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Infusion of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning in Charter Middle Schools

Lewis James Sampson
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education

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Lewis James Sampson

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MA, San Diego University, 2003

BS, University of Toledo, 1986

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Charter schools often have more autonomy (i.e., freedom to innovate) and are typically more student centered than their traditional school counterparts. To address less privileged, underserved student academic deficits, some charter schools have infused curriculum with academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL initiatives with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools. The exploration of educators' perceptions of low-income, underserved students' academic and social-emotional advancement and the efficacy of infusion of SEL into the academic curriculum in their Northern California, Southern California, and Arizona charter school settings was the focal point of this basic qualitative study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory comprised the conceptual framework. Data were collected in interviews with two school principals and five teachers from four low-income, charter middle schools and from one teacher who taught in an upper income, charter middle school. An open coding strategy was used to delineate themes that related to the two research questions. Findings included the perceived need for SEL infusion to be in alignment with the schools' social and academic agenda as well as with the schools' culture and values. To advance positive social change, the results suggest current education paradigms should integrate SEL practices that evoke a growth mindset and a tacit schoolwide sense of partnership that is commensurate with the challenges of a changing student demographic and an evolving social-political education landscape.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The gap in academic progress between privileged and less privileged students continues to grow in public school education (Jeynes, 2015). Problems in education may require systemic changes in how policy makers mitigate school diversity issues and address underserved students' academic deficits. Fiel (2013) posited that today's underserved students have less exposure to White students than their counterparts had in the 1970s. In addition, Fiel found that from 1999 to 2010, trends in public school resegregation could be attributed to uneven distributions of underserved students across districts and government failures to challenge special interest group attempts to roll back desegregation laws. Some studies have suggested that, in the long run, desegregated schooling has had positive effects on race relations (Frankenberg, 2018).

Frankenberg (2018) explained that the school diversity and integration issue is complicated by shifting demographic environments. In K-12 public education, the number of underserved students has risen to a little over 50%, with Latinos being more numerous than African American students. In some areas of the country, White student enrollment totals 45%. In the current era, the integration discourse is markedly different from past generations, which involved only two ethnic groups. Today's integration models must reason with a profoundly different demographic milieu, as in larger cities, a White student majority is less likely to be the norm.

Parcel and Taylor (2015) noted that in this age of less consensus regarding social change and education reform, current discourses reflect top-down, privileged-class worldviews; hence, initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act established in 2002

and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 arrive cloaked in the same causal modus operandi that created the social and academic mobility issues at hand. Senge (2012) warned that fixes required a new problem-solving ideology and philosophy. Parcel and Taylor argued that efforts to alleviate longstanding education problems promise little hope when the blueprint for success is grounded in outdated, embedded, and conditioned problem-solving strategies.

Dewey (1916/2011) posited that it is incumbent upon educators to realize that social and individual positive change has a basis in moral character development. Dewey noted that when academic development or character development are treated as separate goals, they are weakened and, therefore, less effective. Dewey proffered that when developing education schemas, frameworks should be created that incorporate and unify both academic and character development aspects.

White and Warfa's (2011) mixed-method case study showed that schoolwide character education programs positively affected school climate, staff morale, and student productivity. Because these programs address the social-emotional needs of students, the impact on student retention is also a topic of interest. Tate (2019) pointed out that the character education concept has expanded, and its transformation and broader scope have brought about new ways to describe it. Some of the current references to values or character development include social-emotional learning (SEL), school-based mental health, social-emotional education, character education, and values training. According to Tate, even as the science and conceptualization of character development became more complex in its current iteration, most forms embrace a social-emotional research base.

Khoury (2017) explained that contemporary character education practices have their roots in traditional education programs, which began in the 1960s and ran through the 1980s. In the current study, character education in charter schools was of interest because charter schools have greater autonomy than most traditional public institutions and, thus, the flexibility to institute programs that may be tailored directly to school needs. However, since the first charter schools opened in Minnesota in 1992 and the windows of support for charter schools and school choice opened wider, special interest groups and education advocates seized the opportunity to enact influence on the direction some charter schools would take (Fox et al., 2012; Marshall, 2017).

In the public school arena, charter school inclusion was significant on several fronts: (a) it foreshadowed a new response to long-standing problems, (b) detractors feared charter schools would ostensibly serve the will and interests of the privileged class, and (c) it inspired a debate concerning their tacit intent and commitment to leveling the education landscape. In other words, while on its surface the charter school movement appeared to reflect a change in the governing mindset, at this juncture, solutions to underserved student academic problems are no less enigmatic.

To mitigate academic deficits, many niche charter schools (e.g., technology charters, art and performance schools, and religious charters) grounded their curricula in some form of character development practice. As an alternative education experience, the charter school format and worldview promised a new conduit to institutional improvement. In this research study, I sought to understand the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of social-emotional

educational initiatives with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools. As Khoury (2017) posited, earlier attempts at character education that focused on student values rather than on universal moral and ethical constructs failed to produce positive results. In the framework of a changing public education landscape (i.e., participation by a plurality of ethnic groups, increased emphasis on mathematics and science testing, and special interest inclusion), I explored the efficacy of integrated SEL and cognitive development programs on underserved students' academic development. Corcoran et al. (2018) found that school-based programs framed in character development and SEL exhibited positive outcomes in statewide reading and mathematics exams. According to Corcoran et al., schools that made short-term investments in SEL programs heightened student self-awareness, study habits, and attitudes toward others as well as improved overall student academic development.

In a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs that included kindergarten through high school students, Durlak et al. (2011) found that the programs were effective vehicles for social-emotional and academic growth. Staff member SEL implementation demonstrated measurable improvements in the participants' attitudes toward school, behavior, social emotional skills, and academic performance indicators. Durlak proposed that these findings support the notion that traditional school policy makers may find value in implementing evidence based SEL programs. Positive outcomes in social emotional growth and academic improvement may be wedded to quality leadership and understanding the roles that moral development, values, character, and social emotional

preparedness may play in these areas. It is also important to recognize positive perceptions by staff and administrators.

Background of the Study

According to Khoury (2017), as nascent public education endeavors took hold in early America, parents and stakeholders felt the need to fortify family values and ensure that school leaders were virtuous role models who would perpetuate student moral development. The charter school phenomenon emerged when many parents and students searched for education alternatives that would not replicate traditional education practices and old education philosophies. In a sense, they sought freedom from the constraints of a traditional education paradigm that appeared to be out of touch with the social complexities of a changing education landscape. For these individuals, the focus was on social change and academic advancement for the less privileged, which was also the emphasis of this study.

The effect character-first education programs have on student academic development is a decades-old debate. As Berkowitz and Bier (2004) made the distinction between past and present character education platforms, they posited that earlier forms of character education curricula were largely experimental since, at the time, practitioners had no substantive pool of empirical data from which to draw. While currently, many schools implement the character education concept, the term SEL conceptualizes a more contemporary iteration of the character development paradigm. Charter schools that adopt SEL frameworks are informed by theories that link cognitive expansion to moral and self-awareness training.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory support the premise that cognitive development is linked to environmental factors. The authors of both theories alluded to the idea that interconnected sociocultural and environmental relationships influence cognitive development. While supporters of a growing number of 21st century education reforms claim that solutions to less privileged students' academic deficit problems lie in crafting systemic leadership and character development platforms, new initiatives may profit from a worldview that accounts for the vicissitudes of an education landscape that has become complex. For example, approaches to leadership and character may defer to the institutional values that frame school objectives.

Twenty-first-century public education approaches to academic development also include religious values-based school practices. Fancourt (2015) explained that these schools embody a systemic mandate to help students learn about religion and from it as well. In this format, the embrace of curricula values and worldviews does not solely aim at student development; the overarching intent is to affect the lives of all who have a stake in the school's program. Unlike traditional schooling, in religious charter schools, moral development sits at the forefront of institutional objectives. While character education is not a new curriculum, its effect on academic progress in a religious framework bears further study. However, as the religious charter school phenomenon may broaden the lens through which traditional learning approaches are viewed, the tacit assumption that moral development sits at the heart of cognitive improvement may have validity.

The charter school movement and school choice initiatives helped reshape the education landscape. Both domains increased parent and stakeholder participation and inspired new school forms (Gray, 2012). In 2009, the Race to the Top school reform initiative mandated public school acceptance of charter schools (Ertas, 2013). According to education policy makers, the measure positively affected education quality and efficiency in private, public, and charter schools. As Ertas (2013) explained, supporters believed that charter schools create healthy competition among schools and give parents better school selection options. Ertas also noted that some participants feared that school choice and charter school policy would lead to less student diversity, widening academic gaps between advantaged and less advantaged students. Similarly, some worried about growth in school district participation in racial, social, and political reconfiguration. The fact that the school choice policy evolved into a window of opportunity for special interest groups is significant because in its wake, the right-to-choose system left a path for formally excluded groups.

Problem Statement

School reforms, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Every Child Succeeds Act, provide timetables for student successes; however, underserved, low-income students' academic outcomes on standardized tests show little or no improvement (Corbett et al., 2015). In addition, as education landscape trends in segregated schooling increase, the efficacy of school choice policies and expansion of school types are now part of the school reform debate. As education policy and reform are attempts to mitigate the growing gaps in academic performance between privileged and less privileged public

school student populations, increased federal reforms, growth in school segregation, and interest group participation have become norms (Yoon, 2017). Parcel and Taylor (2015) posited that change becomes a plodding, slow endeavor when new, relevant systems are lacking. As the politicization of education underscores policy-setting and management practices within education's ranks, consensus and collaboration protocols appear to be fractured. In response to those who struggle to erase long-standing underserved students' education deficits, Senge (2012) emphasized that new responses to old problems represented transformation and a new and emergent worldview. In the contexts of social change, school improvement, and student academic growth, recent studies have placed the onus for academic success on quality leadership. Current innovative leadership enlistment strategies now center on setting selection and training standards for new principals (Superville, 2019). While the charter school phenomenon continues to expand, empirical literature regarding its school centered SEL effect on underserved students' achievement deficits is less substantive.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL implementation at their charter middle schools. To study the efficacy of SEL infusion in charter middle school academic curriculum, I grounded my research in the premise that proximal exposure to SEL programs could accelerate academic growth in low-achieving, underserved students. Interviews with principals and teachers were the sources of data. Discussions with charter school principals and teachers confirmed that the charter school ethos is grounded in

establishing relationships, making meaningful connections, and supporting a student sense of safety paradigm. From this perspective, I sought to understand how, as a practice, SEL infusion would inform curriculum planning strategies and school culture outcomes. In addition, school leadership style as it pertains to SEL implementation, teacher buy-in, and student social emotional and academic outcomes were also core objects of interest.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools?

Research Question 2: How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their charter middle schools?

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory guided this study. In the context of character-based school types and academic development, the authors of both theories positioned cultural and environmental factors at the center of the academic improvement discourse. Bronfenbrenner contextualized human development as a product of socioenvironmental dynamics that exact influence at each stage of human development. Vygotsky argued that while cultural-historical determiners played a role in cognitive development, the negative effects of such environments can be positively impacted by larger, grounded cultural-historical settings. In a related position, Fancourt (2015) reiterated that public education

exists in a theater of complex parts. Therefore, even as some charter schools show promise in public education, there is still a lack of an across-the-board academic solutions to existing achievement gaps between privileged and less privileged student populations. Ecological systems theory and sociocultural theory aligned with my research design, interview questions, and intent to collect data from different vantage points from key stakeholders in the same context/system.

Nature of Study

Using a basic qualitative research framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I conducted interviews to understand the perceptions of eight principals and teachers from selected charter middle schools regarding SEL infusion at their institutions.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to guide the reader's understanding of the theme and approach of this study.

Character education: A form of instruction that helps develop positive moral, civic, and social values (Khoury, 2017).

Charter schools: Schools that are tuition free, publicly funded, and have distinct governance and design and fewer state regulations (Brown & Makris, 2018).

Ecological systems: Relationships that exist within communities and the larger society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Low achieving: Students who score below national and statewide norms on standardized tests (McDonough, 2015).

Values-based learning: A learning environment that improves relationships, personal well-being, and attitudes regarding education (Khoury, 2017).

School choice: Options within public education that allow parents and students to choose schools or services outside of their neighborhoods (Parcel & Taylor, 2015).

SEL: The curricular bonding of character and academic development in education (Cohen, 2006).

Assumptions

My first assumption was that the interviews with principals and teachers would provide diverse perspectives on the research problem. Another assumption was that the participants would willingly reflect on their experiences and have accurate memories bounded by their perceptions of the infusion of SEL within the academic curriculum at their schools. I also assumed that the eight stakeholders' interviews would provide sufficient themes from the data related to the research questions. The field of SEL has many manifestations, and I assumed that the schools I identified were implementing various forms of values-based learning, character education, and SEL strategies to support student academic outcomes.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was reflected in the research questions and the choice of the five charter middle schools that have high numbers of low-income, underserved student populations as participating institutions. In these schools, I sought to interview participants who had experiences with SEL infusion in Grades 6–8 in the context of SEL and academic development. A delimitation of this study was the exclusion of private

charter schools, including religious charter middle schools and traditional public middle schools.

Limitations

This study involved data collection at charter middle schools; consequently, such a small sampling may have limitations. Because student academic development is complex and while the focus on less privileged and underserved students has merit, establishing a meaningful connection to other sociopolitical groups may present significant challenges. Some of my training and teaching experiences were in charter schools, so I had to be mindful of the potential for bias in how I framed the interview questions or in subtle comments that might have reflected a preference for the charter school ethos and philosophy. Additionally, participants' willingness or reluctance to offer honest and in-depth responses to interview questions could have affected the quality of their responses and the overarching feeling of the interview experience.

Significance of the Study

In this study, I addressed an aspect of the nature of a changing 21st century education environment. Because government policy setting is on the rise in public education, Senge (2012) emphasized the need to approach problems in education with up-to-date strategies rather than with old tactics that reflect ineffective past practices. The current study was focused on education's changing face (i.e., the birth of more liberal acceptance of charter schools). I also referenced the implications of a charter school curriculum that included the bonding of academic and SEL strategies and how their implementation may give agency to changes in curriculum planning, principal leadership

styles, school learning culture, and attempts to mitigate gaps between privileged and less privileged student populations. As the education landscape undergoes a paradigm shift, there is concern among some educators that, while school choice was a fit for emergent charter school participation, from a social change perspective, school choice policy may also be considered a factor in the resurgence of segregated public schools across the states.

Yoon (2017) argued that while some saw school choice as a bridge to underserved student, empowerment and inclusion, school choice was never intended to close racial inequity gaps. Instead, as Frankenberg et al. (2011) observed, school choice was a tool that afforded privileged parents the right to select and maintain schools aligned with the racial and socioeconomic parameters consistent with their worldviews. In this study, charter schools were the phenomenon of interest because they suggest progressive education models representing greater administrative autonomy and flexibility (see Paisner, 2011). Hence, character and SEL implementation could have currency as charter schools typically espouse student-centered learning strategies. The outcomes from this study showed that the participants saw a relationship between SEL infusion and student academic development; therefore, solutions to the student academic deficit problems could be viewed through a charter school pedagogy and philosophy lens, adding to the knowledge and literature on this topic.

Summary

The proposition that new 21st century progressive, political, and educational strategies could positively impact academic development for less privileged students

underpinned this study. In the literature, some educators suggested that challenges and roadblocks to school reform may lie in systemic dependence on old paradigms that stall reform and restructuring efforts and ultimately replicate a status quo on public education's philosophy and goals (Senge, (2012). In this chapter, I included the background, problem statement, and purpose of the study. I also alluded to current efforts to monitor and examine leadership quality to strengthen leadership training programs that have gained attention in many school districts. The conceptual framework and research questions built on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that learning (i.e., cognitive development) has a social construction were presented. In the section on limitations and assumptions, the issues that affected the overall interview processes and research outcomes were highlighted. Finally, I discussed how this study might add to the body of work that addresses less privileged students' academic deficits. In Chapter 2, I will contextualize the research questions and the conceptual framework through a review of the extant literature on the topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL implementation at their charter middle schools was the purpose of this study. McDonough (2015) noted that test scores showed that African American students in traditional public schools were less likely to have academic mobility than their European American counterparts. As test scores from grade to grade showed a widening gap between Black and White student academic achievement, McDonough found that current efforts to stem this trend have been ineffective, mainly because the reform approach has used outdated strategies that may not support failing students. As public education efforts to solve the problem have failed, support for charter schools continues despite the ambiguity and controversy regarding their efficacy and best practices. I conducted this study to expand the knowledge of how implementing the infusion of character development and academic-based curriculum may affect underserved students' academic development.

Literature Search Strategies

The main sources for the literature reviewed were available in the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. From both resources, I found current and seminal studies that pertained to my research topic. Through the Walden University Library, I had access to the ERIC, PsycINFO, ProQuest, Sage Journals, and Taylor and Francis databases as well as the *Journal of Education Policy*. The Google and Google Scholar search engines were especially helpful because both provided citations that led to additional articles related to my topic. The following keyword terms and phrases were

used in the literature search: *education policy and reform*, *charter school history*, *charter school politics*, *issues in minority student academic development*, *school choice*, *types of principal leadership*, *the politics of education*, *SEL*, and *character education*.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory guided this study. Bronfenbrenner contextualized human development as a product of the socioenvironmental dynamics that exact influence at each stage of human development. Ecological systems theory informed my understanding of how cognitive development is shaped by environmental factors that support or hinder academic growth.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that while cultural-historical determiners played a role in cognitive development, the negative effects of such environments can be positively impacted by larger, grounded cultural-historical settings. In other words, proximity to character-building programs could override the influences of past experiences. With this perspective, I referred to Fancourt's (2015) claim that 21st century religious charter schools conceptualize student academic and civic development as an interrelated process of learning about religion and learning from religion. What Fancourt proposed supports the premise that systemic cognitive development is complex, especially considering the many procedural variables involved in the process. Fancourt's position reiterates that public education exists in a theater of complex parts; therefore, even as some charter schools show promise in public education, there is still a lack of across-the-board

academic solutions to the existing achievement gaps between privileged and less privileged student populations.

Ecological systems theory and sociocultural theory aligned with my research design, interview questions, and data collected from different vantage points from key stakeholders (i.e., principals and teachers) in the same context/system. In the context of character-based school types and academic development, the authors of both theories positioned cultural and environmental factors at the center of the academic improvement discourse.

Empirical Literature Review

In the following subsections, I examine the influence of school choice policies, public charter schools, and religious charter schools on public education. The degree to which these and other initiatives reshaped current education landscapes and informed overall school reform policies is also an underlying objective I sought to meet in this review. Other topics of discussion include school equity, desegregated schooling, parent-school preferences, principal leadership, student/teacher perceptions of leadership, and school types. In the literature review, I also provide a lens through which to view education's changing climate, including reforms in education philosophy and intent, increased government and outside interest participation in school reform, and process agendas.

School Choice Policy and Public Education

McLendon and Cohen-Vogel (2015) found that during the 1980s, federal and state involvement in education policy setting increased. In the K-12 sector, bureaucratic

management and control mandates set new curricula standards, teacher certification models, assessment and accountability paradigms, innovative incentive programs, charter school inclusion, and teacher performance incentives that exemplified a philosophical shift in direction and education purpose. As public education took on a new, more conservative identity, standardization and less consensus shaped policy setting, and governing practices became the norm. In other words, with this new government-based ideology, public education administration and policies began to be at variance with past, tradition-based consensus frameworks (Ertas, 2013; Parcel & Taylor, 2015)

Parcel and Taylor (2015) found that school choice policy came with a caveat because traditional systems for enacting social, political, and educational policy would now encounter greater input from government and self-interest groups with the power to tilt the newly minted conservative education landscape in a direction that served a specific agenda. From a historical perspective, those of lower economic status were subjected to a narrower range of choices despite the promise of a policy framed in leveling the education playing field. While school choice was an ideal social justice ideology, with the absence of strong governmental civil rights support, implementation was difficult, as restructuring and shifts in the education schema increased divisions within the education landscape.

In its emergent conservative posture, administrators were charged with maintaining control and power as conflicting opinions about equity, equality, inclusion, integration, and education best practices became a constant part of the contemporary, reduced consensus discourse (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). In education, the charter school

inclusion and school choice debate escalated as the opposition pressed for civil rights protections for underserved student populations (Ertas, 2013; Frankenberg et al., 2011; Parcel & Taylor, 2015). Even though charter schools seemed like a viable alternative to the traditional school paradigm, in the political arena, some found them to be extensions of a larger conservative school agenda (Parcel & Taylor, 2015).

Skeptics also had concerns about claims that characterized school choice policy as a vehicle for greater underserved student access, more classroom diversity, and a way to mitigate students' low academic performance problems. Frankenberg et al. (2011) found that charter and school choice implementation, segregated schooling, and increased marginalization of the less privileged were also part of the charter school narrative. As lines between the privileged and the less privileged were drawn, contradictory reports showed that institutional intent and purpose were still unclear. For example, when the U.S. Department of Education published a report on the effect of school choice on public education, Frankenberg et al. found they had used data from the 2000 National Study of Charter Schools. The U.S. Department of Education concluded (as cited in Frankenberg et al., 2011), based on these findings, that the proportion of White students to underserved students in charter and public schools was almost equal and that there was no evidence of increasing patterns of segregation in public education. However, Ertas's (2013) findings from the 2000 Charter School and Race report showed perceptible reductions in White student attendance in traditional schools in Ohio and Texas. In addition, the report revealed that across the states, charter schools were more segregated

because they tended to be located in communities that had highly homogeneous racial compositions.

Gray's (2012) study of school choice and the charter school movement in Ohio, had a twofold intent: (a) to learn how the influx of charter schools would assist struggling student populations and (b) to examine whether the charter school effect would create competition among Ohio traditional school districts and, thus, spark systemic improvements in academic outcomes and pedagogy. While the study showed that traditional schools made modest gains on standardized tests, Gray concluded that the presence of multiple variables (e.g., the No Child Left Behind policy affect and sociopolitical factors) suggested the need for further study. Gray noted that insight into the effect charter schools had on struggling students was difficult to measure partially because some students benefited from the experience and others did not.

While charter schools have a solid footing in public education, the windows of autonomy, isolation, and self-governance appear to be closing as outcomes fail to show public charter schools are significantly better than traditional schools. The literature on charter school academic performance is clouded with data that project both positive and negative academic outcomes (Clark et al., 2015; Marshall, 2017; Silverman, 2013). When Clark et al. (2015) used a lottery-based study to compare test scores from two student categories (i.e., students randomly selected via lotteries and those not admitted to the lottery schools), the data showed that urban charter middle schools had a more positive effect on disadvantaged students than on advantaged students. As Clark et al. reported, data from 33 charter middle schools across 13 states showed that in the context of lottery

and nonlottery student groups, charters had a negative, although not a statistically significant impact, on student achievement. Clark et al. felt the study was weakened in that conclusive evidence of the charter schools' impact on middle school students was obfuscated by variables within both the student selection process and contrasting advantaged and disadvantaged groups. For example, it was difficult to measure the effect non-admittance might have on some students in the study or on selected students who had proximity to advantaged students and, therefore, had access to a better quality of education.

Silverman's (2013) findings on charter schools and public schools in New York State demonstrated there were more similarities between charters and traditional schools than differences. However, statistics on poverty, suspensions, and poor attendance had a strong effect on student academic outcomes regardless of school type. Silverman posited that difficulties surrounding definitive data collection on student charter school outcomes were exacerbated by variances in parent engagement, student socioeconomic profiles and demographics, and noticeable differences between schools.

Marshall (2017) argued that equity was the main issue with charter schools. While the intent of charter schools was to improve academic performance for all students, equity problems have continued unabated. According to Marshall's examination of prior case studies, low-income students were less likely to receive the same high levels of instruction as their more privileged counterparts. Marshall also found that new charters were less likely to have a high percentage of experienced teachers. Marshall posited that because they often offered a unique academic lens and sparked competition between

school districts, charter schools were good for education. Despite the positives, Marshall claimed that unsolved equity issues prevented less privileged students from achieving academic mobility.

Today's charter schools face new challenges from government and special interest groups that have agendas. Couched in a conservative political backdrop, noticeable trends in segregated schooling, corporatization, and more government intervention may make the previous, more inclusive, collaborative, and shared power education paradigm a thing of the past (Marshall, 2017). Given education's palpable shift toward a more conservative agenda, Yoon's (2017) claim that school choice and redistricting had little effect on bringing diverse groups together has merit. Moreover, implicit in Yoon's polemical use of the term *neoliberalization* (i.e., the tendency to favor capitalism and reductions in states' rights) of education supports the idea that the school choice initiative was never intended to do what it claimed. According to Parcel and Taylor (2015), politically related reductions in monitoring school district student assignments, an enforced pairing of school populations with housing segregation patterns, and an unresolved school choice dialectic have normalized the segregated education agenda. Some school choice detractors believed the school choice referendum was partially to blame for the resurgence of segregated schools across the nation (Burgess et al., 2015; Ertas, 2013; Frankenberg et al., 2011; Kotok et al., 2017).

Kotok et al. (2017) used a different lens to study the effect school choice had on the education landscape. As school choice policy accelerated, White, Black, and Latino student movement from traditional to charter schools increased. Geographical student-

level data from the University of Pennsylvania concerning eight to 12 public schools showed that many student transferees had adopted segregated schools (Kotok et al., 2017). The data also showed that while most students had moved to less impoverished environments, urban, White students transferred to more racially segregated schools. Black and Latino students transferred to segregated schools with high levels of White students or to schools with high levels of underserved students.

School Choice, Parent Preference, and Equity

When it comes to parental preference and school choice issues, the assumption that high- and low-income parents shared the same concerns is misleading (Ritter et al., 2014). As a preference, the call for high-quality schools is strongest in high-income populations (Ritter et al., 2014). Although low-income parents want good schools, safety, minimal travel costs, and equal opportunity were also high on their list of concerns (Burgess et al., 2015). Burgess et al. (2015) collected data through a survey as well as administrative, census, and spatial data that concerned parent-school preferences and school choice. Their variables included household types, schools, and home-to-school distances. School characteristics data, admissions criteria, and allocation rules provided details regarding some sociopolitical factors that influenced parental school preference and school choice decisions. For most parents, segregated schooling was not as much a deciding factor as the school's academic quality, socioeconomic make-up, and proximity to home. Whereas superior academics underscored parental choice, school district administrators saw how continued academic improvement would create healthy competition within school districts. Burgess et al. found that high academic preference

was stronger in high-income families, and proximity to the home was particularly important to low-income participants. However, because better schools were mainly found in high income districts, the potential for segregated environments in those districts was high.

Ritter et al. (2014) provided a plausible explanation for why, in many cases, school choice policy has been short sighted, finding that when parents had the freedom to choose any school, they were more likely to do so based on school quality and racial lines. Both White and less privileged parents wanted good schools; however, decisions made in favor of one school or the other had a sociopolitical context. Even though White parents may be sensitive to segregation claims, schools in areas with a high percentage of underserved demographics and high academic instruction deficits are not realistic options (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Burgess, 2016). Despite the ubiquitous spread of charter schools across the United States, the movement still lacks definitive data that proves its efficacy in low-income, low academic performance environments. As an unproven entity, doubts as to whether, at its core, the charter movement represents a commitment to integration and equality continue to persist (Johnston, 2016; Kotok et al., 2017).

Education, Diversity, and Social Change

Johnston (2016) found that while most schools in districts in Kentucky seemed to have a tacit hands-off interference policy toward segregated schooling practices, the Louisville, Kentucky, school district took a firm stand for school integration. As a district, Louisville, Kentucky, refused to join the rush toward charter-hood even though buy-in from the rest of the state was energetic and unconstrained. To study state

integration policy trends and the charter school phenomenon, Johnston developed a theoretical educational ecosystem framework to test whether dividing metropolitan areas into geo/social units was part of a systemic school district integration policy objective. Johnston used a case study and a comparative/historical analysis tool to test the theoretical integration policy lens that state officials used.

Johnston (2016) found that in the Louisville, Kentucky school district, some schools espoused a firm commitment to integration and diversity while other schools did not. Moreover, because Louisville school board members believed that integration (e.g., student diversity) had a positive effect on all participants when charter schools were voted in as education options, the school district refused to give in to pressures from those who ignored data that showed charters were typically segregated institutions. Louisville board members acquiesced under the condition that they could continue an integrated school policy.

Studies have shown that segregated schooling affects students, parents, and the collective national character. As Yoon (2017) indicated, school choice studies typically focused on White flight, racial equity, and other political complications, while the causal effect school choice had on racial stereotyping within student cultures has received little attention. To highlight the effects school choice policy had on student perceptions of race, Yoon used critical theories of race, space, and youth to examine 59 students' (ages 11-19) perceptions of race and their choices made from socially constructed racial identifiers. Yoon found that as school choice isolated student populations, emergent stereotyping processes made eighth through 12th graders less dependent on adults for

racial meaning-making. In many instances, social media and other technologies were the conduits through which youth culture communicated and constructed sociopolitical values. The growing tendency to construct racial meaning that had a basis in youth culture and peer-driven norms was a significant finding in the study.

Moreover, Yoon (2017) found that in the absence of real, meaningful racial and socioeconomic relations, the 59 students in the research sample categorized in peer groups along economic, academic, and social power lines. Yoon noted a need for more research literature on student perceptions of the school choice movement and how they view the politics of race in school and social contexts. There is also a lack of literature that explains how race relations are constructed due to several factors that determine its trajectory, pattern, and purpose.

The politics of race are given a similar treatment, as Kirp (2013) found a fundamental gap between how older and younger generations perceived race relations. As many members of the previous generation learn to adapt to new 21st century racial trends, younger generations do not have to undergo the same life-changing sociopolitical adjustments. Kirp studied the racial equity issues in education and the impact of less privileged environments on student academic outcomes. Kirp posited that the academic gap between White and underserved students from low-income communities could generally be attributed to differences in levels of exposure to vocabulary and texts. According to the study, the less privileged, less educated households typically had reduced vocabulary usage compared to more affluent, educated White families.

The Religious Values-Based Charter School Paradigm

Innovative religious schools that combine spirituality and values training curricula could represent what Kivunja (2014) termed a pedagogical paradigm shift that adds agency to the premise that academic development and character development are linked. Jeynes (2012) conducted a far-reaching meta-analysis study on religious private schools, charter schools, and public schools. Jeyne's research included 90 studies and measured student academic outcomes related to each school type. Jeynes found that attending religious private schools offered the highest levels of academic achievement among the three kinds of schools.

To explain why religious private schools performed better than charter or public schools, Jeynes (2012) posited that first, African American students do better in religious schools because, in the extant religious ethos, they are more likely to feel a sense of unity and connection to others from membership in a faith-based environment. Second, faith-based schools have high levels of parent involvement. Third, teachers are caring, and they have high expectations. Fourth, faith-based environments view all people as equal in the eyes of God. Finally, smaller class sizes were a factor in student outcomes.

Implicit in religious values-based models is the idea that participants are guided by core beliefs. These beliefs give learning a context that supersedes academic mastery and preparation for tests. Even though Jeynes's (2012) study showed that charter school performance was basically on par with traditional public schools; nonetheless, Jeynes concluded that through collaborative activities, religious and public schools could learn from each other.

According to Thapa et al. (2013), context matters and belief systems shape individual experiences and learning, and they influence the multiple levels of relationships within social interactions. On this point, Vygotsky (1978) posited that advances in cognitive development are predicated on the presence of social interactions and relationships that construct a capacity for focus and cognitive development. Furthermore, focus and concentration affect relationships, learning outcomes, and the capacity for differentiation to higher cognitive experiences.

Cross et al. (2018) found that while in its early stages as isolated, separated entities from traditional school populations and society in general, religious school curricula that contextualized compromise, tolerance, and other esoteric principles offered insufficient preparation for life in global, pluralistic societies. On this point, Passini (2010) argued that in multicultural societies teaching moral reasoning is complicated, as morality may have different interpretations from culture to culture.

Finefter-Rosenbluh and Perry-Hazan (2018) maintained that religious schools had an obligation to prepare students for the realities of global, multicultural experiences that offered various perspectives. From student interviews, they found that most religious school students favored diversity-minded staffing policies as such practices provided input from many different worldviews. While Passini (2010) and Finefter-Rosenbluh and Perry-Hazan claimed that character development (e.g., values training) in multicultural societies is complicated, such pursuits must be grounded in a search for universal human values. In other words, as a concept, character development and values training are more than simply preparation for social engagement.

Fancourt's (2015) research showed that many institutions now distinguish between learning about religion and learning from religion. This new, evolving values-based education paradigm is significant in that cognitive development and student transformation objectives are treated as reciprocal, interrelated structures—as interactive parts of a religious-based developmental, cultural framework (Biesta, 2010). According to Biesta (2010), values are shaped by the environment, and conversely, the environment is informed by extant cultural values. In the context of Fancourt's learning from religion, Antlova et al. (2015) and Sternberg (2014) noted that what is learned is initially affected by the values learners bring to the experience. As Sternberg posited, because values (e.g., character) give meaning to life experiences, the construction of values is influenced by engagement and proximity to institutional cultural and philosophical assumptions. However, King (2015) found that in some traditional education settings, practitioners had difficulty seeing how values education could be tied to evidence, standard-based curriculums. King learned that while research showed integrating the concept of values led to a more positive school culture, improved student academic performance, and positive teacher and administrator relationships, many practitioners favored one structure or the other. From a traditional perspective, the mutuality between values education and evidence, standard-based curricula were difficult to conceptualize.

In another related study, Sekiwu (2013) used the findings from a qualitative, grounded case study of Ugandan students to explain whether inclusive education curriculum and citizenship programs could impact student discipline and academic performance issues. The study is relevant in that, to some extent, it mirrors the religious

charter school assumption that academic development is a multifaceted process (i.e., the integration of two related domains). When Sekiwu analyzed data from interviews and focus groups with 60 stakeholders, the findings showed that parents, teachers, and administrators favored an integrated values framework and implementing positive discipline theories. Seider et al. (2013) used a quasi-experimental research design to study three high performing, high poverty, values-based curricula in middle schools. In each school, the findings showed that when values and ethical philosophy informed curricula throughout the school, students showed higher commitment to academic goals and to their peers. The conclusions reached by Seider et al. parallel Vygotsky's (1978) theory that development is informed by systemic adherence to repeated, disciplined patterned activities.

Few studies that address student academic deficits suggest a character development component, although some studies agree that values shifting is a requisite aspect of the cognitive development process. Khoury (2017) used data from a single case study on Grades K-6 lower division and Grades 7-12 upper division students to show the need for character development strategies that support student transition from elementary to middle school. While there is literature on the role character development plays in student social development, there is a shortage of data that illustrates its role in mitigating academic outcomes. From individual interviews, documents, and artifacts, Khoury found that key practices and processes may be efficacious under some circumstances; however, across-the-board implementation is complex due to various priori experiences that both student and practitioner bring to the exercise.

Intention Driven Leadership and Values Agendas in Education

Religious values-based curricula are grounded in the assumption that establishing a systemic ethos of meaningful relations is key for school leaders and teacher-positive outcomes. In this light, for students, teachers, and administrators, identification and an embrace of school core principles and systemic procedures come with extended, collective institutional exposure and engagement. Hence, social engagement with prevailing school norms may affect student values development and meaning-making strategies (Brady, 2011). The hypothesis that student behavior and academic development are informed by relations with teachers who exemplify a spirit of humility, empathy, tolerance, and a joy of living demeanor is fundamental to the religious values-based approach to student development (e.g., transformation). When values-based character education curricula have been compared to traditional learning systems, a fundamental difference lies in how each administrator perceives the purpose of education. With an outcome orientation, traditional models focus more on content mastery. In contrast, the intent of values-based education is the focus on emergent values that empower self-mastery and thus cognitive development. Jeynes (2015, 2019) stated that religious and family influence on academic achievement is not valued enough when administrators and educators attempt to mitigate student education deficits.

In Australia, Lovat and Dally (2018) evaluated the effects of values education in public schooling using quantitative and qualitative data regarding values education. The study focused on data that might substantiate teacher claims that values implementation in the classroom positively affected teachers and students. Lovat and Dally were also

interested in understanding teachers' claims that values education had a positive effect on student academic outcomes. The researchers found that the emphasis on values seemed more natural to nontraditional schools and added that most public schools espouse a values-neutral philosophy instead.

A survey of the efficacy of values education that included 112 teachers and 550 students in Australia met with conflicting results (Lovat & Dally, 2018). Teachers in the survey observed positive changes in student behavior and how they adopted values education language markers. When student responses were tallied, they were mixed. Some students reported that they were less inclined to follow the values-related behaviors because, from their perspective, the program seemed artificial or controlling. However, when asked whether the program might positively affect peer behaviors, most students were more optimistic as they felt that the program elevated levels of awareness about values and their potential role in the education experience. Lovat and Dally concluded that despite 21st century education calls for more character development inclusion, in Australia and elsewhere, public school leaders may have apprehensions about the efficacy of implementing values-based programs because the program implies the need for systemic changes in school philosophy and cultural norms.

Jeynes (2015) included 30 studies in a meta-analysis of factors that may affect reductions in academic performance gaps between White, Black, and Latino student populations. The study's findings framed several needs. These included the need for problem solving approaches that considered religious faith-oriented schools and cultural factors that should be considered in government policy. The study showed that although

not statistically significant, government policy had a negative effect on closing the achievement gap. Next, educators in the United States need to inculcate a broader problem solving ethos or a more open-minded approach, as findings showed that the academic achievement gap conundrum is mired in several social issues. Intervention schemas must go beyond just the educational sphere. Finally, the source of strength for solving the problem was, as the study's findings suggested, in tapping into religious behaviors and family factors. Jeynes's claim that government policy had no statistically significant impact on closing the academic achievement gap may be misleading, as literature on the effects of the school choice movement and on the lack of regulation of charter schools may be insufficient to substantiate such claims.

From a later, more specific meta-analysis, Jeynes (2019) claimed that character development did indeed inform values construction and cognitive development. Jeynes's included 52 studies with the purpose of gathering data that established a relationship between character education and student achievement. Jeynes also sought information on the effect character development had within grade level, race, socioeconomic, and demographic contexts. The object of the meta-analysis was to understand whether there was a strong relationship between character education and pre-kindergarten to first-year college students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Jeynes found those who experienced character education had more significant expressions of love, integrity, compassion, and self-discipline. What is more, the positive effects of character education were consistent across racial lines.

Agency, Autonomy, and Empowerment

Studies have shown that leadership has at least two forms: innovative and traditional (Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Tai & Kareem, 2018). Principal preparation programs are part of the strategic aims of improving leadership efficacy and teacher-to-principal relations. To broaden insight into these topics, Orphanos and Orr (2014) collected data from a U.S. study on effective leadership preparation and a nationally representative sample of elementary school principals. The sample consisted of 175 teachers whose principals were prepared by participation in high quality leadership programs and 589 teachers whose principals were trained in traditional programs. The results showed that compared to traditional preparation practices, the nontraditional, innovative principal preparation strategies had a more significant effect on principal leadership practices, teacher collaboration, and satisfaction. Principals from traditional training programs were considered less prepared to meet new challenges and were less collaborative as they tended to rely on old, familiar practices.

Bloom and Owens's (2013) study examined the role principals played in staffing, curriculum planning, and formulating discipline policies in high and low performing urban high schools. Survey data from 14,000 administrators showed that principals at low performing schools had more say in school funding issues and less impact on curricular construction, hiring and firing teaching staff, and course offerings than principals from high performing schools.

Robey and Helfenbein (2018) researched the features of metropolitan public charter and Catholic schools from the principals' perspectives. The rationale for

examining these perspectives centered on the premise that systemic school success was linked to leadership. The need to collect data on the differences in leadership approaches between public charter and Catholic schools was a driving force in the study. The principals selected from 76 city public and faith-based schools were part of a sequential explanatory inquiry that measured perceptions of major elements in the context of school administration. The overarching focus included student and principal self-reflections and factors related to the principal responsibilities. According to Robey and Helfenbein, although school types may differ in philosophy and theoretical approaches to pedagogy, from a leadership perspective, most principals found the plethora of administrative tasks demanding. In addition, most agreed that experience and leadership skills played a major role in school and administrator success. When Robey and Helfenbein compared public charter schools to faith-based schools, the latter had greater autonomy as central office and union demands were not a factor. All principals in the study agreed that high authority over all areas of study was a necessity for sustained student achievement outcomes.

Superville (2019) posited that student academic improvement is informed by effective school leadership. Innovative principal leadership training programs target a potential leader's strengths and personality traits. Placement becomes less about who is next in line for the job but rather on matching candidates to schools whose leadership strengths and personality fit school needs. The Gates et al. (2019) principal pipeline study found that candidates in a 6-year Principal Pipeline Initiative funded by the Wallace Foundation outperformed new principals who were not in the program. In addition, based

on higher principal retention rates and significant growth in academic performance in these low-income, underserved communities, the researchers suggested that the Principal Pipeline Initiative marked a new approach to principal training and perhaps a breakthrough in the battle with low student performance. The program included preservice preparation, higher leader standards, and selective hiring and placement. On-site induction and evaluation support had a positive effect on student performance, school culture, and principal retention. This model may represent a new understanding of principal leadership, training, and standards that differ from traditional reform approaches that fail to solve long-standing academic deficit issues within the underserved, less privileged school districts.

Leadership Paradigms

In this section, I address three aspects of leadership: caring, transactional, and transformational.

Caring Leadership

Principal leadership may involve establishing productive relationships based on caring. Caring leadership styles suggest intentionality and a student-centered leadership model that may have value in all types of schools. Studies show that caring leadership had a positive impact on student academic achievement (Louis et al., 2016). From an empirical analysis of a survey of 134 schools, Louis et al. (2016) constructed a conceptual framework based on caring in schools and caring school leadership. An exploration into caring school culture measured levels of quality social relationships and caring principal leadership in relation to systemic student support for cognitive

development. Caring was described as levels of attentiveness, authentic knowledge of others, motivational displacement, situationality, mutuality, and authenticity. Louis et al. concluded that to be effective, caring leadership had to be a systemic priority, an ethos, and a worldview that is exemplified in institutional and school cultural norms. When caring leadership becomes a part of the school mission and goals, it is a collective ideology, which embodies an implicit transformative intent.

Transactional Leadership

Studies have shown that quality school leadership factored into immediate and future student academic success (Gale & Bishop, 2014; Nir & Hameiri, 2014). Gale and Bishop (2014) noted a lack of substantive literature on middle school principal leadership. To facilitate greater comparability, Gale and Bishop used a qualitative approach that included focus groups and 24 individual interviews to study perceptions of effective school leadership from principals' perspectives. The researchers categorized worldviews, values, and actions that offered insight into effective principal leadership strategies and trends. The focus of the study was the levels of principal developmental responsiveness awareness and relationship building efficacy. Developmental responsiveness was contextualized as an aspect of caring that included strategies that aligned with individual and collective student cognitive and developmental levels. Gale and Bishop posited that in the context of middle school leadership, developmental responsiveness was an important component. Emotional and physical development were also at the forefront because, at this stage of development, students are preoccupied with making sense of their environment and with processing old and new input.

Relationship building acumen was part of Gale and Bishop's (2014) study as the capacity to establish positive proximal relationships with students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders was deemed important to the assessment of the potential leadership strengths and weaknesses process. In the context of school reform and closing the academic gap between the privileged and less privileged, principal leadership styles, principal preparedness programs, caring and transformational leadership, and values-based initiatives may hold great promise as these offer a broadminded approach to solving school academic progress problems.

Transformational Leadership

Nir and Hameiri (2014) underscored the lack of literature on how principals use power-based strategies to affect school success and faculty compliance. To help fill the gap, Nir and Hameiri distributed questionnaires to 954 teachers from 191 randomly sampled public elementary schools. Collected data were used to gain information on the relationship between leadership styles and the use of power-based strategies in principal leadership. The data suggested that transformative leadership styles represented positive soft power-based approaches, and the use of controlling, harsh leadership formats represented authoritative, less collaborative leadership styles. Nir and Hameiri posited that leadership style and power-based implementation need to be factored into attempts to aggregate ailing and successful institutions.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Leadership and Religious Charter Schools

According to Odhiambo and Hii (2012), parent and student perceptions of teachers and administrators are often informed by the degree to which leaders show a

caring leadership style and the degree to which practitioners exemplify the overarching philosophy of the institutions they serve. Odhiambo and Hii posited that while some progressive religious charter schools prioritized caring leadership, implementation may be stalled. This occurs under the following circumstances:

- When the concept of caring leadership is new and difficult for overall staff and stakeholders.
- When, due to systemic weaknesses, teachers and principals struggle to make the school mission and vision come alive.
- When caring leadership needs time to transform the school culture.
- When caring leadership needs more clarification from leadership.

MacMullen (2018) argued that religious schools were training grounds for life outside the classroom. Religious schools are, therefore, obligated to prepare students for civic and social engagement. The student readiness issue is complex, and because religious character schooling has several levels and multiple variables, struggles to understand the student readiness dialectic are exacerbated by the fact that schools differ in methodology and overarching intent. MacMullen used an analytical and evaluative framework to support the proposition that student civic preparedness in religious schools should be measured according to the degree of religious emphasis these schools espoused. While, as MacMullen found, this premise may have its share of problems, it may be fair to assume that religious schools that are deeply rooted in religious doctrine may appear weak in areas of student civic awareness preparedness because such matters are addressed in the context of religious teachings rather than by direct civic instruction.

Hence, judgment and policymaking regarding these school types should be informed by facts that denote whether the religious curricula approach was narrow or broad-based. As MacMullen claimed, immoderate types of religious schools (e.g., private Catholic and Christian schools) may well offer poor levels of social conscience evolvement due to the narrowed lens through which they view the world. The study also argued that moderate types of religious schools (values/character-based) should be welcomed into the education landscape because, compared to other school types, they offer a values framework grounded in character and a sociopolitical consciousness that other school types may choose to replicate.

Another perspective regarding principals came from a study by Bloom and Owens (2013), who sought to explain the role principals played in staffing, curriculum strategies, and discipline policies in high and low performing urban high schools. Data from a survey of 14,000 administrators showed that principals at low performing schools had more say in school funding issues and less impact on curricular construction, hiring and firing teaching staff, and course offerings than principals from high performing schools. While MacMullen (2018) noted that student success is tied to systemic obligations to balance both academic and civic readiness (character building), Bloom and Owen's study failed to reference the fact that positive outcomes in either domain are also linked to levels of leadership efficacy.

Education Ideology, Innovation, and Equity

School choice in education gives stakeholders more school options, but it also makes school selection more challenging as choosing between traditional models and

more progressive institutions require research. For some parents and stakeholders, the need to evaluate the attributes of various school types is an important part of the school selection process. Robey and Helfenbein (2018) stated that in this current education era, knowledge of school philosophy, school record of achievement, and amplified stakeholder calls for school choice in metropolitan cities might have political as well as socioeconomic implications. Reckhow et al. (2014) posited that policy cues (i.e., school choice and the charter school movement) led to a growing trend in liberal and conservative ideological polarization. While religious charter schools have found a niche in the public education landscape, principals must perform in an era when leaders encounter a variety of political and social issues. Odhiambo and Hii (2012) explained that there are two types of religious charter schools: those rooted in long standing traditions (e.g., Catholic and Christian) and those that are less doctrine-centered, more innovative, and values-based.

Leadership Power and Authority

Stakeholder and Teacher Perceptions of Leadership Power

Odhiambo and Hii (2012) conducted a purposeful case study focused on stakeholder, student, and teacher perceptions of school principals. Data from interviews with 26 teachers, 12 students, and 12 parents showed that (a) stakeholders felt principals had power based on their roles (i.e., their image or standing in education), (b) principals had the power to improve and establish positive outcomes, and (c) stakeholders felt that the principals' power was grounded in their decision-making skills and in the rapport, they maintained with the school community. Stakeholders and teachers differed in that

teachers emphasized that principals must have authority in order to lead. Furthermore, their directives should be the final decision, and that teacher-principal cohesiveness had an impact on what took place in the classroom.

Most stakeholders in Odhiambo and Hii's (2012) study held the view that despite their authority, principals were only as powerful as their actions and what they accomplished. In this context, the stakeholders indicated that authority and trust were associated with leadership style, and it was ultimately outcome dependent. While most stakeholders saw school principals as the formal authority, Odhiambo and Hii found that across all domains, there was rising pressure to move toward a nontraditional leadership paradigm.

Balance Setting and Finding Common Ground

Fancourt (2015) noted that to engage in the education discourse, religious charter school communities had to shape an approach framed in compromise, tolerance, and policy processes that allowed them to work with the status quo. Fancourt posited that it was when new forms of religious charter schools promoted a curricula policy that focused on learning from religion rather than, for example, on replications of long-standing Catholic school paradigms rooted in learning about religion that a requisite working balance was set between academic and religious values-based education. This shift in philosophy caused a renewed interest in religious charter schools among parents and a wider audience in general.

Bailey and Cooper (2009), in a multicase study consisting of five religious schools, learned that parents and students were attracted to the palpable sense of

community and the unified cultural identity that these schools projected. For religious charter school parents, cultural relevance was an important factor in choosing a school. According to Bailey and Cooper, You and Penny (2011), and Sekiwu (2013), values-based learning curricula are important as well. In another case study, King (2015) observed that the introduction of values-based studies into the curriculum often led to confusion and resistance from those tied to evidence, standards-based curricula. King found that some practitioners preferred one format over the other. Balancing the two structures had positive effects on student academic performance and on teacher-administrator relations because values-based approaches embody an implicit collaborative effect that appreciates perspectives from multiple sources.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed how some government policies might play a pivotal role in the widening academic achievement gaps between White and underserved students. School choice policies and other redistricting initiatives led to more school segregation and to less student diversity in public schools. Yoon (2017) claimed that school choice and redistricting had little to do with bringing diverse groups together and posited that given the a priori social issues in public education, social equity and increased student diversity were perhaps never on the privileged sector agenda.

As Parcel and Taylor (2015) found, public education policymaking is grounded in a less consensual paradigm. Therefore, Parcel and Taylor argued that in education, sociopolitical change and education reform discourses reflect a top-down, privileged class worldview. Johnston (2016) posited that the solutions to underserved academic

deficits rest, in part, on a leadership model that reflects an understanding of the currency school diversity brings to academic and social development experiences. Johnston's perspective suggests that school choice initiatives, segregated schools, etc., exacerbate the academic achievement issue. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory proposed that optimal learning environments support proximal exposure to peer group diversity.

Middle school charter education curricula that framed academic improvement in the character education (i.e., SEL) construct was the primary focus of this study because these school types often assume that character development may assist in academic improvement. In Chapter 2, I explored the impact principals have on school culture and academic outcomes in relation to academic and character development. The literature is widespread regarding the importance of quality leadership in schools; however, Louis et al. (2016) found that the caring leadership formula ranked high on the list of effective leadership practices. Odhiambo and Hii (2012) explained that in progressive religious charter schools, caring leadership is a priority as leaders attempt to reflect the spiritual values that underscore school philosophy and worldview. Fancourt (2015) noted that it is incumbent upon school leaders in religious charter schools to establish a school culture that reflects the religious principles that guided the institution. Lastly, in this chapter, I discussed other leadership models in the context of a growing governing trend of matching new leaders with institutions that fit their style and worldview. My research plan was to fill the gap in the literature relating to principals' and teachers' perceptions of

SEL infusion in their school curriculum and the effect SEL might have on student social and academic outcomes.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL initiatives with academic curriculum at their public charter middle schools. In this chapter, I outline the rationale for the study, detail my role as the researcher, describe the methodology that informed data selection, and demonstrate a clear alignment between these aspects of the study and the research questions. I also provide justification for selecting charter middle schools and explain my recruitment strategy, the criteria for selecting participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis format. Finally, I include a synopsis of any trustworthiness issues that pertain to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Research Design and Rationale

The following two research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools?

Research Question 2: How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their charter middle schools?

The charter school education paradigm was of interest in this study because, in their more autonomous nature, charter schools can be vehicles for understanding the perceptions of principals and teachers have regarding infusion of SEL curriculum with academic curriculum. To answer the research questions, I used a basic qualitative research design (see Liu, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) posited that

qualitative studies often require a cross-case analysis, a form of analytic orientation that may lay bare researcher assumptions and inferences. The choice of a basic qualitative design was consistent with my research goals. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contributed two other substantive points that served as the justification for basic research implementation: (a) basic qualitative research design is often used in education when researchers seek a deeper understanding of effective educational processes, such as strategies, techniques, and operative leadership and teacher practices; and (b) because basic (i.e., generic) qualitative research design engages in understanding how individuals interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and in understanding what meaning they attribute to their experiences, they are epistemologically social constructivist and theoretically interpretive.

Saldana's (2015) proposition, that in the application of a social impact lens, qualitative researchers commit to drawing inferences from participant perceptions of problems and participant engagement with the phenomenon, iterated a similar perspective. Patton (2015) posited that when researchers wish to circumvent the restrictions of established traditional qualitative methodologies, they may find basic qualitative research more pragmatic. Kahlke (2014) explained that due to their decidedly inductive characteristics and since they ostensibly borrow from other methodologies, basic research designs are constructed from the ground up. This basic research study aligned with the research questions and a conceptual framework comprising Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. In both theories, the authors proposed that learning and development have a social

construction. In addition, Stake (1995) made the case that in a social or applied science context, qualitative studies provide more variety and balance and, thus, extend opportunities to learn.

In the current study, interviews with principals and teachers from five western U.S. charter middle schools helped focus attention on the social constructions that inform participant perceptions of the phenomenon of study. I chose the basic qualitative research paradigm instead of case study, phenomenological research, or narrative study formats because it offered a more balanced research design. Basic qualitative research studies allow researchers the freedom to borrow analytical data collection processes from other qualitative designs.

Stake (1995) noted that case studies typically focus at length on one or a few cases; as a result, the analytical focus is less grounded in interpreting generalizations and more on particularization. Because case studies emphasize, in part, understanding participant reactions to their experiences, the researcher needs to know what the case is and what it does. The case study focus, and its complex probing orientation, which typically includes multiple data gathering methods, exceeded the needs and objectives of this basic qualitative research inquiry.

Phenomenological research was also not a suitable option because I sought to understand how SEL implementation and outcomes in charter schools were perceived by participants rather than what those structures may mean to them. Phenomenological approaches typically build upon the lived, quintessential, and overarching essential invariant structures that describe the phenomenon's experiences (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). Patton (2015) observed that phenomenology goes beyond the limits of claiming that participant experiences are the ultimate reality, explaining that phenomenologists need to describe what was experienced and how the participants experience what they experience. However, it is worth noting that Patton suggested that all qualitative studies have some phenomenological characteristics to them.

I did not consider narrative inquiry because the intention to interpret participant stories was not part of my research objective. In addition, as Creswell (2013) noted, most narrative studies focus on significant events that pertain to one to three individuals and, therefore, focus on a small number of stories and narratives. My basic research process was aimed at making meaning of how school site principals and teachers related to a combined SEL and academic advancement environment.

Role of the Researcher

Because I have worked in a school that promoted social and emotional growth, I needed to be mindful of maintaining an objective stance throughout the research process. For 5 years, I taught multiple subjects at a public, charter, Waldorf School. Over the years, I grew to appreciate the independence and freedom to guide students along a path that mirrored the Rudolf Steiner philosophy of education and school culture norms that undergird Waldorf schools. As Patton (2015) explained, “Every researcher brings preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied” (p. 706). For the study results to appear trustworthy, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that researchers must cultivate high levels of impartiality, ethics, and integrity. While my experiences with

charter schools were highly positive, I made an effort to keep my familiarity and respect for this type of school from influencing this current research study.

To offer additional transparency, I note that 5 of the 8 interviewees worked in my school district of 29 schools. Despite the proximity, I did not encounter any conflicts because my school is a traditional, public middle school, and the schools in the study were charters.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

As stated earlier, charter middle schools were the focus of this study because they place a premium on SEL programs and on other student-centered constructs that support experimentation and innovation. School district location and demographic makeup consisted of two Northern California, two Southern California, and one Arizona public charter middle schools. Participant socioeconomic levels ranged from low to low-middle income. Student demographics consisted of a high percentage of Hispanics, a low to medium proportion of European American student representation, and a small mixture of other ethnicities, such as African American, Asian, and Filipino. The selection of this demographic aligned with the research goal to explore less privileged student academic experiences in the context of five charter middle schools.

This purposeful sampling strategy (see Patton, 2015) included participants from five diverse charter schools that served low- to middle-income individuals. I interviewed the two principals and six teachers from five schools on a first response basis. My original plan was to interview at least 12 participants, but the COVID-19 pandemic-

related issues had an effect on the recruitment process. Patton (2015) claimed that qualitative studies could reach saturation with as few as one to 10 participants from a stakeholder group.

Participant Recruitment

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University, I contacted the principals from each of the two schools who had shown interest in taking part in the study. Creswell (2013) stated that once school decision makers agree to participate, it is important that researchers acknowledge ethical issues at the school site. Initially, upon gaining the principals' approval, I emailed or telephoned the participants with an invitation to participate in the study. While I preferred to have participants who have been at the school site for 2 years or more, the COVID-19 pandemic limited stakeholder mobility and access; therefore, participation in the study was on a first-come basis.

In addition, participation was contingent on receiving a "yes, I consent" statement returned via email or a telephone conversation. To protect the study's validity and honor participant privacy and safety concerns, I reminded potential interviewees that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate their participation anytime they felt the need to do so. Although long-time staff members would have been ideal candidates, the selection process was open to all responders, and I accepted those who volunteered first.

Instrumentation

For this basic qualitative research study, I collected data from interviews with principals and teachers from five charter schools. The interview questions were designed to elicit descriptive data regarding the participants' perceptions of SEL practices and their potential to have a positive effect on schools' academic outcomes. Seidman (2013) explained that in-depth interviews help the researcher understand the experiences of those interviewed and attenuate the temptation to predict or control that experience. The Appendix contains the interview question protocols for principals and teachers.

The research questions guided the collection of data from the interviews. I designed the interview questions following suggested guidelines from Rubin and Rubin (2012), Seidman (2013), and Patton (2015). For example, as Rubin and Rubin noted, researchers seek rich and in-depth information rather than yes and no or agree and disagree responses. Open-ended questions are preferable because they give the interviewee the freedom to respond in a manner that reflects their nature and personal experiences with the subject under investigation. Importantly, while a certain number of questions may be allocated, good interviews are seldom fixed; as a lived experience, the interview should unfold and flow in a semi-structured or unstructured manner (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Finally, because the SEL concept has various labels, such as values learning and character education (Corcoran et al., 2018), to verify the term each school uses, I consulted with the principals before the interview process began.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of person-to-person interviews via teleconference. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, interviews are typical in qualitative studies, especially when conditions are such that the researcher cannot make direct observations. As Patton (2015) explained, researchers conduct interviews to uncover participants' thoughts and perceptions that cannot be acquired from observing the phenomenon in a natural setting. Patton (1987) posited that contrary interpretations of data are equally important as the interpretations and assumptions formulated earlier.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) claimed that record keeping was an essential part of the data collection process. I kept a journal during each interview (e.g., making note if certain questions brought tension or if the interviewee was cooperative even though he or she tended to stray from the topic). I also returned to journal notes to reflect on procedures and practices that might have appeared biased. The potential for rich and meaningful interviews was enhanced by data collected from diverse sources, such as the responses of principals and teachers as well as from observations in my researcher's journal.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews via teleconferences and by phone. The participants decided which format they felt most comfortable with. In both cases, I used a digital recorder to collect interview data. The interviews took 40 to 60 minutes and commenced after I had received the participants' "yes, I consent" statement. I transcribed the digital recordings and offered each participant a copy of the transcript, asking for any changes or corrections. I also offered all participants a $30 gift card in recognition of their time.

Data Analysis Plan

I used open coding to explore source data and discover extant categories, leading to themes and relationships between the data collected from the interviews. Continuous coding is an organized system that provides a way to view the research problem from multiple perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this basic qualitative study, the primary source of data was derived from the perceptions of principals and teachers of SEL at five charter middle schools in the western United States. Codes could be labeled in three ways: participants' words, literature concepts, and collected notes in my journal (see Liu, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also explained that continuity is a necessity when researchers attempt to mine rich and meaningful data. As a study moves from discovery and verification to confirmation, Merriam and Tisdell noted that descriptions of the interview process also have currency because doing so provides a more holistic view of the research experience.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure credibility, I compared responses from interviews with principals and teachers at five charter middle schools (see Patton, 2015). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, credibility (i.e., internal validity) is tied to the researcher's capacity to develop precise, descriptive links between collected data and the phenomena of interest. To assist my efforts to accurately transcribe, code, and interpret interviewee responses, I sought feedback from my committee chair.

Transferability

Interviews with principals and teachers provided rich data for this study because each group had insights and experiences regarding SEL that reflected diverse worldviews, education, and social change perspectives. Interpretations, descriptions, and understandings about charter middle school SEL implementation obtained from the data could be useful in other educational settings.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, I obtained feedback from my mentor regarding my approaches to data collection and interpretation of the transcripts. To help close any dependability gaps, I relied on input from colleagues who had already conducted interview sessions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) found that dependability is reflected in the triangulation of perspectives from diverse sources and from getting second opinions regarding researcher interpretation of data proficiency.

Confirmability

As Yin (2014) explained, research confirmability begins with a clear, concise depiction of how the study was organized. In this regard, I presented an outline of the data collection and analysis process to my committee chair. I also established a complete outline of the conceptual framework, research design, and data management schemas.

Ethical Procedures

Seven face-to-face virtual interviews and one telephone interview were the sources of data for this study. Saldana (2015) posited that to maintain an equitable and balanced relationship, researchers need to be mindful that their needs do not override the

needs of participants. Saldana also suggested that to reduce bias, researchers must realize that their assumptions and worldviews about the topic may differ from that of the participants.' In this process, I reiterated the confidential nature of the study, that interview data would be kept in a locked file, and that to maintain privacy, no real names would appear on any public document related to this study. As Patton (2015) noted, building rapport with participants enhances levels of trust and interview quality.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advised that in basic qualitative research studies, ethical goals are ostensibly linked to an understanding of the meaning the phenomenon has for participants, how they perceive their experiences, and relationships they have with the phenomenon rather than to the researcher's need to align assumptions or theories to the research problem. Another ethical concern I monitored related to decisions about what data were important, what should be included, and what should be left out. Merriam and Tisdell found that if researchers omitted data that were contrary to their views, validity and integrity might be compromised. Once Walden's IRB approved the study, I asked participants to return the letters of consent or write an email confirming "I consent." I reminded the participants that partaking in the interviews was strictly voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. To reduce availability concerns, I organized interview sessions that fit interviewee schedules.

Summary

This chapter began with a restatement of my research purpose and goals. I outlined the rationale for the study, detailed my role as the researcher, discussed the methodology that informed data selection, and assured that alignment to the research

questions was clear. Rubin and Rubin's (2012) continuous coding strategy was a resource for my data analysis plan. In this chapter, I also provided justification for selecting charter middle schools and discussed my recruitment strategy and criteria for selecting participants. I outlined my instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis plan. I explained my ethical responsibilities as a researcher, IRB protocol, and ethical commitments regarding interviews. Finally, I described the data collection process and handling procedures. In Chapter 4 I discuss the themes that relate to the two research questions resulting from analysis of collected data.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL initiatives with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools. In both Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the authors asserted that learning and development have a social construction. These theories gave agency to the construction of the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools?

Research Question 2: How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their charter middle schools?

In this chapter, I detail the interview setting, participant demographics, data collection and analysis process, and the trustworthiness of the findings. The closing portion of this chapter includes a discussion of my findings and a conclusion.

Setting

Data were collected from eight interviews with participants from five charter schools. I conducted five Zoom interviews with participants in Northern California, two with participants from Southern California, and one by phone from a participant living in Arizona. Despite the challenges that came from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zoom video format provided what I perceived to be suitable levels of connection and communication. The participants chose a setting for the interview that was free from

interruptions and afforded privacy. I conducted all interviews in the privacy of my office at my school.

Demographics

I collected data from interviews with two principals and six teachers from five charter middle schools in Northern California, Southern California, and Arizona. Two teachers taught at the same Northern California school. In this study, the economic levels of the five California schools ranged from low to middle income, as reported by the participants. The teacher from Arizona represented an upper class, highly educated charter school. Both principals in the study were White. The ethnic makeup of the teacher group was three Whites and three Hispanics. Three participants responded to my invitation to participate posted on the social media outlets of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Charter Schools Work. The remaining five participants responded to my recruitment efforts in Northern and Southern California charter middle schools. The participants had levels of experience that ranged from 3 to 16 years. One principal had 1 year of experience, and the other had been on the job for more than 10 years. All participants came from charter middle schools; therefore, they met the criteria I described in my invitation letter. To protect their identities, I gave the participants and their schools pseudonyms. Table 1 provides complete demographic information on each participant.

Table 1

Participant Gender, Ethnicity, and Years of Experience

Pseudonym	Job title	Gender	Experience	Ethnicity	Region
Alondra	Teacher	Female	5-9 yrs.	Hispanic	Northern CA
Brenda	Teacher	Female	4-6 yrs.	White	Northern CA
Blanca	Principal	Female	1-5 yrs.	White	Northern CA
Geeta	Teacher	Female	8-11yrs.	Asian	Southern CA
Janet	Teacher	Female	5-8 yrs.	White	Northern CA
Maddy	Teacher	Female	9-13 yrs.	White	Arizona
Stan	Principal	Male	10-14 yrs.	White	Northern CA
Tia	Teacher	Female	4-8 yrs.	Hispanic	Southern CA

Data Collection

After I received IRB approval (No. 09-11-20-0231235), to gain interest and support for my study, I arranged an in-person meeting with two charter school principals from a Northern California school district. After our meeting, Blanca agreed to an interview and to provide a list of potential participants. Stan also agreed to an interview and offered to post my flyer on his school's bulletin board as well as add my contact information to his weekly blog page. When I asked Stan for a specific list of teacher contacts, he explained that his blog and the school bulletin board postings should be sufficient; however, no teachers from Stan's school responded to the invitation posted on the blog page or the school bulletin board. I did, nonetheless, recruit three teachers from a list the first principal provided. After several weeks of waiting for additional responses to my email requests to participate, with IRB approval, I turned to social media. I posted invitations to participate on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Charter Schools Work. The Charter

Schools Work website attracted the interest of three charter middle school teachers who met the criteria I set for interviewees. Postings on LinkedIn and Facebook brought a few responses, but none met my requirements for participation.

I conducted eight interviews, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. I recorded each interview on a small, portable, USB Sony IC recorder and used the Otter.ai app to transfer my data files into the computer. I found the premium version of Otter.ai was superior to the free download software. I listened to each recording while reading the transcripts. The Otter.ai transcriptions were fairly accurate, but they required some editing to ensure they matched the recordings.

Data Analysis

From the data analysis, two prominent themes and six subthemes emerged. I utilized what Corbin and Strauss (2008) termed as an open coding process to delineate the concepts or themes that emerged from the data analysis. Once I finished collecting data from the interviews, I realized that each participant had their own story to tell. While each participant responded to the same questions, the scope of the interviews broadened when some alluded to matters such as years of teaching experience, demographics, levels of autonomy, pedagogic style, and sociopolitical worldviews. Importantly, once I became immersed in the data, I had to determine how effectively the various participant perspectives addressed my research questions.

Before coding and delineating themes in the data, I studied the initial interview transcripts in search of responses that aligned with the research questions. I also journaled about the assortment of personalities within the participant group. Every response was

focused, direct, and informative. Saldana (2015) noted that contemplation of the interviews allows insight to emerge. Saldana's observation reiterates that qualitative research has a highly subjective dimension that is the antithesis of the purpose of quantitative research. After the first interview, I intuited that the developing trails of pertinent data showed patterns that would inform my coding process and the search for themes. The final two themes that emerged came from the notes I kept in my journal. Throughout the interview process, I looked for descriptive terms and phrases that would address the research questions and sought words and concepts that assisted the construction of potential codes and themes that pertained to:

- charter school culture/autonomy and curriculum,
- SEL concept and infusion,
- principal perspective,
- teacher perspective,
- relationship building,
- connection, and
- student sense of safety.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained that when researchers search for various components of the data, they are more equipped to identify the properties and dimensions of the components and, therefore, able to make deductive inferences about how the parts relate to the study's overall objective. Corbin and Strauss's reference to properties and dimensions was helpful because that strategy had application throughout my search for themes, patterns, and codes. Saldana (2015) posited that, in the deductive process, the

researcher has a specific agenda and a general sense of what markers relate to the research as well as the concepts that do not fit. Saldana's observations grounded my understanding of the essence and nature of qualitative research. Deductive thinking had significance during and after interview sessions as I mined for meaningful, incisive clues that would inform the data analysis process.

Examining, categorizing, and brainstorming about what was reflected in responses from the principals and teachers about SEL infusion in their respective schools assisted the construction of codes and the search for themes that pertained to the research problem. From this process, the first theme emerged: SEL alignment in a charter middle school setting. This theme was a product of the interviewees' need for SEL initiatives that fit school culture and curriculum agendas and that most respondents favored the simultaneous use of multiple SEL programs, such as Character Strong, Growth Mindset, and Choose Love. The second theme pertained to SEL outcomes within a charter school social construction paradigm. In the coding process, school culture, positive relationships and connections, and students' sense of safety were prominent participant talking points.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted the theoretical constructivism concept that underscores basic qualitative research. My interactions with interviewees showed that each participant had a story to tell. During the interviews, the participants' comments and experiences confirmed that they comprehended the interview questions and could make meaning of them, thus understanding the overarching research objective. In addition, they could, as Seidman (2013) described, "Make sense to themselves as well as to the

interviewer" (p. 27). My understanding that they could make meaning of the subject of my research confirmed the credibility of the data.

Credibility

To increase credibility, I applied a triangulation strategy to interviews with multiple principals and teachers. This analysis process represented both a leadership viewpoint and the perspectives of educators from various grade levels, multiple subject areas, and different regions of the country. Comparing and interpreting responses from these diverse sources provided a collection of rich viewpoints. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation is frequently used in basic qualitative research when data are collected from interview responses, thus representing data from individuals with differing perspectives. In Chapter 3, I stated the purpose and circumstances related to the research as they pertain to the realities that drive the charter agenda. I read the interview transcripts many times to ensure that my interpretations of the data were free of bias. I also asked my dissertation chair to scan my work for instances of bias that would present credibility issues.

Transferability

The results obtained from this research regarding public charter middle schools have transferability because the participants represented a broad range of perspectives and levels of experience. The interviews with two principals and six teachers provided an array of worldviews on education and socioeconomic issues that could apply across the education landscape. I enhanced transferability of the findings by providing numerous excerpts from their interviews. Specifically, transferability to other charter schools is

possible because the basic canons of the charter school philosophy and habits of mind are reflected in the research questions and the descriptive data that emerged during the interview sessions.

Dependability

I used triangulation to compare and cross reference interview data from two principals who represented various viewpoints and from teachers who, due to differences in school demographics, years of experience, and perceptions of SEL infusion, offered multiple perspectives regarding the research questions. In addition to achieving saturation, each session had a timely, cohesive relevance. Moreover, as each participant responded to questions, they appeared to appreciate the opportunity to share and tell their story. In the early stages of the research process, I journaled about the slow responses to the invitation to participate in the study and my lack of knowledge regarding coding and themes. I wrote about my goal to complete skilled, professional interviews and hoped that the sample size was enough to achieve saturation. After the first interview, I reminded myself to follow the list of interview questions. In the end, I noted that all interviews provided rich data and that the flow of the interviews and rapport between myself and the participants were rewarding.

Confirmability

McCabe and Holmes (2009) posited that while qualitative researchers must be profoundly unbiased, change, emancipation, and transformation are the roots of qualitative research. McCabe and Holmes proposed that the ebb and flow of rich and meaningful data between researcher and participants can create a new way of being for

both parties. My interview sessions had a mutuality that produced what I felt was authentic dialogue and participant interest in the phenomenon. Responses to interview questions were concise and thoughtful, with each educator's perception of the phenomenon reflecting their worldviews and interest in assessing SEL's utility regarding its infusion into their curriculum.

Results

The perceptions charter middle school principals and teachers had of SEL infusion and outcomes in their respective school settings were the main focus of this research study. During the interviews, the participants referenced the influence school culture, building relationships, positive connections, and student sense of safety have on social and academic outcomes. I used the first interview as a reference point. I studied its tone and flow and assessed how close the responses were to the research questions. Afterward, I began to isolate and catalog the interviewees' words, phrases, and repeated concepts. This process led to coding and the generation of themes. The data analysis process produced a prominent theme for each of the two research questions. Additionally, I identified three subthemes for each research question (see Table 2).

Table 2

Research Questions, Themes, and Subthemes

Research question	Theme	Subthemes
1. What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their public charter middle schools?	1. SEL alignment to school goals and education philosophy.	1. SEL supports the overarching curriculum. 2. Locating SEL infusion, purpose, design, and intent. 3. Fostering positive relationships and meaningful connections.
2. How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their public charter middle schools?	2. SEL outcomes within a charter school social construction paradigm.	1. Measuring SEL and academic outcomes is complicated. 2. SEL informs student social development, school climate, and student sense of safety. 3. Relationships and meaningful connections influence SEL outcomes.

Theme 1: SEL Alignment to Fit Charter School Goals and Education Philosophy

I designed Research Question 1 to explore the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools. All participants directly or indirectly expressed that SEL infusion should be relevant to and align with the school culture and its extant values. All but one of the participants perceived SEL infusion as a tool that helps explicate overarching school goals and the school's educational philosophy. As SEL alignment to school values and philosophy is a salient concern, it is significant to note that the data showed that both

principals in the study were charged with finding initiatives that coalesced with their school objectives, philosophy, and curriculum. Therefore, successful SEL alignment may depend on their perceptions of school needs and their capacity to articulate those needs to stakeholders.

Subtheme 1*: *SEL Supports the Overarching Curriculum

SEL infusion in charter school settings is often filtered through the lens school principals and teachers use to structure and articulate school goals and philosophy of education. Blanca, one of the principals, proposed,

> I honestly think you use it [SEL] as, as a background. I think you have to use it as a case study. If you're talking about character and character traits that you want or that we want our students to embody, you then have to shine a light on, on, on where their [positive character traits] present. Yeah. And then, by contrast, where they [negative character traits] are not without being political.

Blanca added,

> The ones [SEL initiatives] that are the most impactful are the ones that, that align with your school. Yes, your culture. Yeah. And your school values and, and really shine a light and . . . there's like a leader in me. And so, some of them, some of them really promote certain characteristics and qualities in the students. But if they're not reflected in the teaching staff or in the overall culture of the school, then it doesn't mean anything.

According to Blanca, during the COVID-19 epidemic, introducing SEL comes with a caveat. While they have a SEL program in place, full implementation was in abeyance

due to challenges that stemmed from the distance learning format. From a school principal's perspective, she maintained:

> Because so much of it [SEL] is relational in terms of the kids being able to, like, turn and talk to, you know, their partner about it or get into a group and yeah, and so much of that you can't do [virtually]. It's like these kids doing social-emotional activities that are done in isolation is pretty hard.

SEL alignment and relevance to the school agenda and worldview was a consistent concern for most of the interviewees. Just as Blanca saw SEL as an adjunct or subsection that worked within the parameters of the school's social constructivist mandate, Geeta, who teaches in a large Southern California charter middle school, shared a similar view. Although teachers at her school are not mandated to teach SEL, Geeta noted that most of her colleagues implement some form of it. However, she cautioned that such programs could be "somewhat moralistic when they are not aligned with real-life experiences." She added,

> And so, it's more expedient to separate these things [programs]. It's some of the failings in education of not merging real experience and authentic experience with what you're trying to teach. I want to get away from me telling people (i.e., students) something. Yeah. And I want to get to the point where they're telling me because I think collectively. They have the knowledge, maybe not the specific knowledge, but they have an understanding, and I think if they have a way of thinking about it, they can come to a good understanding. Yeah, yeah. If they're given the resources to find real information.

Subtheme 2: SEL Infusion, Purpose, Design, and Intent

Blanca and others posited that SEL infusion was an additional strategy that could reinforce efforts to sustain positive school community values, such as building positive relationships and enhancing the school culture paradigm. When asked about his perception of SEL implementation and alignment at the school where he is a principal, Stan expressed a similar viewpoint regarding SEL's role:

> The Character Strong SEL program is a set curriculum kind of outside of our traditional academics. We also have our own school-wide CCP values framework; there's a value for each letter: C is for caring, C is for commitment, P is for persistence.

According to principals Blanca and Stan, in charter schools, SEL implementation is typically introduced by the school principal. Infusion strategies are established and outlined during staff meetings. From the interviews, I learned that as SEL strategies are applied to pedagogy, teacher autonomy was high. This was because most teachers were free to use SEL to inform overarching pedagogic goals (e.g., develop character, foster relationships, or cultivate meaningful connections between students and peers). Stan explained that SEL is introduced to staff in a weekly 30-minute session and then to students:

> We have a Friday teacher learning meeting that is basically about teaching teachers. So, we have a Character Strong curriculum taught to the teachers, and then they use that lesson that they just learned to roll out to their kids the following week. And so, by the way, when we made the decision to go with

> Character Strong, we said, "All right, well, we can't just throw it out once in the beginning of the school year and then, you know, not talk about it. We got to keep this alive and going throughout the first week and once a week." And that's worked.

From the interviews, I understood that even though principals introduced a specific SEL program, teachers had the option to work with other SEL models as well. Janet shared,

> In the past 5 years, or basically, we could just do whatever. Like if we wanted to do a character [development] thing. It's like, yeah, do whatever you want . . . so they [the principal] trust us; they don't second guess us. The administration always has our back.

At the public charter school where Blanca was principal, Stanford Harmony was the selected SEL program; however, some teachers also leaned toward the Growth Mindset SEL program. Brenda, one of Blanca's sixth grade instructors, used multiple SEL initiatives. As I probed to learn more about Growth Mindset and discern what perceptions led to favoring one initiative over another, Brenda explained:

> Growth Mindset is like a philosophy that has developed out of Stanford. The main idea is that unless you're willing to, like, accept mistakes and learn from them and grow from them rather than hide from them, you cannot learn. For example, even if a child, one child forgot their pencil, well, it's easy for me to go to my back closet and say, "Oh, here, I got a pencil for you." But instead of doing that, I always say, "No. Does anybody have a pencil in here that Johnny can borrow?

> Johnny, you have a great friend in this classroom. Thank you for being such a great friend." It's easy for me to solve their problems. But if they can help each other solve them, there's a different sense of community.

Subtheme 3: Fostering Positive Relationships and Meaningful Connections

Across the interviews, community and relationship building were integral parts of the best practices discourse. However, Janet perceived the value of the Growth Mindset initiative in the context of a tool that alleviated parent concerns about how to best relate to and support their child:

> To facilitate a growth mindset, I have a parent meeting and show them the literature on it, show them some studies, and send them home with an article. We do a lot of parent outreach. So, I teach the parents about that. And then, I give them steps on how to foster a growth mindset. You know, say this instead of this. Can we do this instead of this? Yeah. Eventually, it's shocking how well that works with the kids. They know that my classroom is a safe place; they will never be shamed. They will never get in trouble for asking [a] question. They can always approach me.

My interview with Tia, who taught in a large inner city district, had a different tone. Tia's misgivings about SEL focused on her need for more curriculum depth and more student accountability. She posited that most SEL programs failed to go deep enough, so her perception was that change or growth in student academic and social development, is at best, minimal. Tia felt,

> A lot of the conversations that we've been having in our SEL lessons have been centered around family culture and family values. The difference between, you know, [cultural] differences that we might all have. And that's what we're doing right now. It's, like, superficial. It's not strong enough, you know, not built-in strong enough. So, so kids, you know, some kids just don't grow.

Blanca explained that student sense of safety is inextricably linked to the relationship building objective that underwrites the school's plan for successful outcomes:

> As a school leader, I work to build relationships with students. And because I really do feel like, as educators, our Number 1 job is to make kids feel safe and help them learn. Yeah, they won't learn otherwise and feel safe physically and emotionally; relationships are huge. If I have a student who trusts me, then they're going to share things with me, like when they're in trouble or when they don't understand something, or they're hurting. Yeah, right. Yeah, they're gonna share those things.

Blanca contextualized the need to infuse SEL into their charter school curriculum because it fills in some of the gaps when the children's capacity to make positive connections and stable relationships are lacking:

> There's a lot of learning that they're not getting inherently, whereas my family, you know, and all the families and the kids that I knew when I was growing up, it was, "Go out and play and don't come back till the streetlights are on." Yeah, when there was a problem, it was like, "Well, why didn't you guys handle it?"

> And I think that now we have to explicitly teach kids how to be socially emotionally aware because they're not getting it on their own anymore.

Theme 2: SEL Outcomes Within a Charter School Social Construction Paradigm

Research Question 2 focused on perceived outcomes derived from SEL infusion in public charter middle school settings. Each of the interviewees expressed the social constructivist worldview through which progress and outcomes were perceived to be measured in their respective schools. SEL outcomes and social constructivist paradigms appeared to be driven by interviewee assumptions that placing students in supportive, nurturing environments enhanced their opportunity to thrive socially and academically.

Subtheme 1: Measuring SEL and Academic Outcomes Is Complicated

When I inquired about the perceived SEL outcomes at his school, Stan detailed that measuring outcomes was a complicated endeavor because specific qualitative data on SEL outcomes can be illusive and ambiguous:

> Yeah, I think it's hard to tell a lot. I think that's one of the most difficult things about character and social-emotional learning is it's hard to measure. Sometimes you can get at it tangentially, but like, you know, even that's arguable. But you know, you can kind of measure just based on, you know, proficiency scores, etc., what have you. Okay, are the students learning math? Are they growing, learning English? And that's measured quantitatively. And with the character, strong curriculum, and the students' social-emotional well-being, we send out surveys, and the surveys, you know, can be an indicator of, you know, how students are feeling. But there's so many different factors that influence that.

Stan pondered my SEL outcomes question and added:

> Another way we can measure [SEL] is through discipline referrals. So, you know, how many people have been suspended? As those numbers have not gone down, and if not, why? Or if they have, why? And then, even within those suspensions, why are people being suspended? And then you can take a look at that. And sometimes, you can kind of see trends or correlations between programs like Character Strong and the discipline.

Blanca pointed to a previous job where her administrators argued that positive outcomes were guided by a holistic SEL approach. Practices that attended to both the social and cognitive development of the child led to, according to Blanca, positive connections and relationships: "I taught at a school that had a strong sense of what they called pastoral care and care for the social-emotional well-being of the child in general, not just academics."

Subtheme 2: SEL Informs Student Development, School Climate, and Student Sense of Safety

The development of social awareness and relationship skills are core SEL objectives. Alondra, a Northern California charter middle school teacher, provided a perspective regarding how SEL programs that affect positive relationships may inform student development and school climate and culture:

> I remember these eighth graders walking up to me and saying, "Well, hello. How are you? What's your name? You're new here." And I was, like, completely dumbfounded. Yeah. What middle schooler would act like that? And I know that

> just going and being inside of schools you feel a feeling. Yes. And you can see whether kids feel safe and loved. And you see whether teachers really care. And you can see what the culture is. And so just having those middle schoolers walk up and actually even care what my name was, it was like a level of comfort with adults because there are a lot of adults volunteering at school, and, and comfort [*sic*] with themselves and a lot more lightness to their being in their presence in the darkness in that preteen world.

Subtheme 3: Relationships and Meaningful Connections Effect SEL Outcomes

Alondra's recollections alluded to SEL's explicit focus on building positive connections and meaningful relationships in school settings. Concepts such as relationships and student sense of safety were also broached when Janet (who teaches at the same school as Alondra) recalled how comfortable the students are when communicating with adults. Students' sense of self-confidence and self-knowledge mirror the competencies or outcome expectations described in most SEL agendas:

> The kids are not afraid of the, of teachers. It's like, even when they talk to them, they're not afraid to like, "Oh, there's a grown-up." Kids can see grownups almost as equal people. Respect, but they feel that they can talk to you. Yeah, they don't feel like, "I have to watch my words" or, or, "He's a teacher, and I'm a student. And we're in different places." When I went there for the first time to be interviewed, I walked in, and it was a child who greeted me. And like, "Hey, how are you doing? What are you doing here?" And it was, because I've been at different schools, and you can walk right past the kid, and they see an adult, and

> they ignore the adult. [Here] it's a partnership between the parent [and] the teacher, yeah, and the kids. Yeah, it's a, it is holistic; it is a partnership.

Stan, the principal at another public charter middle school, proposed that mechanisms for achieving desirable outcomes include a focus on the values that embed the SEL schema:

> We adopted a SEL curriculum called Character Strong for [the] 2021 school year. And we're teaching that across the different grade levels. And it's kind of teaching values, persistence, grit, things that, you know, successful people have in life. And we're trying to instill those values in our students as they go through our school.

Stan also remarked that, in school settings, overall positive outcomes depend on the quality of the connections and relationships that inform the school culture. Stan projected a blueprint for how he approached social-emotional issues at school:

> Oftentimes, like, if things don't go well in the classroom, a lot of times there's a broken relationship there. And that's not that the student didn't have a lot of responsibility in breaking that relationship. Oftentimes, that's the case. But the only way you're going to fix that is to repair that relationship between those two people.

Janet teaches sixth grade at Principal Blanca's school. When asked about SEL outcomes, her response was grounded in the premise that positive social and academic outcomes were the product of healthy relationships. For example, Janet shared that in the classroom, getting students to feel good about themselves was her priority, but she

wanted to assist them in taking ownership of their emotions and to explicitly take ownership of their social and academic development.

> I think in some cases, they [teachers] play the biggest role for some students when it comes to this [SEL]. I really do. I feel very confident in working with students who might be lower academically; that's sort of where I feel very, very strong as a teacher. So, the way that I always approach it and especially with writing, is I want the kids to develop a better relationship with themselves. Uh-huh. And in order to do that, I create that by having a good relationship with myself in front of them.

When Geeta spoke about education outcomes and pedagogy, she offered a perspective that surfaced across the interviews. The proposition that authentic education has a social construction came to the fore, as Geeta explained how relationships are a catalyst for student engagement and for positive teacher-student interactions:

> I think it's all about relationships. I think that's what education is. But you can see where the real excitement comes in; the excitement comes in through our relationship. Yeah. Through the ideas that we can share together or grow together. You know, sometimes, like, I had a class, this last unit that I was teaching in my writing class. I didn't like this unit. I wasn't comfortable with it. And I think I don't know how this is gonna work. And I'd go in there, and I kind of give it to the kids like, “What do you know? What do you think? What's he doing?” . . . . It was because it was like, fiction from looking at a picture. And I don't have that kind of imagination anymore. I'd rather write a research paper. And they always come

> through. Like yeah, I don't have to know all the answers. Yeah. I just have to put it out there and let them come up with it. But it's also our relationship.

Stan offered another example of how relationships affect a student growth mindset and, therefore, student academic outcomes:

> We have a math teacher in seventh grade. She's phenomenal. She gets the most amazing scores, but she also really connects. She has this plan that's different than what [SEL] we're talking about. Mm-hmm. But at the same time, the students respond to it. Yeah. And it's amazing to me, but she gets the buy-in consistently year after year. And it doesn't matter the student, and it's like, it's like, it's almost like, "What do you do?" And she just jumps out, like, when we're having this conversation, she's always kind of dancing around the back of my head because she's, she has that magic touch. I don't know what it is; the expectations are really high. And all students, she holds them accountable. But they also, they, you know, they're not scared. They're just, they respond accordingly in a really good way.

When I asked about SEL, the importance of school culture, and SEL's relationship to student outcomes, Geeta spoke about her experiences with the Crestwood Academy Charter School (a pseudonym). In the discussion, she shared that at Crestwood, student outcomes were tied to how committed they were to the school's vision and values. Geeta observed that at this charter school, students learned a growth mindset that they could learn, go to college, and that hard work and long days made them part of a special, dedicated, purposeful community of learners.

> So, I'm thinking, there's a school called Crestwood Academy Charter School that I know some kids that go there, and their culture is very academically oriented. Yeah. I think that I think that parents have to agree to certain stipulations. And I think that the students have to agree to, you know, what their goal is the, you know, the staff, like everybody gets together, and they're, yeah, on it. The culture of the school is, "This is what we're working for. And this is what we're doing." And I think in this school, it's very effective. The kids who come from this school, generally, they are readers; they have the idea that they're going to college, you know, whatever the values of the school were.

Crestwood's theoretical proposition that students need to be introspective and have a shared vision and milieu reinforces that education has a social construction grounded in productive relationships. This is also reflected in subsequent potions of my interview with Maddy. When questioned about SEL outcomes, she remarked:

> I've been using a Chose Love [SEL] program. It's about getting the kids to share how they are feeling. Talk about the feeling in their body when things are not right and so on. You're getting kids to sort of express their emotion in a way. And then bringing the [SEL] curriculum kind of brings it around to relationships, you know, knowing yourself. Yeah. Knowing, knowing what you're feeling, knowing those feelings. What they're telling you, and when it's time to be alone [or] when it's time to do something creative. And it's time to reach out to somebody else. And then, and then it kind of reaches out more into relationships; that if you know yourself, you can recognize those things.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the research results and described the steps that led to the construction of codes and themes. I also presented the themes directly related to the two research questions:

- Theme 1: SEL alignment to school goals and education philosophy.
- Theme 2: SEL outcomes within a charter school social construction paradigm.

Both themes are positioned in the context of the charter middle school phenomenon. Findings chronicled the various perceptions of SEL infusion and outcomes in the relative school curriculums of the participants. Interview data from two principals and six teachers demonstrated that SEL involvement or inclusion is expected to align with school ideals, objectives, and extant school culture norms.

The participants' reference to school culture and community and the importance of positive relations, meaningful connections, and student sense of safety had meaning and significance because they help describe the charter school ethos and worldview. The rich data that emerged from the analysis of the perceptions of SEL infusion and outcomes was derived from the fact that in most cases, the interviewees exercised their autonomy to implement more than one SEL program and their right to apply SEL strategies to specific social change and pedagogic challenges.

The analysis and descriptions of principals' and teachers' perceptions of SEL infusion and outcomes in charter middle school settings could provide a better understanding of the conditions that enhance its efficacy and how these practices could mitigate less privileged students' social and academic deficits. It could also demonstrate

how SEL infusion into curriculum may ultimately foster positive social change outcomes. In Chapter 5, I provide in-depth interpretations of the findings compared to the research literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the infusion and outcomes of SEL initiatives with academic curriculum at their charter schools. The charter school ethos and its reliance on community, relationships, and meaningful connections were the overarching findings of this study. The embedded, stabilizing social objectives reflected in that ethos, as described by the participants, align with the conceptual framework that guided this study. The study contained two research questions:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools?

Research Question 2: How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their schools?

Two major themes emerged from the data analysis process, one for each research question. The theme for Research Question 1 was SEL alignment to school goals and education philosophy (i.e., Theme 1). The theme for Research Question 2 was SEL outcomes within a charter school social construction paradigm (i.e., Theme 2). Each of the major themes had three subthemes. The three subthemes for Theme 1 were

- SEL supports the overarching curriculum;
- locating SEL infusion, purpose, design, and intent; and
- fostering positive relationships and meaningful connections.

The three subthemes for Theme 2 were

- measuring SEL and academic outcomes is complicated

- SEL informs student social development, school climate, and student sense of safety; and
- relationships and meaningful connections influence SEL outcomes.

My interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research appear in the following sections.

Interpretation of the Findings

In Chapter 2, I used scholarly research literature to explore how charter schools approached social and academic problems and how school culture or the charter school philosophy influenced student social and academic development. The literature I analyzed focused on school leadership (e.g., the perceptions of principals and teachers of the interventions used to mitigate the problem). In light of literature pertaining to these three constructs and the inherent charter school holistic developmental approach, my analysis of the interview data resulted in a description of the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the problem and how they perceived the outcomes that result from their approach to student development and their educational philosophy. In the following subsections, I explain how each of the findings was consistent with the theories that formed the basis for the conceptual framework and the empirical literature.

Theme 1: SEL Alignment to School Goals and Education Philosophy

Bronfenbrenner (1979), in the ecological systems theory, and Vygotsky (1978), in the sociocultural theory, both posited that social and cognitive development are influenced by the social environment that frames them. Moreover, as Vygotsky explained, social and cognitive deficits due to negative cultural-historical influences may

be overcome when individuals have proximity to positive, higher aspirational settings. The idea that the social environment has agency in social and academic development endeavors is reflected in the perceptions of teachers and principals that charter schools prioritize building positive school cultures, healthy relationships, and meaningful connections. For example, Blanca reiterated the supposition that learning has a social construction (see Vygotsky, 1978). When asked about SEL implementation at the school where she is a principal in the context of the challenges that stemmed from the distance learning format, Blanca explained, "Students do not learn in isolation but in relationships with peers. Because so much of it [SEL] is relational, it's like these kids doing social-emotional activities that are done in isolation is pretty hard." The findings suggest that relationships, a sense of community, and making meaningful connections are, according to the individuals who represented the public charter schools, the centerpieces of the charter school social and academic development agenda.

Subtheme 1: SEL Supports the Overarching Curriculum

When Stan, a principal, alluded to the systems that support overall school outcomes, quality connections and relationships were key concepts. From Stan's view, those concepts construct an environment or framework out of which all other social and academic endeavors flourish. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory supports Stan's assumption that social and academic development needs alignment with systems that facilitate growth rather than hinder it. When asked about SEL implementation at her school, Geeta, a teacher, responded that systems and programs (i.e., SEL) need to be authentic and in touch with the realities that frame student

experiences: “It’s some of the failings in education of not merging real experience and authentic experience with what you’re trying to teach.” During the interview, Geeta also shared how colleagues were free to fill in the gaps when, in their estimation, some initiatives lacked relevance or authenticity to the overall pedagogic agenda.

While principal and teacher autonomy was not the focus of this study, autonomy is a fundamental charter school precept. According to Paisner (2011), autonomy is a crucial part of the charter school schema because it gives administrators the freedom to serve a wider variety of student needs. In the context of SEL implementation, Corcoran et al. (2020) proposed that while it typically focused on individuals, it is also a tool for shaping communities. Hence, when asked about SEL implementation at the school where she is principal, Blanca explained, “Some of them [SEL] really promote certain characteristics and qualities in the students. But if they’re not reflected in the teaching staff or in the overall culture of the school, then it doesn’t mean anything.”

Subtheme 2: Locating SEL Infusion, Purpose, Design, and Intent

Jeynes (2019) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between character education, student achievement, and behavioral outcomes, finding that when character education was infused into traditional schools, charter schools, and religious charter schools, positive social-emotional and academic outcomes occurred at all grade levels, in all school types, and in both privileged and less privileged sectors. Stan observed that SEL infusion into the curriculum played a role in his efforts to mitigate school discipline challenges. For example, his school data showed a reduction in student referrals and suspensions. When asked about how he quantified SEL outcomes, Stan said, “Then you

> can take a look at that [the data], and sometimes you can kind of see trends or correlations between programs like Character Strong and the discipline."

Pike et al. (2020) noted that character education programs grounded in teaching positive attributes substantially affected school efforts to alleviate discipline problems. Their results were from a wide range of student demographics in schools that used a form of SEL called Narnian Virtues, which focused on understanding the value of qualities, such as wisdom, love, integrity, fortitude, self-control, and justice. Pike et al. found that consistent exposure to these values, through discussions and academic scenarios, profoundly impacted individual and school cultural norms.

Fancourt (2015) noted that school leaders who established a school culture that mirrored the principles that guided the institution complemented the overarching pursuit of meaningful relationships and connections that framed the school's philosophical approach to education. In the interviews, the participants who referred to school culture spoke of their perceptions of optimum learning environments. According to Blanca, SEL was positioned as a subordinate system that worked in tandem with the regular school curriculum. She cautioned that because many of the SEL initiatives do not directly consider the charter school model (i.e., charter school best practices), to get the best results, educators must find the parts that work and those that do not. She stated, "I honestly think you use it [SEL] as, as a background. I think you have to use it as a case study." Blanca's perception of SEL's use demonstrates that schools are still searching for ways to make it authentic, relevant, and effective.

When studying 51 schools to learn what SEL practices held the most promise, McCallops et al. (2019) found that most practices attempted to correct student behaviors; however, the practices were remiss in presenting culturally relevant materials that brought out the strengths and realities that informed the mindsets of the students they served. For example, McCallops et al. discovered that none of the schools addressed the negative effects of racial discrimination on social-emotional development in their SEL implementation schemas.

Thapa et al. (2013) claimed that context mattered, belief systems shaped individual experiences, and learning influenced the multiple levels of relationships that exist within social interactions. Geeta repeated this assertion when she shared how Crestwood Academy Charter School conceptualized student pathways to success. Geeta shared that in Crestwood Academy, student outcomes are tied to how committed they were to the school's vision and values. While she no longer teaches at Crestwood Academy, our discussion led to this observation:

> The culture of the school is, "This is what we're working for." And, "This is what we're doing." And I think in this school, it's very effective. The [inner city] kids who come from this school, generally, they are readers; they have the idea that they're going to college, you know, whatever the values of the school were.

Donohoo et al. (2018) and Martinez (2016) demonstrated the school values and culture concepts in their study findings. According to Donohoo et al., school culture is often grounded in the idea that the quality of relationships and connections determine outcome levels. Moreover, they found that school cultures reflect how principals,

teachers, and students feel, think, and motivate themselves. The perspectives of Donohoo et al. may explain why charter schools emphasize the need for powerful, collaborative school cultures. When focusing on a high-performing charter school located in an underprivileged, urban setting, Martinez found that when school-designed SEL studies were implemented, there was a positive effect on students and teacher practices. Positive changes in student attitudes about school, performance, and relationships in the school environment were attributed to collaborative efforts focused on (a) empirical studies/action research, (b) support for teachers, (c) identifying conditions that support teacher's development, and (d) practitioner-driven methodology.

In another study, Dishon and Goodman (2017) distinguished how some charter schools conceptualize the intent and purpose for SEL, such as character education infusion in the curriculum. In their study, the charter schools were characterized as being either traditional or progressive. Dishon and Goodman posited that traditional charter schools focused on getting students into college, while progressive schools emphasized college preparation and situated SEL in the context of a holistic, deeper moral obligation to prepare students for college and life beyond academics. The findings from their study showed that traditional charters stressed habit formation and management of student behavior as a means to reach their goals, and progressive charters promoted student autonomous reasoning and habit formation in service of principles.

In their mixed-method case study, White and Warfa (2011) found that character education significantly impacted school climate and student social, emotional, and academic development. They concluded that character development implementation

represented a multifaceted, sociocultural approach and, in most instances, had a significant, positive effect on school climate, student behavior, and teacher morale. White and Warfa also suggested that when such initiatives are rooted in empirical evidence, the potential to meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs is notably greater. In a related study, Martinez (2016) found that due to changes in the home, an increase in school violence, cyber and classroom bullying, and other concerns across the education landscape, the need for SEL had grown exponentially over the years. Importantly, Martinez's findings suggested that schools must educate beyond mathematics, science, and language arts and showed that, when implemented, SEL was a causal factor for improved student prosocial attitudes toward themselves and others.

Blanca explained that because all schools are not the same, not all programs fit: "The ones [SEL initiatives] that are the most impactful are the ones that align to the school culture." In addition, Principal Blanca indicated that SEL (i.e., character education) was a means to fill in the students' social-emotional gaps once achieved through family relationships, team participation, and other forms of social interactions. She added, "And I think that now we [educators] have to explicitly teach kids how to be socially emotionally aware because they're not getting it on their own anymore."

Corcoran et al. (2020) positioned SEL in the context of a moral reasoning strategy. Data from their meta-analysis study indicated a relationship between moral reasoning capacity and academic achievement outcomes. The self-knowledge or moral reasoning concept (Brodkin, 2021; Robinson, 2017; Snipes & Tran, 2017) was revisited when Janet noted that in the classroom, getting students to feel good about themselves

was her priority. She wanted to assist students in taking ownership of their emotions and, explicitly, their social and academic development. Maddy responded along similar lines: "You're getting kids to sort of express their emotion in a way. And then bringing the curriculum [SEL] kind of brings it around to relationships, you know, knowing yourself. Yeah. Knowing, knowing what you're feeling, knowing those feelings."

Brodkin (2021) characterized frontline responders in the COVID-19 pandemic, firefighters who battle wildfires, educators fighting for education for all children, and protesters who march in the streets to protest social injustices as street level organizations, with each battling a perceived crisis. Their common, atypical willingness to confront and go beyond the limits imposed by the challenges they face is noteworthy, particularly, when from an SEL perspective, such individuals project the virtues (e.g., self-knowledge and moral reasoning) these programs espouse. If, as Robinson's (2017) growth mindset theory purports, students need to be invested in the learning process and given tools that enhance self-awareness and self-efficacy, the responsibility for doing so must be given to individuals who perceive their engagement with such matters in the context of a moral imperative derived from their understanding of themselves.

Snipes and Tran's (2017) showed that English language learners and students from less privileged settings often arrive with a fixed mindset about their capacity to achieve academic excellence. As Snipes and Tran found, to move students toward a growth mindset (i.e., believing they can grow), educators must perceive that self-development and cognitive growth are not fixed but malleable. Moreover, as SEL is infused in curricula and gains ubiquity across the education landscape, its reciprocal

effect must not be overlooked. As Janet contextualized, education is about relationships; it is a partnership.

Subtheme 3: Fostering Positive Relationships and Meaningful Connections

Across the interviews, the participants placed a premium on the development of positive relationships and meaningful connections. Both concepts ground the charter school paradigm and maintain school culture and ideology. Serpell (2017) defined culture as a pattern of recurrent activities, technologies, and institutions informed by a system of meanings shared by members of a social group over time. Serpell's definition of culture and the moral reason framework of Corcoran et al. (2018) provide a description of the conditions that nurture SEL infusion in curricula and the rationale, intentionality, and mindset that should govern leadership practices, rich relationships, and meaningful connections in schools.

When Bloom and Owens (2013) placed principal leadership at the forefront of the low-income school outcomes debate, they posited that the genesis of quality interinstitutional relationships was with principal leadership style and the relationships and connections they established in their district and schools. Blanca shared an instance, before she became a principal, when her principal declared that positive outcomes came from a holistic SEL approach: "I taught at a school that had a strong sense of what they called pastoral care, and care for the social-emotional well-being of the child in general, not just academics." If the belief that caring is the causal, driving factor when successful schools petition to establish positive relationships and meaningful connections, then, as Edmonds (1979) suggested, solving some of the less privileged student social and

academic problems in education may be addressed by way of increased levels of caring within governing sectors. On this point, Edmonds' polemical tone addressed the issue:

> Whether or not we will effectively teach the children of the poor is more a matter of politics than of social science. It seems to me therefore, that what is left of this discussion are three declarative statements: (a) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. (b) We already know more than we need to do that; and (c) Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (p. 22)

In conclusion, Edmonds found that educators who subscribed to the social science theory that less privileged student academic deficits were due to family background lacked the understanding that with the proper conditions, all students can learn. What is more, effective learning programs affect a growth mindset that belies what social scientists postulate regarding the impact family background has on social and academic development.

Theme 2: SEL Outcomes Within a Charter School Social Construction Paradigm

To address the complexities associated with the search for outcome indicators that directly correlate to SEL implementation and student social and academic behaviors, I analyzed the outcomes from the perspective of the charter school social construction framework and findings from the empirical literature. In this subsection, I explore the two subthemes in the context of the socially constructed nature of the charter schools in this study.

Subtheme 1: Measuring SEL and Academic Outcomes Is Complicated

The advent of increased SEL use across the education landscape has produced new trends in how school and student outcomes are evaluated. Analyzing data from a large-scale panel survey of SEL outcomes of students in Grades 4 to 12, West et al. (2020) noted recent developments in how policy makers assess school district outcomes. Data from student self-reporting surveys, quality of school culture, school academic outcomes, and SEL efficacy standards are now part of the school outcomes intervention process. This new, more in-depth focus on SEL outcomes is significant on at least four fronts. First, it indicates that SEL is more than a passing movement. Second, as West et al. intimated, the standardization of SEL outcomes is on the horizon. Third, across-the-board SEL practices may have an increased influence on curriculum designs. Finally, overall interventions may replicate the charter school constructivist ideology. Hence, an emerging, more student-centered education approach may be coming as SEL implementation becomes a tactical part of education's tool kit.

In their constructivism paradigm, charter schools are grounded in social constructs, such as a sense of community, school culture, and building relationships. In this light, individual social and academic activities are couched in past experiences and forms of discovery learning (Dewey, 1938) that may affect behavior. As Dewey (1938) noted, inherent values based on previous learning and immediate exposure to new value systems may make it difficult to ascribe the greater pull or influence on either of the two classifications. Antlova et al. (2015) maintained that as individuals evaluate their surroundings, their values, hidden in past experiences, give meaning to the surroundings

and thus influence subsequent behaviors. When asked to connect SEL infusion to school social and academic outcomes, Stan stated,

> I think that's one of the most difficult things about character and social-emotional learning is it's hard to measure. Sometimes you can get at it tangentially, but like, you know, even that's arguable. But you know, you can kind of measure just based on, you know, proficiency scores etc. . . . Yeah. I think it's hard to tell a lot.

Subtheme 2: SEL Informs Student Social Development, School Climate, and Student Sense of Safety

As Brady (2011) highlighted, when SEL or values education is infused into the curriculum, the participants bring their own values to the event. Importantly, Brady explained that the transference and buy-in regarding values and worldviews from administrators and teachers to students are highly dependent on the quality of the relationships among them. The degree to which principal and teacher values inform student social development, school climate, and student sense of safety is an important inquiry. Stan contextualized the enigmatic nature of values education:

> We have a math teacher in seventh grade. She's phenomenal. She gets the most amazing scores, but she also really connects. She has this plan that's different than what [SEL] we're talking about. The students respond to it. She gets the buy-in consistently year after year. . . She holds them accountable.

Janet reiterated Brady's values transference concept and Robinson's (2017) growth mindset theory when she articulated the importance of modeling the values and behaviors she wanted to pass on to students:

> I think in some cases, they [teachers] play the biggest role for some students when it comes to this [SEL]. I really do. So, the way that I always approach it and especially with writing, is I want the kids to develop a better relationship with themselves. And in order to do that, I create that by having a good relationship with myself in front of them.

Subtheme 3: Relationships and Meaningful Connections Influence SEL Outcomes

In light of the pivotal role they play in this discussion, there is a need to qualify the two concepts of relationships and connection as they emerged in Theme 3. Brady (2011) cautioned that while teacher-to-student relationships may be amicable, where values learning is concerned, some cases may not necessarily lead to exemplary social and emotional outcomes. As Stan noted earlier, relationships and meaningful connections have value; however, according to Brady, those concepts are only a part of the overarching education itinerary. In what was termed the hidden agenda, Brady found that teaching and education was a value laden activity. Hence, in the context of teaching and transmitting concepts, educators are positioned to project their values onto a multitude of social-emotional issues in the classroom.

Moreover, in the absence of data that shines a light on, or measures, the nature of the interactions between teacher and pupil and principal and teacher, and the influence those in power have on shaping interactions, the causal factors that give agency to determining outcomes may be, at best, less apparent. Therefore, the orchestration of successful SEL outcomes is less than a straightforward enterprise; rather, it is replete with a myriad of factors that may affect the process. Examples of this include (a) when an

initiative is new and difficult for the staff, (b) when there is a struggle with getting a new initiative in alignment with the school's overarching mission and vision, and (c) when the concept (SEL) needs time to affect the school's culture or needs more clarification from administrators (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012).

As I contextualized Alondra's and Janet's perceptions of school relationships, connections, and student sense of safety and juxtaposed those responses with Brady's (2011) findings, the intent was not to devalue their perspectives. My purpose was, as Stan stated, to note that in the face of complex participant interactions and a basic qualitative research format, attributing outcomes to a specific agent was challenging. Recalling her impressions of the students at her school, Alondra shared the way students approached her as she waited in the hall to talk with her principal, Blanca:

> And so just having those middle schoolers walk up and actually even care what my name was, it was like a level of comfort with adults because there are a lot of adults volunteering at school and comfort [*sic*] with themselves and a lot more lightness to their being in their presence in the darkness in that preteen world.

The students at Alondra's charter school showed intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that generate positive social and cognitive development. The study by West et al. (2020) on SEL outcomes indicated that intrapersonal skills (the capacity to regulate behavior in search of long term goals) and interpersonal skills (the capacity to collaborate with others) were ingredients of the SEL growth mindset construct and crucial elements in the pursuit of constructive social and academic outcomes. According to Janet, the

students showed the same positive qualities when, on a different occasion, she encountered a group of students in the hallway. She shared,

> I've been at different schools, and you can walk right past the kid, and they see an adult, and they ignore the adult. [Here] it's a partnership between the parent, the teacher, yeah, and the kids. Yeah, it's a, it is holistic; it is a partnership. The kids are not afraid of the, of the teachers.

Janet's perceptions of the school culture reiterated her school's commitment to student sense of safety, establishing positive relationships, and maintaining a stable social-emotional school climate.

Limitations of the Study

Patton (2002) explained that "by their nature, qualitative findings are highly context and case dependent" (p. 563). Because the participant sampling was confined to public charter middle schools, there are limitations based on the attenuated potential for generalizability to the larger educator population. Therefore, rather than providing a broader and more diverse education perspective, responses to the interview questions were limited to the public charter school point of view of a small number of educators. In addition, while the interview responses did represent viewpoints from multiple, diverse school districts that had different socioeconomic demographics, they were nonetheless grounded in the middle school experience. My prior experiences as a charter school teacher did, to some extent, allow for a sense of familiarity with the interviewees' perspectives.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this basic qualitative research study, I investigated the perceptions charter middle school principals and teachers had of the infusion and outcomes of SEL implementation at their schools. While policy makers view SEL as a potential social and academic deficit intervention strategy, in its current manifestation, it is a relatively new field and must be treated as such. The literature review showed a scarcity of culturally responsive and culturally sensitive approaches to SEL implementation (Buchtel, 2014; McCallops et al., 2019). Because current research studies on SEL planning and implementation are remiss in considering the embedded cultural norms that inform social development, there is also a dearth of literature that illuminates student social-emotional and academic outcomes due to racial discrimination. Explorations into the benefits culturally responsive and culturally sensitive SEL programs bring to bear may add more understanding of how to make them more efficacious across the education landscape.

While there are studies that pertain to SEL implementation, it is necessary to expand the research on teacher engagement with the process (Martinez, 2016; Neth et al., 2020). Teachers play a key role in SEL implementation. However, there is a need for literature that provides tools that inform pathways for reevaluation of teacher pedagogical thinking and reexamination of their values and worldviews. This may provide insight and a deeper understanding of SEL's effect on teachers' implicit perceptions of their role in the SEL movement and how to accommodate the presence of a new pedagogical paradigm.

Implications for Positive Social Change

The findings from this study may provide a more concerted focus on the systemic and social conditions that created longstanding social and academic deficits in less privileged communities across the globe. Conversely, this study suggests that SEL practitioners be more aware of the causal conditions that may render SEL efficacy and sustainability. In schools, SEL implementation may prosper from a unified growth mindset perspective and a culturally sensitive agenda that informs the capacity to understand various racial groups more fully. As a strategy for social and academic growth, today's trend toward SEL in schools may be the gateway to greater efforts to set a balance between the traditional content-oriented education approach and the progressive cultural/holistic student-centered education approach and therefore serve the needs of a changing society.

Conclusion

In this basic qualitative research study, the literature assisted in describing the sociopolitical landscape that frames the public education landscape. Knowledge of how education initiatives are introduced and the challenges to school reform and a consensus were useful in exploring the causes and solutions regarding the less privileged student academic deficit problem. I grounded the conceptual framework in the supposition that education has a social construct; therefore, its functionality and efficacy are rooted in the quality of relationships and in constructing meaningful connections. Charter schools were the source for data because their student-centered educational approach aligned with my research design. The social construction framework underpinned this research inquiry.

In recent years, the idea that student character and emotional development may impact academic outcomes has gained momentum. To understand how character development may affect student social and academic development in the context of the charter middle school setting, I studied principals' and teachers' perceptions of SEL infusion in their school curriculum. From interviews, I gathered data on their perceptions of the impact SEL infusion had on student social-emotional development and academic outcomes at their schools. The findings confirmed that SEL programs, such as Stanford Harmony, Growth Mindset, Chose Love, or Character Strong, have separate agendas, as each targets specific character attributes. Selecting the SEL program that aligns with school needs is crucial to positive outcomes goals. As the SEL concept becomes a mainstay in education, its success is linked to knowing the conditions that make it thrive and in the practices that give it agency in and outside of the school experience.

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Appendix: Interview Protocols

This study is grounded in two research questions:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do principals and teachers have of SEL infusion with academic curriculum at their charter middle schools?

Research Question 2: How do principals and teachers perceive the outcomes from SEL infusion at their charter middle schools?

Interview questions for each group of participants are listed below. The alignment of interview questions to the research questions follows the interview protocol.

Principal Interview Questions

1. What can you share about being a principal in a charter school setting?

   Prompt: Have you ever worked in a traditional school? What was that like for you?

2. What role did you play in the implementation of SEL in the curriculum?

   Can you tell me about it?

3. As a leader, do you subscribe to a particular leadership style or leadership model?

   Prompt: Are there ways one's leadership style adapts to school culture, or does the school culture dictate the leadership style?

4. What makes charter schools noticeably different from other school types?

5. How does your staff, students, and teachers feel about SEL infusion?

   Prompt: Any pushback? Do they understand why, etc.?

6. Just like other schools, charter schools can have their own political hurdles to deal with. Have you had challenges, particularly related to the SEL curriculum? Can you tell me about them?
7. The Corona virus outbreak led to distance learning. What effect did this have on SEL infusion in your curriculum?

   Prompt: For example, did it make SEL more relevant?
8. How does one measure the effect SEL infusion has on school culture, teacher attitudes, or school social and academic outcomes?

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Why do charter schools and positive school culture seem synonymous?

   Probe: What would a visitor notice when they come to your school?
2. What does a teacher need to consider when they think about teaching at your charter school?
3. What are the relationships like between students and teachers at your school?

   Prompt: Does that matter?
4. Why do you think social emotional development has become such a hot topic in education these days?
5. What are some overall sociocultural impacts of SEL infusion strategies at the school?
6. What do you perceive are some of the academic outcomes of the SEL curriculum?

7. How is the teacher and principal relationship when it comes to curriculum implementation?

   Prompt: How important are teachers in the SEL infusion process?

8. What effect, if any, does SEL infusion in curriculum have on your pedagogical approach and toward students?