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The Social Emotional Competence of Teachers and Their Responses to Children with Challenging Behaviors

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Abstract

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MA, Ashford University, 2012

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Expulsion rates for children occur at a rate of 10 children per every 1,000 enrolled in center-based early learning programs. The inability of teachers to manage the challenging behaviors of children contributes to these rates. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to answer the research question that inquired how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's social emotional learning framework served as the foundation for the interview protocol questions. Data were gathered during semistructured interview from 6 teachers who met the participant criteria and analyzed using a thematic and inductive approach. The inclusion criteria included teachers with at least 1 year of experience working with children ages 2-5 years, and who have at least 12 units of early childhood education or a bachelor's degree. Results indicated discrepancies in participants' perceptions of their self-confidence with variances between their professional and personal lives. In their responses to the scenarios that illustrated challenging behaviors, participants emphasized the importance of respecting the rights of children and understanding the underlying factors that contributed to those behaviors. Findings suggest the need for a more hands-on approach to better support teachers' efforts in managing challenging behaviors in children, which in turn can potentially reduce the number of preschool expulsions in center-based programs. Results promoted positive social change by extending our understanding of the influence of the teacher-child relationship on the behaviors of children, specifically challenging behaviors.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to my children, Shannen, Emma, Jake, and my daughter-in-law, Jennifer. You are and will always be the brightest stars in my sky. You are my inspiration, my strength, and my heart. I dedicate this to my sister Jennifer, who is about to write a new chapter in the story of her life and is the strongest, most beautiful woman I will ever know. Sunnyside up, darlin'! To my sister, Anna, who shares my greatest love and my greatest sorrow, one that ultimately enabled us to find our way to each other. To my brother, Tommy, I so wish things could have been different. We could have been amazing friends, I think. To my Mom, because you always wanted to call me "doctor." I also dedicate this to my Grandma Jessie, a woman of beauty, grace, and strength, and the first person who truly believed in me. To my best friends, Cindy, because I could never get through this thing called life without either one of you; and to Jane, I cherish all those moments spent laughin' laughin' with you, my friend. I also dedicate this to JM, whose music saved me on more than one occasion and is the philosophy by which I live my life every day. I also dedicate this to DG, whose music accompanied just about every single word of this dissertation. And of course, to George Bailey, the best dog ever. Luckily, the heart is big enough to love more than one dog; there will never be another George Bailey, but there can be a Lucy.

And finally, I dedicate this to my Dad, whose words of wisdom I try to live by every day. He would always say, "Be good, be kind, and love each other, because you know, Christine, life is short." I miss you.

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I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who inspired me over the past thirty years. I would not be the professional I am today without you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In a recent study, Zinsser, Zulauf, Das, and Silver (2019) found that the decision to expel a child from a preschool program was predicated on several factors, including the child's behavior, administrative support, classroom resources, and the teacher's ability to manage the child's challenging behavior. Such disciplinary actions in an early care setting perpetuated the *school-to-prison pipeline* earlier than previously thought due to the long-term, adverse effects of preschool expulsion (Zinsser et al., 2019). In private center-based preschool programs, expulsion rates occurred at a rate of 10 expulsions per 1,000 children enrolled and exceeded those of K-12 school settings behavior (Zinsser et al., 2019). Preschoolers were less likely to be expelled from early care programs when teacher-child ratios were low, children spent fewer hours in care, and mental health consultants were used as classroom support, while efforts in decreased preschool expulsion rates were better supported when children and teachers engaged in universal strategies that promoted social emotional learning (Zinsser et al., 2019).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined social emotional learning as a set of competencies that included self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making, acquired through social interactions between teachers, peers, and parents (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). Classroom environments more conducive to children's learning were more effective when children were supported by social emotional learning that facilitated the skills and competencies that enabled children to manage their emotions, focus their attention, engage in successful relationships, persist

through adversity, problem solve, and learn from and apply academic content (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Further, children with strong social emotional competencies were more likely to attend and graduate from college, experienced greater career success, more positive peer and family relationships, better mental and physical health, reduced criminal behavior, and became more engaged citizens (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Social emotional learning competencies that were age-appropriate for preschoolers better prepared children for greater success in social and cognitive development, preacademic achievement, school readiness, and overall adjustment to school, which in turn, contributed to school retention (Zinsser et al., 2019). High-quality early learning programs that intentionally focused on social emotional development showed a positive correlation to academic achievement and positive behavioral outcomes for children (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Children with stronger social emotional competencies showed increases in executive functioning, self-efficacy, persistence, prosocial behavior, grades, and standardized test scores (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Findings in Zinsser et al.'s (2019) study included the assertion that the facilitation of social emotional development and learning for children required teachers to promote the social emotional skills of children, yet teacher preparedness to meet these requirements was inconsistent and inadequately supported. Teachers who were less emotionally competent have students who have greater problem behaviors and poorer attention skills (Zinsser et al., 2019). The authors further reported that while the implementation of social emotional learning supports for teachers reduced the incidences of expulsion requests, the effects of those supports were mediated by the stress

experienced by teachers. Stress inhibited the ability of teachers to provide emotionally supportive classroom environments (Zinsser et al., 2019). Higher levels of stress for teachers correlate to higher expulsion rates for preschool age children (Zinsser et al., 2019). While social emotional learning supports do not directly mitigate preschool expulsion rates, the effects of such supports show a reduction of stress experienced by teachers (Zinsser et al., 2019). Lower levels of stress experienced by teachers result in a decrease of the number of requests for the expulsion of children from preschool programs (Zinsser et al., 2019). The feelings of teachers while working in a preschool classroom influence their perceptions of children's behavior and their ability to successfully manage that behavior (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Social emotional learning instruction and support for children are interrelated with the teacher's social emotional competence and well-being and together promote a positive classroom environment and effective behavior management but have yet been applied to the process of decision making teachers use in the instruction and support of social emotional learning for children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

This focus of this study was the development of a deeper understanding of how a teacher's perception of their own social emotional competence influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors. In Chapter 1, I introduce and contextualize the study through an exploration of the study's background, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, the conceptual framework, and nature of the study. I briefly review the nature of the study, provide definitions, and review the study's assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. The chapter concludes with the

significance of the study to the field of early childhood education, social change, and a short summary of the study.

Background

The optimal time to identify and address any early signs of behavioral difficulties in children before they develop into more permanent patterns of behavior that inhibit academic and social success is during the early childhood years (Poulou, 2017). The process of emotion socialization, primarily viewed as the responsibility of parents, significantly predicted the social-emotional development of children (Papadopoulou et al., 2014; Seçer& Karabulut, 2016). The modeled parental behaviors of emotion expression and emotion coaching influenced the social behaviors of children, specifically a child's self-regulation skills, social behaviors, and the frequency of expressed aggressive behaviors (O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr, Luo, & Romm, 2017d). Further, children who participated in preschool programs that implemented social emotional learning developed emotion knowledge, the ability to express and self-regulate their emotions, and were viewed as more socially competent and capable of developing stronger relationships with teachers and peers (Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014). Children with challenges in acquiring such skills displayed more frequent feelings of negativity and emotional outbursts, a lack of focus, and subsequently exhibited more challenging behaviors, those behaviors, however, were mitigated by teachers' reactions to those emotions and positive teacher-child relationships (Bassett, et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2014). Teachers who reported feeling ill-equipped to manage challenging behaviors experienced higher stress levels and more frequent negative interactions with children

and less tolerance and fewer interventions for those behaviors, which resulted in a more negative classroom climate and a higher frequency of challenging behaviors in children (Jeon, Buettner, Grant, & Lang, 2019). Teachers with strong social emotional competence were better equipped to understand the role of emotions in children's behavior, respond to the emotional needs of children, and created a more positive classroom environment conducive to the social emotional instruction and support for children (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017). Current research provided evidence that teachers trained in emotional competence are better equipped to effectively meet the emotional needs of children (Ulloa, Evans, & Jones, 2016). The interrelated characteristics of empathy and self-efficacy contributed to the overall social emotional competence of teachers; teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy were better able to regulate their own emotions and manage challenging behaviors in children and a strong sense of empathy enabled teachers to have a better understanding of the emotions of children and were better able to predict the how a child expressed their emotions (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). Researchers have shown that teachers with a more moderately supportive approach to the emotions of children could benefit with greater knowledge around emotions, the ability to discern which emotions to express, and the self-regulation of those emotions (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015).

Limited research exists, however, on the beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions of teachers toward specific social behaviors of children (Coplan, Bullock, Archbell, & Bosacki, 2015). Further research is needed on the emotional competence and self-awareness of teachers to enable teachers to respond to the emotions of young

children more effectively (Ulloa et al., 2016). Further attention is also needed to better understand how teachers' beliefs about emotions and their perception of those emotions are related to a higher quality of emotional support behaviors and the learning outcomes for children (Zinsser et al., 2014). These gaps in the current research highlight the need for further research on the beliefs of teachers as related to their own emotional competence and its influence on their relationships with children and their behaviors, particularly for children who exhibit challenging behaviors, so as to mitigate the effects of those behaviors on future academic and social success.

Problem Statement

Preschool expulsion rates exceed the expulsion rates of children in grades K-12, with rates for center-based preschool programs ranging higher at 10 expulsions per every 1,000 children enrolled (Zinsser et al., 2019). Factors of preschool expulsion include the child's behavior, the support received from administrators, availability of classroom resources, and the ability of teachers to manage challenging behaviors (Zinsser et al., 2019). Smith and Fox (2003) defined challenging behavior as repeated patterns of disruptive behavior that interferes with the child's learning or engagement in positive relationships with peers and adults. The problem, as demonstrated by the following research, was described as a need for more in-depth of focus on the relationship between teacher and child, specifically, the social-emotional competence of teachers and its influence on children with challenging behaviors. To better understand the dynamic between teachers and their relationships with children, current researchers recommended

research of (a) the social-emotional competence of teachers and their contribution to the quality of the relationship between teachers and children; (b) its influence on social emotional learning for children and classroom behavior, particularly children with challenging behaviors; and (c) more specifically, that a decrease of behavioral and emotional challenges in children is reliant upon the relationship between the child and the teacher (Bassett et al., 2016; Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Jennings 2014; Poulou, 2017).

McLeod et al. (2016) identified common components of teaching practice designed to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children. McLeod et al. catalogued 14 items deemed essential in early childhood settings: choices, emotion regulation, error correction, ignoring, constructive feedback, modeling, opportunities to respond, praise premack statements, problem solving, promoting behavioral competence, promoting teacher-child relationships, scaffolding, and social. Each of these teaching practices that intended to improve a child's social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes begin with the responses of teachers to a child's actions and behaviors. If the quality of the relationship between the child and teacher, as stated above, informed behavior, this illustrates the significance of a study that examines teachers' responses to children with challenging behaviors.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. To further inform the growing body of research, I used a basic qualitative approach using teachers who work in one childcare center at a local university campus.

Research Question

RQ1: How do teachers' perceptions of their social emotional competence influence their responses to children with challenging behaviors?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on social emotional learning framework as defined by CASEL to encompass the skills and abilities of teachers concerning self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (CASEL, 2020). The research question was designed to determine how the perceptions of teachers' own social emotional competence influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors and the study was grounded in the relevant constructs of social emotional competence to provide a better understanding of that influence. The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

CASEL (2020) identified five core competencies of the social emotional learning framework as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The self-awareness competency is identified through characteristics such as identifying emotions, self-perception that represents the true self, the ability to recognize strengths and limitations, and a sense of optimism and self-efficacy and defined as the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and their influence on one's own behavior. The self-management competency is identified through characteristics such as the ability to regulate emotions and control

impulses, manage stress, set goals, and self-motivation and is defined as the ability to regulate emotions under different circumstances. The social-awareness competency is identified through characteristics such as the ability to empathize and take the perspective of others, with respect for those from diverse cultures and backgrounds and defined as the ability to understand behavioral social norms with respect to culture and diversity. The relationship skills competency is identified through the ability to build relationships, work as a team, and utilize effective communication skills and is defined as the ability to build and sustain healthy relationships, including the ability to resolve conflicts successfully. The responsible decision making competency is defined as the ability to identify, analyze, solve, evaluate, and reflect on problems with a focus on ethical responsibility and is defined as the ability to interact on a personal and social level with a focus on ethical standards, social norms, and the consideration of consequences of choices and actions for one's own self and others. In Chapter 2 I explored the components of social emotional learning in greater detail.

Semistructured interview questions were designed based on CASEL's five core competencies and specifically, the characteristics of each competency to gain a deeper understanding of teacher's perspectives of their own emotional competence as related to those competencies. The second portion of the interview questions was designed to explore teacher's responses to four scenarios presenting children with challenging behaviors. The data were analyzed through an inductive coding process, initially read and notated as to my thoughts on the teachers' interview responses, and as patterns emerged, were categorized, and analyzed (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The outcome of the

inductive coding process, categorization, and analysis resulted in themes within that data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Themes that emerged were linked to integrate CASEL's conceptual framework of social emotional competence. The development of the resulting theories was informed by the data collected from the results of interviews with teachers regarding their perceptions of their own social emotional competence and the results of the interviews that examined their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a basic qualitative approach. Qualitative research was consistent with direct interaction with participants in the field and examined through the interview process, teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and their responses to scenarios of children with challenging behaviors. The study used a bottom-up approach to develop a complex picture of the problem (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For the purposes of this research, I used a basic qualitative approach and analyzed the results of the interviews conducted with teachers until saturation was reached.

Definitions

Challenging Behaviors: Challenging behavior is defined as repeated patterns of behavior that interfere with learning or engagement in positive relationships with peers and adults (Smith & Fox, 2003).

Early Childhood Education (ECE): A term that refers to educational programs and strategies for children at the most crucial stage of development, from birth to the age of eight (Lewis, 2019).

Emotional Efficacy: Emotional self-efficacy refers to one's perception of their own ability to process emotion and is considered a significant factor in influencing emotional state and performance accurately and effectively (Goroshit & Hen, 2016).

Emotional Intelligence (EI): Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000)

Emotion Socialization: Within their own cultural norms, intentional strategies utilized by parents, such as modelling, contingency, and teaching, to promote the emotional competence of their children (Ornaghi, Agliata, Pepe, & Gabola, 2020).

Empathy: Empathy is defined as the ability to identify the thoughts and emotions of other, and respond with appropriate emotional responses, thereby enabling teachers to understand and predict the behavior of children (Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Self-Efficacy: Self-efficacy is the perception of teachers' in their ability to manage feelings, thoughts, and challenges as to whether teachers can successfully execute the responsibilities of their job (Sahin, 2017).

Social Emotional Competence: Social-emotional competence encompasses the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive competencies of teachers concerning self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (What is SEL? Core SEL Competencies, 2020).

Social Emotional Development: A child's ability to identify and understand one's own feelings, to accurately read and comprehend emotions in others, to manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner, to regulate one's own behavior, to develop empathy for others, and to establish and maintain strong relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL): The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy toward others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (What is SEL? Core SEL Competencies, 2020).

Teacher Child Engagement: The interactions between teachers and children that provide opportunities to build positive relationships (Ostrosky, M., & Jung, F., n.d.).

Assumptions

This study was based on several assumptions, particularly the educational parameters of the selection criteria that required teachers to have at least 12 units in child development, or a bachelor's degree in child development, and at least 1 year of experience in an early learning setting for children birth to 8 years of age. The assumption of basic qualifications for teachers illustrated the belief that teachers possessed the educational background that suggested possession of a body of knowledge that included an understanding of child development, particularly the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional needs of children, an understanding of teaching and learning philosophies, and an understanding of the significance of the teacher-child relationship, particularly when engaged with children with challenging behaviors. The assumptions

were necessary to provide me with a belief that teachers understood the social-emotional needs of children and had the ability to respond to and implement effective behavior management strategies to meet the social-emotional and learning needs of children with challenging behaviors. As the study focused on teachers' responses to children with challenging behaviors, the assumptions ensured that teachers have had rich experience in responding to and managing the behaviors of children who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom setting.

I further assumed the integrity of teachers' perceptions of their social emotional competence when participating in their responses to the interview questions. I assumed teachers were capable of reflecting on their perceptions of their own self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making skills, as those capabilities were explored through the interview process developed to assess their perceptions of their own social emotional competence. I also assumed the integrity of teachers' responses to the scenarios that describe children with challenging behaviors accurately reflected their responses to children with challenging behaviors in a classroom setting. The assumption of integrity was necessary to ensure the quality of data collected during the study. As the study focused on children with challenging behaviors, I assumed that teachers had the capability to define challenging behaviors as outlined in this study and distinguish those behaviors from typical child behaviors in the classroom setting. The assumptions were necessary to ensure the data aligns with the scope of research presented in this study.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the research problem was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to the high rate of children expelled from center-based preschool programs. Preschool expulsion rates occur at a higher rate than those of children in K-12, at 10 children expelled per every 1,000 children enrolled; rates of preschool expulsion are mitigated by factors such as the child's behavior, administrative support, classroom resources, and the teacher's ability to manage the child's challenging behavior (Zinsser et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. Participant criterion included selection of teachers with at least t12units of early childhood education courses or a bachelor's degree and at least 1 year of experience working with children aged 2-5 years of age. The delimitations of the study were bound by the parameters of the educational background and experience of teachers chosen for the study, and suggested a body of knowledge and experience that included an understanding of child development, particularly the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional needs of children, an understanding of teaching and learning philosophies, and an understanding of the significance of the teacher-child relationship, particularly when engaged with children with challenging behaviors. Teachers who did not meet the participant criteria were excluded from the study, as the lack of education and experience suggested such participants would not provide information relevant to the study.

The results of qualitative research are transferable when the researcher can present a thick, rich description in which the setting, the participants, and themes were

described in rich detail such that the reader could review the narrative account and envisioned themselves within the experiences described within the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I included as much detail as possible about the participants, the relationship as it developed between myself and each participant during data collection, and in the description of the narrative derived from the data analysis to illuminate the relationships and interactions within the research process (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, to establish transferability, I created a thick description of the teachers to illustrate not just the behavior and experience of the participants, but their context so the behaviors and experiences were meaningful to the outside reader (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The descriptive data provided information for each participant in a table format (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, I created a thick, rich description of the data collection and analysis process, as well as the study's findings.

As the researcher, I reflected on my own biases of my perceptions of the relationship between the social emotional competence of teachers and their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The source of my curiosity of the social emotional competence of teachers and how it might influence their responses to children with challenging behaviors began with a single observation of a teacher harshly shaming a child for their behavior. In that moment, I wondered about the emotional competence of this teacher and drew the conclusion that she might not be emotionally competent, as I perceived this to be true as evidenced by her response to this child's behavior. This observation, along with countless other similar observations, contributed to my

assumption that teachers with a higher measure of social emotional competence had more emotionally responsive interactions, specifically their verbal responses, when engaged with children with challenging behaviors. I actively worked to temper that bias with careful reflection on past and present experiences with teachers who engage in positive verbal exchanges with children who exhibit challenging behaviors which suggest a higher measure of social emotional competence, but who also had other challenges that included difficulties in their relationships with other teachers and supervisors, or in their personal lives, which suggested a lower measure of social emotional competence. The disparity of those observations helped maintain objectivity throughout this study and enabled me to focus on the findings of the study to inform my beliefs. The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. I did not intend to cover populations of teachers outside of the ECE field; study participants included qualified teachers currently working in the ECE classroom with children aged 2-5 years of age. In an effort to ascertain how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors, participant criterion included selection of teachers with at least 12 units of early childhood education courses or a bachelor's degree and at least 1 year of experience working with children aged 2-5 years of age. This criteria supported the assumptions of the study, such that teachers understand child development, the significance of the relationship between teacher and child as it pertains to the child's social emotional development, and their own role in the learning process for children. The expanse of this inclusion criteria therefore helped

illustrate the differences in the social emotional competencies of teachers. Those potential differences in competencies can therefore identify potential gaps in teacher training and professional development for ECE teachers around social emotional competence and its role in the development of social-emotional learning for children. In the interviews, scenarios of children who did not exhibit challenging behaviors were not explored as part of this study and limited the scope of the study to a specific population of children and did not explore the influence of teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and their responses to children who do not exhibit challenging behaviors.

Limitations

Due to the pandemic and the shelter-in-place mandate, the interviews were conducted virtually, and this limited the observation and interpretation of the finer nuances of nonverbal communication. Limitations of the study included the interview process as the method of data collection. While the scope of the study was to better understand the perceptions of each participant on how their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors, the data were collected through each participant's unique lens. Data collected through an interview process is limited because the information was given through the perspective of the participants and each participant may not have been able to effectively articulate their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To establish reliability and validity of the interview process I conducted a pilot interview to better assess the ability of teachers to provide in-depth answers to the questions asked and to avoid asking leading questions designed to garner responses to support the study. I took notes during each interview

rather than relying solely upon the recording of each interview and gave each participant the opportunity to summarize and clarify points made during the interview to better assure accuracy of their responses (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Significance

Expulsion rates in center-based preschool programs exceed those of children in K-12 school settings and are mitigated by the behavior of the child, the administrative support available to teachers, classroom resources, and the ability of teachers to manage children's challenging behavior (Zinsser et al., 2019). The current body of research suggested the need for further study on the social emotional competence of teachers and its influence on the social emotional learning of children with challenging behaviors and stated that a decrease of behavioral and emotional challenges in children is reliant upon the relationship between the child and the teacher (Jennings, 2014; Poulou, 2017). This study focused on the aspect of the teacher-child relationship that explores the influence of teachers' social emotional competence and their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The findings of this study led to an increased understanding of how a teacher's social emotional competence influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors and identify aspects of the social emotional competence of teachers where further training could potentially result in more effective interactions and practices when engaging with children with challenging behaviors. Teachers who were better able to manage children with challenging behaviors created a more positive and effective classroom environment, resulting in decreased stress, increased feelings of self-efficacy, decreased incidences of challenging behavior in the classroom, and decreased numbers of

children expelled from preschool classrooms. A decrease in challenging behaviors in children is reliant upon the relationship's teachers share with children (Poulou, 2017). This study added to the growing body of knowledge of the significance of that relationship, specifically the role teacher's play in a child's social emotional learning, specifically their responses to children with challenging behavior. The field of early childhood education has long focused on the social emotional development of children and its role in their development, both socially and academically, while the focus on the social emotional competence of teachers, particularly the interrelationship between the social emotional competence of teachers and how that influences their responses to children with challenging behavior, is an emerging area of study. I sought to further this emerging body of research and promote positive social change by determining how the social emotional competence of teachers influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors and potentially strengthened the teacher-child relationship, and supported the assertion that a decrease in those behaviors was reliant upon the relationship teachers shared with children, particularly those children with challenging behaviors (see Poulou, 2017).

Summary

Social emotional competence for children prepares them for greater cognitive and social development, preacademic achievement, school readiness, and their ability to adjust to the schooling environment, factors that contribute to student retention (Zinsser et al., 2019). As teachers play a significant role in the social emotional development of children through the development of positive, responsive relationships and the ability to

manage the behaviors of children, it is therefore critical to further examine the role of the social emotional competence of teachers who engage with children, particularly children who exhibit challenging behaviors. In examining the components of social emotional competence of teachers, research also suggests the further need for studies involving the development of self-awareness in teachers, as well as the relationship between empathy and self-efficacy in teachers. The outcome of such research can inform future efforts in the training and education of teachers focused on the development of social emotional competence in teachers.

This chapter served as an introduction to the study of the social emotional competence of teachers and its influence on children who exhibit challenging behaviors. This chapter presented the problem statement, purpose and nature of the study, conceptual framework, and definitions. In addition, I reviewed assumptions, limitations, and delimitations inherent to the study. The following chapter includes an overview and synthesis of the current research on social emotional competencies of teachers and its influence on children with challenging behaviors.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The early childhood classroom is most often a child's first experience within a learning environment and the building of relationships between peers and with their teachers. A positive classroom environment promotes the social, academic, and emotional learning of children (Jennings, 2014). One facet of a positive classroom environment is the ability of teachers to manage classroom behavior (Coleman et al., 2012). Teachers are role models of positive social behaviors that help facilitate and guide peer relationships between children and promote social, academic, and emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). With an understanding that the relationship between a child and teacher are influenced by the characteristics of both child and teacher, evidence suggests the quality of that relationship predicts the behavior of children (Williford et al., 2013).

Researchers have examined the significant role of social emotional competence in teachers and its influence on the social emotional learning of children. The subsequent positive impact on the overall development of children, the decrease in challenging behaviors, and facilitation of successful academic achievement for children have also been investigated. However, research on the social emotional competence of teachers and its influence on children with challenging behaviors is scant.

The problem I addressed in this study was the gap in research on the influence of the social emotional competence of teachers and the social emotional learning of children, particularly children with challenging behaviors. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and how it

influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. This chapter helps to contextualize my research by providing an analysis and synthesis of existing research on the social emotional competence of teachers and the challenging behaviors of children, including other significant factors of that relational dynamic such as teacher-child engagement, the role of parents in a child's social emotional learning, the role of empathy and self-efficacy as related to the social emotional competence of teachers, factors that contribute to the stress and potential burnout experienced by teachers, and the need for further training and development for teachers in the area of social emotional competence. Included in the literature review are search strategies employed during the evaluation of the current literature, the conceptual framework of social emotional competence and social emotional learning and concluded with a synthesis of that research to illustrate the need for the study itself.

Literature Search Strategy

An exhaustive literature review was conducted using keyword searches within multiple education and psychology databases that included ERIC, Sage Journals, Taylor and Francis, Education Source, and psycINFO. Keywords used include: *social emotional competence, early childhood education, preschool teachers, emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, emotional self-efficacy, empathy, self-efficacy, social emotional learning, social emotional development, classroom management, children with challenging behaviors, emotion socialization,* and *emotional responsiveness.* Search terms were used in various combinations of terms; reference lists of research articles written within the last 5 years were reviewed for additional resources and articles.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on social emotional competence of teachers as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to encompass the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive competencies of teachers concerning self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (CASEL, 2020). The ancillary construct of emotional intelligence includes the ability of the perception of emotions, the use of emotions to facilitate thought, the understanding of emotions, and the management of emotions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). While the concepts of emotional intelligence are more narrowly embedded in the construct of social emotional competence, the framework of social emotional competence is more closely aligned with the social emotional learning outcomes for children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

CASEL (2020) defined social emotional learning as the "process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy toward others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (What is SEL? para 1). Social emotional learning facilitates the integration of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to navigate daily activities and the challenges those tasks might present (CASEL, 2020). The components of social emotional competence include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making skills (CASEL, 2020). The interview questions used to assess the social emotional competencies of teachers were designed to reflect the characteristics of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

relationship skills, and responsible decision making of teachers, which align with CASEL's model of social emotional competence.

Self-awareness is defined as the ability to identify one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and the influence each has on personal behavior (CASEL, 2020). The ability to identify emotions, recognize strengths and limitations, and develop an accurate self-perception, sense of self-confidence, and self-efficacy fosters a strong sense of optimism, confidence, and growth-mindset for teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Self-aware teachers use their emotions to inspire and motivate learning in themselves and in the children they teach. Self-management is the ability to self-regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in ways that are appropriate for the situation and environment and provide support in stress-management, impulse control, and goal setting (CASEL, 2020). As self-awareness is the ability to identify emotions and understand their influence on personal behavior, self-management is the ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others, and in turn, understand how the expression of emotions impacts social interaction (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers with strong self-management have good impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, organizational skills, and can set strong personal and professional goals (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Responsible decision making is the ability to make practical, productive choices and understand the consequences those choices (CASEL, 2020). Within the process of decision making is the understanding and acceptance of ethical and societal standards as well as the ability to hold oneself accountable for those decisions and subsequent actions

and interactions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers capable of responsible decision making can identify problems, analyze situations, problem-solve, evaluate, and reflect, and are ethically responsible (CASEL, 2020). Social awareness is the ability to empathize and understand the emotions of others especially those with diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences, especially as it pertains to behavior (CASEL, 2020). Social awareness encompasses perspective taking, empathy, the appreciation of diversity, and respect for others and enables teachers to manage challenging behaviors, facilitate positive classroom outcomes without a negative influence on their own emotional health, and are comfortable setting healthy boundaries and fostering autonomy in the children they teach (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The final tenet of social emotional competence, relationship skills, is the ability to build and sustain strong relationships with diverse individuals and communities and achieved through effective communication, collaborative effort, a strong sense of values, and the ability to problem solve to resolve conflict and seek or provide support when necessary (CASEL, 2020). Teachers with strong relationship skills can communicate effectively, build positive relationships, develop cultural competency, and resolve conflicts when they arise (CASEL, 2020).

Social emotional competence is contextual; teachers may be proficient in area of competence but limited in other areas. Social emotional competence contributes to a teacher's ability to create a warm, positive classroom climate, build strong relationships with diverse parent populations, work productively with colleagues and parents, manage the ever-changing demands of the field of early childhood education, model social

emotional learning for children, navigate challenging behaviors, and facilitate conflict resolution (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

CASEL's (2020) current research efforts include the development and publication of reviews of evidence based social emotional learning programs, the use of quality assessments in classrooms, and a collaborative effort with states on social emotional learning guidelines and related policies. My study benefited from this framework by providing a model of social emotional competence for teachers, one that teachers are encouraged to implement in their own classrooms. As a profession, the expectation for teachers to hold a body of knowledge in child development and best practices and prepare children for school is significant. If teachers are role models for children's learning, and their relationships are an integral component to that learning, it also holds true that teachers must also have a level of competency in their own social emotional skills to model those abilities and competencies for the children in their care to foster the social emotional development of children.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Social Emotional Competence of Children

The benefits of social emotional learning programs for children are optimal when introduced from birth because children can appreciate not only their own emotions and those of others at an early age, but also interpreting the emotional climate of the learning environment (Deans, Klarin, Liang, & Frydenberg, 2017; Housman, 2017). The identified skills and practices of social emotional learning programming for children is framed by different child development evidence-based theories (White, Moore, Fleer, & Anderson,

2017). Social-emotional skills for children can be taught and measured; research results stated that social-emotional learning in children promotes positive development, reduces challenging behaviors, and facilitates successful academic achievement, positive social development and citizenship, and overall better health in children (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017).

Social emotional learning for children is characterized by several mitigating factors. The regulation of emotions for children is based on the emotional context, the age and gender of the child, socioeconomic risk, and is supported by a child's executive control (Denham, Bassett, Brown, Way, & Steed, 2015; Waters & Thompson, 2014). Children tend to attribute problem-solving behaviors to the emotional expression of anger, need support from teachers and adults when expressing sadness, and typically endorsed more ineffective strategies as applicable to the expression of emotions (Waters & Thompson, 2014). Girls tended to view emotion-related strategies as successful more often than boys (Waters & Thompson, 2014). Socioeconomic risk and a variance in executive control showed a negative association to the emotion knowledge of children (Denham et al., 2015).

Children can be characterized by three profile types: social emotional learning competent, social emotional learning competent-restrained, and social emotional learning risk (Denham, Bassett, Zinsser, & Wyatt, 2014). Social emotional learning competent refers to a child's social and emotion expressiveness, while social emotional learning competent-restrained refers to a child's level of emotion engagement (Denham et al., 2014). Social emotional learning risk refers to children who exhibit difficulty in

identification and understanding emotions, a pattern of problem solving characterized by anger and aggression, and emotionally aggressive and negative behaviors (Denham et al., 2014). Social emotional learning risk children showed deficiencies in adjustment to the preschool classroom (Denham et al., 2014).

In the preschool setting, suggested frameworks for social emotional learning include three components: the learning context, or the classroom environment, children's social-emotional learning, and social-emotional learning of teachers (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social emotional learning for children is the processes by which children acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions, feel, and show empathy for others, to establish and achieve goals, to develop and maintain positive relationships, and responsible decision making (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). CASEL (2020) defined social emotional learning competencies for children include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills. One recent study, focused on delineating the social emotional learning skills of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, expanded to include the emotional competence skills of emotional expression, emotion regulation, and emotion knowledge respectively (Zinsser et al., 2014). Aligned with CASEL's concept of self-awareness, emotional expression describes a child's ability to identify, label, and express emotions verbally and nonverbally (Zinsser et al., 2014). Children who successfully navigate these skills build stronger relationships with teachers and peers, develop positive feelings about their experiences in the early childhood setting, and are generally perceived as more prosocial and friendly by teachers and peers (Zinsser et al.,

2014). Aligned with CASEL's concept of self-management, emotion regulation describes a child's ability to assess and adapt their feelings to meet the social goals of the early childhood setting, particularly behavioral expectations that can be challenging for children (Zinsser et al., 2014). Children who exhibit challenges in emotion expression may experience emotional outbursts, an inability to focus on group activities and expectations, may result in negative interactions and feelings among teachers and peers (Zinsser et al., 2014). Children with challenges in emotion expression may also lack the resources to stay focused on learning due to negative emotion expression (Zinsser et al., 2014). Aligned with CASEL's concept of social awareness, emotion knowledge describes the child's ability to identify the emotions of peers and teachers, to understand classroom expectations, as well as understand more complex emotions (Zinsser et al., 2014). Children who exhibit emotion knowledge exhibit prosocial classroom behavior and are viewed as more socially competent by teachers and peers (Zinsser et al., 2014).

Identified challenges in social emotional learning include a deficiency in the inclusion of cultural and social differences in children (O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr, Luo, & Romm, 2017a). One-third of studies on SEL did not include the ethnic or socioeconomic status of children and more research is needed on social emotional learning and gender, the culture of children and families, as well as English language learners (O'Conner et al., 2017d). Many studies are conducted in low-income, urban areas and presents difficulties in distinguishing the effect of the two on social emotional learning and more research is needed to reflect rural areas (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015). Intervention programs are targeted toward children with

identified behavioral challenges and there are limited studies on the implementation and outcome of social emotional learning for these children (McCormick et al., 2015).

Parents' Role in Social Emotional Learning

The process of emotion socialization for children is primarily viewed as the role of parents and is a significant predictor of the social-emotional development of children (Papadopoulou et al., 2014; Seçer and Karabulut, 2016). The specific values and beliefs of parents that motivate their socialization practices include their attention to and acceptance of children's behaviors, as well as the value placed on emotional self-regulation of children (Meyer, Raikes, Virmani, Waters, & Thompson, 2014). Research on emotion socialization practices has centered on the role of parents, specifically focused on modeling, teaching, contingent reacting (reacting to emotions), and the overall emotional environment of the home (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parental predictors of a child's ability to understand emotion include the accuracy within which parents understand and value the child's emotions, the emotional availability of parents, and the inclusion of teacher-reported social behaviors (Silja, Lars, Trude, Jay, & Turid, 2015). In conjunction with those inter-personal predictors, the verbal and social skills of the child also predict emotional growth (Silja et al., 2015).

Parental beliefs about emotions inform those socialization practices and the development of a child's social emotional learning (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parents who accept and address emotional behaviors and believe in the regulation of children's negative emotions exhibit more positive emotion socialization practices and constructive self-regulation strategies (Meyer et al., 2014). When expressing positive or negative

emotions, parents serve as role models for children's expression of emotion (Zinsser et al., 2014). The emotion socialization behaviors of parents, however, varied between mother and father depending upon the parents' level of education and the child's gender (Seçer & Karabulut, 2016). Fearful children experience greater challenges in the regulation of their emotions; mothers who respond to a child's fears with emotion socialization behaviors that are positive, serve to increase emotional competence (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2016). When labeling a child's emotions and discussing the trigger and consequences to the child's behavior, parents serve as teachers and coaches to help that child navigate their emotions and behaviors (Zinsser et al., 2014). A parent's reaction to a child's emotions serves to support social and emotional outcomes for children; responsive interactions promote self-regulation, whereas dismissive or punitive reactions promote negative outcomes for children's social emotional learning (Zinsser et al., 2014). Factors that contribute to the emotion socialization skills of parents include emotion knowledge, regulation and expression, the developmental level of the child, and parents' beliefs about emotions (Zinsser et al., 2014).

The underlying intentionality of parents' emotion socialization practices impacts a child's social-emotional development (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parents who value emotions invest in more positive practice and invest their time in coaching children through their emotions (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parents who view emotions as irrelevant tend to protect children from experiencing emotions; children with less emotionally supportive parents tend to exhibit more negative emotional expressions (Zinsser et al., 2014). Examining the role of the mother in a child's development of social emotional skills, Denham and

Kochanoff (as cited in Zinsser et al., 2014), suggested the positive attitude of mother's toward engaging actively in children's emotion expression was determined to be the best predictor of a child's emotion knowledge. Mothers who value teaching their child about emotions support the development of emotional competencies for that child; parents who exhibit more punitive or restrictive attitudes toward emotion expression, have children who are less knowledgeable about appropriate emotion expression and emotion knowledge (Zinsser et al., 2014). Another study conducted with low income, African American families suggested that a focus on the behavioral challenges of children must also include a focus on the strengths and assets of children (Humphries, Strickland, & Keenan, 2014). Targeted interventions for low-income children showed positive SEL outcomes, particularly when parents conducted assessments of children's behavior (Schmitt, Lewis, Duncan, Korucu, & Napoli, 2018).

In contrast, a later study suggested that parents' positive and negative emotional expression still exhibited the modeling of adaptive behaviors for children (Miller, Dunsmore, & Smith, 2015). The study continued by suggesting that parental role in the emotion socialization of children, through either coaching or dismissing the emotional expressions of their children, contributed to the ability of children to self-regulate their emotions. The context within which children expressed emotions contributed to the manner within which parents' chose to respond, either positively or negatively, to the emotional expression of their children (Miller et al., 2015). This study also suggested the level of involvement and engagement between parents and children had an influence the ability of children to self-regulate their emotions (Miller et al., 2015). In conclusion,

Miller et al., (2015) suggested that parental modeling and coaching of the expression of emotions influenced the social behaviors of children and more specifically, that emotion coaching influences a child's self-regulation, social behaviors, and the decreased expression of aggressive behaviors in children. The role of parents in the emotion socialization of children is primary, yet early childhood programs need to engage parents on a deeper level inclusive of the cultural background of families to assist in SEL curriculum (Dinallo, 2016).

The body of research on the parental role in children's social emotional learning highlights the significance of parents' beliefs of the importance of SEL for children and how those beliefs inform social emotional learning for children (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parents serve as role models for the social emotional learning for children; the response to children's behaviors, whether those behaviors are dismissed, or parents engage in coaching children through their emotional expressions, and therefore, contribute to a child's ability to self-regulate their emotions (Miller et al., 2015). The parents' level of engagement and involvement in their children's behaviors contribute to a child's ability to self-regulate their emotional behaviors (Miller et al., 2015). Research on teachers' social emotional competence and children's social emotional learning extended the research of the parents' role in children's social emotional learning. Subsequent studies examined the role of teachers' beliefs about social emotional learning for children, teachers' as role models for children's social emotional learning, as well as the level of involvement and engagement of teachers' and social emotional learning for children.

Social Emotional Competence of Teachers

While conflicting studies revealed the discrepancy in the perceived significance of parental role versus the teacher's role in social emotional learning for children, more current research examined the importance of the partnership between parents and teachers and suggested that familial concerns guide that approach to children's social-emotional development (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2016; Humphries, Williams, & May 2018; Kilic, 2014). Teachers believe a solid foundation of social emotional learning precedes academic learning and expressed the need for social emotional learning curriculum that can be adapted to the needs of children, the demands of teaching, and reflective of the culture of the children, families, and community (Humphries et al., 2018). Additionally, teachers expressed the need for administrative support, a critical factor in social emotional learning implementation, that reflects and understanding of the importance of social emotional learning in learning and development for children (Humphries et al., 2018).

Social-emotional competence in teachers contributed to the quality of both teachers and the classroom environment, as well as the implementation of social-emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). Schonert-Reichl et al., (2017) stated that teachers need the knowledge, tools, and strategies to develop social emotional learning within the construct of the learning context, the children's social emotional learning, and the teacher's social emotional learning. The social emotional competence of teachers plays a significant role in classroom management strategies, teacher-child relationships, and their ability to implement social emotional learning curriculum

(Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers who exhibit strong social emotional competencies are more self-aware, display prosocial values, and organize classroom environments to provide strong emotional and instructional support and promote a high-quality classroom climate (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Social-emotional competence of teachers enables the development of strong, supportive, and emotionally responsive relationships with children and informs the academic performance, achievements, social functioning, and a child's ability to engage successfully with the learning process and environment (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). Teachers with strong social-emotional competence are more self-aware and better able to manage themselves and their relationships with children, parents, and teachers (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). Teachers who exhibit confidence in their own social-emotional skills understand the role of emotions in children's behavior and are better able to respond to those needs by instilling trust and respect within that relationship (Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Without an understanding of how teachers' own emotional well-being and the ways in which teachers inform the social-emotional learning for children, we cannot fully understand how to best promote social-emotional learning for children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Such information can guide not only theory, but practice (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers' social-emotional competencies influence learning in children through the quality of their relationships, the ways in which teachers model social-emotional learning skills for children, and the organization and management of classrooms (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Teachers' social-emotional

competence affect their ability to implement social-emotional learning strategies and programs to promote a healthy classroom climate and social-emotional learning success for children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers' social-emotional competence influences the learning contexts and implementation of social-emotional learning for children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The quality of teacher-child relationships, classroom management, and effective implementation of social-emotional learning for children mediate child outcomes and promote learning in the classroom environment (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

The attributes of teachers with strong social-emotional competencies are reflected in their relationships with children and serve as the foundation for the socialization of children in early learning environments (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social-emotionally competent teachers create and organize learning environments that provide instructional and emotional support for children that lead to more successful outcomes for children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social-emotionally competent teachers are more self-aware and able to recognize their own emotions and use those emotions to motivate learning in children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social-emotionally competent teachers understand the capacities, strengths, and weaknesses of their own emotions (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social-emotional competence of teachers enables more social-awareness and facilitates the recognition and understanding of the emotions of others, strong and supportive relationships, and a deep cultural awareness and understanding of others' perceptions (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The cultural tools integrated into teaching practices provide insight into the ways in which children learn to be part of a

peer group; children's transgression from the behavioral expectations within the classroom environment highlight the complexities of the teacher's role (Brennan, 2015). Social-emotionally competent teachers exhibit a strong respect for children, parents, and colleagues and understand and care about the consequences of their behaviors and decisions (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Social-emotional competence in teachers also promotes better self-management skills; teachers are better able to regulate their own emotions and actions to promote a positive classroom environment that is conducive to the social-emotional learning skills of children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

When examining the delineated concepts of emotional competence, teachers exhibiting strength in emotion expression, emotion regulation, and emotion knowledge, were more able to model appropriate communication skills around emotion, normalize emotions and emotional experiences for children, and expose children to the natural consequences of emotion expression (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). More emotionally supportive teachers, however, when analyzing their classroom management skills, utilized a more pedagogical approach to emotions, as well as a deeper understanding of the nuances of emotions and how they impact the climate of their classroom and their ability to successfully manage that classroom (Zinsser et al., 2015).

The body of research of the social emotional competence of teachers' supports the effect that strong teacher-child relationships have on a child's academic achievement; teachers' with strong social emotional skills have a better understanding of the role of emotions in children's behaviors and are better able to respond the those behaviors, and therefore, serve as the foundation for the socialization of children in early learning

environments (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers with strong social emotional competencies are characterized by self-awareness, an understanding of their own emotions, the emotions of others, and create trusting, respectful learning environments that are conducive to the academic and emotional support children need to learn, both academically and socially (Hen & Goroshit, 2016; Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Empathy and Self-Efficacy

Beyond teaching skills, teachers must also develop the emotional capacity that embodies the resilience and innovation necessary to teach (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). The self-efficacy of teachers, referring to their beliefs in their ability to regulate emotions, may contribute to the development and strength of empathy in teachers (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). Self-efficacy is the perception of teachers' in their ability to manage feelings, thoughts, and challenges as to whether teachers can successfully execute the responsibilities of their job (Sahin, 2017). The emotional self-efficacy, or the ability of teachers to judge their own ability to process emotions efficiently and correctly as a method of emotional self-regulation, predicts empathy and self-efficacy of teachers (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). Characteristics such as well-being, sociability, and self-esteem can predict self-efficacy in pre-service teachers (Sahin, 2017). Hen and Goroshit (2016) found that the emotional self-efficacy of teachers has a direct and indirect effect on teachers' empathy, and that a teacher's belief in their teaching abilities mediated this relationship. Teachers who have strong belief in their ability to identify and regulate emotions exhibited empathy when engaging with children, which is partially mediated by

their beliefs in their own teaching abilities (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). The emotional and teaching self-efficacies of teachers support empathy and represent the broader construct of social-emotional competencies in teachers (Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Empathy and self-efficacy are interrelated characteristics that contribute to the overall social-emotional competency of teachers (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). Empathy is defined as the ability to identify the thoughts and emotions of other, and respond with appropriate emotional responses, thereby enabling teachers to understand and predict the behavior of children (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). When examining the relationships teachers have with parents, particularly when engaging in the more complex dynamic when supporting families with children who exhibit challenging behaviors, empathy enables teachers to feel and understand the emotions of parents, to effectively communicate that understanding to parents, and respond in ways that respectfully meet the needs of parents (Peck, Maude, & Brotherson, 2015). Teachers who exhibit empathy toward children and families consider inclusion of all children as part of their teaching philosophy and are therefore better able to understand and respond to family culture and engage in meaningful conversation with parents (Peck et al., 2015). Empathy in teachers provides a learning environment wherein different perspectives of children and families are understood, respected, and resolved in ways that also model that behavior for children (Peck et al., 2015).

Research results suggests that teachers with a strong belief in their own ability to self-regulate their emotions were better equipped to manage their feelings and the challenges faced in their classrooms (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). When partnered with

parents, teachers with a strong sense of empathy were better able to internalize the role of family and culture and resulted in their capacity to serve as role models for positive emotional behaviors for children (Peck et al., 2015). Teachers were better equipped to develop empathy, which enables teachers to have a deeper understanding of children's emotions, as well as the ability to predict how a child will express their emotions (Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Teacher-Child Relationships

The relationship between a child and teacher are influenced by the characteristics of both child and teacher and evidence suggests the quality of that relationship predicts children's behavior (Williford et al., 2013). The quality of the relationship between teacher and child are correlated to the social-emotional development, self-regulation skills, and academic outcomes for children and show a positive effect on a child's executive functioning (Gozde Erturk Kara, Gonen, & Pianta, 2017; Williford et al., 2013). The better the quality of the relationship, the better opportunities exist for the development of self-regulation skills in children; conversely, the more conflict within that relationship, the lower the child's ability to self-regulate (Williford et al., 2013).

Research results show that temperamental surgency, the child's tendency to approach or withdraw from situations, affects the teacher-child relationship (Bassett et al., 2016). Children low in surgency are characterized by exhibiting apprehension toward new people and activities within the classroom environment, while children who are high in surgency are highly active in a constant physical exploration of the classroom, show disregard for behavioral expectations regarding the regulation of their own behavior,

interact more frequently with teachers, and may learn through observed teacher-child interactions (Bassett et al., 2017). Teachers' reactions to the expression of emotions by the children in their classroom also predicted children's social-emotional behaviors (Bassett et al., 2016). The conflict between teacher and child are negatively associated with emotion regulation in children (Garner, Mahatmya, Moses, & Bolt, 2014). Understanding the role of the relationship between teachers and children and its impact within varying environments and contexts is critical to the social-emotional development of children (Garner et al., 2014). The perception of teachers of social emotional competence for children and the goals of social emotional competence implementation is dependent upon the cultural contexts within the environment and findings indicate those differences mitigate teachers' perceptions of children's expression of emotion (Louie, Wang, Fung, & Lau, 2015).

Researchers explored the relationship between children's engagement between peers, teachers, and classroom tasks to better understand its impact on the development of self-regulation skills in children (Williford, Vick Whittaker, Vitiello, & Downer, 2013). Self-regulation skills in children are characterized by the child's ability to focus their attention, manage their emotions, and control their behaviors in response to the environmental expectations within the early childhood setting (Williford et al., 2013). The development of self-regulation skills in children, particularly in the areas of emotion, behavior, and cognition, must meet the increasing expectations of teachers in the classroom (Williford et al., 2013). Emotion regulation, which includes internal and external supports, has been shown to be instrumental in the development of self-

regulation skills in children (Williford et al., 2013). The ability of children to regulate behavior includes skills that help manage their own emotions and responses to those emotions (Williford, et al., 2013). Cognitive control, or executive functioning, is the child's ability to remember information and utilize that information, as well as their ability to manage their impulses (Williford et al., 2013). Characteristics of executive functioning include the ability to plan and reflect and feelings of independence, control, and competence (Williford et al., 2013).

Peer relationships also significantly influence a child's ability to develop self-regulation skills and social-emotional competence; characteristics of those relationships include acceptance, communication, sharing, and successful engagement in play (Williford et al., 2013).Vygotsky's sociocultural theory stated the social relationships children experience while engaged in play helped children develop self-regulation skills through the formulation of social relationships (Williford et al., 2013). The positive engagement of children in classroom tasks and activities provide further opportunities for children to regulate their behavior; children's positive engagement with classroom activities, particularly the ability to persist in those activities, helps further facilitate self-regulation skills in children through the development of prolonged focus and attention to classroom tasks and impulse control (Williford et al., 2013). In children who exhibit negative behaviors in the classroom, positive relationships with teachers mitigated those negative behaviors (Williford et al., 2013).

Research findings suggest that teachers in higher quality classroom environments experience interactions with children that are characterized by emotional warmth, more

positive expressions, greater responsiveness to the emotional cues of children, and the facilitation of greater opportunities for children to be autonomous (Hatfield, Burchinal, Pianta, & Sideris, 2016). Effective high-quality teacher-child relationships promote the development of language, literacy, and social-emotional outcomes for children in early childhood settings (Hatfield et al., 2016). Clear expectations and a learning environment with consistent activities and classroom materials contribute to the inhibitory control of children (Hatfield et al., 2016).

A more recent study examined the relationship between the teacher-child relationship and the emotional context of the classroom environment with the academic skills and behaviors of children in an early childhood setting and findings concluded that teacher-child relationships significantly inform children's behaviors but have less of an impact on academic skills (Lippard, La Paro, Rouse, & Crosby, 2018). Three patterns emerged from this recent study: teachers' reports of their relationship with children were strongly associated with outcomes for children, with a lesser association to the overall emotional context of the classroom; teacher-child relationships moderate those associations between the classroom emotional context and child outcomes; a stronger association exists between teacher-child relationships and child behavior, than a child's early academic skills (Lippard et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, the developmental processes that occur for children exist within the context of the overall level of classroom responsiveness to the emotions and behaviors of children (Lippard et al., 2018). While researchers differ on the influence of the teacher-child relationship and the impact on a child's academic skills, research strongly supports the quality of teacher-

child relationships on the behavior and self-regulation skills of children in early learning environments (Hatfield et al., 2016; Lippard et al., 2018; Williford et al., 2013). Challenging behaviors in children were mitigated by positive relationships with teachers (Lippard et al., 2018; Williford et al., 2013).

Children with Challenging Behaviors

The emotional and organization quality of an early learning program is the strongest predictor for children who exhibit challenging behaviors in 1st grade (Broekhuizen, Mokrova, Burchinal, & Garrett-Peters, 2016). The early childhood classroom is most often a child's first experience with formal relationships among peers. Children bring their individual learning styles, temperament, unique personalities, culture, family background, and life-experiences into the classroom and into their interpersonal relationships. While navigating the nuances of peer relationships, many children express challenging behaviors. Challenging behavior is defined as repeated and ongoing patterns of behavior that inhibit learning, and positive social interactions with peers and teachers (The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, 2020). This conduct manifests itself in many different behaviors, such as physical aggression toward peers or themselves, oppositional behavior, task avoidance, non-compliance with rules and expectations, repetitive movements and sounds, collapsing to the ground when overcome by emotions, throwing of objects, biting, yelling, and crying (The Boggs Center, 2020). Attainment or avoidance of attention, tangible items, and sensory input are the two primary reasons for challenging behaviors in children (The Boggs Center, 2020).

Teachers are role models of positive social behaviors that help facilitate and guide peer relationships between children and promote social, academic, and emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). Teachers must navigate the teacher-child interactions, classroom management, and the social-emotional learning for children within an intentional healthy classroom environment (Jennings, 2014). A positive classroom environment promotes the social, academic, and emotional learning of children (Jennings, 2014). One facet of a positive classroom environment is the ability of teachers to manage classroom behavior that includes teaching behavioral expectations, executing smooth transitions, the use of positive reinforcement upon observation of desired behavior, effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, as well as the ability to work with parents in addressing challenging behaviors (Coleman et al., 2012). When faced with children with challenging behaviors, the processes of teachers in the management of those behaviors include monitoring, documenting, summarizing, analyzing, interpreting, and implementing interventions for those behaviors (Classen & Cheatham, 2015).

The role of teachers, as described in the above research, focuses on the environment and management of the classroom. A more recent study focused on the teachers' perceptions of their own emotions, the social skills of children, and how they differentially predict challenging behaviors in children. The components reflected in emotional intelligence include teachers' perceptions of their own emotions and emotional competence, and how that relates to the emotional behaviors of children, the teachers' perceptions of the social-emotional skills and behaviors of the child, and the ways in

which teachers' perceptions of their own social-emotional competence and its relationship to their perceptions of the children's behaviors and their social-emotional skills (Poulou, M., 2017). Findings concluded that challenging behaviors and emotional difficulties can be interpreted as an inter-related set of skills for both teachers and children (Poulou, 2017). The ability of teachers to perceive, understand, and manage emotions and the ability of children to engage in positive social behaviors can individually and relationally impact the emotional behaviors of children (Poulou, 2017). The inconsistency of teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviors further contributes to those challenges. The reaction of teachers to challenging behaviors, along with their attitudes and beliefs about those behaviors, influences the emotional behaviors of children; teachers expressed negative associations to physically aggressive behaviors as compared to withdrawal behaviors and more positive associations with exuberant and physically rough and tumble play (Coplan et al., 2015).

Preschool is the optimal time to identify and implement interventions that reduce behavioral problems before those behaviors develop into life-long behavioral patterns (Poulou, Bassett, & Denham, 2018). Deficits in the emotion knowledge of children are expressed through context-inappropriate behaviors, such as anger, which can result in the inability to remain focused on tasks and pay attention in the classroom (Locke & Lang, 2016). Among the challenge's teachers face in addressing challenging behaviors, Poulou (2015) suggested a significant factor is the lack of knowledge in the causes and treatment of the problematic emotional behaviors in children. Teachers lack a valid tool to assist in distinguishing between normal and abnormal emotional behaviors (Poulou, 2015).

Moreover, teachers must develop an understanding the reasons for the assessment of children's behaviors and the ways in which assessment data can be used constructively to address the challenging behaviors of children (Denham, Ferrier, Howarth, Herndon, & Bassett, 2016). Teachers need targeted training on social emotional learning programming and instruction to better meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors (Denham et al., 2014). Teachers need the observational and assessment skills to help identify the strengths, weaknesses, progress, and overall effectiveness of programming to better meet the needs of children, especially children with challenging behaviors (Denham et al., 2014).

Targeted social emotional learning interventions, such as the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence, showed improvements in the social skills of children (Hemmeter, Snyder, Fox, & Algina, 2016). Mindfulness training can enrich the academic and social outcomes for children (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015). The *Getting Ready Model* provides parents and teachers a collaborative approach toward the development of children's social-emotional skills. Parents reported more positive interactions with children, more consistency in setting limits around children's behaviors, and an increased ability to utilize daily routines within the family to promote the positive development of children (Kuhn, Marvin, & Knoche, 2017). When parents and teachers are equipped with the opportunity to work together toward problem solving they experience more satisfying relationships characterized by open communication, trust, and a mutual appreciation for the respective and collaborative roles of teachers and parents (Kuhn et al., 2017). Targeted interventions such as this model enable teachers and parents

to identify specific behavioral concerns for the academic and social development of children and serve to elicit active parental involvement (Kuhn et al., 2017). Targeted implementation of social emotional learning also mitigate stress for teachers and increase positive experiences in the workplace and teachers' feelings of well-being (Zinsser, Christensen, & Torres, 2016). Teachers who experience less stress and depressive feelings have greater job satisfaction, a more positive work climate, and have greater support in managing children with challenging behaviors (Zinsser et al., 2016).

A positive classroom climate promotes the social, academic, and emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). The relationship between teachers and children, particularly for children who exhibit challenging behaviors, is an inter-related set of skills between teacher and child (Poulou, 2017). Teachers have the task of responding to challenging behaviors through a responsive environment and through a positive, responsive level of engagement with children and their challenging behaviors (Jennings, 2014; Poulou, 2017). Preschool is the optimal time to identify and address challenging behaviors in children through targeted intervention and instructional strategies and contributes to the overall feelings of well-being and mitigating the stress teachers feel because of managing the challenging behaviors of children (Hemmeter et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2016).

Teacher Stress and Burnout

Decades of research results posit that teaching is one of the most stressful professions, with 93% of teachers indicating stress and burnout as one of their biggest challenges in teaching (O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr, Luo, & Romm, 2017c). Jeon,

Buettner, Grant, and Lang (2019) studied the working conditions, well-being, and motivation of teachers and its influence on the professional commitment of teachers to change jobs, leave the field, or remain in the teaching field. Teachers who chose to change job locations were more intrinsically motivated (Jeon et al., 2019). Teachers who chose to leave the field because of job-related stress cited emotional exhaustion and poor working conditions (Jeon et al., 2019). Teachers claiming dissatisfaction with the profession of teaching and reasons for leaving the field include the inability to, or challenges with, managing emotions, and challenging behaviors in children (O'Conner et al., 2017d). Teachers who chose to remain in the field attributed that choice to positive working conditions, high levels of well-being, and a strong commitment to the teaching profession and exhibited strong emotion regulation skills (Jeon et al., 2019). As described in earlier research, Friedman (2000) noted that teachers continue to cite children with challenging behaviors as a significant frustration in teaching. Later research noted that challenging behaviors in children have a negative impact on the satisfaction teachers felt in teaching and contributed to teacher burnout (Landers, Alter, & Servillio, 2008). Stress levels of teachers may influence the relationship between the teacher and child (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015). Teachers who experience high levels of stress exhibit more frequent negative emotions and practices, less tolerance for challenging behaviors, less frequent intervention with children exhibiting those behaviors, and therefore culminate in a more negative classroom climate, which in turn, results in more negative child-behaviors (Jeon et al., 2019). Suggested approaches to mitigating stress for teachers include stress reduction, mindfulness-based practices and

changes within the organizational structure that facilitate support for teachers (Whitaker et al., 2015).

Stress in teaching can be attributed to a lack of planning time, large class sizes, an increased workload, and a lack of administrative support (Sandillos, Goble, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2018). The most predominate source of stress for teachers is professional investment stress, described as a general dissatisfaction with their career, characterized by a lack of emotional and intellectual stimulation in their jobs, and a lack of control over job-related decisions (Sandillos et al., 2018). Professional investment stress was the only factor associated with the relationship between teachers and children (Sandillos et al., 2018). The overall psychological well-being of teachers informs the overall quality of teaching practices (Jeon, Buettner, Lang, & Grant, 2018). Developing the competencies of teachers and increasing feelings of self-efficacy can reduce the psychological burden of teaching and facilitate a more positive work environment (Jeon et al., 2018). Providing work climates that create greater feelings of control over the responsibilities of teaching result in teachers who express more positive emotions and contingent reactions, and more positive attitudes toward SEL (Denham, Bassett, & Miller, 2017).

First-year teachers report feeling ill-equipped to manage challenging behaviors in children, classroom management, and meeting the mental health needs of children (O'Conner et al., 2017c). A lack of resources to manage stress results in poor quality relationships with children and contributes to increased problem behaviors, which in turn, results in increased stress for teachers (Sandillos et al., 2018). Teachers receiving training

on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children report feeling more adept at managing challenging behaviors, creating classroom environments, and implementing learning strategies that promote a positive classroom environment (O'Conner et al., 2017c). Children in high-quality programs that engage in SEL, were found to exhibit increased social-emotional competencies, prosocial behavior, fewer challenging behaviors, and increased academic outcomes (O'Conner et al., 2017d).

Stress in teaching is a mitigating factor in the development and use of social-emotional competencies for children and teachers (Jones et al., 2013). Teachers who experience depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion exhibit more negative responses to the negative emotions of children and experience a decrease in feelings of professional commitment (Buettner, Jeon, Hur, & Garcia, 2016). Factors related to more positive responses to the negative emotions of children include the coping strategies teachers utilize in their teaching practices (Buettner et al., 2016). When teachers can regulate their own emotions, reappraise emotional situations, and utilize problem-solving strategies they engage in higher levels of expressive encouragement and more positive reactions to the emotions of children (Buettner et al., 2016). The reaction of teachers to the emotions of children and their social behaviors are the moderating affect to the emotional temperament of children (Bassett et al., 2016).

The presence of stress inhibits the cognitive regulation processes that promote attention, memory, and problem-solving skills and the lack of social-emotional competencies increase those feelings of stress in teachers (Jones et al., 2013). When the primary emotion of teachers is stress, their interactions with children exhibit more

conflict and less warmth, and teachers are less apt to model appropriate behaviors for children (Jones et al., 2013). When stress results in high turnover, children exhibit challenges in adjusting socially to the classroom environment and families struggle with their relationships with care providers (Bratsch-Hines, Mokrova, & Vernon-Feagans, 2015). Interventions for teachers that include the development of emotional competence provide the support to reduce teacher burnout and stress (Fiorilli, Albanese, Gabola, & Pepe, 2017).

The positive outcomes of social-emotional competencies in teachers, such as positive classroom management, strong teacher-child relationships, effective implementation of social-emotional learning, and the positive behaviors of children, promote the continuation of the practices and behaviors of social-emotional competencies (Jones et al., 2013).

Managing challenging behaviors and children can significantly contribute to stress and burn-out for teachers and is one area teachers report feeling most unprepared for as part of their teaching responsibilities (O'Conner et al., 2017c). For pre-service teachers, the development of empathy, as part of social-emotional competence, can mitigate the factors of stress teacher's experience, and further increase job satisfaction and resiliency and make teachers less vulnerable to burn-out (Peck et al., 2015).

In a cyclical fashion, feeling underprepared to manage challenging behaviors can increase those behaviors in the classroom, which in turn, contributes to higher levels of stress for teachers (O'Conner et al., 2017c; Sandillos et al., 2018). This stress results in more negative interactions with children who exhibit challenging behaviors; teachers who

receive training on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children report feeling better prepared to manage challenging behaviors and can contribute to a more positive classroom climate (Fiorilli et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Peck et al., 2015).

Teacher Training and Professional Development

In a recent study, teachers expressed a need for stronger professional support and training to better inform an incomplete body of knowledge of emotion-related practices that include the responses, effects, and contributions of teachers to challenging behaviors in children (Kilic, 2014). When teachers receive social emotional learning training, their overall well-being contributes to a more positive classroom climate and increased effectiveness and implementation of social emotional learning for children (Zinsser et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2019). Teachers who have strong administrative support for social emotional learning, teachers experience less depression, increased job satisfaction, more support in addressing children's challenging behaviors, and experience feelings of a more positive work climate (Zinsser et al., 2016). Inadequate training and support contribute to the negative self-efficacy of teachers (Zinsser et al., 2016). The differences in education levels of teachers and their responses to the challenging behaviors of children include variances in teachers with an Associate's degree who reported more negative responses to those behaviors and viewed those behaviors as disruptive and destructive, while teachers with BA degrees reported more positive responses to those behaviors and generally viewed those behaviors through a more constructivist, child-centered lens (Lang, Mouzourou, Jeon, Buettner, & Hur, 2017).

In a recent study, findings report that while all 50 states have certification requirements for teachers that address social emotional learning of teachers, 10 states address four of the five social emotional learning competencies and 36 states address only one to three of the social emotional learning competencies for teachers (O'Conner et al., 2017b). The most frequently addressed components of social emotional learning for teachers include responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills; those skills most infrequently addressed include self-awareness and self-management (O'Conner et al., 2017b). Few states have any expectation of teachers to acquire the ability to identify their own emotions, including their strengths and weaknesses, to express and control their emotions, manage stress, or monitor their progress toward the achievement of goals (O'Conner et al., 2017b).

More than 50% of states preservice learning requirements for teachers include coursework addressing the social emotional learning of children, with only 27 states promoting responsible decision making skills, relationship skills, and self-management skills (O'Conner et al., 2017b). These teacher preparation components focus heavily on facilitating learning outcomes for children that include making respectful and constructive choices, creating and sustaining positive peer relationships, and the self-regulation of emotions and behaviors (O'Conner et al., 2017b). Teacher preparation programs focus less on promoting self-awareness and social awareness in children, with limited attention to the development of children's abilities to identify their emotions, including their strengths and weaknesses, to understand the perspective of others, and to feel and show empathy, especially concerning cultural differences among children

(O'Conner et al., 2017b). As to the social emotional learning of children, 51-100% of courses for teachers in 49 states do not address any of the five components of social emotional learning for children (O'Conner et al., 2017b).

Teacher training related to an increased understanding of the impact of emotionally supportive teachers must first focus on the acquisition of a positive understanding of the role of emotions in teaching, particularly the emotions of teachers (Zinsser et al., 2014). One recent study concluded that emotional intelligence as part of teacher training impacted their awareness and the adoption of the concepts of emotional intelligence, increased their self-awareness, facilitated the development of emotional intelligence skills, the deeper understanding of emotional intelligence in daily teaching practices, and in the understanding of teachers' roles in the development of social emotional learning for children (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). Research results stated that emotional intelligence can be developed in teachers to support a change in teaching behaviors and practices, an increase in the feelings of purpose in teaching, and in the relationships between the teacher and child (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). Another study supported the significance of social-emotional intelligence training for teachers and stated that such training produced teachers with better social skills, better social-emotional skills, and better psychological skills which had a direct and indirect impact on the proficiencies of teachers (Turi, J., Ghani, M., Sorooshian, S., & Abbas, Q., 2017). The researchers further supported the impact of social-emotional intelligence on the relational dynamic of the child, the teacher, and the classroom environment to produce the active and receptive interplay of teaching and learning (Turi et al., 2017). Even brief training for

teachers focused on the emotional experiences of teachers and their emotional awareness showed that teachers are better equipped to navigate emotionally charged behaviors of children; in more extreme situations, as with children who exhibit challenging behaviors, teachers were better able to understand and respond immediately to the emotional needs of children (Ulloa et al., 2016). Teachers given training specific on strategies on the coaching of engaging effectively with the emotions of children, emotional schemas, reflective practice that focuses on emotions, and mindfulness training were better able to respond effectively to the emotional needs of children (Ulloa et al., 2016). The National Association for the Education of Young Children identified a gap between teaching practices and evidence-based research and recommended improved training and education, strengthened qualifications for teachers based on knowledge and competencies, and evaluation practices that result in improvements in teaching practices (Garrity, Longstreth, & Linder, 2017).

Research results stated that emotional intelligence training for teachers increased their level of emotional intelligence and subsequent skills, as well as increased their understanding of their role in the social emotional learning for children. (Zinsser et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2019). Training changed teaching practices and behaviors, including the relationship between child, teacher, and the environment (Dolev & Leshem, 2017; Turi et al., 2017; Ulloa et al., 2016). Training for teachers, while inconsistent in content, focused primarily on social emotional learning for children, and while research supports emotional intelligence training for teachers, that training is minimal (O'Conner et al., 2017b; Zinsser et al., 2016).

Effects of SEL for Children

A recent meta analysis of social emotional learning programs suggested positive findings for children ages 3-8 years that include increased academic motivation, greater feelings of self-efficacy, better emotion recognition, stronger feelings of empathy, more positive feelings about school, increased academic outcomes, increased problem solving skills, and a decrease in challenging behaviors and antisocial skills (O'Conner et al., 2017d). Significant findings of this analysis reported that cultural differences in the social-emotional processes mitigated outcomes for sub-groups of children, particularly for English language learners, racial and ethnic minorities, and children living in low-income households that result in poor social-emotional development and negative social and academic outcomes (O'Conner et al., 2017d). Another significant finding held that children living in low-income household's exhibit more challenging behaviors, lower executive functioning, and underdeveloped social-emotional skills; teachers serving low-income children and families also tend to be harsher, more insensitive, and more detached when engaging with children with challenging behaviors (O'Conner et al., 2017d). As with low-income children and families, teachers must develop a strong cultural awareness and understanding when engaging with English language learners (O'Conner et al., 2017d). The meta-analysis illustrated cultural and linguistic differences in the expression, interpretation, and regulation of emotions for English language learners and attributed challenges to greater stress, challenges in emotional expression in a second language, limited language proficiency, and socio-economic factors effecting immigrant families (O'Conner et al., 2017d). Teachers who work with English language learners

have found success in implementation of social emotional learning when programming can be adapted or translated to meet the needs of children with limited English language proficiency (O'Conner et al., 2017d).

While the implications of culture, socioeconomic backgrounds, and English language learning need further research on the social emotional learning for children, research largely supports the implementation of social emotional learning for children and its impact on their academic learning (O'Conner et al., 2017d).

Summary

The process of emotion socialization for children was primarily viewed as the role of parents and was a significant predictor for the social-emotional development of children (Papadopoulou et al., 2014; Seçer & Karabulut, 2016). Subsequent research results indicated the significant role teachers played in facilitating the social, academic, and emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). Additional research studies identified common components of teaching practices designed to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children and determined essential characteristics in early childhood settings that comprised, in part, of choices, emotion regulation, constructive feedback, modeling, opportunities to respond, problem solving, promoting behavioral competence and teacher-child relationships, and social skills (McLeod et al., 2016). Each of these attributes were initiated through a teacher's response to a child's question, action, emotion, or behavior and illustrated facets of managing challenging behaviors in children. The focus of this study sought to understand how a teacher's

responses, viewed through the lens of their perceptions of their own social emotional competence, influenced children with challenging behaviors.

The body of research of the social emotional competence of teachers summarized the effect that strong teacher-child relationships had on a child's academic achievement; teachers with strong social emotional skills have a better understanding of the role of emotions in children's behaviors and were better able to respond the those behaviors, and therefore, served as the foundation for the socialization of children in early learning environments. The positive findings of social emotional learning for children contributed to increased academic motivation and outcomes, stronger feelings of empathy, better emotion regulation and problem-solving skills, and a decrease in challenging behaviors (O'Conner et al., 2017d). The need emerged for a more narrowed focus on the role of teachers and the social emotional development of children and concluded the quality of the relationship between teacher's and children correlated to the social-emotional development, self-regulation skills, and academic outcomes for children (Williford et al., 2013). A gap in the research existed in the embedded characteristics of quality and this study sought to extend the research and explored teacher's responses to challenging behavior as a facet of quality within the teacher-child relationship. A positive climate within the learning environment and teachers who acted as role models for strong social emotional competencies contributed to the academic and emotional support children needed to learn and played a role in the facilitation of social, academic, and emotional learning for children (Jennings, 2014). This study sought to extend the body of knowledge as to how a teacher's responses to children with challenging behavior served

to model social emotional competence for children and contributed to a positive classroom climate.

The social-emotional learning in children promoted positive development, reduced challenging behaviors, and facilitated successful academic achievement, positive social development and citizenship, and overall better health in children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The significance of the social emotional development of children and the importance of high-quality teacher-child relationships and its impact on learning for children was well-established in the literature. In an early learning setting, the partnership between parent and teacher, combined with a positive classroom environment, and the quality of the teacher-child relationship promoted social-emotional learning for children and decreased incidences of challenging behaviors in children. What was unclear, however, were the nuances of the teacher-child relationship, specifically, the influence of teachers' responses when engaged with children with challenging behaviors on the developmental and learning processes for children.

Hen and Goroshit (2016) stated that empathy and self-efficacy as interrelated characteristics of teachers contributed to their social emotional competency. The ability of teachers to judge their own ability to process emotions efficiently and correctly as a method of emotional self-regulation, predicts empathy and self-efficacy of teachers (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). Teachers with a strong belief in their own ability to self-regulate their emotions are better equipped to manage their feelings and the challenges faced in their classrooms. Teachers are better equipped to develop empathy, which enables teachers to have a deeper understanding of children's emotions, as well as the ability to

predict how a child will express their emotions. The emotional and teaching self-efficacies of teachers support empathy and represent the broader construct of social-emotional competencies in teachers (Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Managing challenging behaviors and children significantly contributed to the stress and burn-out for teachers and was one area teachers reported feeling most unprepared for as part of their teaching responsibilities. Teachers who experienced stress and job dissatisfaction cited the inability to, or challenges with, managing emotions, and challenging behaviors in children (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In a cyclical fashion, feeling underprepared to manage challenging behaviors can increase those behaviors in the classroom, which in turn, contributed to higher levels of stress for teachers. This stress resulted in more negative interactions with children who exhibited challenging behaviors; teachers who received training on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children reported feeling better prepared to manage challenging behaviors and contributed to a more positive classroom climate. Further research results indicated that stress levels of teachers influenced the relationship between the teacher and child (Whitaker et al., 2015).

Research results stated that emotional intelligence training for teachers increased their level of emotional intelligence and subsequent skills, as well as increased their understanding of their role in the social emotional learning for children (Zinsser et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2019). Training changed teaching practices and behaviors, including the relationship between child, teacher, and he environment (Dolev & Leshem, 2017; Turi et al., 2017; Ulloa et al., 2016). Training for teachers, while inconsistent in content,

focused primarily on social emotional learning for children, and while research results supported emotional intelligence training for teachers, that training was minimal (O'Conner et al., 2017b; Zinsser et al., 2016). Research studies stated that emotional intelligence can be developed in teachers to support a change in teaching behaviors and practices, an increase in the feelings of purpose in teaching, and in the relationships between the teacher and child (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). Another study supported the significance of social-emotional intelligence training for teachers and stated that such training produced teachers with better social skills, better social-emotional skills, and better psychological skills which had a direct and indirect impact on the proficiencies of teachers (Turi et al., 2017). This study of the self-perceptions of teachers' social emotional competence and their influence on their responses to children with challenging behaviors sought to further the body of research on the needs of teacher training around their own social emotional competence.

Further study elucidated the differences in education levels of teachers and their responses to the challenging behaviors of children; teachers with an associate degree reported more negative responses to those behaviors and viewed those behaviors as disruptive and destructive, while teachers with bachelor's degrees reported more positive responses to those behaviors and generally viewed those behaviors through a more constructivist, child-centered lens (Lang et al., 2017). The inclusion criteria for participants in this study included teachers with the minimum number of child development units to teach and a maximum of a bachelor degree in child development to

better examine those differences in education level and its influence on teachers' social emotional intelligence and their responses to children with challenging behavior.

Disciplinary action in preschool has long-term and sever consequences for children (Zinsser et al., 2019). Factors that contributed to the exclusion of children with challenging behaviors from preschool were attributed to teachers' perceptions of the organizational climate of their work environment, access to and implementation of behavioral supports, and the consequences of referral requests for additional assessment and support (Miller, Smith-Bonahue, & Kemple, 2017). Teachers who implement social emotional learning for children with behavioral problems initiated fewer expulsion procedures and the rate of expulsion requests was mediated by the level of stress experienced by teachers (Zinsser et al., 2019). The utilization of social emotional learning contributed to one-third of the variance in initiated expulsion processes (Zinsser et al., 2019). The field of early childhood education integrated the framework of the whole child with developmentally appropriate practice and the integration of social emotional learning and the proactive acceptance of social emotional learning protected teaching practices from the pressures of overarching political policies (Moreno, Nagasawa, & Schwartz, 2018). Overall policies, however, failed to address the relationship between the implementation evidence-based practices and expulsion rates for preschool children (Garrity et al., 2017).

A recent study concluded that emotional intelligence as part of teacher training impacted their awareness and the adoption of the concepts of emotional intelligence, increased their self-awareness, facilitated the development of emotional intelligence

skills, the deeper understanding of emotional intelligence in daily teaching practices, and in the understanding of teachers' roles in the development of social emotional learning for children (Dolev & Leshem, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study explored how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. This chapter examined the current research on social emotional competency of teachers, the social emotional learning of children, the dynamic of the teacher-child relationship in relation to children with challenging behaviors, and the need for increased and advanced training and professional development for teachers. The following chapter will discuss the design and methodology of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. A better understanding of teachers' perceptions of their own social-emotional competence may allow teachers to develop and enhance their social-emotional competence, gain deeper insight into its influence on their responses to children with challenging behaviors, and guide teacher preparation programs in designing curriculum to improve teachers' social-emotional competence. In this chapter, I began with the methodology used and continue with the research design and rationale and the role of the researcher. I continued with the details of the study, including the population and participant selection, instrumentation, procedure for recruitment, data collection, and analysis. The chapter concludes with an examination of procedures to ensure trustworthiness and ethical procedures of the study.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

The central concept of this study was an exploration of teachers' perceptions of their own social-emotional competence and how it influences their responses to children with challenging behavior and seeks to answer the research question, "How do teachers' social emotional competencies influence their responses to children with challenging behaviors?" In consideration of the research design for this study, I carefully evaluated both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to better determine the best

approach. Quantitative research methods begin with an initial hypothesis and the use of measured data to test the initial hypothesis (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Quantitative research focuses primarily on the collection of data in the form of large numbers and statistics, rather than individual perceptions and is used to evaluate the quantity of data (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Quantitative research uses standardized methods that place an emphasis on statistical information and standardized methods that include more td samples that follow a deductive approach, or hypotheses testing (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). The role of the researcher in quantitative research is more objective and maintains separation from the research topic, avoiding bias, wherein the researcher has a clear objective (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

By contrast, qualitative research begins without a specific hypothesis, which is induced during the early stages of research (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative researchers seek to gain understanding of the phenomenon through a holistic, descriptive approach through which meaning emerges through data collection and analysis (Astalin, 2013). While quantitative research removes the researcher from the process by examining predictions and comparisons, in a qualitative study, researchers examine variables in their natural setting, gather data using open-ended questions, observations, interviews, and review of relevant documents (Astalin, 2013). I explored the various types of qualitative research, including phenomenology, narrative analysis, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Ethnography provides descriptions of individual societies within the boundaries of culture (Astalin, 2013). The study I conducted was not bound by culture and I did not choose this method. Grounded theory is the development of a new theory

through the collection and analysis of data (Astalin, 2013). As I did not develop any new theories, this approach was not appropriate for my study. Phenomenology is the study of individuals around a phenomenon and seeks to discover what each individual share with others as the phenomenon is experienced (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A narrative analysis arranges stories chronologically as told by participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). My study did not explore a phenomenon or stories told chronologically and I chose neither the phenomenological approach nor the narrative approach to this study. The basic qualitative approach uses data from in-depth interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I chose a basic qualitative approach using interviews with teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of their own social emotional competencies and how it influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I first identified my values, assumptions, and biases prior to beginning the process of data collection (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The process of reflexivity enables the researcher to better understand their role in the study, particularly the ways in which the background, culture, and experiences of the researcher might shape the interpretation of themes created and the meaning applied to the data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). My role as the researcher was to elicit in depth responses to the interview questions designed to gain an understanding of the social emotional competence of teachers and how that influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors. This process began with gaining the consent of participants that

included information regarding the study, as well as an establishment of trust by ensuring confidentiality of teachers' identities. Further, it was my responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the data collected, a process that began with devising questions that provided that understanding. By asking open-ended questions, avoiding leading questions, and creating a setting wherein teachers not only understand the scope of the study and their role in that study, but also feel as though they can openly disclose their thoughts and feelings throughout the interview process, I established interactions conducive to attaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' interview question responses.

The researcher's role is to maintain the integrity of the research and avoid bias that might influence the research by using self-awareness around thoughts, feelings, opinions, and prejudices that might not fit the expected outcome of the study (see Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016). To maintain integrity of the study, it was important to note any conflict of interest or ethical concerns. I previously worked for the small nonprofit organization that managed three large childcare centers on the university campus where the centers were located. I chose teachers within one of the three childcare centers that I had not directly supervised, evaluated, or engaged with daily for over 1 year. I did not provide incentives for participation and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time, thus coercion was not a factor in this study.

Participant Selection Logic

The population I chose for the purposes of this study was preschool teachers within the same organization who shared commonalities that included at least 12 units of early childhood education courses or a bachelor's degree and at least 1 year of experience

working with children aged 2-5 years of age. While I previously worked within the same organization and managed one of three centers on the university campus, I do not currently supervise any of the participants. I received written consent to conduct the study from the founder of the organization through a response to my written request to include teachers within the organization. In my request, I described the selection criteria for the teachers used in the study and noted that I do not currently supervise the participants. I described the interview questions and scenarios illustrating children with challenging behaviors I used for the study. I detailed the length of time for the study and explained that children within the organization were not used for the purposes of the study. I further explained that the interviews would not be conducted during work hours. I closed my written request for permission to use the organization's teachers in the study with an explanation of the ethical procedures for the study and stated that all information would be kept confidential and follow the ethical protocol of research. Permission was granted through a written email response.

Each teacher selected for the study had at least four core early childhood classes that designated the term qualified teacher: child growth and development, curriculum, child family and community, and early childhood practicum. Each teacher had at least 1 year of teaching experience. Four to six teachers who met the selection criteria were invited through email to participate in the study and had the option to decline the invitation. The invitations for participation described the purpose of my research, participation requirements, inclusion criteria, and a step-by-step description of the study as related to the participation process that included a description of the interview protocol

and a description of the written scenarios of challenging behaviors. Saturation of data were achieved after the data of six participants was analyzed and no new information was gained from any study participant.

Instrumentation

The purpose of the semistructured interview as the instrument of data collection was to gather information that is pertinent to teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and how that influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The interview protocol (Appendix A) for this study included two segments. The first portion of the interview protocol were questions designed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that reflected the characteristics of each category of CASEL's framework: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The second portion of the interview protocol included questions designed to gain an in depth understanding of teacher's responses to four scenarios presenting children with challenging behaviors; scenarios of children with challenging behaviors were based on my observations of children throughout my 30 years of working with children and my study of child development was used for this segment of the interview. I reviewed the interview protocol with three professional colleagues to gather their feedback on the questions to ensure each question was worded in a way such that each participant could understand what was being asked and could answer the question to provide in-depth information. I conducted a pilot interview with a preschool teacher not related to the

study to ensure that each question asked can be answered openly and honestly and will elicit information that will provide relevant data for this study.

Procedures for Recruitment and Data Collection

Center directors sent the participation invitation via email and interested participants responded to me through email. I contacted potential participants in writing through email and shared the details of the interview protocol that included the name of the participant, the date, location, start and end time, the recording mechanism of the interview, and an introduction explaining the purpose of the interview (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Introductory comments served to inform the participants of the purpose of the interview and the ways in which the interview was are conducted; closing comments included details as to what will happen next with the data, permission to contact the participant later if needed, as well as thanking the interviewee for their participation (see Burkholder et al., 2016). The interview was limited to a 45 to 60 minute interview period to provide ample opportunity to thoroughly answer all interview questions. Probing questions were used to help build a connection with the interviewee, gain insight into the nonverbal cues of the interviewee, and provide an overall sense of control over the interview process for the researcher (see Burkholder et al., 2016). As the researcher, I remained unbiased and included corresponding body language and tone and avoided leading comments and comments that communicated a positive or negative response (see Burkholder et al., 2016).

A significant component of qualitative research was the contribution of the time spent in the field of study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As the researcher, I have

spent over 30 years in the field of early childhood working within a variety of programs with a multitude of teachers, which enabled me to add to the richness of the study because of those experiences. Common challenges in the interview process included personal experiences and feelings through which I filtered the responses of the interviewee; to mitigate viewing the interviewee's responses through my personal filter, I practiced the interview process with a preschool teacher who met the inclusion criteria and used a slow and systematic approach with a clear interview protocol for both probing questions and the recording process of the interviewee's responses, and I was careful to reflect on my own assumptions regarding the interview questions and the interviewee (see Burkholder et al., 2016). I used bracketing, in the form of memos, to help mitigate my own perceptions from influencing the responses of the interviewees' during the interview process (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Memos were notes written to myself during the data collection process that recorded descriptions and meanings I attributed to the categories and explanations of patterns emerging among those categories (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Another aspect I focused on during the interview process was being fully prepared for any emotional responses by the interviewee during the interview process, as it is unethical to fail to provide support for the interview should the process leave them feeling vulnerable or in need of support (see Burkholder et al., 2016).

I also chose to conduct a pilot interview with one early childhood professional who met the inclusion criteria not associated with the study to help identify bias in the interview questions and probes, and reactions to and judgments of participant responses, and to help recognize and revise responses to participants that may convey judgment (see

Burkholder et al., 2016). To help identify the culture of the program within which the participants worked, I talked with the center director prior to the interview process to ascertain nuances of the program culture (see Burkholder et al., 2016). To mitigate any perception of power over the participant, I considered my setting to ensure comfort level and perceptions of the participant, encouraged transparency during the interview process, and explained the purpose of the research study (see Burkholder et al., 2016). I currently hold no supervisory capacity in the management of this center or its teachers.

Data Analysis Plan

The types of data used in the analysis for this study included the information gathered during the semi-structured interview process to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' social emotional competence and their responses to scenarios of children with challenging behaviors. The first step in the data collection process was to reflect on the ways in which my personal background, experiences, and the cultural lens through which I viewed the scope of this study shaped the way I interpreted, analyzed, and found meaning in the data. This process of reflexivity was maintained throughout the data collection process through journaling. The second step in the process was to conduct the interviews with each participant and take notes during each interview; the audio was recorded using Zoom and the transcription process completed using Sonix. The third step was comprised of a review of the transcripts in comparison with the recorded interviews for accuracy and the notes taken during the interview. Finally, the transcripts were sent to each participant for review to ensure confirmation of accuracy. Member-checking strengthened the credibility of the study and provided an opportunity for each participant

to confirm the accuracy of their transcription, a summary of their transcript, and a summary of the study's findings. I then began the inductive coding process.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommend the eight steps of Tesch's coding process for data analysis. Once the transcription of the data were complete, I read each transcript and recorded general ideas, thoughts, and my credibility of the data. In addition to the credibility of the data, Tesch's first step in the coding process recommends reading all the transcripts to get a feeling for the over-arching meaning of the transcripts. In the second step of the coding process, I read each transcript and interpreted the underlying meaning for each, as suggested by Tesch. During the coding process, I used a thematic analysis and broke down the text into its smallest parts to reorganize into relatable stories (see Braun & Clarke, 2014). In the following step, I read each interview transcript, listed all topics, and grouped each topic into columns in a spreadsheet format and described significant topics, unique topics, and other topics.

Once I completed that step, I continued with the fourth step in Tesch's coding process and went back to the interview data and abbreviated the topics as codes, wrote those codes next to the correlating text in each document, and determined if any new topics emerged as a result of that process. In the fifth step, I determined the most descriptive words for those topics and created categories, and reduced those categories by grouping according to similarities, and extended beyond the description and theme identification to draw complex connections between categories. In the sixth step, I decided upon abbreviations for each category and alphabetized those categories. The seventh step was to assemble the data into each category, begin the analysis process,

perform a preliminary analysis, and recode if necessary, in the final step. The coding process generated five themes. The data were analyzed through an inductive process and built categories and themes from the bottom up and organized the data into more abstract sets of information and was presented as a qualitative narrative to convey the findings of the data analysis. As the researcher, I looked for discrepant data during the data analysis process and determined that the participants' responses supported each other and did not identify any data that did not fit into any theme. An interpretation of the findings confirmed or diverged from past findings and resulted in new questions that needed to be asked, potential areas for further study, and derived new meaning in comparison to the current literature on this topic (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Issues of trustworthiness of the data must be considered when conducting qualitative research. The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data establish trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility was established by confirming the accuracy of the data, data analysis, and the findings through member-checking. Each participant had the opportunity to review the transcribed data, a narrative from the resulting data analysis, and the resulting findings for accuracy of interpretation. Credibility ensures the accuracy and consistency of the findings. Transferability enabled the reader to internalize the findings and ascertain their ability to apply those findings to similar contexts (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To further establish validity and transferability, I created a thick, rich description of the data, the data analysis, and the resulting findings by using quotes from the participants to illustrate that those experiences

and behaviors were applicable to other contexts and settings relevant to the reader. I wanted to illustrate not only the behaviors and experiences of the participant but contextualize them such that the behaviors and experiences were meaningful, relatable, and transferable to the outside reader. To establish dependability of the research findings, I maintained an audit trail of each step in the data collection and analysis process to ensure that the study's findings were based on the participants' narratives and not researcher's bias (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I recorded and described each step of the process in-depth, beginning with the data collection and data analysis process and concluded with the resulting narrative that illustrated the study's findings. Confirmability of the study's findings was established through the continuous process of self-reflection and self-awareness throughout the study process. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the study process and findings were viewed through the lens of my own professional background, personal experiences, culture, gender, socioeconomic background, and history. Reflexivity ensured that the study findings were based on the participants' responses and not on my bias.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures followed during this study included written consent from the organization's founder for access to its teachers; because the teachers were employed by the organization and the study did not include children that attend the university's childcare program, I did not need the university's consent for the study. A participant consent form was signed by the teachers, and described the background of the study, procedures for the study, a sample of the interview questions, a description of the

voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits of participation in the study, information about compensation, information regarding the privacy of the study participants, and the institutional review board (IRB) contact information. The participant consent form informed each participant of the assurance of the voluntary nature of the study. Further, I assured teachers that should the need arise for outside support regarding any adverse responses to the study, that support would be provided. At the start of the interview process, we discussed the importance of transparency and honesty in their responses, as well as my promise to respect those responses and keep them confidential. The consent form additionally stated that all data gathered was used anonymously for the study, held confidential, used only for the purposes of this study, and then destroyed upon completion of my dissertation. Incentives were not offered for participation in this study to avoid any coercion of participants.

Summary

This chapter details the research design and rationale for the proposed study of teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and its influence of their responses to children with challenging behaviors. Participant criterion included selection of teachers with at least twelve units of early childhood education courses or a bachelor's degree and at least one year of experience working with children aged 2 through 5 years of age. The study followed a basic qualitative approach and utilized the responses of teachers to the interview questions until saturation was reached. The researcher-developed interview protocol (Appendix A) had 2 parts: questions designed to elicit each teacher's perception of their own social emotional competence and questions designed to

elicit each teacher's response to scenarios of children with challenging behaviors. I followed Tesch's "Eight Steps in the Coding Process" for data analysis collected from the interviews with each participant (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The trustworthiness of the data were established through the accuracy of the coding process and member-checking. An audit trail recorded each step in the process and established confirmability. Additionally, to establish transferability, I created a thick description of the data collection and analysis process and the resulting findings, so the behaviors and experiences were meaningful, relatable, and transferable to the outside reader (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data were analyzed using an inductive coding process building categories and themes from the bottom up and organizing the data into more abstract sets of information and was presented as a qualitative narrative to convey the findings of the data analysis (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I ensured the ethical treatment of the participants through IRB approval (07-24-20-0374708) and ensure confidentiality of the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary and each participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Results from this study are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

RQ: How do teachers' perceptions of their social emotional competence influence their responses to children with challenging behaviors?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive narrative of the study results. The chapter begins with a description of the study setting and the participant characteristics, proceeds with data collection and analysis, and a presentation of the results were presented thematically according to the research question. The chapter moves forward with evidence of trustworthiness, including dependability, credibility, validity, and transferability. The chapter concludes with a summary and transition to the final chapter of my dissertation.

Pilot

I conducted a pilot interview with one early childhood professional who met the inclusion criteria and was not associated with the study. This early childhood professional has a BA degree in education sciences and 4 years of experience working with dual language learners in a preschool environment. Conducting the pilot interview allowed me to practice using the interview protocol. When asking the interview protocol questions, I focused on the participant's understanding of the questions and the ease of her responses and did not note any request for clarification of the questions or hesitancy in responding

to the questions. This helped to determine if the questions were posed in such a way that participants understood what was being asked and to elicit the in depth information I was seeking for my study. In listening to the participant's responses to the interview protocol questions and scenarios, I was able to reflect on the process to determine any bias I had with any question or response based on my reactions to the responses of the participant. After the interview was over, I asked the participant for feedback on the interview process, the questions, and the scenarios of challenging behaviors. She said, "It helped me think more about my feelings in the moment when children had similar behaviors in the classroom. I hadn't really thought about how I felt before. Maybe after it was over, but not really in the moment." The pilot interview helped determine that participants could understand the interview questions and provide answers to elicit the information needed for my study.

Settings

Preschool teachers from a single childcare center on a university campus who met the inclusion criteria were chosen to participate in the study. Each teacher had at least 12 units of early childhood education courses or a bachelor's degree and at least 1 year of experience working with children aged 2-5 years of age. Participant characteristics are detailed in Table 1. Data saturation was reached after six interviews. Semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place requirements, the interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Sonix. At the time the interviews took place, the participants and I were experiencing a global pandemic that required everyone other than nonessential

workers to shelter-in-place, most nonessential businesses to close, and enhanced protocols regarding social and physical distancing were put into place. Colleges, public school districts, and private schools were closed and were conducting classes in online virtual formats. Most childcare centers were also closed; childcare centers open to essential workers operated under strict social and physical distance protocols. Teachers who participated in this study worked in childcare centers that remained open to essential workers.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Worked with Children Age 2-5 Years	Educational Background	Years of Experience
PT0001	Yes	AA in ECE	8 years
PT0002	Yes	BA in Justice/12 units in ECE	4 years
PT0003	Yes	53 units toward BA degree	12 years
PT0004	Yes	BA in Child and Adolescent Development	7 years
PT0005	Yes	BA in Child and Adolescent Development	4 years
PT0006	Yes	BA Degree in Linguistics/12 units in ECE	16 years

PT0001. Participant 1 has been a preschool teacher since 2012. She has an Associate of Arts degree in early childhood education and primarily works 2-3-year-old children in a play based program. She stated that being a teacher has provided her with great resources to help when her own 3-year-old son exhibits challenging behaviors and said, "I feel like working with children has made me a better parent to my own son." Avoid ending paragraphs with a direct quote. Add summary to integrate the quotes into the paragraph.

PT0002. Participant 2 has a BA degree in criminal justice and wanted to be a probation officer. After working as a TSA agent at the airport for a brief period, she decided to pursue a different path in life. She began working with preschool age children 4 years ago and has also earned 12 units in early childhood education. She stated that "Children with challenging behaviors leave the biggest stamp on your heart since they are the ones that you miss the most."

PT0003. Participant 3 has worked with children as long as she can remember and began babysitting as a teenager. She knew she wanted to work with children at a young age and initially pursued a career in nursing and worked briefly in labor and delivery. She simultaneously became a parent and discovered the harsh realities of nursing were too much for her and began to pursue a career in the field of early childhood education. She has worked in the field of early childhood for the past 12 years. Participant 3 has completed 53 units toward her BA degree in early childhood and hopes to complete her degree in the future. About her feelings for working with children, she stated, "I

absolutely love working with children, especially in the early years, because they're so innocent."

PT0004. Participant 4 started working with children as a teenager teaching Sunday school. She attended college as a nursing major but eventually pursued a BA degree in child and adolescent development. Her initial focus was on adolescents because she had a desire to be that one person who was there for teenagers who had lost their way in life. She later discovered her love for preschool age children and has been working in early childhood for the past 7 years. She said, "There's just so much love, you can't get that from anywhere else."

PT0005. Participant 5 began working in her mother's school as a teenager. She initially pursued a degree in linguistics while also working with preschool age children because she wanted to work with children but focus on linguistics. She earned 12 units in early childhood and has worked with preschool age children for the past 16 years. She stated, "I have always loved working with children, even when I was younger and I would visit my Mom's school, if I saw a child crying, I always wanted to help."

PT0006. Participant 6 has a degree in child and adolescent development and is currently pursuing a degree in nursing and plans to continue her work with children in that field. She initially wanted to teach kindergarten and first grade but after spending a few years with preschool age children, she discovered her love for that age group, and has been working in that capacity for the last 4 years. She said, "I honestly don't regret going into this field. I think, you know, I think that I'm meant to be in the field working with children, and I think I always knew that it was just the one thing I was good at."

Data Collection

I collected interview data from six participants and used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to conduct the interviews. Due to the pandemic, each participant engaged in the interview process using Zoom. Interviews were conducted outside of the participants' working hours, as stipulated in the letter of cooperation, and most interviews were conducted while the participants were home. Two of the interviews were conducted using Zoom while the participants were outside at a park near their homes. I initially planned for the interviews to last approximately 60 minutes but four of the interviews lasted almost 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Sonix. I had originally planned to transcribe the data using Zoom but as that option was cost prohibitive and required the purchase of more than one user license, I used the Sonix transcription service available for purchase by the hour. The interviews were conducted over a 2-week period; I conducted three interviews each week until all six interviews were complete.

Once the interviews were complete, I thanked the participants for their time and their invaluable input to the study and reiterated their significant contribution to the field of early childhood education. After the interviews were transcribed, I sent each participant a copy of their transcribed interview to review and check for accuracy to ensure credibility of the information collected. Minor corrections were made with certain words mistakenly transcribed, but the overall transcriptions were viewed by each participant as an accurate representation of their thoughts and feelings in response to the interview protocol questions.

Data Analysis

Once the transcription of the data were completed, I printed and read each transcript and recorded general ideas and thoughts as to the credibility of the data. In addition, I read the transcripts to get a feeling for the overarching meaning of the transcripts and recorded those thoughts at the end of each participant's transcript. In the second step of the coding process, I read each transcript and focused on the underlying meaning and wrote down my thoughts in the margins of each document for every response to the interview questions; I then highlighted relevant and meaningful text. In the following step, I listed all topics as noted in the margins of each transcript, grouped topics by similarity, and entered each topic into a spreadsheet. From this list of topics, I went back to the data, abbreviated the topics as codes, and wrote those codes next to the highlighted text I associated with each topic in each document. Table 2 displays the codes I generated because of this step in the coding process.

I entered these codes into a spreadsheet to prepare for the next step in the coding process. I looked at the topics and created descriptive phrases, or categories, for those topics and assigned each category a color. I then considered the interrelationships of categories, reducing the number of categories by grouping topics together and drawing complex connections between those categories and assigned each topic the color associated with its corresponding category. The codes cultural sensitivity, effective communication, empathy, goal setting, learn by experience, managing differences in teaching philosophies, motivation, parent partnerships, principles and practices of teaching, professional development and training, qualities of strong relationships with

children, recognition of emotions, self-efficacy were grouped in the category labeled qualities of effective teachers. Codes such as discrepancies in emotions and emotion management, compartmentalize work and home, manage emotions during conflict, conflict resolution, negative emotions, problem solving, recognition of emotions, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-perception of social emotional competence were grouped into the category labeled emotional strengths and weaknesses of preschool teachers. The codes assigned to the category sense of purpose in teaching include ethics, rewards of teaching, and teaching is a reciprocal process. The category understanding child development includes the codes qualities of strong relationships with children, respect for children, role model behaviors for children, significance of social emotional learning in good citizenship as adults, support children's social relationships, and values. The final category of emotionally responsive strategies in managing children with challenging behaviors includes the codes determine triggers, determine what child needs by understanding behavior, focus on child's immediate emotions and needs, individual needs of children, and responses to challenging behaviors.

I then decided upon abbreviations for each category and alphabetized those categories on my spreadsheet; I entered the corresponding highlighted text into each category and conducted a preliminary analysis. I considered the possibility of discrepant cases, but the data analysis process confirmed that participant responses supported each other and there were no discrepant cases within the data. The common themes that emerged from this data analysis process were (a) qualities of effective teachers, (b) emotional strengths and weaknesses of preschool teachers, (c) sense of purpose in

teaching, (d) understanding child development, (e) emotionally responsive strategies in managing children with challenging behaviors.

Table 2

Generated Codes

compartmentalizing work and home	principles and practices of teaching
conflict resolution	problem solving
cultural awareness	professional development and training
determine what child needs by understanding behavior	qualities of strong relationships with children
determine triggers	recognition of emotions
managing differences in teaching philosophies	respect for children
discrepancies in emotion and emotion management	responses to challenging behaviors
effective communication	role model behaviors for children
empathy	rewards of teaching
ethics	self-confidence
focus on child's immediate emotions and needs	self-efficacy
goal setting	self-perception of social emotional competence
individual needs of children	stress management
learn by experience	significance of SEL in good citizenship as adults
manage emotions during conflict	support child's social relationships
motivation	teaching and learning are a reciprocal process
negative emotions	values
parent partnerships	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The components of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and must be considered when conducting qualitative research (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Issues of trustworthiness of the data must be considered when conducting qualitative research; credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability of the data establish trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Member checking established credibility by confirming the accuracy of the data, data analysis, and the findings through member-checking. Each participant had the opportunity to review the transcribed data, a narrative from the resulting data analysis of each transcript, and a summary of the study's findings to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. Credibility ensures the accuracy and consistency of the findings (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To establish transferability, I created a thick, rich description of the teachers, the data and the data analysis, and the resulting findings by using quotes from the participants to illustrate that those experiences and behaviors were applicable to other contexts and settings and created opportunities for shared experiences with the reader. I wanted to illustrate not only the behaviors and experiences of the participant but contextualize them such that the behaviors and experiences are meaningful, relatable, and transferable to the outside reader. To establish dependability of the research findings, I maintained an audit trail of each step in the data collection and analysis process to ensure that the study's findings were based on the participants' narratives and not researcher's bias. I recorded and described each step of the process in-depth, beginning with the data collection and data analysis process and concluded with the resulting narrative that illustrated the study's findings. Confirmability of the study's findings was established through the continuous process of self-reflection and self-awareness throughout the study process. The study process and findings were viewed through the lens of my own professional background, personal experiences, culture,

gender, socioeconomic background, and history and the process of reflexivity ensured that the study findings were based on the participants' responses and not on my bias.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The framework for this study reflected CASEL's model of social emotional competence and includes five core competencies (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). The questions used in the semistructured interview protocol were designed to reflect the characteristics of these five competencies. The interview protocol consisted of questions that reflected the characteristics of these five competencies and four written scenarios that presented children who exhibited challenging behaviors for a child at age 2, age 3, age 4, and age 5. The six participants provided in-depth responses to the semistructured interview questions. Two of the participants revealed that they felt nervous about the interview, but after spending time helping to reassure each participant that participation was voluntary, that they could choose not to answer particular questions if they felt uncomfortable, and we could stop the interview at any time, the participants felt more comfortable and were able to continue with the interview process.

The following outcomes were a result of the data gathered from the interview data that explored the study's research question. RQ 1 asks: How do teachers' perceptions of their social emotional competence influence their responses to children with challenging

behaviors? The common themes that emerged from this data analysis process were (a) qualities of effective preschool teachers, (b) emotional strengths and weaknesses of preschool teachers, (c) sense of purpose in teaching, (d) understanding child development, (e) emotionally responsive strategies in managing children with challenging behaviors.

Qualities of Effective Preschool Teachers

Five of the six participants were characterized by a strong sense of empathy that included the ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others through an awareness of body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and patterns of behavior. PT0002 shared, "Empathy is what makes me a good teacher and just being able to connect with the children and kind of seeing where their emotions are coming from and how I can help." PT0006 said, "I was able to kind of always put myself in their shoes and kind of think how they would think and that has worked for me for the past 4 years." PT0001 discussed her ability to recognize the emotions of others from her perspective as a preschool teacher and said, "I am not an empath by any means, but I am more aware and as a preschool teacher, I've learned how to read the body language, you know, and what people are saying and combine all of that together to assess how people are feeling." PT0002 also said of her ability to recognize the emotions of others, "I would say I am pretty confident. I feel like I have a lot of empathy and I feel like that's what makes me a good teacher and just being able to connect with the children and kind of seeing where their emotions are coming from and how I can help them." PT0002 emphasized her ability to recognize others' emotions by stating, "I am pretty confident, but it's also

important to know the person, their background, what the source of those feelings could be using my own experiences." She followed that by talking about how that helps her with children's emotions and said, "I can understand and easily put myself in someone else's shoes. That helps me a lot with the children. I feel like a lot of adults dismiss children's feelings instead of trying to understand where they're coming from. Whatever a child is feeling is important." PT0003 also expressed a strong sense of empathy, stating, "I think when it comes to children, I'm really good at their emotions." And finally, PT0004 said, "I'm pretty good at reading people. Yeah, like I, I do well socially, I understand the facial expressions, body language. I'm pretty confident with how I read people."

One of the challenges shared by participants around understanding emotions was their ability to recognize more complex emotions, or emotions that were in contrast with words or body language. PT0003 stressed the importance of communication when trying to recognize the emotions of others, and stated that, "If the communication is not there, then it's hard to guess what somebody is going through." PT0001 said, "It's more difficult to read the combined emotions, rather than the mad, happy, and the sad – the more in-depth emotions are a little harder to read." PT0006 said that "I have a hard time figuring out if someone is being honest about how they're feeling. People can say they are okay, but they're really not." PT0001 felt that body language was an integral part of understanding the emotions of others, stating that, "your face might be saying things, but your body might be saying something else, you might be thinking one thing, but your body is saying something different. I use all of those extra tools to understand the

person's emotions better." PT0006 said that when "someone's body language changes, it's usually a sign of their mood changing, and so you know, moods and feelings go hand in hand."

Each participant expressed aspects of building strong relationships with children, parents, and co-teachers. Qualities of those relationships included trust, respect, honesty, and effective communication. PT0004 talked about strong relationships with children and the importance of trust. She said, "In order to have a relationship with a child, they have to be able to trust you and you have to be able to trust them that when they're ready, they'll start a relationship." PT0001 shared the values that were important to her in strong relationships and included, "Honesty, integrity, and transparency." She illustrated the importance of honesty when she shared a story about her son and her decision to be honest with him about the death of an animal. She said, "Honesty is important. He can't be anything but hones and teaching him that honesty is okay, you're going to be asked to be honest and that's important." PT0002 talked about the interrelationship between respect and strong relationships with children and said, "Give the children the respect they deserve, being somebody they can come to, being somebody that will listen to them, being somebody that will support them, that's a big part of teaching." She continued by saying that "trust and having the same morals, having the same beliefs" are also important in strong relationships with children. PT0003 said when building strong

relationships, “Patience is one of the big things you have to have and the love for the work you do.”

Every participant felt that partnerships with parents were imperative to the child’s learning and development, particularly when addressing challenging behaviors. PT0001 illustrated the importance of “the back and forth communication with parents to keep everything transparent, to help the kids the best way that the parents and I can, inside and outside the classroom.” PT0006 said that for parents, “the worst thing that you can do is not work together with the teachers who are working with your child, because then it becomes a one way street where teachers work really hard to work through certain challenges, but when it comes to home, nothing is put into practice. Communication and teamwork are very important.” Having strong relationships with co-teachers was another central component of effective teaching for these participants. PT0003 stated that “communication with teachers and not reacting when the situation arises and having a safe space to talk about it later on has helped me manage my emotions and hopefully managing the other teachers’ emotions.”

Every participant expressed the importance of the role effective communication plays in their relationships with children, parents, and co-teachers. PT0001 said, “LISTENING!” is the most important aspect of effective communication. She said, “you cannot communicate properly if you cannot listen!” PT0002 added to that perspective and stated that, “honesty is huge, and being able to listen to the other person, to hear it from another person’s perspective and then finding common ground.” PT0004 connected emotions to effective communication by stating that “if you’re honest with your emotions

than you can effectively communicate." PT0003 went even deeper with that thought and said, "the more raw it is, the better you can come to understand the person and try to build that relationship with the person."

Other aspects of effective teaching included the participants' ability to manage their stress. Participants managed their stress in a variety of ways, such as, mindfulness and self-reflection practices, deep breathing, yoga, and listening to music. PT0006 said that she managed her stress by "quickly identifying what I can do to relieve my stress." This suggests that she can quickly identify what the stress might be and how to best alleviate the source of that stress. For some of the participants, stress management held a deeper meaning. PT0004 shared that stress management "triggers innovative thinking" and inspires her to be creative in finding solutions for the situations and circumstances that caused her stress and that process of "learning alleviates her stress." Every participant also overwhelmingly said that conflict is something they avoid. PT0001 said, "I don't like it." PT0003 when asked how she handled conflict, said, "I don't!" All participants also expressed the importance of being a role model for children and discussed the values and ethics that guided their behavior as teachers in the classroom.

Emotional Strengths and Weaknesses of Preschool Teachers

As I progressed through the data analysis process, I became aware of something surprising. Participants expressed a strong sense of self-awareness that revealed discrepancies in their perceptions of their personal and professional sense self-confidence. PT003 said that "at work I am very confident that I have control of my emotions, I am level-headed and able to be as patient and as communicative with the

children as possible," but later said, "I am very confident in the classroom, but in my personal life, I don't feel very confident." When I asked what she felt contributed to that difference, she said, "I am passionate about what I do and it's my escape. I feel free to be myself in the classroom." PT0002 also shared when asked how she felt about her own level of self-confidence, "as a teacher, very well. It's a great thing to model for children – your ideas, your beliefs, kind of your presence." She also shared that when asked about handling conflict, "I usually try to avoid it in my personal life, but with children, I feel like I would try to find the deeper meaning behind it. What is causing the conflict? How can it be resolved? What is my role? What can my role be as a teacher to help get them to that place?"

Emotional strengths for participants included a strong sense of empathy, patience, emotional awareness, and self-reflection. PT0006 shared that "I am very empathic. I understand how someone else feels." PT0004 said when reflecting on her emotional self-awareness, "I don't like feeling things without understanding why I'm feeling those certain things." PT005 talked about patience and a sense of calmness so that emotions don't "escalate and get bigger." PT0003 also talked about patience as an emotional strength and said her strengths lay in her "patience and her willingness to work on what's not right." The identified emotional weaknesses of teachers were more varied and included such characteristics as being too sensitive, the inability to express emotions, reacting rather than thinking through the emotions and the situation, and taking the time to feel and process emotions before acting on those emotions. PT0001 said, "I don't like to talk about my emotions." PT0005 shared, when talking about being too sensitive, that

"it's good to give all of yourself but at the same time, I should kind of step back from it, and kind of not let my feelings out." PT0002 talked about exhausting her ability to control her emotions while at work and lacking the ability to control her emotions at home, stating, "I am pretty reactive." PT0006 said, when discussing talking about her own emotions, "I don't like to talk about my feelings when I am sad. I don't like to feel vulnerable."

Sense of Purpose in Teaching

I asked each participant to share their feelings about working with children. Every teacher expressed a deep love for working with children. PT0006 said, "I was called to the field. It is the one thing I am good at." PT0004 said, "They make me happy. I love the relationships, there's so much love you can't get anywhere else." PT0003 shared that she loved that the connection with children was so "innocent, real, and raw." PT0001 shared that her "favorite part is learning from the kids, who in turn, help me learn more about my job." PT0002 said of working with children that "it's the best – I love the connections, the emotions, and having them learn." PT0005 said that "I loved it since I was little. If I saw a child crying, I want them to feel better.". Each participant talked about the reciprocity of teaching young children. PT0006 said, "Working with children teaches you a lot about, you know, who you are as a person and how you treat others." PT0001 said that, "I love that I can learn as much from them as they learn from me." PT0002 said that "teaching has helped me better at recognizing my own emotions." PT0001 said, "If I wasn't in this field, I wouldn't be as socially and emotionally aware. It's the kids teaching us and us teaching the kids." Participants also understood the

significance of their role in not only the learning and development of children, but the impact those experiences and relationships had on the futures of the children in their classrooms. PT0005 said, “It’s very important, what we do, and you have to really invest yourself in it. You have to give all that you have, and you have to be very patient. You have to have your mind set on what you’re doing, that you are actually influencing their lives.”

Understanding Child Development

I asked them to share their perspective on the meaning of social emotional competence and their responses reflected an understanding of the definition of social emotional competence and included the importance of children’s ability to manage, understand, and express emotions in positive ways and their ability to build strong, positive relationships with their peers. On a deeper level, PT0001 said:

> Social emotional learning is everything in the world. My job as a preschool teacher is to give the children the building blocks for the rest of their academic career. Academics are important, they’ll learn that the rest of their lives, but we need to give them the foundation – how to do things emotionally to prepare them for the rest of their lives.

PT0004 emphasized that perspective by saying, “Social emotional competence is the most important aspect of being a good person. Managing, understanding, and thinking about emotions goes a long way to becoming a good citizen.” PT0003 also said that “understanding people for who they are, how they learn through their emotions, and how that plays a part in everything we learn in this world” is significant in understanding the

role of social emotional competence. As evidenced from their responses, these participants held a deep understanding of the significance of social emotional development as an integral component of child development. Participants understand what it means for children to be socially and emotionally competent, how that competence informs their success later in life, and the role teachers have in the development of social emotional competence in children.

The teachers who participated in this interview shared some common beliefs in what is important in child development. Respecting the rights of children and understanding that each child has individual needs were common themes for every participant. PT0004 said, "I respect their wishes, their bodies, their opinions. I give them their space." PT0002 said, "Everybody deserves to love and be loved, and deserves to be heard. Especially children." PT0003 said that, "I truly want to care for these children and connect with them, each of them has their own personality and making sure we connect with each child individually." PT0006 stated that "You have to really focus in on what each child's needs are…I try and understand each child's needs differently because it's easy to assume that all children have the same needs."

Emotionally Responsive Strategies in Managing Children with Challenging Behaviors

When asked to share their perspective on the most important aspect of managing challenging behaviors in children, teachers expressed a strongly held belief that each child was different and with different needs. PT0001 said, "Every child is different –

finding what works is most important." PT0006 expressed that "each child's needs are different. Do I understand those needs and am I not acting based on similar situations?"

As evidenced by their responses to the challenging behavior scenarios, understanding what motivated or triggered the child's behavior was an essential consideration for all of the participants. PT0002 felt that understanding "where each child was coming from – what's in their background that could be causing this behavior?" was a significant contribution to addressing challenging behaviors in children. PT0003 felt that it was important to understand that "the behavior doesn't represent who that child is – the behavior is something that happens internally." PT0004 expressed the importance of recognizing the differences in each child and in their experiences, saying, "you have to be aware so you can react accordingly." PT0005 echoed this response and said, "for every behavior, there is something behind it." For PT0006, she said that the most important aspect of managing children with challenging behavior was "patience, time, and commitment. Behavior is challenging for a reason. It's a process."

Responses to Challenging Behavior Scenarios

As part of the interview protocol, participants were asked to respond to scenarios of children with challenging behaviors (Appendix A). The first scenario involved a 2-year-old child who did not want to transition from 1 activity to another and she had collapsed onto the floor, crying, kicking, and screaming. PT0005 said, "I would not expect her to join morning meeting." All participants shared that once this child was ready for conversation, they would engage her in a discussion about her emotions.

In the second scenario, a 3-year-old child had been biting his peers excessively and during a transition to the outside yard, he bit another child. All participants shared concerns as to why this child was biting excessively. PT0005 said, “He’s crying out for help.” Because this child was a dual language learner, the participants expressed this child’s need for language and visual methods of communication, such as visual schedules, feeling cards, and visual conflict resolution cards. Participants also felt it was critical to determine the triggers for this child’s behavior and believe that identifying the triggers would help decrease or eliminate this behavior. PT0006 also noted that she would “not single this child out in front of his friends” and instead support his social relationships by “making it into a learning experience for everybody and kind of like a gentle reminder to all of the children that biting hurts.”

In the third scenario, a 4-year-old was refusing to nap and disrupting the other children who were attempting to sleep. She was excited for a visit from her Dad and was looking forward to heading to the park with him at pick up; her mother told her, however, that she had to rest on her cot quietly to go to the park with her Dad. Every participant said that they would focus on having this child do a quiet activity that centered on her excitement at seeing her Dad. Her parents were going through a divorce and the participants believed that it was more important to focus on her emotions than resting on her mat. Each participant was confident that a quiet activity on her cot would meet the emotional needs of this child as well as meet the needs of the rest of the children in the classroom.

In the final scenario, a 5-year-old child hits a teacher who is attempting to talk with him about turn-taking on a bike while outside on the yard. This child is having challenges making friends after his best friend moved away; his Dad is away on business most of the week, his Mom is on bedrest during the final weeks of her pregnancy, and he spends most of his time with his nanny. Each participant shared that in this situation, asking for help would be their first reaction after being hit by a child. Taking the opportunity to step away and process their emotions would better enable them to discuss this with the child. PT0004 said that "a strong relationship with this child is definitely needed to help meet his needs and manage these behaviors…this process is relationship-based."

In every scenario, participants were aware of the needs of each child, whether it was the need for language if a child was a dual language learner or at an age where the child was developing more complex language skills. Participants talked about the "why" of each behavior and asked, "What does this child need emotionally?" and discussed the best strategies to use to meet those emotional needs. Participants respected the emotions for each child in the scenario, gave the child space to express those emotions, used appropriate strategies, and asked for support if necessary.

Summary

The interpretation of the data derived from the interview responses of six participants indicates that teachers can compartmentalize their personal and professional lives, which reflected the differences in their perceptions of their social emotional competence. Participants felt a stronger sense of self-confidence in their professional

lives than they felt in their personal lives. Additionally, participants expressed the belief that managing children with challenging behaviors required a deep understanding of the "why" of the child's behavior. In response to the challenging behavior scenarios, teachers demonstrated emotionally responsive strategies that they felt were most effective and appropriate when managing children with challenging behaviors. The data derived from the interviews enabled me to comprehensively answer the research question and provided a deeper understanding and insight into the social emotional competence of teachers and how that influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. In this chapter, I presented the results of the analysis of the semi-structured interview data of six participants in the form of themes. The emerging themes reflected the perceptions of each participant as to their own social emotional competence and their responses to children with challenging behaviors. In Chapter 5, I will address the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications for social change, and conclusion for this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

A recent study indicated that expulsion rates for preschool aged children occurred at a rate of 10 children per every 1,000 enrolled in center-based early learning programs (citation). These rates were based on several factors which included the inability of teachers to manage challenging behaviors in children. In Chapter 2, an exploration of the current literature revealed gaps in the existing research on the beliefs, attitudes, and emotional responses of teachers toward specific social behaviors of children (see Coplan et al., 2015). Gaps existed in the research on the teachers' emotional competence and self-awareness to better enable teachers to effectively respond to the emotions of young children (Ulloa et al., 2016). Additional gaps also existed in understanding how teachers' beliefs and perceptions about emotions relate to a higher quality of emotional support behaviors and the learning outcomes for children (Zinsser et al., 2014). Key themes that stand out in those gaps include (a) emotional responses of teachers toward specific social behaviors of children, (b) the emotional competence and self-awareness of teachers and effective responses to the emotions of young children, and (c) teachers' beliefs and perceptions about emotions and their relationship to the quality of emotions support behaviors for children (Coplan et al., 2015; Ulloa et al., 2016, Zinsser et al., 2014). In my study I explored the emotional competence, self-awareness, and emotional responses of teachers toward challenging behaviors in children, specifically the emotions of children expressed through their behaviors. These gaps in the current research highlighted

the need for further research on the emotional competence and self-awareness of teachers and their responses to the emotions of young children and the beliefs of teachers as related to their own emotional competence and its influence on their relationships with children and their behaviors, particularly for children who exhibit challenging behaviors, so as to mitigate the effects of those behaviors on future academic and social success, including potential expulsion from center-based preschool programs.

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. In Chapter 3, I outlined the methodology, data collection and analysis process; the nature of this study used a basic qualitative design and used a bottom-up approach to develop a complex picture of teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and how it influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. In Chapter 4, I shared the results of the data analysis gathered from the semistructured virtual interviews I conducted with six preschool teachers. The interview data provided a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and explored their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

The key findings of this study showed that teachers could compartmentalize their personal and professional lives and were very aware that their perceptions of certain aspects of their social emotional competence in their professional lives differed from their perceptions of their social emotional competence in their personal lives. Teachers reported feeling more self-confident in their professional lives and less socially emotionally competent in their personal lives. Social emotional competence in their

professional lives was characterized by strong feelings of empathy; the ability to build strong relationships with children, parents, and coteachers; the ability to partner with parents; and the ability to manage their stress through self-reflection. In their personal lives, teachers reported the inability to manage their emotions, resolve conflicts, recognize more complex emotions, and generally felt less self-confident in the social emotional aspects of their personal lives. Each participant felt a strong sense of purpose in their work with young children. Teachers placed an emphasis on understanding and meeting the individual needs of children, respecting the rights of children, and the significance of the social emotional development of children and its impact on the child's future. Additionally, participants demonstrated the belief that managing children with challenging behaviors required a deep understanding of the why of the child's behavior and demonstrated emotionally responsive strategies in their responses to children with challenging behaviors.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the findings for this qualitative study were a result of the interviews of six participants, a comparison and contrast of the research related to the study topic as discussed in the literature review, and a contextual analysis of the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2.

Social Emotional Competence of Children

McLeod et al. (2016) stated that teaching practices shown to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children included teacher-child relationships

characterized by emotion regulation, constructive feedback, modeling, opportunities to respond, problem solving, promoting behavioral competence, strong teacher-child relationships, and social skills. The emotionally responsive strategies used by the participants in my study in response to the challenging behaviors presented in the interview protocol supported the findings of this study. Participants perceived their ability to regulate their own emotions in the classroom setting as high and used such teaching practices. Children were given the opportunity to respond to an emotionally charged situation and engage in problem-solving dialogue with the teacher when they were emotionally ready. Teachers responded to the child's challenging behavior and "gave them space", thereby promoting the behavioral competence of the child and facilitating learning around a child's social skills to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Parents' Role in SEL

Participants in my study overwhelmingly agreed that a partnership with parents when managing children with challenging behaviors was critical. One participant said, "When parents aren't on the same page the child's behavior just gets worse." Teachers expressed the importance of building strong relationships with parents and stressed the need for effective communication, trust, and an understanding of the family dynamic and culture to better understand the individual needs of the child. This confirms the current research that states that the role of parents in the emotion socialization of children is primary yet expressed the need for early childhood programs to engage parents on a

deeper level inclusive of the cultural background of families to assist in social emotional learning curriculum (Dinallo, 2016).

Social Emotional Competence of Teachers

The findings of my study extend the current research on the social emotional competence of teachers. Schonert-Reichl (2017) studied the topic of socially emotionally competent teachers and found that teachers are more self-aware and better able to manage themselves and their relationships with children, parents, and teachers. Participants in my study were aware of their own emotions and were able to manage their stress with an array of practices that included deep breathing, yoga, and other relaxing activities. When faced with the potentially extreme emotional situation of having an upset child hit a teacher in the face, participants responded to this scenario with patience and a child-centered focus. The findings of my study also support Goroshit and Hen's (2016) research that found that teachers with strong social-emotional competence are more self-aware and better able to manage themselves and their relationships with children, parents, and teachers. Researchers have suggested, and the participant responses in my study confirmed, that teachers with a strong belief in their own ability to self-regulate their emotions were better equipped to manage their feelings and the challenges faced in their classrooms (see Hen & Goroshit, 2016). My study extends the current research that sought to better understand how teachers' own emotional well-being promoted the social-emotional learning for children and created trusting, respectful learning environments conducive to the academic and emotional support children need to learn, both

academically and socially (see Hen & Goroshit, 2016; Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Teacher-Child Relationships and Empathy

Participants all agreed that they learned just as much from children as children learned from them, particularly the moments they spent engaged with children who exhibited challenging behaviors. Participants felt that teaching was a reciprocal process, which confirms the recent findings that concluded that challenging behaviors and emotional difficulties can be interpreted as an inter-related set of skills for both teachers and children (Poulou, 2017). Every participant expressed a great love for working with children. Participants in this study cited their ability to identify and understand the emotions of others as one of their emotional strengths. Five of the six participants characterized themselves as having a strong sense of empathy that included the ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others through an awareness of body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and patterns of behavior. Empathy enabled teachers to understand and predict the behavior of children (Hen & Goroshit, 2016). As evidenced by their responses to the challenging behavior scenarios, understanding the why of the child's behavior was an essential consideration for all the participants.

Teacher Stress and Burnout

Decades of research results posited that teaching is one of the most stressful professions, with 93% of teachers indicating stress and burnout as one of their biggest challenges in teaching (O'Conner et al., 2017c). Contrary to this research, participants in my study described their biggest challenges in working with children within the nuances

of the teacher-child relationship. Each participant talked about a different challenge that caused the most stress, from helping children understand the inconsistencies in life to building strong relationships with children and understanding the individual needs of children to the lack of understanding other teachers exhibit in recognizing the importance of their role in the lives of children. Participants also shared that reduced stress was a priority in their lives and managed in a variety of ways. Some practiced mindfulness, deep breathing, and yoga. All participants said that they were confident in asking for the support of their supervisors when they felt high levels of stress or needed support in managing challenging behaviors and other stress-inducing situations. Others listened to music, wrote in a journal, or used self-reflection to help make changes in their teaching practices, which confirmed research that suggested mitigating stress for teachers include stress reduction, mindfulness-based practices and changes within the organizational structure that facilitate support for teachers (Whitaker et al., 2015).

Training and Professional Development

Diverging from the current research that stated that teachers expressed a need for stronger professional support and training to better inform an incomplete body of knowledge of emotion-related practices in managing challenging behaviors in children, participants said that they learned best by doing and wanted more hands-on coaching and support in the classroom. One participant said that, “Everything I’ve learned has been hands on in the classroom.” PT0002 said, when referring to any training she has had to help manage children with challenging behaviors, “It is something teachers learn over time with experience.” PT0003 said, “Most of my training has been in the field.” PT0006

said, when asked what kind of training she has had in managing children with challenging behaviors said, “Can I say, like, just dealing with it is training?!” While all participants said that the education, training, and professional development they received to help manage children with challenging behaviors was inadequate or non-existent, they said they learned best through experience in the classroom.

Recent findings suggested that variances in teachers’ responses to children’s challenging behaviors was related to their education and stated that teachers with an AA degree reported more negative responses to disruptive and destructive behaviors, while teachers with a BA degree reported more positive responses to the same behaviors and viewed those behaviors through a more child-centered, constructivist lens (Lang et al., 2017). Participants in my study varied in their education, from the minimum 12 units of early childhood education to an AA degree or a BA degree in child and adolescent development and exhibited similar responses to children with challenging behaviors. Despite the differences in education, participants in my study displayed an understanding of the underlying emotional needs of the children’s challenging behaviors as evidenced in their responses with empathy, patience, and respect. Each participant responded to the scenarios of children with challenging behaviors in an emotionally responsive manner and used strategies that reflected their understanding of child development. The findings of my study diverge from current research findings that suggest teachers’ negative or positive responses to children with challenging behavior are not mitigated by their level of education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on social emotional learning framework as defined by the CASEL (2020) to encompass the skills and abilities of teachers concerning self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management. CASEL identified five core competencies of the social emotional learning framework: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision making. The self-awareness competency is identified through characteristics such as identifying emotions, self-perception that represents the true self, the ability to recognize strengths and limitations, and a sense of optimism and self-efficacy and defined as the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and their influence on one's own behavior. The self-management competency is identified through characteristics such as the ability to regulate emotions and control impulses, manage stress, set goals, and self-motivation and is defined as the ability to regulate emotions under different circumstances. The social-awareness competency is identified through characteristics such as the ability to empathize and take the perspective of others, with respect for those from diverse cultures and backgrounds and defined as the ability to understand behavioral social norms with respect to culture and diversity. The relationship skills competency is identified through the ability to build relationships, work as a team, and use effective communication skills and is defined as the ability to build and sustain healthy relationships, including the ability to resolve conflicts successfully. The responsible decision making competency is defined as the ability to identify, analyze,

solve, evaluate, and reflect on problems with a focus on ethical responsibility and is defined as the ability to interact on a personal and social level with a focus on ethical standards, social norms, and the consideration of consequences of choices and actions for one's own self and others. Participant responses to the interview questions suggested that participants showed strengths and weaknesses in each of the five components of social emotional competence.

According to CASEL's social emotional learning framework, the recognition of emotions, both one's own emotions and the emotions of others, are characteristics of the components of self-awareness and social awareness. While participants varied in their ability to identify their own emotions, they felt confident in their ability to recognize the emotions of others. PT0006 said when talking about recognizing her own emotions, "It's hard to understand big emotions in the moment" but felt confident in recognizing the emotions of others and stated that she was "good at reading facial expressions, especially the negative emotions because they show more." PT0003 said, "I am less confident in recognizing my own emotions and very confident in recognizing children's emotions." Participants verbalized the ability to compartmentalize their professional and personal lives and varied in their self-perceptions of their own self-confidence, another component of self-awareness. PT0001 said, "I think it's really important to be able to compartmentalize some aspects of the job. Otherwise, it just becomes mentally and emotionally draining. And when that happens, you burn out quickly." PT0001 stated, "I have to compartmentalize and separate my home life from my work life." She later explained why compartmentalizing is important and stated, "I think it's really important

to be able to compartmentalize some aspects of the job. Otherwise, it becomes mentally and emotionally draining." PT003 said, when reflecting on her self-confidence, "It changes. It goes up and down, but my confidence as a teacher? Very well." PT0005 also shared that "I have a strong sense of self-worth – as a teacher!" Teachers varied in their ability to recognize emotions and were better able to recognize the emotions of others than their own emotions. Teachers in my study stated feeling more self-confident in their professional lives than in their personal lives.

Participants also varied in their ability to set goals between their personal lives and professional lives. When reflecting on her ability to set goals, she said, "I am good with professional goals, but I procrastinate with personal goals." PT0003 also said, "I am confident in my ability to set classroom goals. I can achieve those goals." The other three participants were confident in their goal-setting ability. PT0004 said, "I am confident I can finish what I start!"

Participants' strengths in the self-management component were in their ability to prioritize their stress management practices. PT0005 said when sharing her stress-management strategies, "I breathe, I focus on what's important and I remain aware of my surroundings." PT0006 said "I need time alone to deal with big emotions. I practice deep-breathing to go back to the place where I understand the emotions." PT0002 said, "I paint, I do yoga, and I practice breathing." Participants were varied in what motivated their ability to achieve the goals they set for themselves. When talking about the motivation to achieve those goals, reasons were diverse along the personal and professional lives of the participants. PT0004 said, "People motivate me when it's a

professional goal – I want to be viewed as accomplished. When it's a personal goal, it's how I feel, what will make me feel better that motivates me."

All participants were strong in each facet of the social-awareness component of social emotional competence. Participants were able to feel deep levels of empathy for children, families, and co-teachers and understand the perspective of others. PT0003 said when talking about recognizing the emotions of others, "I am very confident. I am good at recognizing the emotions of others and I have a strong sense of empathy." PT0002 said, "I am very confident in my ability to understand the emotions of others." PT0005 said she was also very confident in her ability to recognize the emotions of others, but qualified that to say, "But some people wear masks." All participants recognized the significance of the role cultural diversity plays in their lives, both personal and professional. PT0004 said, "I am more comfortable with people I have shared experiences with, and I try to find those shared experiences." PT0002 said, "I treat everyone as human beings." And PT0003 echoed that perspective and said that when considering cultural diversity, "I am open to all perspectives."

Strong relationship skills were a significant component of the participants' teaching practice; teachers understood the importance of building strong relationships and characterized those relationships with similar values such as trust, integrity, honesty, openness, and communication. When sharing when she knows she's achieved that strong relationship with children, PT0003 said, "I know I've built a strong relationship when they need me to meet their needs – when they seek me out and when they ask for me

when I'm not there." PT0002 said, "I know when I have that strong relationship when children have full trust in me."

In another component of relationship skills, effective communication was described as an integral part of building and sustaining strong relationships. PT0006 said that effective communication is characterized by the ability to "be responsive, reciprocal, and listening and giving advice." PT0004 said the most important aspect of effective communication is "being honest with your emotions." PT0002 shared that perspective and said the most important aspect of effective communication was, "being open about your feelings." Participants' responses to questions about resolving conflict involved taking in the perspectives of everyone involved. PT0001 said, "I look to understand the issue. I look for the truth behind the conflict. I look at both points of view and let the other person share first. I listen first." PT0005 said, "I look at both sides to understand why. I leave out the emotion to think more clearly." PT0004 said, "I look at both sides to find the best solution." All participants shared the same struggle regarding asking for help. PT0004 said when talking about asking for support, "I am not comfortable, but I am working on it." PT0005 said, "It's a struggle, but I'm better and still learning." PT0003 said that she avoids conflict in her personal life, but in her professional life, "With children, I look for the deeper meaning and stay calm."

In the final component of the social emotional competencies, responsible decision making, participants identified body language and changes in patterns of behavior as indicators of problems in their relationships. PT0004 said she knows there is a problem in a relationship when there are "changes in behavior and different energies." PT0005

talked about challenges in relationships and shared that she can identify those challenges by noticing "when someone shuts down or isolates themselves. That's when I know there's a problem." Five of the six participants considered the "pros and cons" when making decisions involving their relationships. The remaining participant, PT0003, said, "I consider others' perspectives. What are the possible consequences? Is the decision something we can all participate in?"

When considering the influence of ethics on the decision making process, participants talked about the values that guided that process. PT0004 talked about right and wrong, but took it further to question, "What are those perceptions of what's right?" PT0005 said, "Ethics are the basis of decisions, what's right and wrong." PT0006 said, "I think ethically to benefit both parties." PT0001 said, "Morals guide my daily behavior." PT0002 said, "My beliefs, my faith, and my personal understanding of right and wrong. What feels right is how I act."

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study include the interview process as the method of data collection. The scope of the study explored each participant's social emotional competence and gathered data through the lens of each participant's unique perspective. Data collected through an interview process is limited because the information is given through the perspective of the participants and each participant may not be able to effectively articulate their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and limited the researcher's ability to fully observe and interpret the body language of the participants. The technology of a virtual

format presented its own unique challenges, such as frozen screens and the need to stop the interview and log back into the Zoom format to continue the interview. This occurred three times within the first 10 minutes during the fifth interview, but we recovered quickly and were able to complete the interview without further interruption. Other limitations included the location of the interview for the participants. Due to the shelter-in-place restrictions, the participants were home with their families during the interview which caused interruptions during the first interview seven times during the last ten minutes of the interview. Other limitations include location, sample size, and researcher bias.

Data were collected from six study participants. I established trustworthiness by conducting a pilot interview to determine the ability of the participant to understand the questions in the interview protocol and provide in-depth answers to those questions. I took notes during the interview process and gave each participant the opportunity to verify the accuracy of their responses by viewing their transcripts. Participants were given a summary of their transcript as well as a summary of the study's findings to review for accuracy. The number of participants limited the transferability of the findings. To help mitigate researcher bias, I used a journal throughout the process to record my thoughts and feelings and document the interview and data analysis process. I recorded the interviews, reviewed the transcription for accuracy, and shared the

transcripts, a summary of individual transcripts, and a summary of the study's findings with the participants to ensure accuracy and avoid bias, misrepresentation, and omissions.

Recommendations

Recommendations include conducting the study with more teachers to integrate data from those teachers whose perceptions of their own social emotional competence in their professional lives is low to determine if their responses to children with challenging behaviors differ from the responses of participants in this study. Additional research of this kind would help generalize the results to a greater population of preschool teachers. Further, conducting the study with a greater number of participants would strengthen the transferability of the findings. Pairing the interview protocol with in-classroom observations would also provide triangulation of the data and strengthen the accuracy of the findings. Observing teachers' responses to children with challenging behaviors in the classroom could provide greater insight.

Implications for Social Change

An emerging body of research exists on the influence of the teacher-child relationship and the learning and development of children, particularly the social emotional development of children. This study explored one facet of the teacher-child relationship through the lens of the teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence and their responses to children with challenging behaviors to potentially strengthen that relationship and support the assertion that a decrease in challenging behaviors is reliant upon the quality of the teacher-child relationship (Poulou, 2017).

The findings of this study increased our understanding of how a teacher's social emotional competence influences their responses to children with challenging behaviors by revealing that teachers can compartmentalize their professional and personal lives and their perceptions of their own social emotional competence can vary accordingly. The findings of this study showed that participants' shared strengths in identifying and recognizing the emotions of others through body language and changes in behaviors, building strong relationships, in their ability to empathize, communicate effectively, manage their stress, and shared similar values, and the belief that those values also motivated their actions. All participants shared their struggles in asking for help and support from others but noted improvements over time. The findings also showed discrepancies in their responses as to their perceptions of their ability to set and achieve goals, their motivations to achieve those goals, and in their own self-confidence. Participant's responses reflected self-perceived differences and differentiated these abilities between their professional lives and their personal lives. Participants were stronger in these abilities in their professional lives and struggled with the same abilities in their personal lives. Participants, however, shared a strong sense of empathy and understanding the "why" of children's behaviors as well as a strong sense of purpose in teaching. The study's findings suggest that administrators of childcare programs should focus on more hands-on coaching and mentoring for teachers around managing children with challenging behaviors and focus on helping teachers understand the "why" of children's behavior. As the training teachers received on managing children with challenging behaviors was non-existent or inadequate at best, teacher preparation

programs should consider providing more training, while administrators provide support in the classroom to help teachers put what they have learned into practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers' perceptions of their own social emotional competence influenced their responses to children with challenging behaviors. The incident that inspired this study, although not unique and not unlike so many other observations of teachers' responses to children's challenging behaviors, involved a teacher shaming a 3-year-old, dual language learner who, in his excitement to go outside, had run across the classroom. She stood over him, finger pointed at his face, voice raised, tone harsh, face distorted in a grimace, and finally, placed him in a corner with his face to the wall. She turned her back to him to discourage him from moving away from the corner while he cried as though his heart had been broken. He understood very little of what she shouted at him, but he felt her anger and he felt his fear and his shame. As I observed this teacher engage with this child, my own heart broke for him and every child like him who had ever experienced this kind of engagement with a teacher. As an administrator of child-care programs and as a community college professor, I wondered what I could do to prevent this from happening to another child. I wondered if teachers needed to be socially emotionally competent to be effective teachers. I wondered if the social emotional competence of teachers would ensure that children's challenging behaviors would be met with compassion, understanding, and caring. I wondered how much damage teachers who engaged in this way with children who exhibited challenging behaviors were doing to their spirit. I wondered how I could help teachers engage with

children in ways that were emotionally responsive to their needs and I wondered how I could help teachers understand why children behaved the way they did when they had strong emotions or unmet emotional needs.

This study provided insight into a teacher's social emotional competence and revealed that this competence was relationship-driven and defined by their roles; teachers perceived their social emotional competence as high in the classroom when engaged with children. When children exhibited challenging behaviors, teachers responded in ways that revealed an understanding of the child's emotional needs. Outside of the classroom, teachers' relationships and roles were different; their perceptions of their social emotional competence were different from that of their professional lives. The commonalities across the participants in this study was their understanding of child development, of the rights of children, and of the "why" of children's behaviors. This understanding appears to be the essence of the foundation for teachers' emotionally responsive engagement and interaction with children who exhibit challenging behaviors. It is this essence that I will carry forward into my teaching and learning philosophy as a professor; it is this essence that I will carry forward into my practices as an administrator in a child-care center when working with teachers and children who exhibit challenging behaviors.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Dear Participant,

I would like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my study seeks to understand how teachers' perceptions of their social emotional competence influence their responses to children with challenging behaviors. Our interview today will last approximately one hour during which I will be asking you about your feelings when you're engaging with children who have challenging behaviors, the strategies you use in those situations, and the reasons why you feel children exhibit challenging behaviors.

Prior to this interview, you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to record this interview. Are you still in agreement with that? (If yes) Thank you for allowing me to record this interview. If at any time you would like me to stop recording the interview, please let me know and I will stop recording this interview. (If no) Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes during our conversation.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? (Discuss questions)
If you have any questions during the interview, please ask, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

Introductory Questions

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about your professional background?
3. How do you feel about working with children?
4. What do you feel is the biggest challenge in working with children?

Transition Questions

1. You said that you feel _____ about working with children. How do you build strong relationships with children? What qualities do you feel you need to build strong relationships with children?
2. You shared that _____ is your biggest challenge in working with children. How do those challenges affect your emotional well-being? How do these challenges affect teaching practices?
3. What kind of training have you had in managing children with challenging behaviors? Do you feel as though that training adequately prepares you for managing children with challenging behaviors?
4. What do you feel a parent's role is in managing children with challenging behaviors?
5. What does social emotional competence mean to you?
6. How do you feel about your own social emotional competence?

Key Questions

Self-Awareness

1. How confident are you in recognizing your own emotions?
2. What are your emotional strengths? Your emotional weaknesses?
3. How would you describe your self-confidence?
4. How do you feel about your ability to accomplish your goals?

Self-Management

1. How do you manage your emotions?
2. How do you manage your stress?
3. What motivates you to achieve your goals?
4. What steps do you go through to achieve those goals?

Social-Awareness

1. How confident are you in your ability to recognize the emotions of others? Are there some emotions that are harder to recognize?
2. How confident are you in your ability to understand the feelings of others?
3. What role does cultural diversity have in your interactions with other people?
4. What personal values are important to you? How do those values guide your behavior?

Relationship Skills

1. What qualities are important to you in building strong relationships? How do you know when you've built a strong relationship?
2. What qualities do you feel are important in effective communication?
3. How do you handle conflict?
4. How do you manage your emotions during a conflict?
5. How comfortable are you in asking for help?

Responsible Decision-Making

1. How do you become aware of a problem in your relationships?
2. What is important to you when considering a potential solution to the problem?
3. What factors do you take into consideration when making a decision?
4. How do you evaluate the consequences of your actions?
5. What role does ethics play in your decision making process?

Challenging Behavior Scenarios

(Scenario 1)

Two-year-old Gwen collapses onto the floor, crying, kicking, and screaming, every time there is a transition in the classroom. She refuses to get up and can spend several minutes crying, kicking, and screaming on the floor. Gwen is an only child and her parents have shared that they spend much of their time holding her and giving her a pacifier when she cries. It is time for morning meeting and the children are cleaning up and gathering on the

rug while your co-teacher sings a song. Gwen is engaged at the sensory table but collapses onto the floor when you remind her it's clean up time and place the cover on the sensory table. She begins screaming, crying, and kicking, refusing to get up and join her friends for morning meeting. How do you respond in this situation?

(Scenario 2)

Three-year-old Elliot is beginning his second week in your classroom after transitioning from the 2-year-old classroom. He is a dual language learner and speaks very little to the teachers and other children in the classroom. His Mom is expecting their second child and has been on bed rest for the past several weeks as the baby's due date approaches. Elliot's Dad travels extensively for work and Elliot's pick-up and drop-offs are managed by his nanny. For the past 2 weeks, Elliot has been biting other children in the classroom with increasing frequency. The other parents are growing increasingly more upset at this behavior and fear for the safety of their own children. During the transition from inside to outside this morning, Elliot bit another child on the arm while waiting with the group of children to go outside. The child is crying uncontrollably and has a severe bite mark on her arm. Some of the other children begin to move away from Elliot and the crying child. The noise and activity level begins to escalate. The group is no longer ready to transition to the outside play area. What started as a smooth transition has become chaotic as the child who was bitten begins to cry harder, Elliot begins to wander toward other children, and the rest of the children begin to grow agitated. The other teacher in the classroom is

at the back of the room, helping another child clean up. How do you respond in this situation?

(Scenario 3)

Four-year-old Juliana has recently joined your classroom. She has just moved from Brazil and her mother shared with you upon enrollment that she and Juliana's father are going through a divorce and fighting over custody of their daughter. Juliana is learning to speak English, is very physically active, and uses a loud voice inside the classroom. Her Dad is still in Brazil and his visits are infrequent. Juliana's Mom works full time. Juliana has a very difficult time during nap time. She rarely sleeps and spends most of her time talking, making noises, and disrupting nap time for the other children. Because children have a required rest period of at least 20 minutes, Juliana must rest quietly for at least 20 minutes before she is able to read or draw quietly while sitting on her mat. You have shared Juliana's struggle with resting quietly at nap time with her Mom and you have both agreed that this is an expectation that Juliana must meet. Juliana's Mom rewards her with daily trips to the park to play soccer when she has "good" days, which in large part is determined by Juliana's success at nap time. Today during nap time, Juliana is louder, more energetic, and more active than most afternoons. Juliana's Dad is arriving in a few hours from Brazil for a weekend visit and Mom told Juliana that she could only go to the park with her Dad if she had "good" day and listened at nap time. Juliana, however, refuses to stay on her mat and is running around the classroom, talking loudly, taking things off the shelves, and the other children aren't able to sleep. When you remind

Juliana that she needs to rest quietly on her mat, she refuses, and yells, “No!” As you approach her to try and talk quietly with her, Juliana runs away from you, laughing. Your co-teacher is on her lunch break and you are by yourself in the classroom. How do you respond in this situation?

(Scenario 4)

Five-year-old Ian is having a hard time forming relationships with the children in the classroom. His parents both work 12 hours a day and his parent’s report that Ian spends his weekdays with his nanny and his younger sister. He spends time with his parents primarily on the weekends. When you reach out to his parents by phone to talk about Ian’s struggles, they respond by telling you that Ian tells them that it’s the other children that are mean to him and want to know what you are doing about the other children’s behavior. Recently, Ian’s best friend moved away, and Ian has been very sad without his friend. When Ian attempts to engage in play with other children, he often hits and kicks them if he doesn’t get what he wants. Many children tell him, “You aren’t my friend! I don’t want to play with you!” One afternoon after a particularly hard morning of unsuccessful attempts at engaging with other children, several instances of Ian hitting other children, and numerous conversations reminding Ian to use his words with his friends, Ian wants a turn on one of the bikes while playing outside. He pulls the other child off the bike without asking or waiting for a turn and begins to ride around the bike path. The other child comes to you crying and explains what happened. When you kneel down to talk to Ian on the bike, telling him that he has to get off and reminding him that

he must wait for his turn, Ian screams, “No!”, and hits you in the face. How do you respond in this situation?

Closing Questions

1. Is there anything about managing children with challenging behaviors that we have not discussed that you would like to share?
2. Is there anything about social emotional competence that we have not discussed that you would like to share?