1-T1

stating, "The prayer would be that if they are in that difficult home environment, that at least

when they come to school, that can be their safe zone. That can be a place where we're trying to

build up their SEL that they're not getting at home." ES2-A2 in discussing outside influences

reported, "It's (social-emotional development) a culmination of things that started when they

entered in kindergarten. Really things that they may bring with them before they come to

kindergarten…You know, it (social-emotional development) starts in kindergarten and builds all

the way up. When you look at skills (social-emotional) that kids need as they transition to middle

school, if you wait till 5th grade to start, then you've missed the bus.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the internal validity of a study or the

confidence which can be placed on the accuracy of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Results demonstrate credibility when the participant data and interpretation of participant views

are accurately represented. The results of this basic qualitative study were obtained from

questionnaire responses and interviews of elementary and middle school teachers, counselors,

and administrators. Credibility and dependability were established in the study using the

strategies of triangulation, member checks, and persistent observations. Persistent observations

involved multiple reviews of the data relevant to the problem, coding, recording, and analyzing

until the intended depth of insight was visible in themes. The failure of the recording and

transcription of one of the participant interviews presented a potential threat to the credibility of

the research findings and will be further addressed in the limitations section of Chapter 5.

The study findings are potentially transferable to other contexts and settings, especially large suburban school districts in the southeastern United States. Transferability of the study is established through robust, precise descriptions of participant perceptions to convey the results, allowing the reader to conclude whether the findings are transferable. Thick description of the selection and characteristics of the study participants allow the reader to better determine transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Trustworthiness was ensured through consideration of potential researcher bias throughout the collection and analysis of data. Reflexivity on preconceptions and personal biases before data collection and throughout the analysis minimized the opportunity for bias to impact the study. Prior to data collection, subject matter experts were used to ensure researcher bias was not present in the data instruments. Member checks of all interview transcripts were also used to confirm an accurate reflection of participant perceptions.

Chapter Summary

This basic qualitative study was undertaken to gain deeper insight into educator perceptions regarding the socio-emotional preparedness of students for the transition to middle school. Emergent themes were developed based on participant responses to the questionnaire as well as deeper analysis of participant perspectives through interviews. Data was presented in the form of tables, figures, and quotations from participants to support the emergent themes. Research Question One found educator perceptions mixed on student socio-emotional preparedness for middle school. Teachers, counselors, and administrators felt many students were well prepared while some struggled during the transition to middle school. Through the scope and depth of educator responses, it was evident educators understood what socio-emotional skills students needed to transition successfully to middle school.

In Research Question Two, participants believed they had a variety of strategies which were used to effectively support the students' socio-emotional needs as they entered a large suburban middle school in Georgia. Counselors felt most prepared to support students through purposeful district level professional learning to support SEL. Teachers reported more confidently on the use of integrated strategies to support students and felt the district level SEL program was introduced with no training. Educators shared student backgrounds had significant impact on the effectiveness of strategies to support students for the socio-emotional demands of middle school. Discussion, conclusions, additional information on the findings, interpretations, and limitations of the study, as well as implications for leadership will be presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of fifth- and sixth-grade educators regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. Teachers, counselors, and administrators can provide significant support to students before, during, and after the transition to middle school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Butler & Pregont, 2021). This study identified educators' perceived obstacles which may assist educational leaders and policymakers as they attempt to support the socio-emotional development of students more effectively.

Teacher, counselor, and administrator perceptions regarding the socio-emotional preparedness of students for the transition to middle school were examined in research question 1. The following themes emerged: students' strong sense of self; and making and maintaining relationships. Study findings identified self-awareness as a primary skill which is necessary before students can develop skills of self-management and social awareness. Educators recognized students develop socially and emotionally at different times. A strong sense of self was considered a foundational skill required for making and maintaining relationships with empathy and communication skills playing an important role.

Research question 2 regarded the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and administrators on the strategies used to prepare students socio-emotionally for the transition to middle school. Two themes emerged from the second research question: both explicit and integrated practices were used to prepare students socio-emotionally; and the success of educators in preparing students socio-emotionally is influenced by internal and external factors. Findings indicated both explicit programming and integrated practices were utilized to support student socio-emotional development. Educators shared a desire for professional learning with explicit programs as well

as other integrated practices. Training was noted as a factor which impacted educators' ability to effectively prepare students. Influences outside of the educators' control were also perceived as having a significant effect on educators' ability to successfully support students' socio-emotional development. The home environment was perceived by educators as the most significant factor which impacted students' socio-emotional development.

The following section presents research findings and interpretations, limitations, and recommendations for future research. Implications for leadership are also addressed. A brief conclusion summarizes key findings as they relate to the purpose of the study.

Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Research results from this study revealed teacher, counselor, and administrator perceptions about student socio-emotional preparedness, as well as educator use of socio-emotional strategies to support student transition to middle school. Four overarching themes emerged to support the two research questions (see Figure 2). The first two themes directly correlated with research question 1, while themes three and four connected with research question 2. A common perception among educators indicated that students' strong sense of self and the ability to make and maintain relationships were indicators of students who were better prepared for the transition to middle school.

Figure 2

Emerging Themes
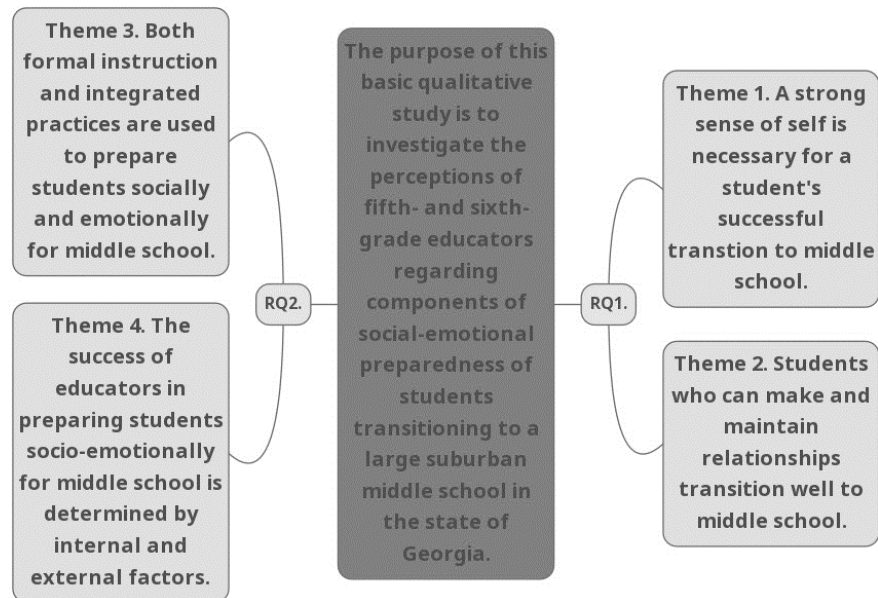
Educator perceptions regarding the strategies used to support the socio-emotional

development of students for the transition to middle school emerged in themes three and four.

Participants indicated the use of both explicit programs and integrated practices were utilized to

provide socio-emotional support for students. Counselors were most confident in the use and

structure of explicit programs, while teachers and administrators were less confident. Teachers

also shared a wide variety of integrated practices which were used to further support student

socio-emotional development.

Findings in Relation to Literature

The study findings corroborate and expand upon the information presented in the Chapter

2 literature review. Each theme from the data analysis was compared to the body of literature

from Chapter 2. Findings in contrast to or beyond the scope of the existing literature are noted.

Socio-emotional Preparedness of Students for Middle School

Data analysis showed educators believed a student's strong sense of self is necessary to support a successful transition to middle school. Many participants (68%) perceived student development of self-awareness to be a necessary skill prior to fully developing competency in self-management and social awareness. Coelho et al. (2020) and Onetti et al. (2019) highlighted similar findings indicating self-esteem and self-concept are elements of student emotional well-being which are tested during the transition to middle school. The perceptions of educators in the study expanded on the current literature by indicating a student's strong sense of self was a foundational skill necessary before other interpersonal skills fully develop.

Participant responses indicated educators understood students develop socio-emotional skills at different rates. Literature paralleled this perception by stating the development of interpersonal skills was shown to vary among adolescents transitioning to the middle school setting (Guyer et al., 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Shoshani & Slone, 2012). The current study aligned with the research of Jansen and Kiefer, (2020) which reported on adolescent developmental differences by noting the onset of puberty begins in the latter years of elementary school for many students, while others enter this developmental stage during middle school.

Analysis of participant responses found educators perceived that as students become more socially aware, conflict management and relationship skills improve. The importance of students having sound relationship skills was also a finding in the literature reviewed. Fite et al. (2018) noted adolescents identified the helpfulness of peers, teachers, and parents, more than any school-based programs for having the most supportive influence throughout the transition. Many educators in the study noted an improvement in communication and active listening were evident as students develop social awareness. This was noted through educator observations of students who were more successful in collaborative groups and dealing with conflict. Educator

perceptions indicated by allowing students opportunities to engage in purposeful conversation in the classroom, socio-emotional development was improved. During adolescence, student anxieties, reliance on peer groups, and a need to feel accepted increase, further driving the need to make connections as new middle school students assimilate into unfamiliar settings (Coelho et al., 2017; Oberle, 2018).

Strategies Used to Support Student Socio-emotional Preparedness for Middle School

Through a review of educator responses, the study revealed a wide variety of strategies were employed to support student socio-emotional preparedness for middle school (see Figure 3). The collection of data through educator perceptions served to expand on the current literature. Counselors were notably most confident in the use of formalized programs (district SEL program, Cares Connect, Wellness Wednesdays), while teachers reported a lack of training on the mandated program and a desire for more professional development in SEL. Educators were markedly aware of student SEL needs but the teachers expressed a need for more time and training to properly support students. Booker (2018) noted middle school teachers must be cognizant of the social-emotional needs of students to develop healthy relationships. Educators' understanding of the middle-grade learner's stage of emotional development can help to support students and strengthen the student-teacher relationship (Booker, 2018; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). The study findings expanded on the current literature by identifying teacher perceptions of the lack of time and training as an obstacle to their ability to fully support students' social-emotional needs.

Figure 3

Socio-emotional Strategies
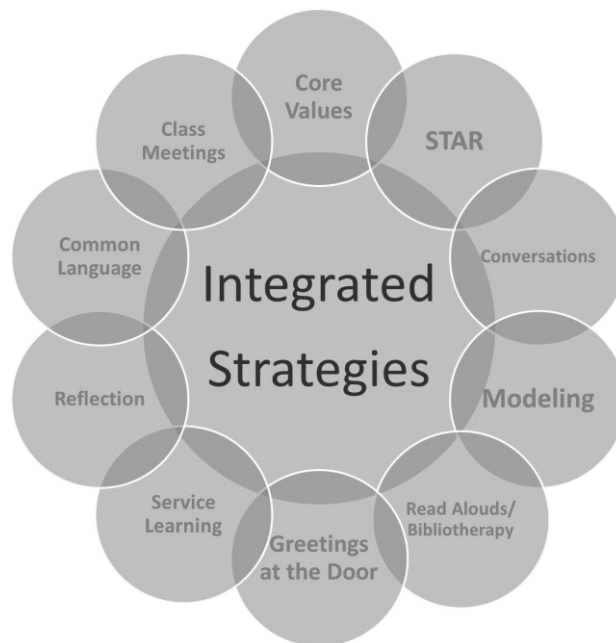
Reviewed literature discussed the use of integrated approaches of strategies to support

student socio-emotional development. The integrated approaches involved teachers providing

SEL or CD support in daily practices promoting healthy relationships (Allbright & Hough, 2020;

Dawes et al., 2019; Lickona, 2018). Educator responses in this study highlighted several explicit

programs (district SEL program, Cares Connect, Wellness Wednesdays) and a wide variety of

integrated practices (conversations, STAR, modeling, core values) which were used in

classrooms, counseling sessions, and throughout the school day. Participants from all schools

reported on the district's expectation for teachers to consistently use the internally developed

SEL program. Educators in the elementary schools also reported the district's expectation of the

daily use of morning meetings to support SEL conversations with students. Successful

integration is accomplished when all classrooms and student spaces throughout the school

address the common language and purposeful practices (Dawes et al., 2019; Lickona, 2018).

Educator perspectives aligned with the current literature agreeing with the importance of regular opportunities for purposeful conversation and the use of a common language within each of the schools.

Study participants were asked to share their perceptions of the external factors which influence student socio-emotional preparedness. Eighty-three percent (83%) of educators felt the home environment was an external influence, either positively or negatively impacting their ability to support a student's socio-emotional preparedness for middle school. Similarly, Fite et al. (2018) found more than 92% of adolescent participants named parents as a critical source of support during the middle school transition. Kovács-Tóth et al. (2021) suggested students who experience maltreatment, or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), are more susceptible to physiological responses which can negatively impact peer acceptance and social-emotional competencies. Strong family support plays a significant role in helping students demonstrate appropriate behavior (Pendergast et al., 2018). In this study, educator perceptions supported the current body of literature by emphasizing the significant influence the home environment plays on their ability to support the socio-emotional development of students.

Findings in Context of Theoretical Framework

The study was conducted to explore the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and administrators regarding student socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school. A blend of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and democratic leadership theory (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938) created the theoretical framework. These key theories overlap to support the importance of students and all stakeholders being actively involved in shared decision-making during the middle school transition process.

Students progress through the stages of transition when moving from elementary school to middle school. Changes in peer-group structures and concerns about social acceptance are prevalent during times of school transitions (Longaretti, 2020). The middle school experience occurs at a time when students are also transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Dahl et al., 2018). By understanding perceptions of educators related to students during the transition to middle school, leaders and policymakers can work to improve practices to support students at this vulnerable life stage.

The theoretical framework also highlighted the importance of participative leadership or the notion that shared decision-making should be prevalent throughout an organization, with a goal of collective input from all stakeholders (Purwanto et al., 2019). When educators allow students and staff to participate in the development of the school culture, these stakeholders become empowered and more invested in the school experience (Booker, 2018). Educator perceptions provided evidence to suggest a level of shared-decision making is available to teachers and staff in implementing socio-emotional supports. Student involvement in shared decision-making was less evident.

Conclusions of the Study

The study supports several conclusions when viewed against the theoretical framework and existing literature. Educators perceived students who have developed a strong sense of self are more successful at forming and maintaining relationships and are better prepared socio-emotionally for middle school. Participants believe student developmental rates differ, impacting a student's readiness for the socio-emotional demands of middle school. Most respondents perceived the home environment as a noteworthy influence on a child's socio-emotional preparedness for the transition to middle school. One aspect which was absent from educator

responses, but prevalent in the existing literature, was the importance of a students' sense of belonging. Maslow suggested a sense of belonging is a primary human need which must be satisfied before other needs are fulfilled (Maslow, 1962). A classroom where students feel respected, supported, and valued will provide students a greater opportunity to develop positive emotional responses and an increased sense of belonging (Dawes et al., 2019).

Limitations

Four limitations were evident in this study. First, the study focused on two suburban elementary schools and a single suburban middle school in Georgia. The limited sample size produces concern for the transferability of the findings. Transferability is identified by how well a study's findings can be applied to similar settings and populations (Roberts et al., 2019). The research is potentially transferable using thick descriptions of data, allowing the reader to determine the level of transferability.

The second limitation relates to the timing of the study. Invitation to participate in the study was initiated during the first week back to school (pre-planning) for the teachers and counselors. Educators were participating in many meetings, room set-up, and open house events during this week. Informed consent and questionnaire responses were collected promptly and exceeded the minimum number needed for the study. Beginning the study after the start of the school year would have allowed the teachers to begin forming relationships with their students and families and may have produced more thoughtful responses. Interviews occurred after the first week of school and the educators seemed relaxed and eager to participate.

The third limitation relates to a single interview which involved the failure of the video conference recording. While the interview was conducted in a typical fashion, it did require hand

recording of the conversation. The hand-recorded notes were placed into a digital transcript format and shared with the interviewee for member checking.

The fourth limitation involves the matter of repeatability of this study comes into question. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student academic and social development are being studied in academic and psychological communities. Elharake et al. (2022) shared, the COVID-19 pandemic created adverse mental health problems in children impacted by social isolation. Children reported being more anxious, depressed, fatigued, and distressed than before the pandemic. Because this study was conducted shortly after students returned to in-person education, it is unknown how teacher perceptions may have differed if the study was further removed from the pandemic.

<div align="center">

Recommendations

</div>

Recommendations for changes in practice and future research were derived from the findings that emerged from the data analysis of the study. The need for socio-emotional support for students at all age levels continues to be a concern for educators and policymakers nationally. Thoughts differ among leaders, policymakers, and educators on the most effective approach to support the socio-emotional needs of students, which are compounded by real and perceived impediments. Recommendations for changes in practice and further research supported by the findings follow.

Results of the study indicated district leadership requires teachers to implement a district designed explicit SEL program and the integrated practice of morning meetings. Teachers shared a list of 25 separate integrated practices which are intermittently utilized throughout classrooms. Many of the teachers reported learning strategies during college experiences, from colleagues, through independent research, or social media. Fite et al. (2018) suggested explicit programs

were not as effective at preparing students as the general practice of building relationships and a

positive school climate. School leaders and policymakers should consider the strategies which

would best support an integrated approach to SEL and character education (CE). Lickona (2018)

acknowledged the importance of implementing broad principles of character education (CE) with

fidelity rather than through a formal program. Providing CE systematically serves to positively

change relationships, work ethic, and school culture. A multi-layered CE implementation,

including collaborative learning, democratic class meetings, literature rich in character

principles, schoolwide emphasis on community, and parent engagement have a long-lasting

impact on students (Lickona, 2018).

The development of a SEL and CE integrated design should be considered to support the

unique needs of each school. Programs which establish core values and a common language,

such as those referenced in the 11 Principles Framework (Lickona & Schapps, 2018), provide

uniformity for staff, students, and stakeholders. Integrated programs draw on a large pool of SEL

and CE strategies to better prepare educators to support the socio-emotional development of

students and provide methods to improve relationship building and school culture. While schools

that incorporate an integrated approach to SEL and CE may have similarities, they should each

have unique designs aligned with the characteristics of the school community. Careful evaluation

at each school site, along with collaborative decision-making on core values and common

language among all stakeholders, is an important means to developing an integrated program

which is supportive of the socio-emotional needs of the students (Fite et al., 2018; Lickona,

2018).

Findings indicated teachers perceived there was a lack of professional learning provided

to fully support the ability to implement mandated programs to strengthen student socio-

emotional competencies. Compounding teachers' perceptions of a lack of training was a general belief that time was not provided to properly prepare for supporting SEL lessons, as well as the academic content they must prepare to teach. Teachers should be provided with professional learning which supports the ability to effectively deliver SEL strategies. Educators should also be provided with instructional preparation time and guidance to help support the importance of the socio-emotional needs of students.

Educational leaders and policymakers must be cognizant of educators' need for professional learning and preparation time to support SEL and CE implementation effectively. To gain educator investment in an integrated SEL and CE method, school administration must invest in targeted professional learning and uninterrupted planning time each week. By providing time and resources, along with leading by example, educational leaders establish the importance of an initiative and inspire teacher confidence. A well designed and supported integrated SEL and CE program can improve student relationships and school culture (Fite et al., 2018).

Recommendations for future research include an expanded sample of participants and schools, the inclusion of student perceptions, and consideration of academic achievement. The recommendation would include the use of a mixed methods study to add a level of statistical analysis connecting teacher and student perceptions with student achievement. A small study sample size was noted in the limitations section of this chapter. An expanded participant pool, including several more schools from within or outside the district, could provide better transferability and a more complete view of perceptions of educators on the socio-emotional needs of students and how to best support those needs. The inclusion of student perceptions and academic achievement could provide deeper understanding of socio-emotional needs and how students perceive the strategies which are most effective to support their needs. Common

limitations found in qualitative studies include participant attrition, incomplete responses from study participants, and sample size concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mir, 2018). Future research using a mixed methods methodology would provide deeper examination of perceptions and academic data correlations which are not achievable in a qualitative study.

The existing literature points to the importance of supporting student socio-emotional needs through an integrated approach to SEL by developing positive school climate and a sense of belonging among students (Bailey et al., 2019; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Fite et al., 2018; Lickona, 2018; Wallender et al., 2020). Future research which focuses on the strategies which most effectively promote students' sense of belonging and a positive school climate could prove impactful and valuable to policymakers and school leaders. The findings of this research could also be used with other studies to investigate connections between educator perceptions throughout K-12 on the strategies which best support socio-emotionally prepared students across the spectrum of grade levels.

Implications for Leadership

The results of this study indicate teachers, counselors, and administrators understand the necessity and value of effectively implementing socio-emotional strategies regarding the transition to middle school. Results also reveal a disconnect among teachers in implementation and consistency. Leadership efforts should be focused on supplying teachers with the necessary skills and training to understand social-emotional stages of development, standardize a common SEL language, and integrate SEL and CD teaching opportunities throughout the school day.

District and state level curriculum requirements can make it challenging for school-based administrators to implement new programs. Teachers can find it difficult to find time and resources, which can unintentionally send the message that SEL is not as important as academic

content. District- and state-level leaders and policymakers need to emphasize the importance of integrating socio-emotional support within all classrooms. True integration means throughout the day, embedded in the core function of the classroom. Integration supports the notion that SEL and CD practices are not another thing on a teacher's plate, but the belief that SEL and CD are the plate or the foundation of a socio-emotionally sound classroom.

The findings of this study have the potential to further inform how educational leaders, policymakers, and schools approach teacher preparation and enacting positive socio-emotional changes at the classroom level. Ensuring teachers are knowledgeable about students' socio-emotional development and the strategies to effectively support these students will be most effective if state-level leaders, district-level leaders, and teacher preparation leaders develop and promote teacher training and socio-emotional best practices.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study focused on teacher, counselor, and administrator perceptions regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. The results indicated the educators had varying opinions and experiences associated with the socio-emotional preparation of students. Results also indicated teachers desired additional professional learning on targeted practices to help with the implementation of SEL and CD strategies. Teachers also indicated time was a considerable barrier to implementing SEL and CD initiatives while also needing to prioritize instructional time with academic content.

Educational leaders and policymakers could use the results of this study to identify and resolve the educators' perceived obstacles to integrating socio-emotional strategies into daily practice. One implication is a need for consistent understanding among educators of student

socio-emotional development. The second implication is a need for professional learning to provide a pool of strategies for educators to support the integration of SEL and CD strategies. Future research focused on a broader sample of schools and the inclusion of student perceptions as well as student academic achievement could provide additional information to educational leaders and policymakers to inform the continuous work of developing and implementing effective SEL and CD reform.

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Appendix A

Request to Conduct Research

January 24, 2022

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]:

My name is Doug Knott, and I am a doctoral candidate at American College of Education (ACE) writing to request permission to conduct research. This information will be used for my dissertation research related to educator perceptions of student social-emotional preparation for middle school transition: A qualitative study. The purpose of the qualitative study will be to investigate fifth- and sixth-grade educators' perceptions regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. My research will involve a target population of 138 educators in two elementary schools and one middle school which are included in the study. Questionnaires will be administered to 11 fifth-grade teachers from the elementary schools and 12 sixth-grade teachers from the middle school where the students matriculate. Questionnaires will also be sent to nine administrators and seven counselors employed by the three schools in the study. A total of 39 questionnaires will be distributed simultaneously to the purposive sample. After questionnaires are complete, a minimum of 15 educators will be selected from this group to participate in interviews. The group to be interviewed will be selected using purposive sampling to include a minimum of two fifth- and two sixth-grade teachers, one counselor, and one administrator from each of the three schools.

Important Contacts for this study include:

Principal Investigator: Doug Knott
E-mail: [REDACTED]
Phone: [REDACTED]

Dissertation Chair: Milton Harris
E-mail: [REDACTED]

Thank you for your attention to this issue and prompt response. I appreciate your time and consideration of my request.

Regards,

[REDACTED]

Doug Knott

Appendix B

Request for Permission to Conduct Research - Principal's Approval

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name: Doug Knott

CCSD Employee: YES [ ]   NO [✔] If NO, list employer: retired Georgia educator

Position or Grade: _____   School: _____

Research Title: Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School Trans

Reason for doing this research:

Graduate Study/Level: Leadership/Doctoral   University/College: American College of Education

Publication/Presentation: ACE Defense 01/2023   Journal/Conference: _____

Other (please specify): _____

Include with this request:

➤ A letter from your supervising professor on college or university letterhead indicating support for your research and his/her confirmation of data collection validity. You may include IRB approvals as applicable.

➤ A brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct.

➤ Method of data collection assessment; Number of respondents, etc.

➤ Participant consent forms must be included if data will be collected on individual students, parents and/or staff.

➤ Copy of interview questions, surveys, etc., that will be used.

➤ If student data is analyzed and/or used, a notarized "Release of Educational Records for Research Purposes Confidentiality Statement" will be required.

I, Doug Knott _____ do hereby submit to not hold the ██████████████ liable for any findings, or commentary involved in this research. I understand that without the express written permission of the ██████████████, I am not authorized to conduct any data collection involving district employees or students and/or any other information that is protected by Federal or State Law. Furthermore, a copy of all finding and data collection instruments will be made available to the ██████████████ as requested. All research is to be sent to the Research Services Department upon completion of the project.

Signature: Douglas W. Knott   Digitally signed by Douglas W. Knott Date: 2022.06.25 12:10:01 -04'00'   Date: 6/25/2022

Signature of Principal (if applicable ██████████████   Date: 6/25/2022

Send request to: ██████████████

███████████████████████████████████

████████████████████████

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name: Doug Knott

CCSD Employee: YES ☐ NO ☑ If NO, list employer: retired Georgia educator

Position or Grade: _____ School: _____

Research Title: Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School Trans

Reason for doing this research:

Graduate Study/Level: Leadership/Doctoral   University/College: American College of Education

Publication/Presentation: ACE Defense 01/2023   Journal/Conference: _____

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I, Doug Knott _____ do hereby submit to not hold the ████████████████ liable for any findings, or commentary involved in this research. I understand that without the express written permission of the ████████████████████████, I am not authorized to conduct any data collection involving district employees or students and/or any other information that is protected by Federal or State Law. **Furthermore, a copy of all finding and data collection instruments will be made available to the** ██████████████████ **as requested. All research is to be sent to the Research Services Department upon completion of the project.**

Signature: Douglas W. Knott   Digitally signed by Douglas W. Knott Date: 2022.06.25 12:10:01 -04'00'   Date: 6/25/2022

Signature of Principal (if applicable ████████████   Date: 6/29/22

Send request to: ████████████████████████████

▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name: Doug Knott _____

CCSD Employee: YES [ ] NO [✓] If NO, list employer: retired Georgia educator _____

Position or Grade: _____ School: _____

Research Title: Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School Trans[+]

Reason for doing this research:

Graduate Study/Level: Leadership/Doctoral _____ University/College: American College of Education _____

Publication/Presentation: ACE Defense 01/2023 Journal/Conference: _____

Other (please specify): _____

Include with this request:

➢ A letter from your supervising professor on college or university letterhead indicating support for your research and his/her confirmation of data collection validity. You may include IRB approvals as applicable.

➢ A brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct.

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Signature: Douglas W. Knott   Digitally signed by Douglas W. Knott
Date: 2022.06.25 12:10:01 -04'00'   Date: 6/25/2022 _____

Signature of Principal (if applicable) ▅▅▅▅▅▅▅   Date: 6/29/2022 _____

Send request to: ▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅▅

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear (Insert name of the educator)

My name is Doug Knott, and I am conducting research in partial fulfillment of my Doctorate in education at the American College of Education (ACE). My research will center on educator perceptions of student social-emotional preparation for middle school transition. I am focusing on grades five and six teachers, administrators, and counselors in order to gain a wider viewpoint of how staff members feel about the socio-emotional strengths and gaps students demonstrate as they transition to the middle school.

Your participation in this research includes the following activities:
- Complete an online questionnaire using Microsoft Forms. 15-30 minutes.
- An optional Study Participation meeting conducted through Microsoft Teams, (Insert date/time)

After completion of the questionnaire, some participants may be contacted to complete an interview:
- If selected to participate, one (1) forty-five to sixty (45-60)-minute semi structured interview which will take place during a time of your choosing using Microsoft Teams video conference.
- If selected to participate in an interview, a Microsoft Bookings invitation will be sent so you can set-up a time and date which works best with your schedule.
- After the interview, you will have an opportunity to review a transcript to determine accuracy.

If you agree to participate, I will need you to return a signed consent form (attached). Once study participants have returned informed consent, another e-mail will be sent with a link to the questionnaire. Please be aware all information shared will be kept completely confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned to all participants to safeguard all identities and responses. Your responses during the study will only be shared with my dissertation chair and my dissertation review committee. The ACE Internal Review Board may also review the transcripts.

You may terminate your participation in this study at any time without the need to provide explanation.

The hope is this research will inform school and district leaders, as well as professional development specialists, regarding the best practices which can support students as they transition from elementary to middle school. Please consider participating in this important work as your views will help to inform and support students as they navigate one of the most significant school transitions in their school career.

Because my dissertation process is on a tight timeline, I would appreciate a response to my request in 7 calendar days. I encourage you to join me on (date/time) through the following link (add link to optional Team's meeting) to our optional Team's Study Participation meeting, where I can answer any questions. If you are unable to participate in the optional Team's meeting, don't hesitate to let me know if I can provide any further information. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. A reminder e-mail will be sent as I know you are all very busy this time of year. I can be reached at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
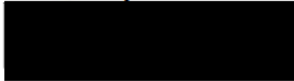
Doug Knott
Doctoral Candidate
American College of Education

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Prospective Research Participant: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at anytime before, during, or after your participation in this research.

Project Information

Project Title: Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School Transition: A Qualitative Study

Researcher: Doug Knott
Organization: American College of Education
Email: ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇   **Telephone:** ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇

Date of IRB Approval: TBD

Please note that this research study has been approved by the American College of Education Institutional Review Board. The IRB approved this study on__(insert date on ACE IRB approval letter). A copy of the approval letter will be provided upon request.

Researcher's Dissertation Chair: Milton Harris
Organization and Position: American College of Education
Email: ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇

Introduction
I am Doug Knott, and I am a doctoral candidate student at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Harris. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. If you have questions, ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, feel free to ask me then.

Purpose of the Research
The purpose of the qualitative study is to investigate fifth- and sixth-grade educators' perceptions regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia. You are being asked to participate in a research study which will assist with understanding the social-emotional needs of students transitioning to middle school. Conducting this qualitative methods study will provide valuable insight into educator perceptions and emerging themes may present to add depth to the current

knowledgebase and assist schools in addressing student social-emotional needs for successful transition to middle school.

Research Design and Procedures

The study will use a qualitative methodology and basic qualitative research design. A questionnaire will be disseminated to specific participants within the ███████ County School District. The study will be comprised of 39 participants, purposively selected, who will be administered the questionnaire through Microsoft Forms. 15 of these participants will be purposively select for an interview. The interview will be 45-60 minutes and conducted through Microsoft Teams video conference.

Participant selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as an educator who works either directly or indirectly with either fifth or sixth grade students and can contribute by sharing your perspective. Participant selection criteria: Full time educator who either serves as a fifth or sixth grade teacher, elementary or middle school counselor, or administrator.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choosenot to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation is voluntary. At any time you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so by sending me an email stating you are opting out of the study. There will be no repercussions for leaving the study.

Procedures

You are being invited to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire (15-30 minutes) and may be asked to answer questions in an interview (45-60 minutes) through Microsoft Teams. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of student social-emotional preparedness for the middle school transition.

Duration

All participants will complete a questionnaire. The time required for questionnaires will be 15-30 minutes. Questionnaires will be conducted online through Microsoft Forms and a link will be sent once the signed consent form is returned. After questionnaires are completed, a portion of participants will be selected to participate in an interview. If selected to interview, you will be asked to provide permission to have the interview recorded for the sake of having accurate transcripts for data. The interview portion of the research study will require approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. The interviews will be conducted through Microsoft Teams on a date and time convenient for the participant.

Risks

The researcher, Doug Knott, may ask you to share personal and confidential information related to the study, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give a reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about student social-emotional needs and how to positively impact their transition to middle school. The potential benefits of this study will aid the education field in understanding student social-emotional preparedness for the middle school transition.

Confidentiality

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted, password protected personal computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information on a password protected personal computer and cloud drive.

Sharing the Results

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Questions About the Study

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact Doug Knott at ████████████████████. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, you may email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given

freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.
Print or type name of lead researcher: Doug Knott

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

**PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR
RECORDS.**

Appendix E

Questionnaire

1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
   a. 0-4 years   b. 5-9 years   c. 10-19 years d. 20 or more years
2. What is your role at your school?
   a. grade 5 teacher b. grade 6 teacher c. counselor d. administrator
3. Which school do you work at currently?
   a. Liberty Elementary   b. Sixes Elementary   c. Freedom Middle School
4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition into middle school?
8. What, if any, explicit (formalized) program or teaching method is used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program or method is presented to students and how consistently the program or method is used?
9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used and how often?
10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?
11. Do you feel prepared as an educator to support student social-emotional learning? Why or why not?

Appendix F

Interview Questions and Script

Introduction: I would like to thank you again for completing the questionnaire and your willingness to participate in this interview. As I mentioned before you completed the questionnaire, my study seeks to better understand teacher perceptions of student social-emotional preparation for the transition to middle school.

In our interview today, questions will be asked about the information you shared when completing the questionnaire. My goal is to provide you the opportunity to expand on those responses to better support your perceptions on student social-emotional preparation for the transition to middle school. You have previously provided consent to record today's video conversation. Are you still comfortable with recording today's conversation?

If yes: Thank you! If at any point you want to stop recording or keep something you said off the record, please feel free to let me know. At this time, I will begin the recording.
If no: Thank you for letting me know, I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, can I answer any questions for you? If any questions (or other questions) arise at any time during the interview, please feel comfortable asking. Let's begin…
1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
2. What is your role at your school, be specific (teacher, counselor, administrator)?
3. Which school do you work at currently?
4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition into middle school?
8. What, if any, explicit (formalized) program or teaching method is used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program or method is presented to students and how consistently the program or method is used?
9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used?
10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?
11. Do you feel prepared as an educator to support student social-emotional learning? Why or why not?
    *Clarification questions will be used based on participants' responses

Closing: Before we close this interview, is there any other information you would like to share? (Allow participant to respond and move conversation forward to gain more insight if additional information is shared, if not, move to close the interview)

Thank you again for taking the time to share your perceptions and support my study. Once I have our conversation transcribed, I will share a copy for you to review for accuracy on your comments.

Appendix G

Request and Feedback - Subject Matter Experts on Interview and Questionnaire Questions

From: ███████████████████████████████████

Sent: Saturday, February 5, 2022 3:38 PM

To: Douglas Knott <███████████████████████>

Subject: Re: FW: D.Knott - Dissertation support

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

I have made a few mechanical and format changes to the document, as bolded in the text below, for your consideration and review.
I have reviewed your interview and research questions, and these align with the purpose of your study.
If you need any further assistance or information, please let me know. Good luck to you in completing your doctoral study.

Sincerely,

███████████████████████

On Sat, Feb 5, 2022, at 1:29 PM Douglas Knott <███████████████████████> wrote:
Hello ████████

Below you will find questions I have designed for interviews and questionnaires to support my doctoral research. These questions were designed to align with the purpose of my study and my two research questions (see below). I would greatly appreciate your feedback regarding these questions.
The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate fifth- and sixth-grade educators' perceptions regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia.

The following research questions will guide the study:
Research Question One: What are the perceptions of fifth and sixth grade teachers, counselors, and administrators who are working in suburban schools in Georgia, as to the socio-emotional preparedness or acquired skill-sets of students transitioning to middle school?
Research Question Two: What are the implemented strategies, as perceived by fifth and sixth grade teachers, counselors, and administrators working in suburban schools in Georgia, that socio-emotionally prepare or have an impact on students for transitioning to middle school?
 Please review the below questions:
 Interview Questions
1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
2. What is your role at your school, be specific (**teacher, counselor, administrator**)?
3. Which school do you work at currently?
4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school?
8. What, if any, explicit (**formalized**) program **or teaching method is** used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this **program or method is presented to students and how consistently the program or method is used?**
9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used **and how often**?
10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?
 Questionnaire
1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
a. 0-4 years   b. 5-9 years   c. 10-19 years d. 20 or more years
2. What is your role at your school?
a. grade 5 teacher b. grade 6 teacher c. counselor d. administrator
3. Which school do you work at currently?
a. Liberty Elementary   b. Sixes Elementary   c. Freedom Middle School
4. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
5. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
7. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school?
8. What, if any, explicit (**formalized**) program **or teaching method is** used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this **program or method is presented to students** and **how consistently the program or method is used?**
9. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used **and how often**?
10. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?
Thank you in advance for your review and feedback!

Doug Knott

Doctoral Candidate
American College of Education

From: █████████████████████
Sent: Saturday, February 5, 2022 4:04 PM
To: Douglas Knott <███████████████>
Subject: RE: D.Knott - Dissertation support

Doug,

    This is a very thorough list of questions. The only recommendation I will offer is to include a question or two about the individual's level of training for preparing students in their social-emotional well-being as they enter middle school. It might help to know if they feel they have adequate training to support the students. Just food for thought. Well done and please let me know how else I can be of service!

Sincerely,

████████████████████

████████████████████

████████████████████

From: █████████████████████
Sent: Saturday, February 5, 2022 1:35 PM
To: Douglas Knott <███████████████>
Subject: Re: D.Knott - Dissertation support

Mr. Knott,

Thank you for your email.

 Your questions align well with your research purpose and questions. Please make sure you share your finding with us. It is a great study that can befit our district.

█████████████████████████

From: █████████████████████
Sent: Sunday, February 6, 2022 2:26 PM
To: Douglas Knott <███████████████████>
Subject: Re: D.Knott - Dissertation Support

Please be cautious
This email originated from outside of ACE organization

Hi Doug.

I am happy to review the questions below. My feedback is in **blue font** below. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to email/text/call.

Best of luck finishing your dissertation and congrats!

███████████████████████

From: Douglas Knott <​███████████████████​>
Sent: Saturday, February 5, 2022 3:46 PM
To:███████████████████
Subject: D.Knott - Dissertation Support

Hello ████

Below you will find questions I have designed for interviews and questionnaires to support my doctoral research. These questions were designed to align with the purpose of my study and my two research questions (see below). **Did you create these questions? Or have they been used in similar research?** I would greatly appreciate your feedback regarding these questions.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate fifth- and sixth-grade educators' perceptions regarding components of social-emotional preparedness of students transitioning to a large suburban middle school in the state of Georgia.

The following research questions will guide the study:
Research Question One: What are the perceptions of socio-emotional student preparedness for transition to middle school of fifth and sixth grade teachers at a suburban middle school in Georgia?
Research Question Two: What are the perceived strategies for socio-emotionally preparing students for transition to middle school of fifth and sixth grade teachers at a suburban middle school in Georgia?

Please review the below questions:

Interview Questions

1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
2. What is your role at your school, be specific - **content, grade, etc.?**
3. Which school do you work at currently?
4. **What social-emotional skills do you feel students develop during their elementary school years?**
5. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?
7. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
8. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school?
9. What, if any, explicit program are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program(s) is used?
10. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used?
11. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?

Questionnaire

1. How many years of experience do you have as a K-12 educator?
   a. 0-4 years   b. 5-9 years   c. 10-19 years d. 20 or more years
2. What is your role at your school? **(Did you want to include paraprofessionals?)**
   a. grade 5 teacher b. grade 6 teacher c. counselor d. administrator
3. Which school do you work at currently?
   a. Liberty Elementary   b. Sixes Elementary   c. Freedom Middle School
4. **What social-emotional skills do you feel students develop during their elementary school years?**
5. What social-emotional skills do students need to effectively transition into middle school?
6. What social-emotional skills do you feel students possess as they transition into middle school?

7. What social-emotional skills do you feel students lack as they transition into middle school?
8. What strategies are used to develop social-emotional skills which help students transition to middle school?
9. What, if any, explicit program are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how this program(s) is used?
10. What other practices are used to support social-emotional learning at your school? Explain how these practices are used?
11. What factor(s) influence student socio-emotional preparedness?

Thank you in advance for your review and feedback!

It looks great Doug. I included the following question: What social-emotional skills do you feel students develop during their elementary school years? It may be something to want to determine from the adult.

Doug Knott

Doctoral Candidate
American College of Education

From: ████████████████████████████
Sent: Sunday, February 6, 2022 5:45 PM
To: Douglas Knott < ██████████████████████████ >
Subject: Research

Doug,
Impressive work displayed here. Your questionnaire aligns perfectly to your research questions. I look forward to reading your dissertation in its entirety. In this day and time, there's no better topic to study than social and emotional learning, especially for students transitioning to middle school. Thanks for sharing with me.

███████████
██████████████████
█████████

Get Outlook for iOS

Appendix H

█████ **Site Permission Letter**

██████████

██████████

02/18/2022

Dear Mr. Knott,

The ███████████████████████ Office of Research has reviewed your preliminary research proposal. It has been determined that the project is of value to the school district's strategic plan and will be approved after your IRB from your University is completed. Once your IRB is received by the district, we will allow your research to move forward at your three requested schools.

Please note any changes to your methodology or protocols must be submitted in writing to the Office of Research before implementing any change(s). Additionally, any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported as an addendum to your application.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

██████████

Appendix I

American College of Education Institutional Review Board Approval

AMERICAN COLLEGE of EDUCATION

July 13, 2022

To : Douglas Knott
    Milton Harris, Dissertation Committee Chair

From : Institutional Review Board
    American College of Education

Re: IRB Approval

"Educator Perceptions of Student Social-Emotional Preparation for Middle School Transition"

The American College of Education IRB has reviewed your application, proposal, and any related materials. We have determined that your research provides sufficient protection of human subjects.

Your research is therefore approved to proceed. The expiration date for this IRB approval is one year from the date of review completion, July 13, 2023. If you would like to continue your research beyond this point, including data collection and/or analysis of private data, you must submit a renewal request to the IRB.

Candidates are prohibited from collecting data or interacting with participants if they are not actively enrolled in a dissertation sequence course (RES6521, RES6531, RES6541, RES6551, RES6561, RES6302) and under the supervision of their dissertation chair.

Our best to you as you continue your studies.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Hamlett
Chair, Institutional Review Board
American College of Education