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The Pre-School Teacher Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success

Cheryl Dorsey
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Cheryl R. Dorsey

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

The Pre-School Teacher Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success

by

Cheryl R. Dorsey

MPhil, Walden University 2019

MS, Capella University 2016

MSW, Gallaudet University 2000

MS, Gallaudet University 1999

BS, University of the District of Columbia, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Psychology

Walden University

November 2021

Abstract

Pre-school is foundational to future academic success, and social skills have been recognized as a critical component of that foundation. How pre-school teachers facilitate social skills development is an area requiring further study. The purpose of this research was to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of early educators. Attachment and social learning theories were used as theoretical frameworks to explore how early education teachers describe the social skills for early education success in young children and how early education teachers facilitate the development of important social skills. This study used a generic, qualitative design to select eight participants and collect interview data. A comprehensive two-cycle coding process was used for data analysis. Results portrayed a rich and diverse picture of how social skills appeared throughout the classroom environment, and identification of critical social skills deemed essential for success in the classroom. Findings also indicated that student-teacher-relationships were integral to how participants saw their role in social skills development. Research recommendations include replicating this study with special educators, using a case study approach, and using the results to develop more robust quantitative assessment methods of pre-school social skills development. This study may contribute to positive social change through developing evidence-based pre-school teacher professional development modules and specific teaching methods to promote social skills development and positive student-teacher relationships.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the host of friends, family, and loved ones who contributed to my upbringing and education. I dedicate this work to my parents, Eve and Joe Dorsey, who nurtured my intellectual curiosity. You were my earliest teachers and examples of the value of education. This work is also dedicated to my grandparents, for never losing faith in my abilities, and to my sisters, who have successfully undertaken educational pursuits. I also dedicate this work to Sasha, my canine daughter who has never left my side in this long journey. Finally, I dedicate this work to my partner in life, who has been unwavering in love, support, and encouragement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Preschool is a critical period for social skills development. Within this setting, teachers and caregivers play a crucial role in modeling, emotionally supporting, and forming relationships that encourage young children's development of academic and positive, age-appropriate social skills (Curby et al., 2013). During preschool years, the student-teacher relationship is a mutually influential affiliation that supports a child's social and emotional development, acquisition of social skills, cognitive gains, and early education success (Hamre et al., 2014).

Several explorations have examined the significance of teacher-child relationships from psychological and educational standpoints. These studies have explained the effects of secure teacher-child attachments upon children's learning and development (Quan-McGimpsey et al., 2015; Riley, 2012; Veríssimo et al., 2017). Many of these studies were grounded in attachment theory (Schuengel, 2012; Sierra, 2012; Underdown, 2016) and based on the overall premise that teacher-child relationships play an essential role in guiding children's motivation, school adjustment, and acquisition of social skills (Gözde Ertürk et al., 2017; Lee & Bierman, 2015; Spilt et al., 2012). A delay in social skills and children's challenging behaviors have become significant concerns for teachers, education managers, and parents (Doubet & Ostrosky, 2015; Hemmeter et al., 2012; Kuhn et al., 2017). Despite the signs of progress, children's behavioral difficulties persist nationwide (Jolstead et al., 2017; Tarman, 2016).

This examination of teachers' experiences of social skills for early education success can increase early educators' understanding of the development of children's

social skills and productive teacher-student relationships. It is hoped that this study will contribute to social change by adding to the existing knowledge base in educational psychology. I hope to share the results of this qualitative research with school districts and teachers, so that they may become better prepared to facilitate prosocial behaviors and progressive teacher-child relationships, along with effectively managing children's challenging behaviors.

Chapter 1 introduces the study, summarizes relevant research literature, and explain key terms referenced throughout the dissertation. This chapter also presents important background information, the problem and purpose statements, research questions, and the nature of the study. Finally, limitations and delimitations as well as links to Chapter 2 are offered.

Background

Early education research has identified behavior problems among preschoolers as an increasing concern (Feil et al., 2014; Gilliam, 2005; Holtz et al., 2015; Jolstead et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2011; Snell et al., 2012). Previously, challenging behavior was defined as any repeated pattern of behavior interfering with a child's learning (McCabe & Frede, 2007). More recently, challenging behavior is recognized as a socially constructed phenomenon (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2015). Challenging behavior may also occur due to an interplay between individual and environmental factors (e.g., teacher training, classroom environment or group size; McCready & Soloway, 2010). Challenging behaviors can cover a broad range of behaviors that can include withdrawal, noncompliance, or non-responsiveness to age-appropriate guidance,

along with more overt behavior such as protracted tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive behavior, and property destruction. Further, challenging behavior during preschool is one of the key indicators of later more difficult behaviors (Gilliam, 2016; O’Conner et al., 2011).

Children’s social and noncognitive skills may be considered a more compelling appraisal of their later academic capability than factors such as cognitive skills or family characteristics (Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Children with delays or deficiencies in these vital areas frequently experience behavioral challenges, in addition to difficulties related to school readiness and academic achievement (Jones et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2007; Mashburn & Pianta, 2010; Sabol & Pianta, 2017). Since emerging as a prevalent issue, social skills have been defined in several ways in educational research. However, social skills most commonly refers to the understandings and behaviors that support successful interactions and experiences (i.e., social competence) in the interpersonal environment (e.g., with teachers and other children). This includes skills like sharing, taking turns, cooperating in groups, engaging verbally, and group-based problem solving (Frey et al., 2014; Gresham, 2016; Gresham et al., 2006; McClelland & Morrison, 2003).

Problem Statement

Research in early education recognizes significant associations between preschool children’s social skills and school readiness (Lane et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2010; Raver, 2004; Raver et al., 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2017; Zins et al., 2004), as well as validating the interrelationship between social skills in preschool and subsequent academic success

(Arnold et al., 2012). Social skills have been progressively recognized for their significant contribution to education success (Flook et al., 2015; Goldberg et al., 2015; Maleki et al., 2019). Existing studies affirm substantial relationships between older children's social skills, school readiness, and future academic success (Lane et al., 2010). However, there is comparatively less current research on teacher expectations or teachers' perceptions of social skills necessary to early education success (Hinnant et al., 2009; Lane et al., 2007; Raver, 2004; Raver et al., 2009).

Previous studies of teacher expectations have been quantitative in nature and focused on older children. While informative, these studies did not address student-teacher relationships, teachers' experience of social skills, or individual processes involved in facilitating children's social skills, particularly at the preschool level (Lane et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2010; Rubie-Davies et al., 2016). Since then, more qualitative examinations of teachers' perspectives have emerged and added depth to the study of young children's social skills and associated teacher-student relationship development (Dellamattera, 2011; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). Current research also describes teachers' beliefs concerning important experiences contributing to school readiness (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009) along with expressing preschool teachers' beliefs associated with the importance of social-emotional competence (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013).

Since it is recognized that pre-school is foundational to future academic success (Phillips et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2020), an expanded understanding is needed of how early education teachers describe: (1) their experience of social skills in young children, (2) their perceptions of student-teacher relationships as part of the skill development

experience, and (3) specific techniques used to support children's social-emotional skills and competence. Finally, there is a further need for qualitative studies producing an in-depth understanding of the significance of positive student-teacher relationships to support social skills development in classroom settings (Mortensen & Barnett, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of early educators. This study will include exploration of how teachers view social skills in student-teacher interactions and inquire into techniques used to cultivate social skills in daily classroom activities.

Research Questions

1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?
2. What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?
 - a. How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings?

Theoretical Frameworks

Theories of attachment by Ainsworth (1991), and Bowlby (1969, 1982), along with Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory, were theoretical frameworks in this study. The following sections will explain the relevance of each theory to this study.

Theories of Attachment by Ainsworth and Bowlby

Attachment theory can be credited to individual and concerted efforts between John Bowlby (1967) and Mary Salter Ainsworth (1964,1969). Ainsworth's (1991), and Bowlby's (1969, 1980, 1982) theories of attachment have been used to explain attachments developed between parent and child beginning in infancy and progressing throughout the lifespan. Since their initial examinations of early mother child relationships, Ainsworth's (1964, 1989, 1991), and Bowlby's (1969,1973, 1982); attachment theories have been used to explain the development of affectional bonds between children and nonfamilial adults, siblings, and peers, eventually transcending childhood to incorporate other significant figures including romantic partners and even pets (Ainsworth, 1989; Kurdek, 2009; Meehan et al., 2017; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012).

In more recent research, early education studies have used attachment theory to explain the development of student-teacher relationships (Spilt et al., 2011; Tsigilis et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Wentzel, 2016). This area of research relates to this investigation in its use of attachment theory to explain that student-teacher relationships play a critical role in children's development of social skills and social competence (Skalická et al., 2015), peer relationships (De Laet et al., 2014), academic success, and cognitive advancement in early education settings (Davis, 2003; Hygen et al., 2017; Riley, 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Tsigilis et al., 2018; Valiente et al., 2008).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura 's (1977b, 2001) social learning theory emphasizes the role of context in the development of young children's social skills. Bandura (1977a, 1977b, 1979, 2001)

depicted cognitive processes as major contributors to an individual's acquisition and retention of new behaviors and described different ways that children and adults function cognitively in their social experiences, along with describing how these respective cognitive operations consequently impact their behavior and development.

Bandura's social learning theory (1979, 2001) fits well with Bowlby's (1969, 1982) and Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theories in view of their shared focus on early relationships and social-emotional development. Further, each theory describes the social environment as a valuable context for learning during early life. These frameworks were selected in an effort to build upon educational psychological theories by adding current insights into teachers' experiences of social skills contributing to early education success. Each theory is described in more detail in Chapter 2.

Theory Application

Significant elements of each theory were used to guide the development of the interview guide, data analysis plan, and categories, codes, and themes. Major themes correlating with this study's key concepts could be used to develop professional development modules for early educators. Further, practical suggestions and recommended best practices for use in the classroom may be developed from teachers' responses to interview guide questions inquiring about their process for facilitating social skills in the classroom. Strategies such as modeling, peer inclusion, and other relationship building techniques were noted and explained from an attachment perspective and their relevance to each theory.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study used a generic, qualitative research methodology to examine early education teachers' expectations and experiences of children's social skills for success in early education. The generic approach is flexible and responsive and enables the researcher to explore original perspectives and approach research problems (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Further, the generic approach is adaptable and well aligned with the goals of this study focused upon describing participants' lived experience in classroom settings (Kahlke, 2014).

The interpretive description method was used to carry out the basic qualitative approach. Thorne (2008, 2016) explained interpretive description as potentially offering an essential direction for qualitative research, while being derived from: (a) practical questions; (2) awareness of what both is known and unknown; (3) familiarity with the theoretical and contextual realm of the intended participants and audience. As an approach to qualitative inquiry, interpretive description can also offer an appropriate methodological choice for educational psychology research and researchers in the applied and social sciences (Teodoro et al., 2018). The focus of the study and content of research questions are appropriately aligned with the overall purpose of the generic, qualitative approach to inquiry in how they focus on teacher's perceptive explanations, access their real-world classroom experience, and integrate their opinions and reflections upon what they believe are the most important social skills for early education success.

Data were collected from early education teachers with at least 3 years' teaching experience using semi-structured interviews. Once recorded and transcribed, I applied

Thorne (2016) and Saldaña's (2015) general steps for data analysis and data interpretation, along with using NVIVO 11 to generate categories, recurring themes, or descriptions. I presented these descriptions, categories, and themes as outcomes from data analysis.

Definitions

Development of social skills: Social skills are developed approximately between 2.5 years and the end of kindergarten, wherein children develop significant social-emotional, language, and cognitive abilities as a result of their respective social environments and their interfacing with adults and peers (Bandura, 1977; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). The quality of children's early social and emotional skills development is significant because it is foundational to later interpersonal relationships, learning success, and life experiences (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Denham, 2006; Papadopoulou et al., 2014).

Early childhood education: Early childhood education may be defined as children's earliest formal experience of learning and education, beginning in infancy, and lasting until 8 years of age (Gordon & Browne, 2016; Morgan, 2011). Early education occurs in a social setting and may be public, private, or home based. High quality early education considers children's physical/motor, linguistic, social-emotional, and cognitive development, with emphasis on school readiness and structural elements of the learning environment (Early et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2016). High quality early education also provides age-appropriate learning and play experiences, along with supportive teacher-child relationships (Pianta et al., 2016).

Social skills for early education: Social skills for early education may be generally described as a critical element of children's social and emotional development, enabling peer acceptance, positive adult-child relationships, and early school adjustment (Davis & Qi, 2020; Johnson et al., 2000; Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2014). Social skills for early education include learning related social skills and behaviors interrelated with cognitive functions (e.g., attention, following directions, peer group participation; Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Denham, 2006; McClelland & Morrison, 2003); they may also emphasize social skills underlying interpersonal relationships such as empathy, assertiveness, sharing, and turn taking (Gresham, 2008, 2016).

Student-teacher relationships: In this investigation, student-teacher relationships were discussed from an attachment perspective and defined in terms of quality. Student-teacher relationships involve the adult teacher or caregiver and young child who interact primarily in the school setting. Positive and supportive student-teacher relations consist of warmth, responsiveness, and affective attunement (Hu et al., 2017; Sroufe, 1997; Trevarthen, 2011), while forming a developmental foundation supporting optimal social-emotional development and educational experiences (Blankemeyer et al., 2002; Davis, 2003; Pianta, 1999). In education contexts, student-teacher relationships are deemed momentous due to their profound influence on children's development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills in early education and beyond (Archambault et al., 2017; Buyse et al., 2008; Tsigilis et al., 2018). Early student-teacher relationships have been represented by attachment theorists as extensions of that between parent and child (Wentzel & Miele, 2016).

Assumptions

This is a study of teachers' experience of social skills in young children. Results were based upon teachers' responses to in-depth interview questions. It was assumed that teachers in this study answered interview questions honestly, based upon their experiences as early educators of young children. It was further assumed that teachers with 3 or more years of experience working with young children possessed the knowledge and experience to address research questions in an informed manner. Finally, it was assumed that teachers could discuss their experiences of young children's social skills and related elements of early childhood development in an informed manner.

Scope and Delimitations

Early childhood was selected as the scope for this study due to the critical, interconnected social-emotional and neurological development occurring during this stage. It is recognized that early childhood represents a critical period for the development of young children's social-emotional and neurobiological development that impacts their formation of relationships and later progress (Cicchetti & Feldman, 2015; Cozolino, 2014; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Siegel, 2001). Early childhood also lays the groundwork for children's development of social skills, academic achievement, and quality of later relationships (Ladd et al., 1997; Lynch & Simpson, 2010; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Mitchell, 2021). While negative experiences place children at risk for challenging behaviors and progressive behavior difficulties later in life, early parental support, healthy attachments, and positive relationships with adults and peers can

positively affect children's social-emotional, behavioral, and cognitive progress over time (Morgan, 2011; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000).

Delimitations of the study included both geographical and technical factors. Geographical limitations were addressed using social media to locate participants across a wider geographical area. I was unable to address the following technical boundaries within the scope of this study due to constraints of time or resources. These include areas of triangulation by not using a second coder or including additional methods of data collection such as classroom observations. Limitations to using a second coder included challenges locating a qualified individual and completing rigorous training of a qualitative coder to achieve intercoder reliability (Burla et al., 2008; Goodell et al., 2016).

An additional limitation included using supplementary forms of data collection such as classroom observations. Given the ethical considerations involved with research including children (e.g., informed consent and confidentiality; Kirk, 2007), I considered using in-depth interviews focusing primarily on teachers the most appropriate choice for understanding the preschool teachers' experience of social skills necessary for early education success. In order to strengthen areas of trustworthiness (e.g., transferability and dependability), I used alternative measures, with attention to the line of questions used in data collection, the use of NVivo coding software as an additional coding method, member checking during the research process, and rigorous data analysis methods (Shenton, 2004). These areas are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

There are several developmental theories that address children's social-emotional development and obtainment of social skills, including theory of mind (Astington, 1993, 1995), Vygotsky's (1978, 1980) social development theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. However, attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1991) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) were considered most relevant to this study's key concepts and research questions concerning the development of social skills, meaning of student-teacher relationships, and facilitating social skills in classroom settings.

Limitations

Qualitative research is often conducted in a manner that intimately involves the researcher in the process. Accordingly, acknowledging the existence of the researcher's preexisting values, experiences, and biases, rather than attempting to control them, is considered an acceptable research practice (Ortlipp, 2008). To clarify any biases brought to this study, I used the strategy of critical self-reflection described by Merriam (2009). This involved ongoing self-evaluation of my position regarding personal assumptions, worldviews, biases, theoretical orientations, and relationship to education, teachers, and children's social skills that may affect the direction of the investigation.

Additional limitations were possible in areas concerning transferability and dependability. Transferability relates to how generalizable results from the study are to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed issues of transferability in the following ways:

1. I used a maximum variation sampling strategy to provide a wide and varied sample enabling detailed description and revealing shared patterns based upon heterogeneous characteristics (Patton, 2015).
2. I provided explicit descriptions of contextual factors, along with rich descriptions (Shenton, 2004).
3. I encouraged participants to generate rich thick descriptions in answer to the study's interview questions, using informed participants' good interviewing skills and a flexible yet responsive interviewing style. Further, I used effective interview techniques, such as establishing an initial rapport, using a friendly and supportive tone to encourage trust; along with using probes and follow up questions to encourage personal narratives and relevant examples (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Dependability refers to the long-term constancy of outcomes (Bitsch, 2005). I addressed issues of dependability in the following ways:

1. I used Saldana's (2015) comprehensive, code-recode strategy during data analysis, which is beneficial for identifying major reoccurring patterns, consistent and discriminant themes, codes, and categories.
2. I also addressed dependability through explicit detail that meticulously and sequentially describes the research design and implementation (Shenton, 2004).
3. Finally, I used reflexive appraisals of the overall research study in effort to evaluate the efficacy of this investigation and increase dependability.

Significance

The examination of early education teachers' expectations and experiences of young children's social skills relates to the process of teaching social skills and has implications for the development of positive teacher-student relationships (Cook et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2007). This research fills current gaps in early education literature concentrating on qualitative explorations of teachers' experiences, expectations, beliefs, and descriptions of critical processes involved in facilitating young children's social skills and/or emotional development (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). Teachers have among the most important influences on children's classroom behavior (Marlowe, 2011; Rucinski et al., 2018). Describing important social behaviors and processes for facilitating social skills for early education success from the teacher's perspective produces research to assist teachers with developing more realistic expectations of young children's social capabilities. It is possible that with additional descriptive research addressing teacher's expectations, experiences of children's social skills prior to school entry, and their process for facilitating these social skills, teachers can become better equipped to build positive teacher-child relationships, encourage age-appropriate social skills, and manage challenging behaviors. For instance, training modules would include suggestions for developing positive, supportive student-relationships taken from the study's results. In addition, key themes related to how teachers described facilitating social skills development in their daily activities might be used to create best practices for new and experienced teachers seeking direction for supporting children's social skills in their daily

activities. Ideally, these professional development modules would provide information and strategies that enhance teacher-child interactions, support social-emotional learning, and enable school readiness.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided the background information and purpose and problem statement, along with detailing the research questions. The nature of the study significance, key definitions, assumption, scope, and limitations were also explained. Chapter 2 will provide more detailed information concerning the study's theoretical framework and relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Preschool teachers are faced with the challenges of children entering early education with delayed social skills and challenging behaviors. Children's social skills may be considered a more significant indicator of their later academic capability than factors such as cognitive skills or family characteristics (García & Weiss, 2016; Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Children who are lacking in these important skills are at higher risk for experiencing behavioral challenges and early behavioral disorders, in addition to difficulties related to school readiness and academic achievement (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2007; Mashburn & Pianta, 2010). Throughout time, social skills have been defined in several ways in educational research, but they most commonly refer to the understandings and behaviors that support successful interactions and experiences (i.e., social competence) in the interpersonal environment (e.g., with teachers and other children), including skills like sharing, communication, taking turns, cooperating in groups, engaging verbally, and group-based problem solving (Elliott & Gresman, 1987; Frey et al., 2014; Gresham & Reschly, 1988; Gresham et al., 2006; Jalongo, 2006; Little et al., 2017; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Phillips, 1978).

Research in early education has recognized significant associations between preschool children's social skills and school readiness (Lane et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2010; Pekdoğan & Akgül 2017; Raver, 2004; Raver et al., 2009; Schmitt, et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2004) and academic success (Arnold et al., 2012; Becker et al., 2014; Collie et al., 2019; Denham et al., 2014; McClelland et al., 2013; Miles & Stipek, 2006). Although

existing studies support substantial relationships between older children's social skills, school readiness, and future academic success (Arnold et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2010), there is limited current research on how teachers of young children consider social skills that contribute to preschool and early education success (Lane et al., 2007; Raver, 2004; Raver et al., 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of teachers of young children. This study will include exploration of how teachers view social skills in student-teacher interactions and inquire into techniques used to cultivate social skills in the classroom.

This chapter offers relevant background information, a statement of the problem, and related literature. I explain the literature search strategy describing the iterative search process used. An exhaustive review of the current literature related to social skills, early education, applications of attachment theory, and student-teacher relationships in early education will be included. Finally, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks germane to attachment theory, social learning theory, key concepts, central theoretical suppositions, and previous pertinent research will be clarified, along with their relevance to the current study.

Literature Search Strategy

Initial literature searches employed general search engines including Google and ResearchGate. Specific academic databases included CINAHL Plus with Full Text, Dissertations & Theses@Walden University, EBSCO databases, EBSCO e-books, Education Source, ERIC, and Education Source Combined Search, ProQuest Central,

PsycBOOKS, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, SAGE Journals, and SocINDEX with Full Text, which were used to locate relevant peer-reviewed research. Both qualitative and quantitative research studies were used to locate information concerning theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as well as current studies related to the research topic.

The literature search process was iterative and occurred repeatedly over several months. During initial searches, keyword combinations included *children's social skills*, *social skills and preschoolers*, *social skills early education*, *teacher's expectations*, *social skills*, *teacher's perceptions and social skills*, and *social skills and early education*. Additional key word searches explored frequently reoccurring themes including *student and teacher relationships*, *attachment theory and early education*, *student*, and *teacher attachment*, and *teaching and facilitating social skills*. Additional subject headings, keyword combinations and key phrases included *challenging behaviors in preschool*, *social change and early education*, *social skills definitions*, and *assessing social skills in young children*. Systematic alerts from Google Scholar, ScienceDirect and EBSCO were also used to identify and review current literature pertaining to children's social skills development and student-teacher relationships. Qualitative, quantitative, and metanalytical studies were also used to identify significant research themes as well as to gain a more holistic understanding of key factors and existing gaps in the literature. Books, conference papers, and supplementary journal articles were also used in the literature search process.

History of Social Skills in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education has a rich and multifaceted history, beginning in Europe during the 1600s (Mitchell, 2021; Morgan, 2011). Initial goals of early education in the United States were philanthropic. These broad objectives included providing safe physical care for children of working parents, along with providing disadvantaged children with access to early care, social services, moral instruction, and education (Cahan, 1989; Kamerman, 2007). Early childhood education made considerable progress in the United States during the 1700s, when Johann Fredrick Oberlin and John Pestalozzi founded the first early childhood school for infants and younger children (Cahan, 1989; Gordon & Browne, 2016; Mitchell, 2021; Morgan, 2011). Oberlin believed that educating younger children with peer groups enabled their development and used a curriculum emphasizing frequent teacher-child interactions while promoting language acquisition through dialogues with adults (Morgan, 2011).

Oberlin's early ideas were harbingers for subsequent enhanced curriculum models used by later prominent constructivist theorists such as Maria Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Friedrich Froebel, and Lev Vygotsky (Cahan, 1989; Mitchell, 2021; Woodhead, 2006). The constructivist, sociocultural perspective was based upon the conception that a child's social and cultural contexts (e.g., respective culture, society, and adult influences) played substantial roles in their cognitive progress, in addition to their development of language and social-emotional skills (Ormrod et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1962; Woodhead, 2006). Young children were considered active learners who gained knowledge through interactions with adults and caregivers, who in turn impacted their social and

psychological development. These adults (parents, teachers, family members) introduced important social and cultural practices, beliefs, and/or experiences that contributed to children's learning and psychological development (Edwards, 2005). From this standpoint, early education provided a prime opportunity to enhance children's growth potential and make use of their intrinsic curiosity and learning readiness.

Consistent with its foundation in human services and social work, during the 19th and 20th centuries early education emphasized social welfare, reducing poverty, and children's school readiness through establishing more high-quality early education programs that included children on both ends of the economic spectrum (Cahan, 1989; Hauser-Cram & Mitchell, 2012). This purpose contributed to the advancement of the field, children's healthy physical development, and improved early education experiences.

Reconceptualizing Early Childhood

As early education progressed, understandings of children's development also evolved. Children were formerly perceived as miniature adults (Howes, 2013; Mitchell, 2021; Vinovskis, 1987). Upon reconsideration, early childhood was redefined. Early childhood is now regarded as a critical, developmental period supporting children's emergent intellectual capabilities, increasingly complex emotions, and crucial social skills (Gordon & Browne, 2016; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Merrell & Peacock, 2016; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). Founded on the premise that a child's earliest years of life lay a critical foundation for later life experiences, the developmental perspective highlighted the importance of children's earliest stages of growth and development

(Howes, 2013; Mitchell, 2021; Morgan, 2011). This developmental viewpoint also explained children's relative dependent state, plasticity, and capacity for accelerated early learning (Ormrod et al., 2020; Woodhead, 2006). Based upon this view of early childhood, early education curricula promoted classroom activities to support children as dynamic learners with skills emerging in cognitive, physical, linguistic, and social-emotional domains (Gordon & Browne, 2016; Hauser-Cram & Mitchell, 2012; Morrison, 1988).

Early Childhood Education: Focusing on Social Skills

The study of children's social skills represents a significant advancement in child development and early education. Children's social skills became a central focus during the 1930s, when developmental psychologists attempted to better comprehend the nature of child psychopathology (Rubin & Ross, 1982). Further, child development theorists observed that important social-emotional developmental tasks of early childhood included managing emotional arousal, minimizing aggressive behaviors, establishing meaningful relationships, and managing interactions (Howes, 2013). These insights lead to an emphasis upon children's social skill development and social behaviors, which continued into the 1980s (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Merrell & Peacock, 2016). Knowledge gained as a consequence of supplementary psychological research expanded comprehensions of children's social skills and student-teacher relationships, along with explaining the role of attachment (Cooper et al., 2017; Ho & Funk, 2018; Jennings, 2015; Vatou et al., 2020). The classroom context was recognized as an environment for

cultivating learning and developing relationships. This further indicated the influence of early education in promoting child socialization and development across domains.

The added focus on social skills was motivated in part by early education research describing how development of young children's social-

emotional skills and self-regulation during early school years may contribute to success in later life (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Raver, 2012; Shala, 2013).

Additionally, the increase in challenging behavior observed in younger children reinforced the importance of emphasizing early social skills (Adams et al., 2018; Gilliam, 2016; Holtz et al., 2015).

Nationally, movements such as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) encouraged educational reform and further motivated a shift in attention from a primary emphasis upon children's cognitive skills to taking a whole child approach, explaining the indispensable role of social and emotional development (Brennan, 2017; Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, 2016; García & Weiss, 2016). This conception has influenced the direction of early education standards, teacher education, curriculum, and classroom instruction by focusing on psychosocial development and cognitive and biosocial areas of human development to support robust early learning and kindergarten readiness (Keçia, 2016; Stipek, 2006).

Current early education research supports the value of emphasizing social skills during early education as a means of addressing challenging behaviors and to support the growth of positive social skills. This direction continues as research confirms that attending high quality early education programs (i.e. characterized by positive student-

teacher interactions, proactive management of challenging behaviors, ongoing professional development, and emotion understanding; (Bierman et al., 2014 ; Hu et al., 2017), contributes to children's developing optimal social-emotional skills and supports future educational experiences, along with having positive effects on professional development and prosocial behavior throughout the lifespan (Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2014). Contributing to additional research on the meaning of social skills, the process of social skills development, and the quality of student-teacher relationships can enhance what is known about young children's social skills development and is consistent with the progression of early childhood education.

Significance of Social Skills in Early Education

Defining Social Skills

The development of social skills is a vital indicator of a child's level of social-emotional functioning. Although children's social skills have a tremendous impact upon human functioning, clearly defining social skills has been a difficult task (Grover et al., 2020; Smogorzewska & Szumski, 2018). As a psychological construct, social skills definitions have been vague or misinterpreted (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Smogorzewska & Szumski, 2018). Despite this definitional challenge, a comprehensive understanding of social skills is integral to the work of teachers, social workers, educational psychologists, and all who work closely with young children in educational contexts.

Although no absolute definition of social skills exists (Grover et al., 2020; Lillvist & Ciric, 2016), throughout time, social skills have been described in several ways in educational inquiry. Across varied disciplines, there has been some overlap in social

skills definitions. In early literature, Phillips (1978) broadly defined social skills as the interactions between an individual and their environment, while indicating the significance of critical interpersonal relations. Argyle (1981, 1994, 2013, 2017) described social behaviors as having a key role in facilitating skillful interactions and health. Correspondingly, McFall (1982) offered influential explanations of social skills as both a trait and as observable behaviors contributing to competent functioning on a given task. Trower (1979), Gresham and Elliot (1984), Merrell and Gueldner (2012), Little et al. (2017), and Downey and Gibbs (2020) also generally described social skills as socially acceptable, goal focused, learned behaviors, with an enabling role in social interaction, possibly motivated by rewards or punishments.

Social skills were further described as a critical element of children's social and emotional development, enabling peer acceptance and early school adjustment (Denham, et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2000). Early definitions by Phillips (1978), McFall (1982), Gresham and Elliot (1984), and Sheridan and Walker (1999) laid the foundation for more comprehensive delineations of social skills and offered future directions for educational research and assessment. This direction was confirmed by Gresham (1987), who previously defined social skills multidimensionally, classifying social skills definitions into three major categories: (1) the peer acceptance definition, relying upon peer acceptance and positive relationships; (2) the behavioral definition, designating social skills as context specific, social behaviors; and (3) a definition from the perspective of social validity, which integrated features of behavioral and peer acceptance explanations. Gresham's (1987) older social skill categories formed the basis for social skills

definitions used in more current research related to definition and assessment of children's social skills (e.g., Heyman et al., 2018; Little et al., 2017; Ros & Graziano, 2018; Tersi & Matsouka, 2020).

Social skills definitions have also progressed as a result of meta-analytic research detailing definitions, interventions, and assessment (e.g., Chenier et al., 2011; Wolstencroft et al., 2018). For instance, Gresham (2015) developed research-related definitions of social skills categorized by emphasis upon: (1) social interactions; (2) prosocial behavior; and (3) social-cognitive skills (p. 101). Additional explanations of social and emotional skills also contain several dimensions including: (a) relations to others; (b) developing self-awareness or self-perception; (c) emotional expression; and emotional and behavioral self-regulation (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Merrell, & Peacock, 2016; Özbey & Gözeler, 2020). More recently, Gresham (2016), Lillvist and Ciric (2016) and Maleki et al. (2019) conceptualized social skills as a particular category of social behaviors children display to support their successful completion of social tasks and positive relationships and future success. Similarly, Rawles (2016) and Gresham (2016) explained social skills as a set of learned behaviors, enabling prosocial interactions and predictable behavior. These indispensable behaviors are central to children's early relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults; along with supporting successful preschool participation (Ellena & Suminar, 2018; Wu et al., 2018). Social skills are instrumental to children's mastery of social tasks, including effective communication and establishing friendships (Løkken et al., 2018). Notable social skills emerging during early childhood might include sharing, comforting upset peers, taking turns, cooperating in

groups, engaging verbally; and group-based problem solving (Frey et al., 2014; Gresham & Elliott, 2017). Additional social skill examples include, entering a peer group, holding conversations, or playing games with rules (Gresham, 2016). More advanced social skills involve perspective taking, empathy, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, accepting consequences, ethical actions, care for one's environment, self-awareness, self-management, emotional self-regulation, impulse control, and sensitivity to other's perspectives (Bierman et al., 2017; Gresham & Elliott, 2017; McClelland et al., 2013; McClelland & Morrison, 2003).

In addition to evolving over time, social skills definitions have indicated several areas for educational research by outlining explicit behaviors supporting children's successful experiences within and external to school settings. What distinguishes explanations of social skills in research is their distinct focus (Michelson et al., 2013). McClelland and Morrison's (2003), Denham's (2006) and Arnold et al.'s. (2012) social skills explanations focused primarily on learning related social skills and behaviors interrelated with cognitive functions (e.g., attention, following directions, peer group participation). Conversely, Gresham (1990/2008/2016) emphasized, particular social skills underlying interpersonal relationships such as empathy, assertiveness, sharing, and turn taking. These two focal points followed the movement in educational research, distinguishing between social skills contributing to relationship building and displays of age-appropriate social behavior, from learning related social skills; requiring considerable executive functions, effortful control, and self-regulation (Bierman et al., 2017; Cooper, 2017; Cooper & Farran, 1991; Fuhs et al., 2015; Liew, 2012; McClelland

& Morrison, 2003). Social skills that build early relationships with peers and adults, along with learning related social skills constitute key components in descriptions of prosocial behavior, improved social skills, children's school readiness and early education success (Barrera et al., 2018; Blair & Raver, 2015; Brock et al., 2009; Frey et al., 2014; Ponitz et al., 2009). These social skills are frequently acquired by observing teachers or caregivers and incorporate critical classroom-based activities including modeling, turn taking, attention and peer group cooperation, which amalgamate cognitive functions and learning related behaviors, together with those elemental to developing successful relationships.

Overall, social skills have several important features and incorporate a range of behaviors that demonstrate a child's social-emotional development and level of social functioning in diverse settings. Both current and previous definitions suggest that socially skilled children and adolescents have the capacity for prosocial behaviors across varied contexts, offer appropriate responses and may even exhibit greater understanding of other's viewpoints (Ellena & Suminar, 2018; Kwon et al., 2012, Rawles, 2016; Warnes et al., 2005). Educational settings are unique and beneficial since they provide a fertile, natural environment for developing children's social skills along with encouraging the development of student-teacher relationships; which contributes greatly to socially competent learners (Elliott & Gresman, 1987; Gresham, 2015; Güral et al., 2013; Løkken et al., 2018; Malecki, 2018; Malecki & Elliot, 2002).

Related Concepts: Social Skills and Social Competence

Further investigation examining social skills has explained different aspects of social skills pertaining to children's adaptive behavior in educational contexts, distinguishing them from associated constructs, including social competence. It is considerable that the term social skills, along with adaptive behavior have been explained as two aspects of the broader construct of social competence (Anderson & Beauchamp, 2012; Grover et al., 2020; Elliott & Gresman, 1987; Gresham, 2016; Lillvist & Ciric, 2016). Observable social skills offer indispensable support for the development of social competence (Hops, 1983; Pekdoğan, 2016). While these two terms share similarities, there are notable distinctions between the two (Gresham et al., 2018). To illustrate, Sheridan and Walker (1999), Warnes et al. (2005) and Adibsereshki et al. (2015) distinguished social skills as more behaviorally focused and goal oriented; whereas Elliott and Busse (1991), Gresham (1986, 2015) and Spivak and Farran (2016) indicated how social competence, emphasizes the quality of an individual's social exchanges, denoting social judgements about situational performance. Despite these contrasts, both social skills and social competencies play a key role in young children's development of relationships with peers and adults (Gresham, 2015; Gresham et al., 2006; Grover et al., 2020; Muscara & Crowe, 2012; Nangle et al., 2010). Further, social competence and adaptive behavior are each significant components in contemporary definitions and measurements of the concept of social skills (Anderson & Beauchamp, 2012; Gresham, 2015; Gresham et al., 2006; Nangle et al., 2010; Nangle et al., 2020).

Implications of Defining Social Skills

Pertinent research studies in both education and psychology describing the development, assessment, and treatment of social behaviors in children support the importance of understanding the concept of social skills (Elliott & Gresman, 1987; Gresham, 2016; Lillvist & Ciric, 2016; Wigelsworth et al., 2010). The development of children's social skills is considered vital both for the child and teacher and the education profession. However, for educational psychologists, teachers and other early education professionals, the previous and more recent emphasis on children's social skills also accentuates the need for understanding which social skills might be considered essential to teachers in their work toward developing age-appropriate expectations of specific social skills considered necessary for preschool success.

Gaps in Social Skills Research

There is a wealth of research related to the importance of social skills. However, given the limited research to date, chiefly in social skills assessment and younger children, more research exploring challenging behaviors among preschoolers, social skills interventions, social skills development for younger children and early education teachers' perceptions of important social skills is needed (Abenavoli & Greenberg, 2016; Gresham, 2015). Early education research on social skills covers an extensive period yet contains some gaps. For this reason, literature from a broad range was included in this review. The variety of articles include recent original research, seminal research; as well as older research considered relevant to the discussion of young children's challenging behaviors; and the definition and assessment of social skills.

In early education research on social skills and challenging behaviors in young children, newer studies frequently reference considerably older research and definitions, using them as a basis for developing new social skills explanations (e.g., Ellena & Suminar, 2018; Heyman et al., 2018; Little et al., 2017). This may be due in part to the ongoing challenges with clearly defining social skills. This may also indicate the relevance of older research and definitions describing the construct of social skills. These research gaps indicate a need for newer research defining and describing the development of social skills in younger children. This investigation contributes to positive social change and adds new ideas to early education research by filling some knowledge gaps.

Assessment of Social Skills

The definition and assessment of social skills are interconnected. Education research details numerous ways to define, classify and assess the construct of social skills. Social skill assessment represents an initial step in the process of teaching and developing insights into children's current social skills level (Lillvist & Ciric, 2016; Luiselli et al., 2005). Social skills assessment is conceived as a multidimensional evaluation to determine present skill levels, identify possible disabilities, and inform choices, or education services for professionals, parents, and the child (Henderson & Strain, 2009; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014).

While there is no definitive procedure, there are many methods of measuring children's' social skills (Gresham & Elliott, 1987, 2017, 2018; Luiselli et al., 2005; Merrell, 2001). These approaches may be used in isolation or combined for increased effectiveness. Although several reviews of social skills measures have been conducted,

(Cordier et al., 2015; Crowe et al., 2011; Luiselli et al., 2005; Matson & Wilkins, 2009; Merrell, 2001), Crowe et al. (2011), along with Gresham (2015) noted that comprehensive assessments of children's social skills measures and interventions were lacking in educational literature. The earliest review of assessment techniques focused on specific instruments and was conducted by McFall and Marston (1970), who described role play, behavioral self-report, and psychophysiological laboratory assessments among their recommended measures of social skill assessment in adults.

Since this time, analyses in both education and psychology describing the development, assessment, and treatment of social behaviors in children affirm the importance of understanding and measuring social skills (Cordier et al., 2015; Gresham, 2016; Gresham & Elliott, 2017; Nangle et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2010). Identifying comprehensible assessment techniques to identify relevant social skills for young children in educational settings may be considered essential to teachers in their work toward developing age-appropriate expectations of specific social skills considered necessary for preschool success. For this reason, awareness, and skills in the assessment of children's social skills is imperative.

Social skills assessment also offers insight into areas of skill and delay. Merrell (2001), Gresham and Elliott (2008, 2017) and Gresham (2015) identified social skills assessment as an indispensable initial step for addressing challenging behaviors in children. Within this process, defining and classifying social skills constitute essential skills for teachers and other practitioners attempting to facilitate social skills in classroom settings. In the history of social skills assessment, used in child development research,

seven primary methods have emerged (Cordier et al., 2015; Gresham & Elliott, 1987b; Gresham et al., 2018; Matson & Wilkins, 2009; Merrell, 2001; Nangle et al., 2010). These methods include: (1) behavioral rating scales; (2) naturalistic observations of behavior; (3) interviews; (4) self-assessment tools; (5) projective-expressive methods in addition to; (6) sociometric and (7) psychometric procedures (Cordier et al., 2015; Greene & Ollendick, 2019; Gresham & Elliott, 1984; Matson & Wilkins, 2009; Merrell, 2001; Nangle et al., 2010). Each type will be explained below and referenced throughout this review.

Behavioral rating scales are useful tools for social skill assessment and contain lists of descriptive items, requiring the rater to score characteristic behaviors (Harrison & Oakland, 2015; Wang et al., 2011). Behavioral rating scales are versatile and may be completed by those acquainted with a child including parents, teachers, or other familiar adults in varied settings (Wang et al., 2011). Merrell (1996, 2001) and Merrell and Gimpel (2014) described behavioral rating scales as particularly advantageous in educational or clinical assessments of children's and adolescent's social skills.

Naturalistic observations or behavioral observations involve the evaluation of children's conduct and interactions with others in a typical setting (Gresham & Elliott, 1989; Wang et al., 2011). This form of assessment has been considered a premier method for assessing children's social skills and consists of (1) a qualified observer recording occurring behaviors; (2) providing detailed descriptions of behavior; and (3) systematic descriptions and in some cases formal coding systems to limit observers' subjectivity (Nangle et al., 2010; Nangle et al., 2020; Whitcomb, 2018; Whitcomb & Kemp, 2020).

An advantage of naturalistic observations includes their simplicity and use independent of specific instruments. However, they require considerable time and may be ineffectively implemented by an inexperienced observer. Consequently, Merrell (2001) recommended a combined approach when using this assessment method.

Interviews use dialogue to gain insight into an individual's behavior or social skill level. Interviews represent a traditional form of social-emotional assessment and allow direct information from the child, or from those closely involved with them including parents or teachers (Wang et al., 2011; Whitcomb, 2018; Whitcomb & Kemp, 2020). Interviews allow flexibility, may involve a highly structured exchange; and may be semi structured or unstructured. However, interview assessments may be most effectively used as supplements to behavior rating scales or self-reports to offer a more holistic assessment of children's social skills (Merrell, 2001; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014).

Self-assessment allows informants to offer direct information about their thoughts, feelings, experiences, physical condition and/or perceptions (Gresham, & Elliott, 2014). These tools gather direct subject information, frequently through semi-structured interview, rather than relying on an informant. This method enables children to give direct impressions, perceptions, or observations. A disadvantage of using this method with young children includes possible cognitive immaturity, making this approach more desirable for children with the cognitive, linguistic, and reading capabilities to give detailed reflections of their experiences (Gresham & Elliott, 2014; Gresham et al., 2004).

Projective-expressive methods in addition to; sociometric and psychometric procedures have a history of frequent use in education and psychology and are beneficial for obtaining information from targeted groups and individual children. Cordier et al., (2015), Matson and Wilkins (2009), and Nangle et al. (2010) completed comprehensive reviews explaining prevalent psychometric approaches for measuring for children's social skills. Among these methods, the most widely used psychometric approaches included standardized role play scenarios, and tests of specific social behaviors. These methods are also recommended for the assessment and screening of young children's social skills, and for identifying social skills deficits.

Issues in Assessing Social Skills

In addition to establishing clear definitions of social skills that may be useful for teachers and other professionals, it is also necessary to develop an understanding of how to classify social skills. However, to expand on definitions and classifications of social skills that can be observed and measured, it is vital to address social skills deficits and problem behaviors. Gresham (1986) previously condensed social skills deficits into 4 specified classifications: (a) skill deficits; (b) performance deficits; (c) self-control deficits; and (d) self-control performance deficits. Gresham and Elliott (2008) later placed emphasis upon acquisition and performance deficits. The basis for these divisions were whether a child knows how to perform the skill in question, and the presence of emotional arousal responses such as irritation or impulsivity. Skills classified in this way have been referred to as academic disablers (Gresham, 2016). Because of their potential for impeding demonstrations of age-appropriate social and academic skills in young

children (Gresham, 2016, 2015; Gresham et al., 2010), it is critical that teachers understand how to recognize, effectively assess, and address these behaviors in educational settings.

The classification of social skills has important theoretical implications (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014; Merrell, & Peacock, 2016). For instance, Gresham's (1986) earlier four classifications of social skills were based partially upon Bandura's (1977a, 1986) differentiation between learning and performance. Bandura's (1977b, 1986) social learning theory, also referred to as social cognitive theory is comprised of four key features applicable to children's learning, relationship building and social skill acquisition. (e.g., observational learning, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism (Grusec, 1992; Spence, 2003). Along with being used as a guiding theory in the development of definitions and social skills assessments, Bandura's (1977a, 1986) social learning theory, provides a theoretical framework that may be helpful to preschool teachers in their efforts toward clarifying social skill definitions, understanding social skills, in addition to teaching social skills in naturalistic settings such as the preschool classroom (Greene, & Ollendick, 2019; Nangle et al., 2010). These early classifications were foundational to later reviews and development of social skills assessment in young children (Cordier et al., 2015; Edossa et al., 2018; Gamst-Klaussen et al., 2016; Greene & Ollendick, 2019; Michelson et al., 2013) and have provided insights into the understanding of young children's social skills assessment and classification and school settings.

Understanding additional descriptions and classifications may further early assist educators with screening, describing, and identifying social skills deficits and challenging behaviors including externalizing (e.g., defiance) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., social withdrawal), bullying, hyperactivity/inattention; and behaviors considered on the autism spectrum (Cheung et al., 2017; Gresham & Elliott, 2008, 2018, Gresham et al., 2010). Developed as measures used in Gresham and Elliott's (2008) Social Skills Improvement System. Commonly used assessment measures found appropriate for assessing social skills, social-emotional functioning and identifying problem areas in young children include the Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scales-2 (Merrell, 1996), Child Rating Scale (Hightower et al., 1987); the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (Matson et al., 1983), (Humphrey et al., 2011); the Social Skills Improvement System-Rating Scales (SSIS-RS) (Gresham & Elliott, 2008); and the Walker-McConnell Scales of Social Competence and School Adjustment (Walker & McConnell, 1995) (Gresham, 2016).

It is useful for early educators to develop awareness of social skills classifications, measurements, and social skills deficits in their work with young children to support the skill building process (McKown, 2017), developing culturally competent practices and as a means of enhancing their efforts to facilitate social skills in daily activities. Further, when explained during the course of teacher education, professional development or teacher training, Bandura's (1977b, 1986) social learning theory, social skills classification, along with teachers' current experiences and expectations for social skills contributing to school success, may assist with more clearly defining the construct of

social skills. The consequent increased understanding of social skills may support teachers in developing more realistic expectations for children's social skills during preschool education.

Challenging Behavior in Preschool Settings

In the United States, increasing rates of children's behavioral challenges during preschool have gained national attention (Feil et al., 2014; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Gilliam, 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Vinh et al., 2016). According to Rescorla et al. (2011), approximately 33% of United States preschool-aged children display challenging behaviors. Gilliam (2005), and Gilliam and Shahar (2006) conducted the earliest national studies focused on increasing rates of expulsion due to challenging behavior occurring in preschool education programs. Gilliam and Shahar (2006) and Gilliam (2016) characterized expulsion as the harshest disciplinary consequence imposed by school programs in response to student misbehavior. In Gilliam's (2005) initial study, participating teachers were asked to report on the number of children expelled over the previous 12 months due to concerns with classroom behavior. Results revealed that 10.4% of preschool teachers participating in the study reported more than one preschool child was expelled in the preceding 12 months, out of which 19.9% were expelled more than once. Since Gilliam's seminal (2005) study, preschool expulsion rates remain a critical issue (Department of Health and Human Services & Department of Education, 2014; Gilliam, 2016; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; Zeng et al., 2019). Challenging behaviors during preschool have negative consequences such as impacting classroom activities, limiting teacher engagement, inhibiting academic achievement, and influencing student-

teacher relationships (Archambault et al., 2017; Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2010; Carter & Pool, 2012; Wilson & Ogden-Smith, 1999).

Teachers' Concerns with Challenging Behavior and Delayed Social Skills

Behavior problems among preschoolers have become a widespread issue in early education settings, causing teachers to express grave concerns (Ifeoma et al., 2016; Jolstead et al., 2017). Several educational psychology studies have cited increases in the prevalence and adverse effects of behavior challenges among preschoolers (Coleman et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Hemmeter et al., 2012; Jolstead et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2011; Powell et al., 2007). McCabe and Frede (2007) identified preschool challenging behavior as any repeated pattern of behavior interfering with a child's learning, engagement, or social interactions. In early education settings, teachers characterized challenging behaviors as aggressive, defiant, or disruptive (Miller et al., 2017). Challenging behavior covers a broad range and may include a child's withdrawal, noncompliance or unresponsive to age-appropriate guidance; along with more overt behavior such as protracted tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive behavior; in addition to property destruction (Hemmeter et al., 2012; McCabe & Frede, 2007; Raver et al., 2009). Further, challenging behavior during preschool is one of the strongest indicators of later more difficult behaviors or harmful outcomes (Duncan, 2014; Kuhn et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2017).

Challenging behavior in preschool settings impacts the young child, teacher, and overall classroom environment (Ifeoma et al., 2016). This view was illustrated by teachers' reports that children's disruptive behavior impedes activities, peer interactions

and learning for both the disruptive child and other learners (Wilson & Ogden-Smith, 1999; Yoder et al., 2019). Accordingly, further research to examine approaches to conceptualizing and preventing challenging behavior through positive student-teacher relationships, teaching, and facilitating social skills and examining teachers' understanding of early social skills development may provide needed insights for educational psychology research and encourage positive social skills in young children in early education settings. Additional research detailing teacher experiences and their process for facilitating social skills in young children may offer further teaching strategies; along with insights into how to prevent and offset challenging behaviors during early years.

Challenging Behavior and Delayed Social Skills

Upon school entry, young children are expected to have the essential cognitive capacity and academic skills to successfully navigate early education environments (Shala, 2013). Specifically, children are required to have developmentally appropriate social skills and the emotional maturity to participate in classroom routines, develop relationships with peers, and to meet their teacher's expectations. Despite these expectations, many children enter school without the required social and emotional competencies (Low et al., 2015; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). While the general curriculum focuses heavily upon meeting children's needs for cognitive growth, the area of social skills is often underrecognized during early years. Children who lack these requisite skills may be ill-equipped for the demands of early education and experience difficulties in later years. The impact of preschool social-emotional development on

academic success of elementary school students is prominent. (Ryan et al., 2006; Shala, 2013). Despite progress in this area, young children's readiness for school remains a critical issue. (Abenavoli & Greenberg, 2016; Bierman et al., 2014). This has negative consequences for children beginning school without preparation to meet the unique social, and cognitive demands of elementary school. Some possible undesirable consequences include low achievement during elementary school, greater susceptibility to learning difficulties, repeating grades; as well as compromised relationships with peers and teachers (Archambault et al., 2017; Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2006).

Traditional responses to challenging behavior in early education and school programs serving older students have been reactive in nature consisting of harsh or exclusionary practices, time-outs, sending children to the principal's office, along with suspension from school (Gilliam, 2005, 2016; Lewis et al., 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Sugai et al., 2000). Educational research has offered several solutions such as mental health consultations or specialized curricula to reduce school expulsion rates or reduce challenging behaviors (Gilliam, 2014; Gilliam et al., 2016; Low et al., 2015; Todd et al., 2008; Vinh et al., 2016); additional teacher training and support, (Zinsser et al., 2017); specialized intervention approaches (Vinh et al., 2016); and school based positive discipline efforts (Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Stanton-Chapman et al., 2016).

However, additional research is necessary to learn more about the scope of the problem and the most current effective solutions for younger children. Despite some changes, expulsion rates and behavioral challenges among preschoolers are a continual concern

and area of study (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Hartman et al., 2017; Holtz et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2017; Vinh et al., 2016).

As an alternative to previously used harsh or exclusionary approaches, Lane et al. (2007, 2010) and Lewis et al. (2016) suggested that clear expression of behavioral expectations from teachers and parents used with a positive approach to managing behavior may actually decrease problem behaviors observed in preschool classrooms. From this, it may be conceivable that a teacher's clear and consistent communication of their expectations for a child's behavior during classroom activities may support children in developing more positive social behaviors. This may also help to diminish future occurrences of inappropriate behaviors; thereby contributing to a more positive classroom environment (Jiang & Jones, 2016; Low et al., 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Sugai et al., 2000). Finally, a precursor to helping teachers learn to clearly communicate expectations and facilitate prosocial behavior in preschool classroom may be identifying their current expectations, beliefs, and experiences of social skills, which is an important goal of this qualitative investigation.

Social Skills and Behavioral Readiness for School

Previous research identified several factors contributing to preschool success, including children's behavioral readiness. Campbell and Von Stauffenberg (2008) defined behavioral school readiness as a set of social and self-regulatory abilities, enabling children to perform functions such as controlling their attention, emotions, and interpersonal behavior in a manner commensurate with their classroom teacher's expectations. Likewise, Bierman, et al. (2009), Blair and Raver (2015), Hartman et al.

(2017), Abenavoli et al. (2017) and (Garner & Toney, 2020) validated social skills and behavioral readiness as key influences upon school readiness, success, and classroom engagement in later years. La Paro and Pianta (2000), Campbell and von Stauffenberg (2008), (Garner & Toney, 2020) and Moore et al. (2015) also described the significance of social and behavioral readiness for preschool, identifying a child's capacity to effectively approach learning tasks while having focused intent, emotion knowledge, sustained engagement, and an ability to positively relate to peers and adults as vital indicators of their behavioral readiness for school. Furthermore, a child's ability to work cooperatively with peers and teachers, along with inhibiting impulses toward aggressive behavior was considered an essential constituent of behavioral readiness (Hartman et al., 2017); reinforcing its influence upon early education success.

Social Skills and Preschool Success

Preschool is a critical period for social skills development (Maleki et al., 2019). To improve nation-wide early education and develop accountability measures, state-wide early learning standards were developed and implemented in preschool settings (Burke, 2015; Stipek, 2006). DellaMattera (2010) and García and Weiss (2016) observed how existing preschool learning guidelines, created in response to requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) placed emphasis upon cognitive, psychosocial, and biosocial areas of human development in effort to ensure kindergarten readiness and academic success. These early learning standards have considerable implications for national preschool programs and have played a key role in the emerging emphasis on evaluating young children's social skills as a means of

promoting successful early learning, and reducing achievement gaps (Brennan, 2017; DellaMattera, 2010; García & Weiss, 2016). This contemporary, amplified focus on social skills has also been influenced by previous studies in early education providing considerable evidence indicating young children's social skills, emotional adjustment and self-regulation during early school years may be strong indicators of their later preschool success (Gilliam, 2005, 2016; Low et al., 2015; Maleki et al., 2019; McClelland & Wanless, 2012; Raver, 2002; Shala, 2013).

Social skills in preschool and academic success have an important relationship. Gresham (2016) explained social skills as facilitators of academic success. Children's social skills can also offer insights into their learning abilities, along with impacting relationships with peers and adults in academic settings (Collie et al., 2019; Miles & Stipek, 2006). McClelland et al. (2013) and Schmitt et al. (2015) recognized significant associations between preschool children's social competence, school readiness and academic success. Associations between children's social skills in preschool and later academic success were also reflected in studies by Bierman et al. (2009), Denham et al. (2012a) and Williford et al. (2013) who examined indicators of behavioral and cognitive readiness for school. Results in each study supported the existence of a meaningful relationship between social skills, student- teacher interactions, social and emotional behavior, classroom participation and academic success, reinforcing further linkages between social skills, student-teacher relationships, school readiness and preschool success.

Teaching Social Skills in Pre-Kindergarten

During early childhood education, classroom behavior and social-emotional learning provide an important foundation for young children's subsequent behavior in school (Denham & Brown, 2010; Eklund et al., 2018; Schultz et al., 2011). Consequently, several methods have been designed and used to equip young children with social skills during preschool years. This was illustrated by, the use of play activities, targeted teacher-student interactions, and early education curricula, which have each been cited as effective means for teaching social skills to young children (Kassardjian et al., 2013; Radley et al., 2017; Sendil & Erden, 2012; Özbey & Gözeler, 2020). Additional methods for teaching social skills were described in research by Schultz et al. (2011) who studied the use of a designated curriculum for teaching social-emotional skills and Flook et al. (2015), who used a mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (KC) to teach social skills and improve prosocial behavior preschoolers. Similarly, Bradley et al. (2009) studied the efficacy of the Early HeartSmarts® (EHS) program in promoting social, emotional, and cognitive development and Smogorzewska and Szumski, (2018) studied the effectiveness of targeted educational methods to teach social skills to preschoolers and found them effective. Outcomes validated an increase in developmentally appropriate social behaviors of preschoolers who received interventions. Results of each study suggested benefits for children's social behavior when using a targeted, social skills program, in addition to daily activities as part of the curriculum focused on building cognitive and social skills.

Bradley et al. (2009), Flook et al. (2015), Schultz et al. (2011) and Smogorzewska and Szumski, (2018) each emphasized key elements used to successfully teach social skills which involved having a trained teacher or clinician offer specified instruction to young children to help them develop targeted social and emotional competencies. All investigations validated a variety of methods that may be used to teach, measure, or facilitate children's social skills. Results further indicated that teachers with these valuable skills may contribute to greater student achievement, enhanced student-teacher relationships, and foster more successful early education environments.

Theoretical Foundations

Theories by Ainsworth (1991), Bowlby (1969, 1982) and Bandura (1977b) will be used as theoretical frameworks in this study in effort to build upon educational psychological theories by adding current insights into teachers' experiences of social skills contributing to early education success. Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory dovetails well with Bowlby's (1969, 1982) and Ainsworth attachment (1991) theories in view of their shared focus on early relationships, social-emotional development, and the role the social environment as initial, valuable frameworks for learning during the earliest stages of life. Each is described in more detail in the following sections along with literature relevant to this investigation's focus on social skills and the meaning of student-teacher relationships.

Attachment Theory

Origins of Attachment Theory

Attachment theory describes the emergence of a relational pattern between the infant and their primary caregiver, with the goal of establishing a secure base.

Attachment theory can be credited to a collaborative effort between John Bowlby (1958) and Mary Ainsworth (1964, 1969, 1970). Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory has philosophical roots in object relations theories by Balint (1968), Fairbairn (1963), and Klein (1935) explaining that humans have an essential need for relationships and possess the innate ability to develop an internal structure for understanding themselves in relation to others as they develop (Bowlby et al., 1989). Bowlby (1969) hypothesized that for newborn infants, individuals and objects were virtually indistinguishable. However, by the end of their first year, the infant developed an early mechanism for increased socialization, forming cohesive relationships and distinguishing between individuals. During this process, infants exhibited a distinct preference for caregivers and experienced a sense of joy and security upon arrival and being in proximity to their preferred caregiver. Conversely, the child also endured a sense of loss, grief, or anxiety during separation or departures; followed by feelings of relief upon reunion. This sequence characterizes initial attachment relationships and operates as a blueprint for relationships thereafter.

Basic Assumptions

Bowlby's (1958) beliefs concerning the nature of mother- child attachments were founded upon four central themes, asserting that: (1) infants have several functional

needs, necessitating immediate attention; (2) early infant feeding behavior is based upon their need to relate to themselves and others; (3) primary clinging in infancy is based upon a need for touch and closeness; and (4) infants may experience resentment concerning their birth process contributing to a rudimentary desire for the pre-birth state and reunion that drives attachment behavior.

Bowlby's attachment theory was also grounded in the fundamental postulation that infants have a preprogrammed disposition toward exhibiting behaviors that ensure their survival including crying, cooing, and emitting prelinguistic sounds inciting caregivers' response and continued care. These ideas were later supported by the research of Harlow and Zimmermann (1958) who studied attachment behaviors in rhesus monkeys; and Prior and Glaser (2006) who studied healthy and problematic attachment behaviors.

Phases of Attachment

Bowlby (1969/1982) postulated four phases of attachment, commencing at birth, with a stage like progression. During the initial phase, (Birth- 8 weeks), infants possessed limited abilities for discriminating between figures, usually tracking individuals visually. Social behaviors include reaching, crying, and smiling. The second phase (2-7 months) in Bowlby's (1969/1982) developmental sequence is marked by the infant's increased socialization. At this point, social responses occur in a more organized fashion, beginning with their mother or primary caregiver, whose behaviors become more familiar and predictable.

The third phase (24 months and above) is characterized by the infant's increasingly directed behaviors. Infants can now discriminate the location of their parent or attachment figure and function with an expanded range of behaviors toward familiar and unfamiliar individuals. Attempts to comfort infants become more tolerable. The concluding stage enables the child to form more goal focused partnerships and behaviors, which enhances mutual connections. The emergence of language skills figures prominently in the relationship building process. Adult-child dialogues concerning the relationship may promote mutual understanding about thoughts, feelings, and intentions of both the child and attachment figure.

Internal Working Models

The process of developing a primary attachment relationship and the establishment of a secure base, contributes to the child's forming images and expectations about future relationships called an internal working model (Bowlby (1980). The internal working model refers to a set of expectations based upon the continuity of attachment during infancy. This model assists the child in conceptualizing relationships between themselves and others, assimilating future experiences and assessing new caregiver situations (Ainsworth, 1989; Berk, 2008; Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton et al., 1990), all considered essential social-emotional competences preparing the child for imminent relationships.

Assessment of Attachment Relationships

Ainsworth (1991) characterized attachment behavior as a universal, developmental process central to basic human behavior and the formation of profound

human relationships. According to Bowlby (1969), one of the great strengths of attachment theory was found in its ability to explain this complex developmental process, and to guide auxiliary research. However, whereas Bowlby's (1958, 1969) ideas regarding attachment were criticized for their lack of empirical support, Ainsworth's (1969, 1971, 1978, 1991) explanations of how initial attachments facilitated secondary affectional bonds with significant others were more evidence-based. Ainsworth's (1978) research made use of The Strange Situation classification (SSC) (Ainsworth et al., 1978), a three-minute technique used as a mechanism for observing and measuring infant-parent attachment bonds; exploring maternal sensitivity and infant's varied attachment styles. From this early measure, additional attachment assessments were developed, such as the Attachment Q-Sort (AQS) (Waters & Deane, 1985; Waters, 1995); deepening comprehension of attachment.

Attachment Styles

Ainsworth et al.'s (1970, 1978) and Ainsworth et al. (1971) examination concluded in the development of a typology, detailing three major attachment styles. Infants classified as Insecure Avoidant (Type A) were hesitant to explore their environment, did not use their mother or another attachment figure as a physical secure base and maintained emotional distance (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Behrens et al., 2007). They rejected comfort from another attachment figure and evaded caregivers upon their return. Both Ainsworth et al. (1971) and Stevenson-Hinde and Verschueren (2002) speculated that children with this pattern might have experienced insensitivity, rejection, or a caregiver's avoidance of their needs. Securely attached infants were categorized as

(Type B) These infants successfully used caregivers as a secure base, made sufficient eye contact and were happily reunified upon their mother's return. These infants demonstrated confidence in caregivers' ability to meet their needs, possibly from consistent care and connections during daily experiences.

Infants categorized as Insecure-Resistant or Insecure Ambivalent (Type C) were described as indecisive in their interactions with caregivers, at times clinging, while at others rebuffing the attachment figure. In addition, these infants also experienced difficulties developing and maintaining maternal contact and were hesitant to make repeated engagement attempts. A fourth Disorganized/Disoriented pattern (Type D) also emerged during infant studies of attachment addressing difficult attachment bonds (Gross, 2018). This type was later confirmed by both Van IJzendoorn et al. (1999) and Waters and Valenzuela (1999). Infants with a more disjointed attachment pattern avoided or resisted contact when initially reunified with caregivers. In addition, a combination of responses (e.g., calm play, freezing, fear) upon a caregiver's return were observed.

Relevance to the Proposed Study

Several explorations have examined the significance of teacher-child relationships from psychological, and educational standpoints. These studies have explained the effects of secure teacher-child attachments upon children's learning and development (Pianta et al., 2003; Quan-McGimpsey et al., 2015; Riley, 2012). Many of these studies were grounded in attachment theory (Cyr, & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Schuengel, 2012; Sierra, 2012), and based upon the overall premise that teacher -child relationships play an essential role in guiding children's, motivation, school adjustment and acquisition of

social skills (Gözde Ertürk Kara et al., 2017; Lee & Bierman, 2015; Pianta et al., 2003; Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2018).

Sierra (2012), Verschueren and Koomen (2012), Gregoriadis and Grammatikopoulos (2014) and Veríssimo et al. (2017) described the essential role of early education teachers as attachment figures. In this critical role, teachers possess the potential to encourage an atmosphere of security and constant emotional support that cultivates the child's feeling loved. For instance, Van Ijzendoord et al. (1992) used Ainsworth et al. (1978) Strange Situation to examine attachment behavior between preschool aged children and their teachers, finding that children were able to use their teacher as a secure base, and to accept their support and comfort. Children using their early education teacher as a secure base may also receive the benefit of protection from later insecure attachments; and experience increased self-confidence (Howes, 1999; Maldonado & Carrillo, 2006; Sierra, 2012; Verschueren, 2020). These children potentially develop higher level social skills such as empathy and cooperation, considered foundational to more positive and supportive relationships with their peers and other adults (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Posada et al., 2019).

Similar to relationships with parents, the student-teacher relationship has been typified by varying degrees of attachment. Both Bergin and Bergin, 2009 and Granot, (2014) affirmed that a child's relationship with their teacher may be characterized as: a) secure, b) avoidant, c) resistant, d) disorganized and e) general (near secure) types of attachment. Further, these relationships may contain an optimal level of warmth, closeness and unrestricted communication and provide children with the needed security

to explore the classroom environment; and pursue relationships with peers. (Pianta, 1999).

A secure, supportive, affective relationship with an early education teacher may effectively reduce challenging behaviors in young children (Poulou, 2015), enable school readiness and support adjustment beyond school settings (Hughes, & Kwok, 2007; Kidwell et al., 2010; Schuengel, 2012). This supposition is supported by research by Commodari (2013) who examined 152 preschooler's attachments to their teachers. Findings demonstrated how preschooler's attachment to their teachers was associated with their language and psychomotor development. When combined with high quality adult-child interactions that provide a consistent base of support, this protective relationship may also mediate developmental risk and decrease undesirable behaviors for the young child (Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Schuengel, 2012; Silver et al., 2005). Studies by Commodari (2013), Poulou (2015) and Schuengel (2012) accentuated the relationship between attachment and the development of positive student-teacher relationships; along with offering evidence of the significant impact teachers have upon young children's social skills and overall development across multiple domains.

Pertinent elements of relationship quality were explained by Sroufe (1997, 2005) and Trevarthen, (2011) who credited early educators' attunement with providing children with a felt sense of safety and promoting their development of internal working models. These internal models shape children's initial thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, along with actively supporting instructional strategies. Effective attunement is an indicator of high-quality relationships, occurring as the teacher purposefully makes the young child's

emotional and psychological states a major focal point. This focused attention strengthens early adult-child relationships, contributing to children's positive self-perceptions, and perceptions of their relationship with teachers; fortifying student-teacher attachment bonds. Previously described studies of student- teacher relationships and attachment (e.g., Sroufe, 1997, Trevarthen, 2011) relate to this investigation of teachers' experiences of social skills in young children by emphasizing the prominent role of attachment in developing positive student-teacher relationships and explaining potentials for those relationships to facilitate overall social-emotional development and optimal social skills. The understanding of positive student-teacher relationships also relates to how relationship quality may assist with teaching and facilitating social skills in early education settings.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Basic Assumptions

Bandura's (1977a) theory placed great importance on specific cognitive processes underlying behavioral change and the attainment of new behaviors. Bandura (1977b/1979) conceived cognitive processes as a major contributor to an individual's acquisition and retention of new behaviors. Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory, also referred to as social cognitive theory is comprised of four key features: (a) observational learning, (b) self-regulation, (c) self-efficacy, and (d) reciprocal determinism (Grusec, 1992). Bandura (1977b) focused on different ways that children and adults' function cognitively in their social experiences, along with describing how these respective cognitive operations consequently impact their behavior and

development. According to Bandura (1977b) once information is encountered through varied social interactions, both children and adults abstract and integrate the significant information. Using the processes of abstraction and integration, learners then mentally represent themselves and environments using certain substantial classes of understanding comprised of response outcome expectancies, perceptions of self-efficacy, along with standards for evaluative self- reactions (Grusec, 1992).

Applications to School Settings

A young learner's integration of socially observed information may occur through exposure to models, verbal dialogs, along with specific teaching techniques (Bandura, 1977b; Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Grusec, 1992). Bandura (1977b) placed great value on instructional modeling as a teaching tool to support learning and changes in behavior. Further, rather than promoting simplistic techniques of reward and punishment to teach behavior, Bandura (1969,1977a) described the use of social models such as teachers as an indispensable part of transmitting and modifying behavior; especially in learning situations where there was strong probability of errors. Therefore, modeling may also be a particularly useful technique for use with early learners and preschool children who are experiencing social skill deficits and challenging classroom behavior as a means for encouraging positive behavioral changes.

Modeling is a central concept within Bandura's (1977/1986) broader theory of observational learning. Observational learning using modeling occurs in circumstances when observers display a new pattern of behavior that prior to exposure to modeled behaviors, had zero prospect of incidence regardless of the learner's high motivation

(Bandura, 1969). Bandura's (1977b) social cognitive theory and practical applications of modeling was described in research by Spence (2003) and Buggey et al. (2018) who studied the use of social skills training through modeling with children and young people as a method of addressing deficits in areas of social skills and social competence. Spence (2003) pointed out that the specific behavioral methods most effectively used to teach social skills could be generalized to those used in the acquisition of other skill areas and included instruction, discussion, modeling, role playing/behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and reinforcement.

Relevance to the Current Study

As Spence (2003) and Lane et al. (2007) have described information from the proposed study will apply what is known about the importance of teacher's varying expectations of children's social skills. This study will also offer new information to support the usefulness of a preschool teacher's expectations being clarified, explicitly defined, and regularly expressed to young children to help develop social skills. The use of clear expectations, unique experiences and positive interactions between teacher-student can incorporate the use of peer or adult models and consequently assist children with learning positive, new behaviors, along with facilitating optimal social experiences at school.

Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory corresponds well with Bowlby's (1969, 1982) and Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory in view of their shared focus on early relationships, social-emotional development, along with the role the social environment as initial, valuable frameworks for learning during the earliest stages of life. Theories by

Ainsworth (1991), Bowlby (1969, 1982) and Bandura (1977b) will be used as theoretical frameworks. In effort to build upon educational psychological theories by adding current insights into teachers' experiences of social skills contributing to early education success. Thus, these theories are profoundly relevant for exploring the gap in the research regarding teachers' experience of social skills development in preschool. Furthermore, this study's research questions, and underlying theories will produce in-depth personal narratives and descriptive information explaining the significance of positive social skills to early education success, as well as exploring the meaning of positive student-teacher relationships that support early social skills development. The choice of a qualitative approach addresses the scarcity of research offering detailed accounts of teachers' individual level process and related practices for facilitating social and emotional skills development in early childhood settings (La Paro et al., 2014; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015; Papadopoulou et al., 2014). In addition to addressing gaps in research, results have potentials for adding to professional development clarifying how teachers can support social skills development in early education settings.

Summary and Conclusions

Research in early education recognizes significant associations between preschool children's social skills, social competence, and school readiness (Blair & Raver, 2015; Lane et al., 2007; Raver, 2004; Sabol & Pianta, 2017). Miles and Stipek (2006) validated the interrelationship between social skills in preschool and academic success. In early childhood settings, children's social abilities can offer insights into their readiness for learning, along with impacting relationships with peers and teachers (Miles & Stipek,

2006). While there are studies to support significant relationships between preschool children's social competence, school readiness and future academic success, there is less current research focused upon what preschool teachers currently consider important social skills that contribute to preschool success during preschool years (Lane et al., 2007; Raver, 2004). Lane et al. (2007) and Jiang and Jones (2016) indicated that while teacher's expectations of children's social skills may vary, these expectations should generally be clear and explicitly defined, along with being regularly expressed by teachers in school classrooms to enable optimal experiences at school. When expectations are not clarified or consistently taught by classroom teachers, the risk of children's misbehavior may increase. Accordingly, a teacher's clearly communicated expectations may be an effective way to increase appropriate social behavior in preschoolers.

In effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning for preschool children both teachers and students must be equipped with skills that support the development of prosocial behavior. The earlier data represents an emerging area for research that explores the issue of teacher's skills and expectations for classroom behavior and suggests the need for additional research to help clearly define what might be considered current teacher experiences and expectations for preschool behavior.

Previous studies of teacher expectations of social skills indicated teacher's beliefs that cooperation, assertion and self-control were among the most important social skills for educational success (Baker et al., 2015; Hinnant et al., 2009; Lane et al., 2004; Lane et al., 2006; Lane et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2010). These studies were often quantitative in nature, frequently focused on older children and relied upon rating scales or other

psychometric assessments to produce information concerning challenging behaviors and teacher's expectations concerning social skills. Since then, more qualitative examinations of teacher's perspectives have emerged and added depth to the study of young children's social skills and associated teacher-student relationship development (Dellamattera, 2011; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). Some research also describes teacher's beliefs concerning important experiences contributing to school readiness (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009) along with describing preschool teacher's' beliefs associated with the importance of social emotional competence (Hollingsworth, & Winter, 2013). However, these studies did not address student-teacher relationships, teachers' experience of social skills or processes for facilitating children's social skills, particularly at the preschool level.

The current literature does not address the early education teacher's holistic descriptions of social skills that are considered essential for early education success. A deeper understanding of how early education teachers describe their experiences of social skills in young children during early years; as well as descriptive information relating teachers' beliefs and practices to support children's social skills development is needed. Further, there is also insufficient research offering detailed accounts of teachers' process for facilitating social-emotional and social skills development during their classroom activities (Davis et al., 2010; Mortensen, & Barnett, 2015; Papadopoulou et al., 2014).

Since it is recognized that pre-school "sets the stage" for future academic success, an expanded understanding is needed of how early education teachers describe: (1) their experience of social skills in young children; (2) their perceptions of student-teacher relationships as part of the skill development experience and (3) specific techniques used

to support children's social-emotional skills and competence. Finally, there is a further need for qualitative studies producing an in-depth understanding of the significance of positive student-teacher relationships to support social skills development in classroom settings, (Mortensen, & Barnett, 2015).

Chapter 2 described the study's research strategy and theoretical foundations, along with describing their relevance to the study. Chapter 3 will detail the purpose of the study, detail research questions; as well as explaining the rationale for the selected generic, interpretive descriptive qualitative approach. In addition, research methods, recruitment activities and the interview protocol will be explained and include proposed detailed methodological steps.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of teachers of young children. This study included exploration of how teachers view social skills in student-teacher interactions and inquired into techniques used to cultivate social skills in the classroom.

Chapter 3 begins with a restatement of the research questions and offers relevant definitions of key concepts. The chapter will further describe elements of the research design and rationale, as well as the methodology. This includes details of instrumentation, participant selection, the role of the researcher, and data analysis strategies. Finally, ethical considerations and connections to upcoming chapters will be summarized.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Questions

1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?
2. What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's social skills?
 - a. How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings?

Central Concepts

The primary concepts of this study included social skills for early education, student-teacher relationships, and the development of social skills. Early childhood education may be defined as children's earliest formal experience of learning and education, beginning in infancy, and lasting until 8 years of age (Gordon & Browne, 2016; Morgan, 2011).

Early education occurs in a social setting and may be public, private, or home based. High quality early education considers children's physical/motor, linguistic, social-emotional, and cognitive development, with emphasis upon school readiness and structural elements of the learning environment (Early et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2016). High quality early education also provides age-appropriate learning and play experiences along with supportive teacher-child relationships (Pianta et al., 2016).

Social skills for early education may be generally described as a critical element of children's social and emotional development, enabling peer acceptance, positive adult-child relationships, and early school adjustment (Davis & Qi, 2020; Johnson et al., 2000; Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2014). Social skills for early education include learning related social skills as well as behaviors interrelated with cognitive functions (e.g., attention, following directions, peer group participation; Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Denham, 2006; McClelland & Morrison, 2003); they may also emphasize social skills underlying interpersonal relationships such as empathy, assertiveness, sharing, and turn taking (Gresham, 2008, 2016).

In this investigation, student-teacher relationships are discussed from an attachment perspective and defined in terms of quality. Student-teacher relationships involve the adult teacher or caregiver and young child who interact primarily in the school setting. Positive and supportive student-teacher relations consist of warmth, responsiveness, and affective attunement (Hu et al., 2017; Sroufe, 1997; Trevarthen, 2011), while forming a developmental foundation supporting optimal social-emotional development and educational experiences (Ansari et al., 2020; Blankemeyer et al., 2002; Davis, 2003; Pianta, 1999). In education contexts, student-teacher relationships are deemed momentous due to their profound influence on children's development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills in early education and beyond (Archambault et al., 2017; Buyse et al., 2008; Davis, 2003; Rucinski et al., 2018). Early student-teacher relationships have been represented by attachment theorists as extensions of that between parent and child (Wentzel & Miele, 2016).

The development of social skills refers to social skills development occurring approximately between 2.5 years and the end of kindergarten, wherein children develop significant social-emotional, language, and cognitive abilities as a result of their respective social environments, together with their interfacing with adults and peers (Bandura, 1977a; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). The quality of children's early social and emotional skills development is significant because it is foundational to later interpersonal relationships, learning success, and life experiences (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Denham, 2006; Papadopoulou et al., 2014).

Approach

This qualitative study used a generic, qualitative research methodology to examine current teacher experiences of social skills needed for early education success. Earlier studies of teacher expectations were quantitative in nature and reflected teachers' beliefs that cooperation, assertion, and self-control were among the most important social skills for education success (Lane et al., 2004; Lane et al., 2007). Consistent with goals of quantitative research, those studies offered descriptions of specific social skills and made predictions or broad generalizations about social skills needed for early education success. In this study, the intent is to provide holistic descriptions, emphasizing human understanding, discovery, and making meaning out of specific experiences (Merriam, 2009). Congruent with goals of naturalistic inquiry, I used in-depth interviews and a purposive sample to interpret teachers' experiences of social skills using pronounced and robust descriptions (Bowen, 2008; Salkind, 2010; Thorne, 2016). The study's central focus fit appropriately with the overall focus of qualitative research, as well as correlating with the theory underlying the social constructivist framework, which asserts that the individual's reality or personal meanings are individually constructed and must be clarified at the individual level (Merriam, 2009).

The generic research design is distinct from other qualitative traditions such as narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study, yet may combine elements of each approach (Caelli et al., 2008; Kahlke, 2014). Kahlke (2014) characterized generic qualitative approaches as less defined and established but more flexible, without an adherence to a singular, conventional methodology. Merriam (2009)

described the generic or basic research approach as having its philosophical roots in constructivism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. The convergence of these three areas enabled me to represent how individuals interpret their experiences and construct their inner worlds. This approach is a suitable fit for early education research with outcomes of improving educators' understandings and practices as well as explaining in-depth processes such as student-teacher relationships and developing social skills in preschoolers through daily interactions.

Within the broad basic or generic qualitative approach, interpretive description was used. Thorne (2008, 2016) explained interpretive description as potentially offering an essential direction for qualitative research while being derived from: (a) practical questions; (2) awareness of what both is known and unknown; and (3) familiarity with the theoretical and contextual realm of the intended participants and audience. As an approach to qualitative inquiry, interpretive description can also offer an appropriate methodological choice for educational psychology research and researchers in the applied and social sciences (Teodoro et al., 2018)

As an approach to qualitative research, interpretive description was developed by Thorne et al. (1997) as a method of describing experiences from clinical and practical nursing contexts. Consistent with the emphasis in qualitative research, benefits of using this approach were found in their ability to offer detailed and rich descriptions along with informing practice in other areas including education.

Clinical nursing and early education share important similarities. Clinical nursing is geared toward improving the quality of patient life and overall health, while the early

education professions have the overall goal of enhancing young children's quality of life, education, and early development through developmentally appropriate curriculum (Ormrod et al., 2020; Thorne, 2016). Both nursing and education are helping professions. Each profession requires intimate knowledge of individual strengths and challenges, involve levels of assessment, incorporate planning and implementation, and include integral practical knowledge that guides research and practice.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research recognizes the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection, situating them in the center of the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this investigation, I had direct interaction with the study's participants to extract information that sufficiently conveyed their lived experience and personal understanding of children's social skills necessary for early education success, the meaning of student-teacher relationships in the process of social skills development, and practices that facilitated early social skills development. Throughout this process, I functioned as a participant as well as a facilitator of the research process, data collector, transcriber, and data analyst.

Given my role, there were possible ethical, interpersonal, and tactical issues requiring my self-reflection and identification of preexisting personal biases, opinions, unique cultural frame of reference, gender, work history, and/or theoretical suppositions (Thorne et al., 1997). This study was not conducted in my work environment and did not involve those over whom I had a supervisory role. This helped to reduce ethical issues related to power differentials or conflicts of interest.

Qualitative research is often conducted in a manner that intimately involves the researcher in the process. Accordingly, acknowledging the existence of the researcher's preexisting values, experiences, and biases, rather than attempting to control them, is considered an acceptable research practice (Ortlipp, 2008). To clarify biases brought to this study, I used the strategy of critical self-reflection described by Merriam (2009). This involved the ongoing self-evaluation of my position regarding personal assumptions, worldviews, personal biases, theoretical orientations, and relationship to education, teachers, and children's social skills brought to the study that may potentially affect the direction of the investigation.

Researcher's Reflexivity

Given my experience in the field of early childhood education, children's services, and clinical work with young children, there may be biases or pre-conceived opinions regarding teachers' beliefs, experiences, and expectations of young children's social skills. In effort to address these biases, I worked to set these ideas aside through the process of self-awareness, while maintaining what Finlay (2008) and Hopkins et al. (2017) described as a phenomenological attitude. Finlay and Hopkins et al. explained the key challenge is for researchers to concurrently embody contradictory standpoints of being "scientifically removed from," while also remaining "open to" and "aware of" their biases and ideas even as they interact with research participants during their own experience. This perspective does not involve a researcher becoming detached, distanced, or objectivistic. Instead, as Finlay described, the researcher will strive to be fully involved and engage with participants with an attitude of interest, while remaining open

to what they have to say about key social skills, their expectations, and all other issues raised during the interview process without critical comment or any attempt to influence their responses.

I kept a self-reflective journal as a method of facilitating reflexivity and examining any personal assumptions, goals, opinions, expectations, or biases brought to the study. Russell and Kelly (2002), Etherington (2004), and Connelly (2016) recommended self-reflective journals as an effective strategy and common practice in qualitative research to increase credibility and offset researcher biases that may influence the investigation. Finally, to make use of the “phenomenological attitude” in this study and reflexively interrogate any previous understandings, see with renewed vision, and better access the phenomena and deepen the analysis, as suggested by Finlay (2008) and Hopkins et al. (2017), I focused on the research process and attempted to be open and to meet the phenomenon in as fresh a way as possible. When necessary, I discussed biases with my chair and recorded in a separate place all personal thoughts that surfaced during the interview process with careful attention to keeping these reflections out of the data collection and interpretation processes.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target group consisted of pre-school and early education teachers living in the United States. I created a sample of eight to 10 preschool teachers of students attending preschool programs that serve children between the ages of 2.6 and 6 years old. These participants were lead teachers of preschool aged children and have at least 3 years of

teaching experience with young children and expertise in early education, enabling them to describe attitudes, beliefs, and opinions related to important social skills for classroom success. This included teachers of children attending community-based organizations, home providers, public, public charter, and/or private schools. Community-based programs were targeted that commonly accept childcare vouchers and have a diverse demographic composition to include children from low-income homes, as well as serving children from diverse races, ethnicities, and/or those children with special needs.

Participants were invited from an invitation flyer (Appendix A) in two ways. First, the flyer was distributed to member schools of the community partner, District of Columbia Childcare Connections (DCCC; Appendix B) Letter of Agreement. The flyer was sent as an email attachment to school principals and individual members on the list (Appendix C).

During monthly trainings, a DCCC representative had permission to distribute flyers to early education teachers in attendance. Flyers had details of the study and my contact information for opting in. Facebook, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and LinkedIn message boards were also used to identify candidates by posting flyers in online discussion areas, in conjunction with snowball, chain sampling to identify possible participants.

Sampling Strategy

This study used purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2002; Thorne, 2016). I selected a sample of maximum variation across types of schools (Patton, 2015). Maximum variation is a form of purposeful sampling that involves including unique

variations within a target sample. This occurred by selecting teachers from varied backgrounds and professional settings. This enhanced credibility and validated common patterns and themes emerging from the interviews (Thorne, 2016).

Thorne (2016) noted that an interpretive description study can be performed on almost any sample size. In this investigation, this smaller sample size was based on the rationale given for small sample sizes in interview-based qualitative research offered by Mason (2010), the questions being asked, the availability of resources for supporting the study, and the rules of thumb used for generic qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). Kuzel (1992) recommended between six and eight interviews when using a homogeneous sample and between 12 and 20 when looking for maximum variation. Finally, the precedent set by earlier interview-based, qualitative studies was considered, along with the rigor of data analysis when determining the sample size selection in the current study.

As indicated in published methodological resources, a small study that makes modest claims, means data saturation, or data redundancy may be achieved more quickly with fewer participants (Latham, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). To illustrate, Guest et al. (2006) reported reaching saturation within the initial 6 interviews, despite conducting a study including 60 female participants. This suggests that data saturation and the development of meaningful themes and codes can be reached while using a smaller sample and further validates using a smaller sample size.

Instrumentation

I collected data through conducting semi-structured interviews with 8-10 participants using approximately eight (8) open-ended questions. The questions were

developed to explore key social skills and the teacher's ideas about how these skills might be demonstrated in their classrooms. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were collected during 1 interview session.

Interview guide questions were developed from research questions; along with this study's key concepts and definitions of social skills (Johnson et al., 2000), student-teacher relationships (Archambault et al., 2017; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Buyse et al., 2008; Davis, 2003); as well as the development of social skills (Bandura, 1977; Bowlby, 1969, 1982 Merrell, & Gimpel, 2014). The interview protocol used in this study was also based upon Castillo-Montoya (2016), Rubin and Rubin, (2011); Thorne (2016) and Merriam's (2009) suggestions for structuring interview questions.

Key concepts from the study's theoretical frameworks are interrelated with interview questions. Some questions and prompts combined key concepts. Questions 1-2 were introductory questions about teachers' general experience with young children. Interview guide questions 3,5 and 6, were related to key concepts concerning social skills for early childhood. Questions 4 5, and 8 were related to the development of social skills, while questions 7-7a were related to student-teacher relationships. The final question was also summative and asked for additional thoughts and ideas related to interview questions.

Guiding Interview Questions

The following guiding interview questions were used to focus data collection:

1. How long have you been an early education teacher?
 - a. Can you tell me about the students you teach?

- b. How old are the children you typically teach?
 - c. Do you use a curricular model or philosophy? Does this model address social skills? If they are Montessori educators, for instance, it would shape all the next questions. If they are using a SEL curriculum, that might suggest something different.
 - d. If there is no formal curriculum how is a typical day structured?
 2. On a typical day, tell me, what do you observe regarding your student's inaction with each other, and with adults?
 - a. Can you describe an example of a typical social skill most have mastered for children interacting with children?
 - b. Another example? Another example?
 - c. additional example?
 - d. Do you have a system of observation? Tell me about that system
 - e. An example of a social skill they have not yet mastered. More examples
 - f. What is a social skill that most of your students struggle with? More examples
 3. So, overall – What do you see as the most important social skill to support success in your classroom?
 - a. Can you give an example of this skill?
 - b. Examples of the Next most important?
 - c. How to you teach or encourage this skill?

4. If you were to narrate what typically happens from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year in a child's development of social skills, how would describe this evolution?
 - a. What do you see as your role (as the teacher) in this development process?
Probe: Ask for examples
5. What does the phrase "appropriate social skills" mean when you think of your students? Might not need to ask this. might be a probe. Is this related to your research question? Don't make the question sound like a test question!
 - a. Can you give an example of an "appropriate" interchange? I bet you would have heard this already
 - b. Can you give an example of an "inappropriate one"?
6. What might be very important contributors to developing social skills in the classroom? (Then ask, "other contributors?")
7. -How do you feel the student-teacher relationship impacts children's development of social skills?
 - a. Can you give me an example of how your relationship with a child might support their positive social skill development?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would help me understand your experience of how your students develop social skills as part of their classroom experience?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

After receiving approval for the study from the Walden University Institutional Review Board, (Approval # 09-30-19-0665618), I began reaching out through the recruiting strategies described below with the District of Columbia Childcare Connections, Facebook, Linked-In, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Open Forum email, message board to invite participants from interest groups exclusively for early childhood professionals; and used chain referral sampling.

Groups were identified by performing a search, joining the group, and posting the invitation flyer (Appendix A) to participate in a research study. When necessary, the group administrator was contacted to ask for permission to post recruitment flyers on groups' page or to message individual members. Once permissions from social media group administrators was obtained by e mail, information flyers with my contact information and relevant details of the study were posted at these sites (Appendix A). The invitation flyer explaining the study's details and voluntary nature of the study, along with my contact information was posted in the group chat area or was emailed to individual members.

Recruitment also occurred through emails to early education teachers (Appendix C) and directors (Appendix D), as well as at DC Child Care Connections professional development meetings. I also sent flyers through emails to directors and teachers identified through Internet searches and the DC Child Care Connections Public Access data base. Directors were asked to pass on the invitation to teachers who qualified.

Teachers who were interested were able to contact me through phone or e mail in order to participate. Those teachers were also be asked to refer other suitable candidates

At DC Child Care Connections professional development meetings, Pre-K and early education teachers were given a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) by the group moderator with the details of the study and my contact information. I did not attend these meetings and did not attempt to recruit in a group setting.

In addition, recruitment using social media was used as a means of locating participants. Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social media as internet-based applications enabling users to socially interact and share specific content with a selected assortment of users. Social media offers an additional fast, cost-effective avenue for recruitment and allows researchers to access hard to reach populations and those beyond their immediate geographical area (Kapp et al., 2013).

The use of social media as a tool for research recruitment is increasing and has considerable growth potential (Gelinas et al., 2017; Kapp et al., 2013). LinkedIn, and Facebook are popular social media websites offering platforms for networking, information sharing and connecting with individuals of all ages (Gelinas et al., 2017). These platforms also host several groups exclusively for professionals in early childhood education and were used as a source for identifying appropriate participants.

I used Facebook, and LinkedIn to invite participants from interest groups exclusively for early childhood professionals. Groups and individual teachers were also identified by performing a search, joining, and posting or emailing members the invitation flyer to participate in a research study, along with my contact information. I followed up

on all responses with further information about the study. Recruitment also occurred through flyers left with the community partner.

Participation

Each interview lasted approximately from 60-90 minutes long. In all circumstances the invitation described an “opt in” process for contacting the researcher by email or phone. Once contacted by participants, the researcher described the criteria for inclusion and asked if they’d like to participate. Upon agreement, I scheduled the interview and sent the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix C).

I directly contacted any respondents by email to send consent documents and conduct initial phone screenings to determine their suitability. For those who met the inclusion criteria, I scheduled times for the interview call and began collecting data. This study was not conducted in my work environment and did not involve those over whom I had a supervisory role or classroom collaboration. This was intended to reduce ethical issues related to power differentials or conflicts of interest.

Once Informed Consent was obtained, participants were initially asked to provide general demographic information for summative purposes. This included the teacher’s gender, age, level classrooms they currently teach (e.g., age 3, 4, 5 or older), type of program (e.g., public charter preschool, head start, general or special education), teacher’s credential status, (e.g., early childhood, special education, or lead teacher), and educational attainment.

Actual data collection involved telephone interviews. To ensure privacy, interviews occurred on a private phone line and were audiotaped using a computer

application called (Otter + voice recording). Audio files were stored on a private phone or computer that was password protected and accessible only to me. In addition, transcripts, and written records, notes and reflectivity journals were stored in a locked file cabinet only accessible to me to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection Procedures

People contacted me by email or mail messenger. I reached out to them to describe participation in the study, review inclusion criteria and informed consent. Once they agreed, we set a time and I sent them the informed consent form, (See Attached Informed Consent Form) which was read and returned with a signature or the words, “I agree”. In this study, data were collected using audio methods through semi-structured, open-ended interviews using the telephone. After obtaining Informed Consent, participants were initially asked to provide general demographic information for summative purposes which included the teacher’s gender, age, level classrooms they currently teach (e.g., age 3, 4, 5 or older), type of program (e.g., public charter preschool, head start, general or special education), teacher’s credential status, (e.g., early childhood, special education, or lead teacher), educational attainment and teaching experience.

The one-time interview lasted approximately 60-90-minute interviews via telephone. (See Interview Guide Questions on pp 76-78). No follow up interviews were necessary. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed. This included a description of the procedures for member checking, (sending a summary of the interview transcript), referral sampling (asking the participant to pass on the invitation to persons

they know who may fit the criteria for inclusion) and explained how I would send the interview summary. Debriefing is described in more detail below.

As a final step, I informed participants that they will be emailed copies of the results summary as well as explaining that the small thank you Starbucks \$5.00 gift card will be mailed upon the study's completion. I remained in contact with participants by email for member checking of interview summaries. After interviews were transcribed and summarized, I sent copies of result summaries by email for participant review. Participants verified the accuracy of results in an email response. No additional phone meetings were necessary for additional clarification of transcript summary information. There were no incentives offered. However, a small thank-you gift card from Starbucks worth \$5.00 was offered to all participants.

I conducted interviews by phone and audiotaped them using a phone application called Otter. Otter is a voice recording application suitable for interviews (Perez, 2018). In addition, Otter created an accompanying transcription which was stored on my phone and reviewed later. Interviews were conducted in a private area between the participant and me. All identifying names and characteristics such as city of residence, place of employment and/or ethnic background were changed in transcripts and while reporting results. Audio file and recordings were stored on a password protected computer, phone or kept in a locked file cabinet only accessible to me. Handheld recorders used to make an additional copy was locked in a file cabinet in my home office. I also used Trint, a professional automated transcription service to transcribe audio recordings. No human transcribers were used, which protected participants' confidentiality.

Debriefing involved my thanking participants and explaining the process of member checking. In addition, I asked if they were willing to refer other early educators for participation in the study. As a final step, I asked participants if they would like a copy of the study, as well as explaining that the small thank you gift card will be mailed upon the study's completion. I remained in contact with participants by phone and email for member checking of interview summaries. After interviews were transcribed and summarized, I sent copies by email for participant review.

Data Analysis Plan

General Steps for Data Analysis and Data Interpretation

Data were collected by the researcher and applied Thorne (2016) and Saldaña's (2015) general steps for data analysis and data interpretation. Each method can be used for a variety of research designs and are listed below:

Step 1: Becoming Familiar with Transcripts

The initial step involved my recording and transcribing interviews. Transcribed interviews were visually scanned for accuracy. This enabled me to become familiar with the collected data. I then looked for initial codes.

Step 2: Sorting and Organizing the Data

Interpretive description necessitates more than a simple, initial analysis. As directed by Thorne (2016), I carefully read through the transcripts and reflected on their content to gain a general sense of the information and its overall meaning. This included allowing reaction time to the initial fragments of data and allowing important aspects to come to awareness. Participant's essential ideas, as well as the overall complexity,

credibility and usefulness of the information was noted through analytic memos and the process journal. This process allowed using alternative sorting options. Data analysis also included preparing the data to be coded and analyzed by the NVivo 11 software program for Windows for more illuminative themes.

Step 3: Begin Making Sense of Observed Patterns Using 1st And 2nd Coding Methods

Beyond the initial work, data analysis entails making sense of the patterns that surface in the data and developing them into a comprehensible whole (Malterud, 2012). This process offered the opportunity for becoming more intimately involved with coding the data and encapsulating significant analytic understandings. To find preliminary and more detailed patterns, themes, and codes in the data, I used Saldaña's (2015) two cycle coding process. First cycle coding enabled an initial summary of the data; whereas second cycle coding involved grouping initial codes to develop even more condensed themes, ideas, or categories.

Step 3 A: First Cycle: In Vivo Coding. In vivo coding is also called verbatim coding and is appropriate for all qualitative studies Saldaña (2015). This form of first cycle coding requires the researcher to look at transcripts line by line and extract key words, phrases, or passages for analysis. I reviewed transcripts and assigned each sentence a number. I then carefully reviewed each line or number and further grouped sentences based upon their relevance and content. Consistent with In Vivo coding procedures, I applied words, codes, or phrases to individual or grouped sentences (1-3) with shared meaning. Codes were also extracted from direct quotes and summaries of salient phrases or points in transcripts to produce the most participant inspired, insightful

codes. I then summarized these first cycle findings with attention to the important themes.

As a supplement to the coding process, I developed analytic memos to explain thoughts interpretations or mental notes related to the interview and coding process that offered additional insights and assisted with the coding process (Saldaña, 2015). I described analytic memos as comparable to a researcher's journal. A process journal and analytic memos functioned as a space useful for expressing honest ideas about the study's participants or the research process itself and consisted of a personal conversation about both the data and the unfolding research process (Clarke, 2005).

Step 3 B Second Cycle Coding Pattern Coding. A second coding cycle was subsequently used to assist with more in-depth data analysis. Miles et al. (2013) described pattern coding as useful for abbreviating longer data segments into more compact analytic components. I used pattern coding to further develop and identify major themes; in addition to examining any emerging pattern of human relationships. Pattern coding also enabled me to identify consistent and discriminant themes relating to student-teacher relationships, important social skills, teachers' daily experiences and observations of key social skills when reading across interviews. To extend the first cycle In Vivo coding process, which assigned preliminary codes to each numbered segment, I reviewed initial codes, grouped them, and developed a pattern code describing the common themes or patterns emerging from preliminary codes.

Step: 4 Developing Additional Themes

Once transcribed and the text was coded into first and second cycle codes, I used NVIVO 11 to generate additional categories, recurring themes, or descriptions. I subsequently prepared to re-present these categories and themes. I summarized these first and second cycle findings, along with stating important themes and implications for children and early education teachers in the study's results.

Lincoln, and Guba (1985) described a useful question "What were the lessons learned from the qualitative research process?" These important lessons may incorporate the researcher's personal interpretations contained within the individual understanding that the questioner adds to the study from their own individual perspective. These reflective questions were used to allow me to offer insights and reflections that conveyed significant themes within the data; as well as being a segue for my conveying important implications to the broader area of educational psychology.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Establishing Credibility for the Research

Merriam (2009) described credibility as the equivalent of internal validity, concerned with how congruent research findings are with reality. Credibility may also describe the researcher's awareness of the study's full range of complexity; along with their ability for management of the intricate and unanticipated information and themes presented during the study (Guba, 1981).

Based upon Shenton's (2004) suggestions, I established credibility with rigorous research methods for qualitative investigation and information science. These methods

included informant triangulation, member checking and clarifying biases brought to the study.

Informant Triangulation

Patton (1999) representationally compared triangulation to a triangle, indicating the underlying premise of triangulation is that no singular method ever sufficiently solves the problem of rival explanations. Consequently, triangulation may involve a combined approach and can take several forms (Patton, 1999). Using a wide variety of informants represents a form of triangulation and increases credibility in qualitative research (Anney, 2014) I used informant triangulation as described by Cooper and Endacott (2007) as well as Shenton (2004) to lend credibility to data collected. I included a wide variety of informants from different organizations and work sites as a form of triangulation; while looking across varied interviews (Shenton, 2004). This offered dissimilar perspectives of the experience of social skills in young children.

Prolonged Contact

I sustained contact with participants throughout the recruitment and interview period in addition to sustaining contact during the data analysis period in order to debrief participants on progress and to solicit feedback on transcripts and responses. This step enhanced credibility through helping to ensure honesty in informants (Shenton, 2004), developing a rapport with informants (Rubin & Rubin, 2011); along with enhancing the member checking process.

Member Checking

Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Creswell and Plano-Clark (2012) described member checking as a vitally important provision to enhance credibility in a qualitative research study. This strategy involves the accurate interpretation of participant responses to lend credibility to the development of themes. I verified the accuracy of the information gained through interviews through the process of member checking. While examining transcripts, I requested feedback from participants to validate information collected during the interview in effort to rule out the possibility of misinterpretations of their responses concerning their perspective of the development of social skills in young children. This occurred through providing participants with copies of transcript summaries for review and asking for clarification if necessary (Cooper & Endacott, 2007).

Iterative Questioning

Iterative questioning was used to increase credibility. Shenton (2004) described iterative questioning as a preventative strategy to encourage participants' honest responses. I asked prepared interview questions, as well as following up with prompts and/or requests for examples in order to elicit more detailed information, encourage elaboration on responses and to revisit previous questions for clarity. This may increase transparency and minimize discrepancies in participant responses.

Reflexivity: Clarifying Preexisting Researcher Biases

To clarify biases brought to the study, I used the approach of reflexivity or critical self-reflection described by Merriam (2009) and Ravitch and Carl (2016). This included

my keeping a process journal and analytic memos to engage in ongoing self-evaluation of positions regarding personal assumptions, worldviews, personal biases, theoretical orientations, and relationship to the study that potentially affect the direction of the investigation.

Transferability

Transferability addresses questions concerning how generalizable results from the study are to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability can be equated with external validity and is concerned with the degree to which the findings from one study may be applicable to other conditions (Merriam, 2009). I addressed transferability in this study through strategies of purposive sampling, description of the study's contextual factors, use of thick descriptions, as well as variation in participant sampling.

Description of Contextual Factors

To address transferability, I offered full descriptions of all contextual factors impinging upon the inquiry and followed criteria offered by Guba (1981) who described provisions that qualitative researchers can make to address transferability. I also provided enough background data to establish a context for the study, while offering detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of social skills in order to allow comparisons (Guba, 1981).

The Use of Thick, Rich Descriptions

An additional strategy to establish credibility in this investigation, involved the use of thick, rich descriptions (Anney, 2014). Thorne (2016) and Patton (2002) suggested that qualitative researchers use thick, rich descriptions to communicate reoccurring

themes in the data and in the expression of findings. I used pronounced descriptions to facilitate communication of important research process elements including data collection, as well as the final report. Additionally, I provided sufficient descriptions to enable readers to determine the extent to which their situations corresponded with the research context (Merriam, 2009). Thick descriptions allow comparisons between the research study's contexts and those external to the study with analogous elements (Anney, 2014; Li, 2004).

Dependability

Bitsch (2005) defined dependability as the long-term constancy of outcomes. I addressed dependability through devoting sections of the text to describing the research and design, as well as its implementation. I described what was planned and implemented in a strategic, sequential manner and in meticulous detail (Shenton, 2004). I also described the operational details of data collection with attention to the intricacies of all that was done during each step of the process. Finally, while reporting results, I provided a reflective appraisal of the investigation, in order to assess its overall effectiveness (Shenton, 2004).

An additional strategy for enhancing dependability involved my using a code-recode strategy during data analysis. This two-stage coding strategy potentially enhances dependability of results. Anney (2014) described coding and recoding the data as a strategy for increasing dependability and for gaining deeper insights into data patterns

Confirmability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained confirmability as tantamount to the quantitative construct of objectivity. Qualitative research considers the world from a subjective perspective and does not attempt to assert researcher objectivity (Guba, 1981). Nonetheless, research results must be verifiable. In this investigation, I demonstrated confirmability through keeping a process journal. Keeping and analyzing a process journal can increase the study's confirmability (Anney, 2014). Miles et al. (1994) emphasized reflexivity as a principal measure for achieving confirmability in qualitative studies. I used careful methods of self-reflection to address possible biases, maintain awareness of the researcher's position and as a means of guiding action to limit their effects upon the research process and findings

Ethical Procedures

After receiving approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board, and incorporating all requirements, the following ethical guidelines were observed. In adherence to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2010), during recruitment activities, I obtained written, informed consent to convey that participation was voluntary and advised participants of their right to withdraw from research at any phase during the study. Additionally, participants received information detailing the purpose of the study, probable length, as well as the study's procedures. I ensured privacy and confidentiality during the recruitment, data collection, data analysis and data transcription processes. Participants were assigned numeric identifiers rather than having their names used on preliminary screening data. In addition, since transcription was not

performed by a professional transcription service using human transcription, there was no need for a confidentiality agreement.

To comply with ethical guidelines related to privacy and confidentiality all interviews occurred in on a private phone line and audiotaped using a computer application. Audio files were stored on a private password protected phone and/or computer, accessible only to the researcher. In addition, all transcripts and written records, notes or reflectivity journals were stored in a locked file cabinet available only to the researcher. All data collected during the study will be retained in a secure location for five years and then destroyed.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the purpose of the study, detailed research questions, and explained the rationale for the selected generic, interpretive descriptive qualitative approach. In addition, research methods, recruitment activities and the interview protocol were explained and included detailed methodological steps. The data analysis plan described Saldaña's (2015) and Thorne's (2016) steps for data analysis and coding. The use of NVIVO software for a more comprehensive analysis was also explained. Activities to ensure trustworthiness in areas of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability and ethical procedures were also expounded. Chapter 4 will offer the results from data collection and data analysis activities.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of early educators. This study explored how teachers viewed social skills in student-teacher interactions and the techniques used to cultivate social skills in daily classroom activities. The research questions that guided the inquiry were:

1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?
2. What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's social skills?
 - a. How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings?

Chapter 4 presents the setting and participants' demographic characteristics most relevant to this study. Additional elements of this chapter describe important details of data collection. The process used for data analysis including specific codes, categories, and themes, as well as any discrepant cases, will be specified. Evidence of the study's trustworthiness, including descriptions of implementation or adjustments to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies will be described. Finally, results and findings will be presented.

Setting

The process of recruiting participants and collecting data went as planned. After receiving informed consent, the participants and I selected the date and time of each

interview. Data were collected during a private phone interview with each participant. There were no personal or organizational conditions influencing participants' experience concomitant to the study with potentials for influencing result interpretation.

Demographics

The eight participants were initially asked general demographic questions for summative purposes. This information included the teacher's gender, age, level classrooms they currently teach (e.g., age 3, 4, 5 or older), type of program (e.g., public charter preschool, head start, general or special education), credential status, (e.g., early childhood, special education, or lead teacher), and educational attainment (See Appendix F). Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

The study included eight participants. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 55 years old. Children were from 3 to 5 years old. The type of preschool program varied and included state-based Pre-K programs, Head Start programs, private childcare centers, public schools, and university-based programs. Teachers' educational attainments included Child Development Associate's, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees. All teachers were currently working as lead teachers, with experience ranging from 4 to 27 years.

Table 1*Demographics of the Participants*

Participant	Age	Children's age	Type of program	Educ./Credentials	Years as lead teacher
P1	34	4-5 years	Pre-k program	Master's degree/ Early education lead teacher	8 years
P2	45	3-5 years	Head Start	Master's degree/ Early education lead teacher	Over 10 years
P3	38	3-5 years	Private childcare center	Child development associate Early education lead teacher	4 years
P4	43	3-4 years	Head Start	Child development associate/ Early education lead teacher	4 years
P5	30	2.5-5 years	Public	Bachelor's degree Early education lead teacher	9 years
P6	55	3.4-5 years	Public	Master's degree Early education lead teacher	27 years
P7	45	3-5 years	University early childhood program	Associate degree/ Early education lead teacher	15 years
P8	42	3-5 years	Public school	Master's degree / Early education lead teacher	10 years

Data Collection

The initially proposed interview guide was reviewed by an expert panelist. Based upon the expert panelist's suggestions, I revised the interview guide to better focus interview questions. Data were collected from the eight participants using semi-structured, open-ended telephone interviews. All interviews were audiotaped. Actual data collection involved one telephone interview per participant. Interviews lasted between 70 and 120 minutes each. Interview conversations followed the amended guiding interview questions to focus the data collection and consisted of eight main questions and several prompts.

To ensure privacy, interviews occurred on a private phone line and were audiotaped using a computer application called (Otter + voice recording). An additional handheld Sony ICD-PX470 Digital Voice Recorder was used as a backup recording device. Audio files were then transferred and stored on a password-protected, private phone and computer accessible only to me.

Audiotaped data were later transcribed using Trint transcription service. After each interview, audio files were uploaded from my computer to the Trint interface for transcription. Trint uses artificial intelligence to produce transcripts. I then reviewed and edited these transcripts. I listened to each interview and simultaneously reviewed the transcript for accuracy. I further edited all original transcripts to produce the most accurate account of each interview.

Due to the poor audio quality of some interviews, I used an alternative transcription service. Walden IRB was informed and approved this change through the

Change of Procedures Process. Some audio files were edited using the Wave Pad software program to reduce background or mechanical noise detected during some parts of the interview. This additional step facilitated the transcription and editing process by making each speaker's words more understandable. There were no unusual or adverse circumstances encountered during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The process used to move inductively from coded units to larger representations used Saldaña's (2015) method. The coding process moved from specific codes gained from the first and second cycle coding processes to the more general concepts and themes that could then be aligned with theory. I applied Thorne (2016) and Saldaña's (2015) general steps for data analysis and data interpretation. This application involved employing four distinct steps: (1) becoming familiar with transcripts; (2) sorting and organizing the data; and (3) using 1st and 2nd cycle coding methods to begin making sense of observed patterns. This third step consisted of two cycles involving in vivo coding; and pattern coding. Step 4 involved identifying and developing additional themes.

This four-step process was used to move inductively from initial coded units to larger representations comprised of categories and themes. The initial step necessitated becoming familiar with transcripts. I recorded and transcribed all interviews. Once transcribed, each interview was visually scanned for accuracy, facilitating my familiarity with the collected data. During this stage, I hand coded and noted preliminary codes as well as initial themes.

The second step in this process involved sorting and organizing the data. Interpretive description requires going beyond a simple, initial analysis. As directed by Thorne (2016), I carefully read through all transcripts while reflecting on their content to gain an overall sense of the information and its overall meaning. This included allowing reaction time to the initial fragments of data and becoming aware of the salient aspects. Participants' essential ideas, as well as the overall complexity, credibility, and usefulness of the information were noted through analytic memos and a process journal. I then prepared the data to be coded and analyzed using the NVivo 11 software program for Windows to assist in steps 3 and 4, illuminative themes. Appendix E presents examples of the process that was used to move from data to coded units and larger representations.

First Cycle In Vivo Coding

First cycle coding consisted of In Vivo or verbatim coding (Saldaña, 2015), where I identified exact words and phrases directly from the transcript to represent the codes. Then I grouped phrases and sentences (1-3) that represented shared meaning. These words and phrases were grouped into 12 broad, concomitant themes. These themes became the nodes when the data was imported into NVivo. Each node contained interview references, and to read across the cases; I used the interview questions to “pull apart” the 12 themes into 29 categories and subcategories.

Second Cycle Pattern Coding (Recoding)

Using NVivo™ (version 12) for the second cycling, I used Pattern coding to assist with more in-depth data analysis (Saldaña, 2015). I searched for consistent “patterns” (in words, phrases, and stories). I combined the pattern codes into 22. I saw the categories as

emergent thematic patterns describing teachers' descriptions of social skills, student-teacher relationships, relationships between children, student-teacher supportive interactions, teaching social skills to children, and social skills development.

As I read through these groupings, I began to see elements of attachment and social learning theories. I noted these elements in order to provide a form of triangulation of the data with frameworks. This triangulation contributed to substantiating trustworthiness. I went back to the summaries to verify the categories and the elements of the theoretical frameworks. A summation of the process and results is presented in Appendix E, along with exemplary quotes. While there were no discrepant cases, several participants offered unique "discrepant" perspectives in response to some of the interview questions. These are discussed in the Results section, embedded within the context of each research question.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Based upon Shenton's (2004) suggestions, I established credibility through informant triangulation, member checking, and clarifying personal biases brought to the study. I selected a wide variety of teachers to lend credibility to the data collected. Teachers were also carefully chosen from diverse organizations, serving as a form of triangulation. This procedure enabled looking across interviews to determine similar and disparate experiences (Shenton, 2004) and presented several distinct perspectives concerning teachers' experiences of social skills in young children.

Prolonged Contact and Member Checking

Consistent with proposed procedures, I sustained prolonged contact with participants throughout the recruitment and interview phases. I remained in contact intermittently during data analysis to debrief participants on progress and solicit feedback on transcripts. I completed member checking activities and sent interview summaries to each participant. This step allowed participants to give input and authenticate interpreted interview results, thereby increasing the credibility of theme development.

Additionally, I used the proposed method of iterative questioning during the interview process to substantiate credibility. I asked the list of prepared questions, along with eliciting more information using prompts and follow up questions and by asking participants for specific examples and details as appropriate. This was useful for clarifying responses and reducing discrepancies.

Researcher Reflexivity

Finally, I addressed reflexivity and preexisting biases by keeping a process journal throughout the recruitment, interview, and data collection processes. This journal included notes, memos, and personal self-reflections of what occurred throughout the interview process and the steps to follow. I spoke with the doctoral chair, asking questions and discussing areas where personal biases or interpretations became apparent during data collection and writing results. I shared transcripts and the step-by-step process used to determine codes, in addition to seeking feedback on how to continually self-evaluate and identify personal interpretations of participant responses during data

analysis. This step was valuable for addressing any personal interpretations that might affect the investigation's direction or the interpretation of results.

Transferability

Steps to address transferability and support the degree to which the findings from this study may be relevant to other circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), included implementing the use of purposive sampling and variation in participant sampling. An additional strategy to address transferability involved providing descriptions of the study's contextual factors and contained relevant background information. The use of thick descriptions while discussing results and outcomes further supported transferability by elucidating reoccurring themes in the expression of findings (Patton, 2002). These themes were also reviewed intermittently by the doctoral chair to support their relevance to the study's research questions and outcomes.

Dependability

I addressed dependability by devoting sections of the proposal to describing the research design and its implementation. Details explained what was planned and implemented in a strategic, sequential manner and used thorough detail (Shenton, 2004). Each step of the research process, along with the operational details of data collection, was described and followed during the course of the study. Finally, I provided a reflexive appraisal of the investigation process during planning to assess its overall effectiveness (Shenton, 2004). Further, the selected coding strategy enhanced the study's dependability. I applied a two-step code-recode strategy (first and second cycle coding) during data analysis consisting of Saldaña's (2015) in vivo and pattern coding methods to

develop major codes, themes, and categories. These steps heightened the dependability of outcomes and resulted in gaining deeper insights into data patterns (Anney, 2014).

Confirmability

To address confirmability, I used careful methods of self-reflection to address possible biases, increase awareness of personal position, and limit their effects upon the research process and findings. As stated in the research plan, I kept and analyzed a process journal to increase the study's confirmability (Anney, 2014). The journal increased researcher reflexivity, a fundamental component of increasing confirmability (Anney, 2014). As an additional step, possible preconceived ideas or personal opinions were also discussed with my committee chair during a review of the data and throughout data collection and data analysis.

Results

Research Question # 1

The first research question asked: How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children? The results of this analysis identified three themes consisting of: (1) Meaning of appropriate social skills; (2) Important contributors to developing social skills, and (3) Important social skills for classroom success. What follows are detailed descriptions of each theme and related categories. Table 2 presents a summary of the results for this question.

Table 2*RQ1 Summary of Results*

Themes	Categories	Central concepts from theoretical frameworks
1. Meaning of appropriate social skills	(1) Teachers' expectations (2) Appropriate and inappropriate social skills and interchanges, (3) Behaviors and emotional skills (4) Significance of circumstances and characteristics	Social skills for early education* Development of social skills*
2. Important contributors to developing social skills	(1) Teachers' influential role, (2) Understanding individual characteristics , (3) Parental/Sibling and peer influence, (4) Clear and positive expectations, (5) Forming positive relationships and gaining trust.	Social skills for early education*, Development of social skills* - Social learning theory*
3. Important social skills for classroom success	(1) Supporting positive relationships, (2) Relationship building social skills, (3) Learning related social skills, (4) The Teacher's supporting role; and (5) Considerations for inclusion of children with special needs.	Social skills for early education*

*Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

**Attachment Theory

Theme 1: Meaning of Appropriate Social Skills

Several vital categories emerged from the results of data analyses. The most prominent categories emerging from the data were consistent with this theme: 1) Teachers' Expectations; (2) Appropriate and Inappropriate Social Skills and Interchanges; (3) Behaviors and Emotional Skills; (4) and The Significance of Circumstances and Characteristics.

Relevant codes included: *Getting along with others, having manners, appropriate communication, showing respect, respect, understanding consequences, displaying appropriate behavior, positive classroom ambiance teachers' global impact, allowing others to share feelings, learning right and wrong time for behaviors, knowing themselves, others, and their surroundings, knowing they are loved, self-awareness, self-esteem and treating others positively self-knowledge*. The following sections will describe major categories and themes, along with supporting quotes and examples from interview participants.

Teachers' Expectations

Teachers' expectations were linked to the concept of appropriate social skills. They described the experience of expectations in several different ways, including how expectations are related to developmental age and capacity to learn, along with how teachers need to be flexible.

For example, P4 shared:

I would not expect the same dialogue or talk as I would from a 10-year-old as I would from a three-year-old. I expect a three-year-old to come see a toy or see

something they want and just take it. I would not expect a ten-year-old that doesn't have a learning disability to go, over and just snatch a toy. I would expect a three-year-old to do that. P7 similarly acknowledged: "From their age, I think, appropriate social skills., I think the main key is having the ability to get along with one another."

P6, conveyed additional ideas about teachers' expectations.

Like what you're teaching them to do. You can't expect a child to do anything that they've never been taught. I would never expect them to be able to count if they weren't taught to count. There's got to be some things that people do to help them learn how to do it. Unless we're following the example of other people or not really doing what we feel, you know or saying what we're feeling because it's not appropriate to do that. Yeah. And if you didn't teach them, how can you even expect to be able to do that? That's not, it's not in your genes, that's for sure.

P6 also described significant components of the process. She stated:

Yeah. And I think it's not my way or the highway. It's not. "You better do it or else" kind of thing. It's, you know, knowing and accepting how much they can do. There is going to be an amount of screaming from this new little boy. they're not going to send him home because he's screaming too much. But my job is to figure out how to make him less frustrated with what he's doing and arrange his day so that he doesn't think about screaming because he's too busy.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Social Skills and Interchanges

This category focused on expressing appropriate and inappropriate behaviors that shape social skills, describing how teachers understand the children's needs and the situations for appropriate expression. P6 illustrated this and revealed:

I think, nowadays people are thinking “well if the child is angry, you’ve got to let him kick and punch and do this”. And then, how are you supposed to bring them down from that? They got to deal with their anger in a more appropriate way. Yes, they can bang on the table. They can dig nails into things or whatever. But you also have to say, there is a time to do that and it's time not to bang all over the table cause you're mad.

P5 expressed her insights by saying: “So, learning that there's a right and wrong time for that kind of, kind of mean or scary talk or pretend play. That's what I think of”.

P4 conveyed:

Maybe giving hugs when they’re leaving. And it’s important that kids know how to enter a playgroup. Asking each other, " Hey, can I play with you? And I think not taking things that don't belong to them. Because we have small beads and sometimes kids, you know, take objects that don't belong to them, that they see as very interesting.

P1 described: “Appropriate social skills: sharing, recognizing emotion, and communicating. Yeah, those are the first things that I think of.”

A discrepant viewpoint was described related to inappropriate

interchanges and situations where children displayed resistance to the teacher.

P 6 reflected:

Now, what about an inappropriate skill? I think probably the biggest one is, they don't have to do what they don't want to do. I mean that they can do whatever they want, or they're used to doing whatever they want. There's no limits on them. If they want to do something in a totally inappropriate way, like throwing it across the room. You know, they just do that because that's what they've kind of learned that is acceptable. Yeah, and not really having any limits placed of them. So, they don't really know that it's not appropriate to bang everything as hard as they can or throw things.

Offering an additional disparate perspective, P7 related:

So, I really don't feel like there's inappropriate, I think, lack of exposure. So. Yeah, I don't see it, especially with these kids. I know, we said, oh, this is age appropriate. Yes. I understand that that academic is first that has to be age appropriate. But yet, if we have a child who's very smart and is lingering to learn more, then, of course, I'm not going to set it up for the whole children. But yet I'm going to set it up for that child, to expand that child. So, I guess it depends on a different scenario. So, you know, inappropriate I can pretty much say that if a child is like either screaming or not and not even screaming because screaming is also a way of them communicating. But yet they just don't know how to change it in a way that's more positive, I think. Yeah. It's very touchy because I think that

they have not been exposed to it yet or they haven't got the tools how to maneuver that.

Behaviors and Emotional Skills

Some teachers described appropriate social skills in terms of distinct, suitable behaviors and emotional abilities occurring within the classroom (e.g., having manners, using suitable communication, and showing respect). Teachers also described specific social interactions between students as they were observed helping one another and communicating.

To illustrate, P3 conveyed:

I think of manners and speaking in a way that's understandable to others. So, I try to get them to speak in complete sentences or instead of saying "Give me," say "Can I?". I understand "Give me," but the proper way to say it is, "Can I?" And then you finish with, "Please or May I?" Instead of saying, "Give me, or I want." I understand what you want. But the proper way to do that is to ask. We say, "Can I?" or we say, "May I?" Yes, respectful because I've had those kids that say, "no, I don't want to do that. This is what I'm going to do".

P 5 communicated:

The first thing that comes to my mind is this kind of scary talk that the boys are doing. And the main thing we're trying to cover with them with the curriculum about this is that we're going to give the other kids an opportunity to talk about how that topic makes them feel. Because some kids do find it scary, the other kids, some other kids are finding it scary. Some of the kids are finding it exciting.

P8 explained:

With interactions, interactions with each other and with adults and with their families and communicating and building relationships. So, I've mentioned before that they are all learning to zip up their jackets. Some of them are very good at zipping up their jackets. And other people are struggling. So, a few children are very good at zipping up their jackets, and if someone will come up to me or one of the other adults and say "Oh, I need help zipping up my jacket", our first response is usually. "Let me see you try and zip up your jacket".

And these other children that know how to do it are like, "I will help you. I will help you". And they, run over and they're like, ready to do it for them. You know that's so, caring and they're communicating with each other, and they're like, "let me show you how to do it." And they're trying to teach each other. And I just love it. I'm like, well, at the same time, these children do not know each other at all, and now they are here, and somebody is struggling across the room, and they jump into action. They want to help somebody.

P7 included her thoughts, expressing: "So, the appropriate social skills are having kids communicate with one another. Yes. So that's what I think you know, communicating".

Significance of Context in Social Interactions

Teachers communicated diverse perspectives concerning the impact of contexts and described how it contributed to appropriate social skills development. Several teachers explained how situational context and student self-awareness influence social

interactions and the use of appropriate social skills in young children. Teachers identified qualities such as having requisite self-esteem, self-knowledge and receiving love.

Teachers also described creating a positive classroom community and offering students guidance as ways to facilitate appropriate skills.

P 2, shared:

The main thing that they need as far as social skills, like I said, knowing there are others in this world. Because once they know that they are truly important, that they have a voice, that they are someone and they start to feel good about themselves, they will be able to treat others in a positive way also. So that's why I said knowing who they are. Because when they don't know who they are, and don't know they have a place in this world, if they don't know that they are loved, they are cared for regardless of their situation, that's going to be hard for them to connect to someone else.

P7 explained:

Yes, having a positive ambiance in the classroom. We're a community in the classroom and we set the tone and also, the classroom is culture. So, we don't see racism. We don't see bias. We don't see stereotype. Unfortunately, society is not like that. But I don't like to set that tone even though we know that the parents are the first teachers. You know, the majority of the time they're spending with us. So, I think if we have a positive community. I always reflect. If I do this, is it going to hurt the child? It is going to play an impact. It is going to embed in the child's brain. What's going to happen?

P 5 described:

We're working on this "ask first kind of thing", which is, you know, kids want to give hugs often. But not everybody is interested in getting a hug. So, we're working on this "Ask first situation," and I think in general. A child getting a hug is not that big of a deal, but, you know, I think it's a shame the age that we live in now. Consent is a huge thing. We can do our best to teach the kids about it in an age-appropriate way. Now, so that when they're in elementary school, so you know that it's inappropriate or appropriate at that time, they're not getting into trouble basically.

P6 also shared:

The only thing coming to mind is most of them you could take by the hand and lead them So, you know, that would be an appropriate social skill that we could take them to where we need them to be. Most of them will come with you. And you could kind of entertain them enough to stay where they're supposed to be.

Theme 2: Important Contributors to Developing Social Skills

During discussions of important contributors to developing social skills, teachers described their thoughts concerning a range of relevant characteristics. Salient categories included: (1) The Teachers' Influential Role; (2) Understanding Individual Factors; (3) Parental/Sibling and Peer Influence; (4) Clear and Positive Expectations; (5) Forming Positive Relationships and Gaining Trust. The importance of developing positive relationships, the significance of the teacher's role in the developmental process, and the importance of family involvement and understanding individual child

characteristics such as temperament, culture, and present level of functioning were noted as vital contributing elements.

Significant composite codes included: *Forming positive relationships, developing positive student-teacher relationship primary, trust, relationship building, relationships essential before teaching, offering necessary guidance, setting positive expectations, understanding different temperaments, understanding different expectations*. Major categories are described in the sections that follow.

The Teachers' Influential Role

Teachers communicated the influential role early education teachers played in influencing learning, supporting self-esteem, and early social skills development in young children. Teachers also conveyed beliefs that they acted as children's behavioral models.

For example, P3 affirmed: "I mean, the teachers are most important to help them while they're in the classroom to develop that skill first and foremost. That's our main job is to help them develop all the skills".

P7 also stated:

I think teachers also play a part because if their child, for example, a child wants to explore more like their creativity or anything and they get oppressed saying, "no, you can't do this", or they just knock your idea down. I feel that that child's self-esteem just knocks down where that child would not want to branch out anymore. So, teachers also play a big impact on the child's life.

P4 asserted, "I'm a firm believer that if the teacher has positive, positive energy, inside the classroom was positive behavior. The kids will mimic that behavior and energy. "Hey, I can, do this too. I can teach".

P8 voiced this feeling from a different perspective:

Well, I kind of feel like if I were to think back on which of my teachers had an impact on me, you know, it's the ones that I had a relationship with. You know, I know that they cared about me. And, you know, it could have been like my worst subject, but I knew that they cared about me.

P6's comment was somewhat discrepant from the other teachers, expressing some of the difficulties involved in the teacher's role as they interacted with children and attempted to develop trust and teach social skills: "It's difficult to teach if they're not willing to come along. So, a lot of time we put out our hand, and they have to come with us."

Understanding Individual Characteristics

Teachers identified the contributing role that understanding a child's individual characteristics such as temperament, culture, or age played in developing social skills. Relevant ideas included understanding the role of culture, community, parental characteristics, and personality to help teachers understand influences that shape children's development of social skills. Expressing a slightly distinct perspective, one teacher suggested also considering the teachers' cultural influences and expectations as they worked to teach children social skills.

To demonstrate, P7 pronounced, “I think understanding each individual child and understanding their personality, their trade and things that could be happening around their home, their community is important.” P2 added:

Because understanding their temperament, you know while they're playing, you can see the different temperaments and see if they're persistent about certain things and stuff like that. They become frustrated because they can't accomplish something. And then also understanding how, you know, you have different cultures and where it's like, “I'm not supposed to cry right now, ” understanding how their culture plays into everything else.

P5 explained: “Yeah, I take into consideration that child's age and temperament. But generally speaking, this is the same approach.”

Expressing a distinct awareness, P7 noted:

We have to stop and think about our own childhood sometimes, right? You know, and I know culture plays a big part also because I have encountered, with colleagues whose cultures have been “Sit, Crisscross. Don't talk back to the teacher. You sit down don't say anything. You wait till I say you can speak” and all that. And I'm like, wait a minute. This is a whole different generation, you know, So, I assume that also culture plays a big part. And I know it falls in the classroom. You know, if I'm being honest, I know my childhood plays a part in my classroom when I teach.

Parental, Sibling and Peer Influence

Parental influence was considered an additional contributor to developing children's social skills. Teachers also shared diverse ideas about the importance of

developing relationships with families as one way to support children's development of social skills. Some teachers recognized social skills as learned from infancy, with teachers and parents contributing to skill development. Other ideas explained how teachers, parents, siblings, and even peers were vital contributors to children's developing social skills.

P7 indicated:

You know, because it could also be, you know, a child who comes into school and doesn't have any socialization skills because it could also be that the parents aren't social ones. You know, they don't see it. You know it could also be that a child is a social bug because their parents, probably host a lot of gatherings or something. And they see it.

P3 stated:

Siblings, if they have older siblings, that can very well be a beneficial, positive thing. Because now that interaction is with someone younger than adults. So, it makes them understand, you know, the language a little more. Communication between their siblings or kids of their age is better than if they probably couldn't talk. Because, I mean, we're not going to really baby talk sometime, this parent. But they would understand, their siblings and what they are trying to say.

P8 described:

I talked about how we do home visits at the beginning of the year. But just those first impressions and building those relationships with the families, as well as doing them because they're usually very attached to, whoever brings them in. So,

if they see that, the interactions between me and the adult, their caregiver, then it eases them to come and join us and to trust us. So, building that trust is really important. So, I definitely think it plays a major role in building social and emotional and pro social skills and what not.

Clear and Positive Expectations

Teachers explained how clear, consistent, and positive expectations could also influence children's developing social skills. Having positive expectations for children and building positive relationships with them were seen as vital contributors to children's social skills development.

P5 expressed:

I think within the classroom, it's just a matter of being consistent. And doing the same thing, having the same approach every time will help the kids know what the expectations are. So, having clear expectations I think, is really important because if they're changing all the time or expectations are unclear altogether, that makes it even more difficult to reach any kind of approval, which many kids are often seeking from the adults in their lives. So yeah, having clear expectations and approach, I think those are the keys to getting the results that you're looking for. Just communicating, like being straightforward, telling children what you expect. And then believing in them.

P2 explained: "And so, in that relationship with everyone and understanding the different expectations from everyone, you also see that in interaction."

P 8 also shared her thoughts, stating: “I care about all of these kids; I love all of them. I wouldn't trade them. They're all great. Some just need a little bit more guidance to be as great as they can be.”

Forming Positive Relationships and Gaining Trust

Developing trust with both parents and children and being predictable to children were mentioned as critical elements contributing to developing social skills. Teachers also discussed the importance of developing positive relationships with children prior to teaching and noted the impact of having caring teachers.

P8 related:

Forming positive relationships, developing relationships, primary, trust, and relationship building. Relationships are essential before teaching. Caring teachers impacted me. In order to learn from someone, in order for the children to learn anything that I have to say, they have to know that I care about them. So, before I can teach them any social skills, cognitive, physical, any skills, I have to have a relationship with them where they are going to listen to me. They're going to trust me. They're going to want to interact with me. So, they need to know that I want to interact with them, that I care about having a relationship. I think the first step in teaching anybody anything, you have to have a relationship with them.

P6 explained:

I think the biggest thing is, you know, having that bond with them. Even like how you can get in, you know, in their little hearts, you know, so that they want, not that they just want to please you, but that they're willing to do what you're guiding

them to do because they genuinely like you or they genuinely feel that you're fair, know that you're consistent. Feel that you're predictable. You have to be very predictable to them, so that they trust you. They take your hand. They come to you. They come in. You're not pulling them, kicking, and screaming away.

P 4 recalled:

When I was working with infants, we had to do an introduction with the new class. I like working with them because you're also working with the parents. Most of them were first time parents. You have to gain their trust. They don't know you. They're leaving their most precious thing that they have and trusting you.

P2 also responded:

I don't want to sound repetitive but, yes, just being able to form that relationship. Forming a relationship with the teacher, the adults or the peers and being able to form some type of relationship, some positive relationship.

Theme 3: Important Social Skills for Classroom Success

The data in the category examining “Important Social Skills for Classroom Success” produced five major themes with several relevant codes. These themes included: (1) Supporting Positive Relationships; (2) Relationship Building Social Skills; (3) Learning Related Social Skills; (4) Teacher’s Role; and (5) Considerations for Navigating Inclusion of Children with Special Needs.

Important codes included: *Communicating and sharing feelings, children need outlets relationship-building significant skill/experience, cultivating lifetime*

friendships/relationships important, reading people and situations vital, self-expression key skill, considering others valuable, group membership/participation important, caring important, organizing their world, developing a bond, compliance, and conformity necessary, routines and tasks, structuring activities, developing trust, attention, preparing for kindergarten, creating balance, along with making activity choices. Major categories and specific examples are described in the following sections.

In the discussion of important social skills for classroom success, several teachers emphasized essential social behaviors, qualities, and characteristics they felt were essential to children's early education success. Several teachers described social skills that helped to build and develop relationships such as cooperation, respect, or communicating needs. Other perspectives communicated the importance of social skills that enhanced children's learning and classroom functioning (e.g., self-control, group participation, following directions and routines, paying attention). A unique viewpoint described the importance of demonstrating self-regulation of both behavior and bodily functions

Supporting Positive Relationships

Teachers described important social skills for success in their classrooms in several ways. Specific skills such as getting along with others, cooperation, respect, kindness, and caring for others were considered essential for classroom success. Teachers also explained critical social skills through communicating the value of children's cultivating positive relationships with their peers and referred to examples of children offering support to one another. P4, articulated:

We were doing a project. We were focusing on bears last week. So, one of our activities was to paint what you think a bear is. So once the children all painted the bears and stuff, they held their little picture up, and they explained what they'd painted. And one of the little kids had told another, "That's a good job." He said, "That's a good job, or you did a good job." And I thought that was amazing. Coming from a 3-year-old, I say, wow. That was really great. So, they're getting it. So, you keep repeating it until it will come out.

P7 commented: "Getting along with everybody and being respectful. I'm not saying that you have to be well, goody-goody two shoes. But yet, being respectful and kind". P2 also stated: "Just being able to establish a positive relationship with people and their environment."

P6 expressed:

You would describe that as an important skill to succeeding in school, caring about each other. I guess, you know because there are so many things that happen within the day. I think they kind of expect that there's going to be some loud stuff, you know, some kids that aren't participating in their work the way they're supposed to. And I think that they come to the point that they almost have a built-in trust. We just have to help them.

Relationship Building Social Skills

The importance of communication, using words to express needs, and problem-solve with peers were considered valuable relationship-building social skills by several teachers. Moreover, teachers discussed the importance of communicating needs

and dislikes, feeling empowered with peers, trusting friends, expressing appreciation, and maintaining relationships, and how they might also contribute to early education success.

P4 communicated her thoughts, pronouncing:

In my classroom, it's using their words. When they have to communicate with their peers, I want my children to be independent and learn how to solve basic problems among their peers without fighting and whining. An example would be when their parents come in. They recognize each other's parents. They will say, "Hey, so-and-so, your mom's here. Ready to go? Have a nice day," or they will use their words.

P5 explained:

The thing that I'm really, really working on is trying to repeat and what I have my teachers repeat as well is: "Did you ask your friends?" Basically, getting those peers to peer connections and conversations happening before they seek adult intervention. I don't want that to be the first line of defense, I want them to feel empowered to tell their friends themselves before, and if that doesn't work, then you seek out the teacher and get some help. But yeah, I would like for the kids to feel empowered enough to take care of their conversations with their friends and have them come to a solution. But I mean, that's really high-level stuff for them. But the first step is to get with them talking to each other.

P7 expounded:

For example, when I see that a child is being mean to another child. I usually say, "look, you hurt your friend. You think that's OK? I wouldn't like nobody to come

to hurt your feelings.” And I use myself as an example. “So, you see me being rude to this teacher? Do you see me screaming at this teacher? Do you see me hitting at this teacher? No? OK. then, what can we do?” We usually just talk, figure it out. And if we can't figure it out, let's get somebody else to help us. We can all work together.

P1 revealed:

I know I also want to say verbal communication but just communicating like what's wrong or like what you need. It doesn't have to be verbal. It can be signing or just appropriate communication. So, if they are hungry, instead of having a tantrum or taking someone else's food, they are able to communicate.” I'm hungry. Can I go get my snack out of my bag”? or just not feeling like they have to sneak or anything. Just using their words.

P8 contributed:

Sure. You know, back to when they're playing with each other. If someone does something that they don't like, they really do need to be able to say,” “you know, I don't like when you.” and then fill in the blank, whatever it is they don't like”. Sometimes, and even for adults, it's hard to tell people how you feel about things. And I feel like it's really important for everyone, but I only can teach to people in my class. To tell people how you feel, you know, and not only that, but it's also important to tell people like, “thank you for helping me hang up my picture. I appreciate that”.

Using her personal experience as an example, P 8 also communicated:

You know, relationship building is so important, you know, between the adults in the classroom and the children, between the families and the teachers, between the children themselves. You know, there are a lot of these children. Their families have lived in this area their whole lives. So, these are potentially friends that they could have for the rest of their lives. So, building that relationship is important. Having people that you can count on. As an adult, I know this. It's important for me, I have friends, and I need them. I need them, and they need me. So, it is important to me to help these children develop relations that could potentially, be long lasting.

Learning Related Social Skills

During the discussion of this theme, teachers explained behaviors such as learning to differentiate situations, read emotions, communicating feelings and preferences to peers and adults, along with following directions as social skills enabling children to function more effectively in learning situations. In addition, teachers described how skills such as self-control, self-regulation, following rules, listening, paying attention, acting in safe ways and cooperation contributed to maintaining a safe, harmonious classroom environment and promoted classroom participation.

One teacher described her unique experience with young male students, who needed to check in with their bodies, drink water, and learn to identify and express their physical needs to help focus on task completion. Additional contrasting views addressed

how adults may use self-control in their daily experiences. Teachers further explained some of the challenges of encouraging children's listening and following directions.

P1 expressed:

And I know a lot of that behavior comes from things that they've seen. you know at home or different things. But that's where that relationship, and just feeling comfortable, comes into play, or even communicating when they're trying to go from interest area to interest area. Like," I want to go to the water table but such and such has been there that whole time I've asked them, but they didn't want to". But instead of walking around the classroom, they come and communicate with myself or the teacher's assistant and say, "such and such is over there but I want a go". Being able to confide in adults when they tried to work it out themselves. Instead of moping around the classroom and not saying what's wrong or what they really desire I think that's a good example of communication.

In her comments, P3 articulated:

I guess cooperation. They cooperate pretty good. But I would still say that a very important thing to be able to do with that age group is to cooperate. I mean some adults still struggle with cooperation. So, I can only imagine how hard it is for somebody that age to be able to understand how to cooperate with another child.

P 8 noted:

So, you know, as you get older, situations change. You're going to want to be able to read people's body language their facial expressions. So, for them right now. You know, a teacher might be trying to get people's attention, and so it's

important for them to know when it's time to be serious and when it's time to fool around. You know, one thing that they do at our school is an adult will raise their hands up in the air and then everyone else is supposed to raise their hands and close their mouth. So, it's important for them to be able to read the situation and comply along with everyone else.

You know, when we go out for fire drills, or we have they call it code red. When someone could be in the building. They need to be able to follow the directions and do what we need to do to keep everybody safe. But it's important that they understand that it's a serious situation and they need to be quiet. So even if they don't understand why they need to do something, they need to be able to read at least the people that they are closest to.

Some disparate concepts emerged specifically related to young male students around self-regulation of physical needs, P5 described:

I would say the other thing that we really are trying to work on is self-regulation. You know, getting the kids to check in with their own bodies. Like even just the physical needs that they have. throughout the day Especially with boys. You're still asking, "I'm fine, that's okay I'm fine". You know, if they fall or get hurt or things like that, just because I think that's the way society and culture is still very much like boys have to be tough and all of these things. So, they're just not in touch with their bodies at all. You know, we have to remind them constantly drink some water or, you know, go to the bathroom. They have such a difficult time leaving to go to the bathroom. And you know you can see the change, the shift in

their energy. The shift is there. They're more focused once they've taken care of these physical needs that they have and they're able to engage more meaningfully with the curriculum, with their peers or their whatever activity they were working on. It doesn't get too chaotic because they are feeling chaotic inside.

Sharing a somewhat different perspective, P1 noticed how both children and adults may also use self-control in their daily experiences.

I always tell them safety is the biggest thing. So, I feel like with that, I'd probably say, I'm thinking self-control. So, self-control is one of our Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) things. So, we have something called big rules and little rules. So, the big rules are like the school expectations. We say the full pledge every morning and you know, for them, it's kind of like big words. so, we have to kind of like make it real. You know, so it's kind of hard to explain self-control to four and five-year-olds.

But you know we know that they need this skill for the rest of their lives. We use it as adults when you're in the work environment and when we want to say something but know we shouldn't. We use self-control in that respect. So, you know, some of those. I think self-control in Pre-K was more like not having this tantrum or using a different way to express my needs to get what I want. Just being able to utilize their words or point to a picture to let us know how they're feeling. And just not hitting your friends. You know, following the rules the that they've created as far as using gentle hands or that type thing. Self-control is more so kind of like our getting into our safety. I tell them it's my job to keep you safe,

it's your job to help me. So, you help me by having self-control, by following the rules, by using gentle hands and walking feet and those types of things I hope they follow.

Explaining her experiences with these skills from a different perspective, P3 acknowledged:

I'll also touch on listening. Sometimes it depends on what kind of day we're having in the classroom. I feel like sometimes they have this switch that they have like to turn off. And sometimes it comes off as being ignored because sometimes you will call them, and they won't respond. So that's a big thing. I'm working on with them, too because I try to tell them that I could be calling you away from danger and you're not responding and that could put you in a dangerous position if you're not responding or you're blocking me out for whatever reason. Whether its play or whether you just don't want to change what you're doing at the time. It could present a very dangerous situation.

The Teacher's Supporting Role

Several teachers described their interventions and examples of offering direct support to students. Teachers' descriptions of varied experiences demonstrated their roles as facilitators of children's communication and problem solving. Teachers also described organizing children's daily experiences, establishing structure, introducing experiences, and helping them prepare for kindergarten as important supporting activities with children.

P7 described:

For example, when I see that a child is being mean to another child, I intervene. I tell the kids that they got to think. So, I tell them, I say, your brain tells you what you need to do, but if your body moves faster than your brain, I need you to stop and think. Wait a minute, if I do this, this it could be the consequences.

P5 explained in the following example:

I think most often the thing that comes up for the kids and problems is. “, I want to turn, and he won't let me have a turn”. But often they haven't even really asked yet if they could see something the other kid has. And so, when asked "Did you ask them?". And they go “No, no, no”. I say, "Okay well let's go back over there and ask them". So, yeah, I guess the first step is the most important thing to me because we got to get to the first step at least before we can just do other things. So, talk to your friends first.

P6 explained:

I think, you know, like what I was saying about like organizing their little life for them, you know, getting them to understand that there are certain things we do at certain times, even though we may not want to, you know, to reach that time, to play, you know, to reach that whatever they want to do. I always question myself about, the mundane tasks that we have to do. Well, that's really preparing them for kindergarten when there's going to be a lot of things that you have to do, not that you necessarily want to do. So as much as I want to take that out of my program,

it's very important that I keep it in, because they can't always be doing what they want to do or what's fun or what you can, you know, make them perceive as fun.

Considerations for Navigating Inclusion

A disparate theme emerging from the data focused on helping children navigate inclusion of children with special learning needs. Prominent viewpoints emerging in this area described teachers experiences of trying to integrate children with peers without special needs and trying to assess levels of support and/or intervention required to develop children's social skills in the early education setting. Other perspectives explained the teacher's thoughts about the importance of teaching social skills to children with special needs.

To illustrate, P7 shared:

I don't know if I have like a sensitive touch for the kids with inclusion. I want them to fit in. I want people to treat them like they're normal. There is nothing wrong with them. So, what I do is tell the kids, I say, listen. I said, tell her what you want, but tell her slowly. Just give her two words. That's something also that I teach to kids. It's a little bit of how to include friends. So, I can't go and tell the kids. Oh, this child is special. I think, there is nothing special with this child. It's just this child learns different. She has learning differences. I don't like to use special education or special at all. Nothing of disability because then I've already stereotyped that child. So, I find a way and I tell him oh she's learning English because like I said, we have kids who are visiting scholars, so they don't speak English. English is their second language. So, my kids already know that there's

kids here who's learning how to speak English. So that's also something that we do, socialization through inclusion.

P6 described:

You know, there's a lot of people that, wouldn't even think about the social aspect of anything. They think, oh, I just have to teach how to count and do their letters and do whatever. I feel like, most of my goals right now ended up being on the social, emotional realm of things and learning to play, wanting to be with other kids, learning to take turns. I don't really care if they can count. If they can't be around other kids, it doesn't much matter if they can do it or not.

P8 discussed her experiences, explaining:

Well, we don't have anybody who is diagnosed with anything. The majority of the children, this is their first foray into the group setting. They haven't been in day care. They weren't in any preschool or childcare program before this. So, this is the first experience of people saying, "hmm I don't know if this is typical behavior". We might need to have an evaluation about that. So that's kind of where we are now as teachers. We've been observing and trying to do some behavior modification. And now there's a couple of kids that we're like, well, we should bring in somebody with a little more credentials than we have to do an evaluation and see if they see something. We have two children who fit that mold. One, he has the emotional maturity of a toddler. He will have a temper tantrum throw stuff on the floor, scream and cry like a 2-year-old. Like, typical 2-year-old

behavior from this 4-year-old. So, he has gotten better. But not where we feel like he needs to be. Another child, who we are evaluating, he has older siblings. One of his older siblings has some cognitive diagnoses. We feel like he may. While we're unsure if he has the same issues or if he is copying the behaviors that he sees his brother doing, because he sees that they work for the brother.

Research Question # 2

The second research question asked: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills? The results of this analysis distinguished four major themes consisting of: (1) Development of social skills; (2) Student-teacher relationships and student-teacher relationships impacting social skills development; and (3) Teaching social skills to children. What follows are detailed descriptions of each theme and related categories. Table 3 presents a summary of the results for this question.

Table 3*RQ2 Summary of Results*

Themes	Categories	Central concepts from theoretical frameworks
1. Development of social skills	(1) Specific social skills developed (2) Stories of children's development (3) Teachers' perceptions of children's developmental progress	Social skills for early education* Development of social skills* Student-teacher relationships* Attachment theory*
2. Teacher's role in the development of social skills	(1) Teachers' role in the skill development process	Development of social skills* Student-teacher relationships* Attachment theory*
3. Student-teacher relationship	(1) Significance of student-teacher relationships (2) How student-teacher relationships impact social skill development (3) Examples of student-teacher relationships supporting positive social skill development	Attachment theory*

*Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

**Attachment Theory

Theme 1: Development of Social Skills

The data in the theme examining “Development of Social Skills” produced three major themes with several relevant codes. These categories included: (1) specific social skills developed; (2) Stories of children’s development; (3) Teachers’ perceptions of children’s developmental progress; (4) and Teacher’s role in the development of social skills. A common view among these three categories focused on teachers’ observations of the development process during the course of the year.

Important codes included: *They don’t leave the same, learning to interact, learning problem solving, language, Finding options, initially behaved inappropriately, child changed noticeably, stopped running around, interacting with peers, initially nonverbal, amazing for him, child learned from peers, He wouldn’t talk, get him communicating, hoping for verbalization, angry about non communication, peers played huge role, Building relationship, maintaining patience, pointing in the beginning, communicating feelings with teacher, sibling with behavioral issues, difficulty when together, tantrums, uncooperative, difficulty with redirections, observation impacted behavior, Became well rounded, liked class rules, stopped shutting down, Initially they don’t know, lack communication or relationship building skills, generally self-absorbed, social skills learned throughout the year, begin reading emotions, learn to navigate emotions, caring and helping others, they become friends, bonding with children/adults, establishing love/concern, Low separation anxiety, understanding expectations, feeling independent, learning perspective taking, problem solving. Trying new things, developing trust, evolving developing social skills, I help guide her.* Major categories and

specific examples are illustrated in the sections below.

Specific Social Skills Developed

During discussions, teachers communicated their experience with children's development of social skills by describing some of the specific skills children acquired during the course of the school year. Some teachers described skills such as learning to interact, problem solving; in addition to learning to make choices; while others explained communication, functioning in social groups, learning routines, developing bonds with children, and adults, in addition to developing love/concern as skills developed during the year. Other teachers' viewpoints referred to children's development of relationship building skills including, beginning to read emotions, navigate social situations with peers, and caring for others as significant skills gained during the course of the year. Additional social-emotional skills included perspective taking, shared problem solving, expressing needs, learning emotional control, developing positive relationships, and self-responsibility. Offering a somewhat unique perspective, one teacher spoke generally, observing that children developed more trust in the environment, the ability to express ideas and engage in play with peers during the year.

Articulating her observations, P4 communicated:

They don't leave the same way they come in. They learn how to interact, interact with the kids interact with their teachers. They learn new words. they learn how to problem solve. And to find other ways to do different things if the first option is not available

P6 described communication, group functioning and bonding with children and adults as important social skills developed during the year. She recalled:

Most kids end up being able to function within the classroom. We've never had a kid that can't figure out how to get through our day, learn the routine. They've always been able to learn the routine. Maybe they can't do the work that the rest of us are doing. But, you know, kids can do whatever they can. And I think they think it'll grow them becoming a part of the group or part of the family dynamic we have. I don't think there's ever been a child that's like "man he is just not buying into this group".

P6 conveyed additional experiences illustrating children's developing bonds with other children and adults. She explained:

You know, as much as you know, and I think it usually starts with them bonding with me or with one of the adults. But then they might start a little bonding with a child. But, you know, I don't think we've ever had a child that can't establish some kind of, genuine love or concern for, one of the adults in the room. You know? I think it's interesting because all of a sudden, we'll say, "oh, my gosh, he's calling us, he's calling us mama". Like all of a sudden one of us will say, "hey, did you hear him? He's calling us. He wants us to be with him".

Some teachers discussed skills contributing to forming relationships such as communication and helping others. P8 disclosed:

I think, in general, in the beginning of the school year, they come in and they don't know what they don't know. They don't know how to communicate. They

don't know how to build relationships. They don't. And they don't know that they don't know how to do that. They are in general, very self-absorbed. And they want what they want, and they're not interested in other people is the deal. And then over the course of the year, they learn to look at someone's face and say he looks sad. Or you look happy, or you look angry or, you know. They learn how to navigate situations. "I want to play with that truck can I have a turn when you're done"? versus just taking it from them, which is what they would previously have done. They learn how to care about each other. They help each other out, through the stress of growth.

P2 described children's development of social skills that supported positive relationships with others. She explained:

Being able to look at things at a different perspective now at the beginning part of this. I know that there are other people. There are other people's feelings to consider. "I'll take four. We can share. We can figure out how we can do it together". Being able to control their emotions. Applying the rules that I do know as far as my friends, taking responsibility for myself. Something positive interactions, relationships again going back to my environment. Having that positive relationship with teachers, with my friends, I can express my needs I am able to express my needs and establish many friendships with all these new people that are connected. And now I have so many friends that I have established over the years as I move forward. And I can take that with me when I move on to kindergarten.

Speaking generally about her children's development of social skills, P5 also conveyed:

I think I'm going to speak generally. I would say overall that the area of growth for social skill-oriented growth that I see from beginning of the year to the end of the year is seeing more trusting of the environment that they're in. So being able to speak more freely. Or you know, to maybe turn to a different peer, that they wouldn't have turned to in the beginning of the year and engage in play. I would say that overall, that's what we see and then there's the other skills. where they are able to share or express their ideas more openly.

Stories of Children's Development

When asked to think of one child and share their story of social skills development over the course of a year, teachers described noticeable changes in children's behavior and development of social skills. Offering different points of view, teachers' presented examples illustrating children's modifying inappropriate behaviors, developing trust in teachers and the environment, beginning to self-advocate, resolving separation anxiety, and displaying greater communication skills with others. Teachers also described how they interacted with children in diverse ways to facilitate their developmental changes. Details of each child's story are described in the following examples.

P4 described the noticeable changes of a child who progressed from throwing tantrums to communicating and interacting appropriately. She shared:

When I came to the preschool program, this one child was already there in the program. He would run around the classroom and paint on the desks. He would see things that he wanted and grab. By the time he left, the case manager of his program would come inside the classroom and would say "He's not running. Look, at him. He's not, running around the classroom." I'd say "no he's interacting with other kids playing. At the time he didn't have the skills or the language to tell the child. "Hey, I would like to play with you, or I would like to do that". So, when I came here at the beginning, he would run around and do all this to get the attention that he needed. So, at the end, he learned that's not going to get this teacher's attention, because that behavior does not get her attention, only positive and good behavior. He used to throw temper tantrums. We're lining up and what I did was, I kept on lining the children up and we proceeded to walk on. He got up and in the line. So that's one example of a child. Yes, he could function in the classroom. And other people could see the difference in his behavior.

P1 shared the story of a child without verbal skills who developed the ability to communicate and relate with peers. She recalled:

Last school year, I had a little boy. He did not start the beginning of the school year with us. So, for him, it was amazing. He was the child who looked at friends to learn. He wasn't verbal and he would point to things, but he wouldn't talk. So, at the beginning of the school year he was just pointing. And the hardest part for me was trying to figure out how am I going to tell this little boy to ask for toys? So, we made question cards with question marks on them, and he would hold up

the question card to his friends like “I want to ask”. So eventually everyone kind of got the hang of it. But by the end of the school year, because we were modeling, once he got the question card and held it up to the friend, even though he wouldn't say it at first, I would still say, okay, say “I would like this toy please?” or I would model it hoping that he would eventually say it. By the end of the year, he said mommy, daddy. And he was starting to form, like, three-word phrases like “please and thank you”, or just commands and those types of things. So, for him to come in mute and go to using cards, then to actually asking commands like, “please? and pointing to a toy, was just amazing to see. And he would always look to us for like “am I doing the right thing?”. So, just to see that progress was amazing for me.

P3 told a story of a child who was initially uncooperative and later became more well-rounded. She explained:

When I first got this kid, his brother was in my room as well. Now, when him and his brother were in my room together, they're like a year and a half apart in age. It was a lot of issues with him that I noticed. He wanted to cling with his brother. He wasn't as cooperative. He had a lot of fits. He would shut down a lot if you tried to redirect him and he didn't want that redirection. He would just become defiant, would not correct anything. It was very hard to bring him out of that period of shut down. But once I graduated the brother onto kindergarten, he became a little mellowed out and I was able to work with him a lot better. I don't have to carry him from his bed anymore. Because he'll get up and he'll walk. This is, I will say

is one of my more well-rounded ones that's telling me "I like your class rules. He's very different. He's very easy to work with now. So, he has made a large improvement from when I first got him.

P2 described the story of a child who started the year with notable difficulties separating from his mother and eventually became more comfortable in the classroom.

She remarked:

I did have a child. He came to this school since August and just from then even then to September. I just saw how he was able to separate from the parent with little distress. When he began school, he wouldn't let go of mom. Not at all. Just like I said, I greeted every student. "Right now, I don't want a hug. I want Mommy". He tried even to the point where she wanted to run out of the classroom, "Like no, no Mommy come back". They'll do that with the class. We'd get him to where he would feel comfortable staying which we did. Mom arrives now for pick up and she's like, "OK, it's time to go" and now he's like "But I want to stay here and play with my friends". I brought a piece of him into the classroom. And like I said, each of my students, they see a piece themselves in the classroom and it helps them to develop as they see themselves, where they see themselves in the classroom.

P7 communicated the story of a child who was initially shy and unassertive with peers, and with support, developed self-confidence and advocacy skills. She communicated:

So, for example, I have a little girl. When she started school last year, she was very shy. She would not advocate for herself. Her peers, would just come take away her toys, hit her. And she would just sit there and cry. This year, she's advocating for herself. She's telling the children "Hey I don't like that". or "hey, I'm using this please wait your turn". I also, notice that she's advocating for other peers. So, it seemed like she's now holding the torch. Because she has built that self-confidence. I noticed that this child was also shy or scared, but I'm here to help guide her. I would be constantly with her, giving her words, working with her, intervening. Like I said, I'm a very hands-on teacher. So, I was always there with her. Then she said, "OK, this is good. This is happening. Once she started building the self-confidence on her own, I didn't need to be side by side for her anymore. She would do it on her own. And then she saw that things were not working, then she would come and say, "hey, I use my words" or "It's not working". Can you help me teacher? And I will go and help her. By taking that initiative, I think that's the big part of it, too you know.

Introducing a distinct issue, P5 described a story of a child who had difficulty eating and participating in group eating situations. She explained:

One of the children who started with us last year, when he began, literally he barely ate while he was with us. And we offered him a variety of things at snack time. And even food from home at lunch time, they bring their own food from home. Even then, it was like just that he was not used to group eating situations. You know, was only at home with mom prior to coming to school. So, I think that

that was really throwing them off like they're just too exciting. All his friends were there. But also, you know, he didn't know us either. So, I think, there's a lot of levels of trust happening. And so that was happening when he joined us at the beginning. And now, well it's getting close to a year that he's been at the school. He will try new things with us even. So, he may try it with a small bite and spit it out immediately. "I don't like it", but that's far, far, far cry from where we were when he started and wouldn't even touch a goldfish. Now he eats consistently. He eats snack with us. He'll consistently eat at lunch. He still doesn't eat very much, but now, you know, that's just his style because he's not a big eater. He is a nibbler and he's a grazer. But yeah, that to me kind of sticks out in my mind. You know, we'll try new things. And also, you know, it's sort of not just eating. He will try and also tell us "I don't like it". He would share his ideas.

Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Developmental Progress

Along with describing stories of development, teachers shared their perceptions of how this process unfolded in children over the course of the year. These perceptions of children's developmental progress varied. Some teachers described children having a gradual evolution. However, others described it as a more sudden occurrence, with children's skills and behaviors emerging suddenly. Areas explored included children's growth in areas of developing friendships, relationships with teachers and age-appropriate communication.

P8 explained this process as a shared experience that included the teacher. She stated:

Because over the course of this year, you know they've become friends.

And they can share their feelings and their thoughts with each other. And they get to a place you know, which is appropriate for their age, but they begin to just communicate. And as you are experiencing it with them, you can kind of see who needs a little bit of extra help. Who needs a little bit more reminder? Who is having difficulty and you try and get them all in the same general area by the end of the year? You definitely do experience it with them. You know if they can't do it on their own.

P6 observed her children experiencing varied rates of change and evolution during the year. She reflected:

I think, you know because I have a lot of kids for more than one year, it almost is a story to have to span the entire time that I have them. I can really have a child who comes in totally non-verbal, to he's talking a mile a minute, and goes to regular kindergarten. It's just that big of an evolution. Other kids, you know they aren't talking. Speech therapist saying we need to use pictures or voice output or whatever. You know, things like that, like during the free play that you know, it's kind of an all of a sudden kind of thing. It doesn't often happen very slowly. It's like "Oh, my goodness. You know, it finally clicked. He's finally". I could think of one, I think he's almost two years into the program and it's like I finally think that he likes us. I wasn't really sure of that before. Almost like, when did this happen? You know? And, you know, that leads me to think like we can just set this foundation and each one of them takes a different amount of time to get there.

But we have to trust that they are going to get there. Because this happens for all of them, you know.

P7 emphasized the importance of involving children in the process by setting the tone and modeling. She declared:

So, from here, from setting the tone from the get-go and showing them, modeling them, and having them be part of the solution involved in the way that when they graduate, they will go with confidence, their self-esteem will enhance. And children who are shy will leave the school advocating for themselves. So, I guess, you know, I'm seeing the whole child and seeing different children with different development.

Theme 2: The Teacher's Role in the Development of Social Skills

One major category emerged from the data related to the teacher's role in the development of social skill which explained the teacher's role in the development process. Relevant codes included: *I'm their mediator, trying to understand feelings, can't express feelings, they need an intermediary, I'm an emotional social translator, I'm like a guide/coach / I help them get there, breaking it down, steps are individualized, some respond quickly, others need time, supporting their present level, others need time, I do it daily, talking about feelings daily. I figure out their needs, deciding a direction, structure at school. disorganized elsewhere, determining progress facilitation, parents observing changes, continuing home progress, positive with parents, some parents resistant, Developing parent alliance, Developing parent alliance, Trying to do what's best, I accept all children, considering them individually, knowing individual preferences,*

reaching them important, They're important to me, I embrace each one, discovering present functioning, they know you care, incorporating families, families are primary teachers I create a safe space, I validate feelings, and ideas, feeling respected/loved fuels growth, I can role model interactions, I'm an example, I accept all children, considering them individually, I set the example, practicing what I preach, I model for children and colleagues, I educate colleagues. Major categories and specific examples are illustrated in the section below.

Teachers' Role in the Skill Development Process

Teachers described their role in children's development of social skills in a number of ways. For example, some teachers described themselves generally as mediators or guides. Others described themselves as advocates. And still others as the emotional guide. Teachers further explained details of their role, such as ensuring that children saw themselves reflected in the classroom; facilitating parent involvement, as well as trying to initiate engagement. Important functions of this role included enabling children and recognizing the need to individualize. Constant reevaluation and recognizing children's present skills level as they progressed were also viewed as prominent functions.

P1 described her role as being a guide. She explained:

I'm kind of like the guide. You have to listen and kind of like observe the child yourself to see what things he is doing, but you want to enable them. So, I want to come in this particular student. Because like I tell them I'm not going to be there

next year. You know, I am not going to be in kindergarten with you. So, you have to learn how to utilize the skills that we have shown to help you to work it out.

P3 expressed her role as mediator and emotional social translator intermediary.

She stated:

I see my role as their mediator. Because they're still trying to understand their emotions and understand their feelings, and sometimes they don't know how to express that. So, they need that person in the middle to help teach them how to express that or help them express it to the other person. So, I guess I kind of see myself as a between emotional social translator. So, my youngest one I have now, his speech is like really, really hard for other children to understand at times. So, when he is saying things, he'll speak in like just different words. He still can't quite yet speak in a complete sentence. So, his words are broken up. But when he's doing that and, the other person doesn't understand, I just kind of come in and I'll tell him each word to repeat after me so that they can understand it, and then if not understood I intervene I'll tell them, "OK. This is what he's trying to tell you", or "this is what he wants". But I will have him first repeat after me, each word, individually.

P8 described her role as that of a coach who helps children navigate situations.

She acknowledged:

I'm like the coach or a guide. You know, sometimes as a person you kind of understand where you need to be. You just don't know how to get there. And so, my role as the teacher is to be here to help them get there. I can I know what

they're capable of and so, it's just breaking it way down into steps. And some each person's steps are a different size. Some people need to be like "Dude in September you cannot act like that". And they get it right. They're like ok and stuff and some people need like, fifteen million little steps to get to the end of the year to where that other person is. So, kind of seeing where they are and giving them a little push in and seeing, then what happens. There's constant reevaluating and giving them new situations and helping them navigate what's happening next. And then how are you going to get through this one and what's going on there? I feel like I just do that every day. It's my job. But, you know, I just talk to people every day about how they feel.

P4 shared thoughts on the importance of the teacher's role in developing social skills:

I think my role is very important as the teacher because as early childhood education teacher, as the head teacher, as they get prepared to go to kindergarten, it's my job to give them their skills and their learning that they need to have to go to the next level. It plays an important role because if the teacher doesn't have to have a relationship with their students, it could be a kind of awkward environment because you don't know your child. You're responsible for that child for the next nine months, for that school year. That's your responsibility. So, you kind of take on a role of kind of like a parent. Because you know, when something is not right with your child. You know whatever the skills your child has or doesn't have. You can see the growth in your child. So, it's important to have that relationship with the children inside your classroom.

P5 discussed her role of creating a safe space and validating children's feelings and ideas. She expounded:

I think overall, my role is to create a safe enough space for them to feel like their ideas and opinions or feelings are going to be respected and not shut down or invalidated. I think that's my main. My main job is to help validate their feelings and ideas and opinions so that they can continue to feel like, I have value in this place and people here respect me and they love me. I think the more they feel respected and loved and validated, the more growth we'll see. I can be a role model, in my interactions with my peers or the teachers and with the children too. Like I kind of give them an example of what respectful interactions look like. You know, be an example to them also.

P2 explained her role as one of accepting all children and incorporating their families. She affirmed:

I see myself, like I said accepting all the children looking at them individually. That's the most important thing there is, looking at them individually, not taking the class as a whole. Like I said the home visit pieces I love because I'm able to, you know, separate you know ok this is what Johnny likes. This is what Sarah likes. Just bringing what they love to the classroom, being able to reach them that way. Because it's not just teaching or whatever the case is, but just being able to reach the children. Because if you can't reach the children, it's hard for you to do anything else with them. And like I said, they're important to me and I embrace each one of the children with a hug. There are some that don't want a hug and we

do you know fist bump. But just finding who these children are and they absolutely know that you care about them and then their goals. And then also incorporating their families. That family piece too is collaborating with them, letting them know they're important as well. They're the first teachers of the children. So, they have an important say as well.

Offering an expanded focal point, P7 discussed her role as model for both children and her colleagues. She communicated:

So, from the teacher's perspective, I feel that if I don't model the things that I want the kids to learn, then I shouldn't be teaching or saying something. You know that quote that says practice what you preach? Yes, I'm one of those teachers that if I say, "I need you to be kind or I need you to let your friend get a turn or we're a team". I have to model that so they can see it. What I also do is that when I run into colleagues although, we are not in that same level of working there or understanding, I try to model. I try to explain to them. So that gives me a moment of educating them a little bit, but not in the way that I'm undermining them. But in the way for them to see from the children's lessons, from their events and understand what's happening or why this is unraveling like this. So sometimes I do have to educate some of my colleagues.

Presenting a unique perspective, P6 explained her role in terms of involving difficult parents in their child's development process. She elucidated:

There's going to be certainly different ways to involve the parents as much as I can.

And a lot of times I try very hard to involve the parents and I don't feel like I can do it. What do I need to do to get them to respond to what we need them to do at this point? You know, once they see big changes in their child. You know, for them to be able to approach me and say, well, what can I do at home? What do you need me to do to make this continue? I see these good things going on. How do we make it even better? And I think, you know, being positive with them. Like one mom, I said, "could you please come in and meet with me?" She said, "Why so you could tell me everything that's wrong with my child?" And I said "no, so that we could work together. You tell me what's going good at home. I could tell you was going good here. And then we could work together to make it go good everywhere" I'm not being mean, but you know, I'm trying to do what's best for him in his entire day. Not just the time I have him.

Theme 3: Student-Teacher Relationships

Several important categories emerged during data analysis. Major categories included: (1) Significance of student-teacher relationships; (2) How student-teacher relationships impact social skill development; and (3) Examples of student-teacher relationships supporting positive social skill development.

Relevant codes included: *Children take my traits, I allow kids to be kids, I encourage feedback, very loving class, They observe how I react, If a teacher gets upset with child so do kids, kids replicate teacher's reaction, modeling appropriate behaviors important, Learning from me, very good rapport w/ my kids, kids replicate teacher's reaction, positive student-teacher relationships create better future, student-teacher*

relationships impact future relationships, negative teacher student relationships cause problems w/ trust. Details of each category described in the following sections.

The Significance of Student-Teacher Relationships

Throughout this dialogue, teachers explained ideas about the connection between student-teacher relationships and children's positive social skills development. Some teachers pointed out how their child-centered approach which allowed children to be themselves contributed to a loving classroom atmosphere. Teachers also discussed their encouraging feedback, and how giving options facilitated positive relationships with children. Other viewpoints emphasized the importance of modeling appropriate behavior towards children and adults to encourage positive social skills and how children adopt their traits. One early educator reflected upon how student-teacher relationships impacted future relationships and could contribute to negative experiences if not approached carefully. Teachers also expressed the importance of caring about students, wanting to be a teacher, and gaining their respect as a way to develop a relationship with them. Throughout the discussion, rich descriptions of student-teacher relationships development were central ideas.

To illustrate, P4 explained how she related with her students to cultivate a positive classroom environment. She recounted:

My class, I've seen a lot of my children take my energy, my traits. You know, I'm very passionate about allowing the kids to be kids. and when they don't have that you will know. I'm more of a laid-back, easy-going teacher. That's how they are, laid back. They are expressive children. They would tell you how they feel,

because they're used to me allowing them to talk and express their selves. I don't just tell them to go do this, go play over here. It's more of a question I get their feedback. I give them options. "You can do this" or "you can do that". Which one would you like?" They are very loving, my class. I'm not there in the morning. So, most of all, my kids are here in the classroom. But when I come in, they get up give "Hello, give me a hug".

P1 discussed how she uses modeling to encourage positive social interactions with others. She described:

Student-teacher relationships, it is really important, because the reality is, they're with me, a lot of the time. So, they're looking at me and seeing how I will react towards my peers or towards other students. If a teacher gets upset with a child in front of the whole class, well the other kids are going to start getting upset with that child. It's very important for me to model appropriate behaviors, not to just speak. With anyone who enters, works in the class on whether it be parents, whether it be someone else because they're looking at me to learn how to react to everyone and they take those skills and utilize them outside of the classroom. So, it's really important to model at all times what I want them to learn so they can utilize it.

P3 shared her ideas concerning how positive student-teacher relationships impact upon future relationships. She communicated:

I have a very good rapport with my kids. I feel student-teacher relationships are very important. Very important. It could make or break future relationships

depending on how it's done. If it's done positively, it creates better future relationships. But if it's a negative teacher-student relationship, then that could cause further problems down the road as far as trustworthiness and other educators. They could develop a negative approach to providing education in general. Whereas if it's a positive interaction, you know, they'll be more open and susceptible to learning to the classroom environment, to things of that sort, to being around other teachers, other peers.

P8 emphasized the importance of caring about students as part of the student-teacher relationship. She stated:

I feel like the student-teacher relationship is super important. You know if the teacher is checked out, the kids know. As the teacher, you're not going to be there, interacting with them, and modeling the behaviors that you want them to do or trying to get to their heads to help them become better people if you are not a hundred percent. You know, being a preschool teacher is, not an easy job. It's not for people that just want to skate by. You do need to want to do it. If you're not all in then, you need to just get out. Because children know. Right? They know if someone is bullshitting them. And they're not going to have that respect. They're not going to have that desire. They're not going to care what you think. And they're not going to listen. They can feel your body language. You have to want to be there. You have to care. If you as the teacher care about your students, then they're going to know that you care about them.

How Student-Teacher Relationships Impact Social Skills Development

Using different areas of emphasis, teachers described how their relationships and interactions with young children impacted children's social skills development. One teacher discussed the challenge of selecting the right approach with children, children's development of trust, understanding children's needs and individualizing your approach with children. Another teacher pointed out the importance of being aware of interactions and offering transparency. Other ideas expressed the value of being emotionally honest and transparent to build trust and support positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers also discussed difficult student-teacher relationships and how power struggles can impact the student-teacher relationship. Other ideas included the importance of caring, offering children positive discipline, along with acceptance and emotional understanding as important elements of student-teacher relationships.

P6 described the importance of choosing the right approach with children. She explained:

I think, you could think about any kind of authoritative kind of person. Yes, someone that you almost want to come back to them. I think that's very important for them to feel. It's almost an art and how authoritative you need to be and lenient you have to be. How for each separate child. Because you're trying to do what you need to do for each individual child. Well, this kid would have done that. This kid would have not been able to get lunch or whatever. And it's like you know it's not always a punishment to go with each. You know, with saying that it's going on, there can't be. For some kids needs that more authoritative approach.

So, I guess trying to figure out what they each need. You know, this is important.

Right. You know, whatever social skills you're trying to develop.

P1 emphasized the value of making connections with young children using conversations, and transparency to encourage students:

Throughout the day, just, "What did you do this weekend". You know, making connections. "Do you have a dog". "Oh, I have a dog" or "I have a sister too" or "My grandma lives here". It's just those conversations, I think, they help build those relationships and that trust because we're making connections. I think being honest and transparent, like when they do something that I don't like. I tell them, you know, like "that really hurt my feelings or look at my face. Am I making a happy face"? or I need to go look in the mirror, and when they've done something that I absolutely don't like. I go take myself to the calm down area and say, "No, I need a moment to myself." "I'll turn the timer because I'm upset before I talk to you". I'll do that to let them know "like I need a break too before I talk to you" I have to calm down and just, just being, you know, transparent and real with them. Like "that really hurt my feelings. I do not like that you did that". Just letting them know that I am real too. Everything is not always happy. I have emotions too. Things make me upset and angry. So, just making those connections and being transparent

P2 reflected upon children's developing trust and feeling cared for. She discussed:

The student-teacher relationship is major. Because like I said, they have to be able to trust the adult, being able to express themselves with the adult. But like I

said, with the child that had the separation anxiety, and everything. Being able to go from that position to knowing that OK, yes, I am accepted. I am welcome. They genuinely do care for me; I'm able to express myself. Even if there's any redirection, it's done in a positive way and everything. That I know, "OK, if I make a mistake, it can be corrected," or whatever the case is. Even with our group discussion, I let them know like there's no, right, or wrong answer. Just express to me whatever you feel about XYZ or whatever the case is. Just knowing that we do truly accept them for who they are, for their strengths or their weaknesses and things like that, understanding their emotions and helping them to express their emotions in a positive way.

P5 also offered an unusual perceptive and discussed how power struggles between students and teachers could shape relationships. She shared:

Well, I think that if you have a kind of relationship with a child that is maybe constantly in a power struggle, which is very hard. I mean, you know, there's definitely children who will spark something, and a teacher may get something from their own childhood or their own background that makes them triggered, for lack of a better word. That makes the teacher feel triggered about something that happened in their own life or whatever. So maybe their relationship is sort of fraught with peril from the beginning because of whatever personal things that the teacher has. But also, if there is not a connection or a level of trust, or respect, then that child is going to feel those things and won't be able to be their best self,

basically. Give their best effort. So, I think their relationship is sort of at the core of it all.

Examples of Teachers Supporting Positive Social Skill Development

Teachers described examples involving individual students demonstrating how they support positive social skill development in the classroom. Teachers also shared examples of supporting children with disabilities and developing relationships with other students. Additional examples of support involved relating to groups in the classroom. Important points of discussion included how teachers must work on relationships consistently. The final two examples focused on supporting social skills in group care situations.

P7 described how her relationship with a child experiencing autism and their parents impacted social skill development:

For example, I had a child who had autism, and he didn't speak or anything. But I advocated for him with the parents. First, I got permission. Fortunately, the parents were very open. The child who was diagnosed with autism, he sees a speech pathologist. This child started speaking. This child went to school speaking and also saying what he likes or didn't like, you know, because I would tell him just simple words to help him. Yes, that was great. Because the mom came back. She was crying. She goes, "oh, my God. I would never have thought that my child would speak". I said, "don't ever doubt your child". You know, so I think also, empowering the parents and giving them that support system that

they're not alone also makes the energy go towards the child. It's so positive that you want this child to succeed.

P4 shared the following example about her positive experiences of developing student-teacher relationships:

And sometimes you even have a relationship with the children that's not inside your classroom. When I gave you an example of that child when I first started with Head Start. Last November, she was not in my class. I didn't know her name. But all she knew; I like this teacher. I'm going to draw her a picture. I made it my business later to find out what this child's name was and a little something about her. And that was great. That's a great experience.

P5 shared an example describing the importance of teacher engagement with children in group care situations. She informed:

I think that kids in group care, their relationships with their peers are important to them. But I think that they really, really look to their teachers for a lot of the engagement that happens at school. And if the teachers are not engaged or the teacher is just not feeling it or you know, I'm sure you've observed it. There are people who get into the field sometimes. This is not the career choice for them. You know the kids feel that, so they will take on that energy, I think and feel "If they don't really want to be here, then I don't really want to be here". And now, everybody is feeling kind of kind of crappy. So, the teacher really has to be working on relationships with all the children all the time, basically so that all

kids know that positive feeling, that, that engagement, that wanting to be here, that being able to do positive things and feel positively.

P2 discussed an example of a teacher supporting children in group situations. She recalled:

Well, we have family-style dining. You know the children really open up. The dialog that they have and some of the things they say I'm like "Whoa OK". But, you know, just knowing that "OK, we're there". We're present for them. And you help them resolve those conflicts that they do have with their peers and how we can make a situation better. Yeah. There's another solution". You know there's helping them solve problems and everything. I mean just when we open up those lines of communication. Just seeing their faces like, "wow. You want to hear about my day? OK". And that just opens up a huge line from the thing's children say. And just having that open line of communication knowing that, they can come to us you and ask for help. They know they can ask for help and that then we can provide them that help as well. And then also show them that sometimes they can help themselves.

P4 also presented a different perspective and shared her personal experience of having a challenging student-teacher relationship. She revealed:

I remember being in the seventh grade. And I had this really mean teacher that told stories on me You know, and I didn't have a great relationship with her. And that and caused me not to want to perform. And I didn't do well in that class because of that teacher; I felt that she just did not like me

Results

Research Sub-Question # A

Research Sub-Question # A asked: How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings? This analysis identified two themes: (1) Student-teacher supportive interactions and (2) Teaching social skills to children. What follows are detailed descriptions of each theme and related categories. Table 5 presents a summary of the results for this question.

Table 4

Summary of Results, Sub Question # A

Themes	Categories	Central concepts from theoretical frameworks
Student-teacher supportive interactions	(1) Supportive interactions enable social skills development (2), Examples of supportive interactions (3), Teacher insights on supportive interactions	Development of social skills* Attachment theory* Social learning theory* Student-teacher relationships*
Teaching social skills to children	(1) Modeling/role play (2) Facilitating peer interactions (3) Teacher guided discussion and interactions (4) Large group activities	Development of social skills* Attachment theory* Social learning theory* Student-teacher relationships*

*Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

**Attachment Theory

Research Sub-Question A Narrative

Theme 1: Student-Teacher Supportive Interactions

Three major categories emerged from the theme describing Student-teacher supportive interactions. These categories included: (1) Supportive interactions facilitate social skill development; (2), Examples of supportive interactions; and (3), Teachers' insights on supportive relationships. During discussions, teachers frequently elaborated upon how they supported the development of important social skills through positive interactions with children in their classrooms. Relevant codes included: *My role as teacher important, My job to give needed skills, student-teacher relationships play important role, without relationship, knowing child awkward environment, You take on parent role, student-teacher relationship super important, , detached teacher can't help, hard job requires desire, kids don't respect inauthenticity, kids feel your body language, you have to care, children trust authoritative person, deciding appropriate lenient approaches, Individualized approach understanding needs required, kids use models in learning, Teachers provide quality, student treatment important, establishing relationship builds closeness, recognizing children as humans, Giving children respect, establishing social skills develop peer relationships, Emotional intelligence impacts intellect, teachers' encouragement helps develop skills, establishing social skills helps later coping, Helping children is my life purpose, student/teacher power struggles/ Difficult relationship, student/teacher relationship at the core, children look to teachers*

for engagement, Teachers must work on relationships consistently. Details of each category described in the following sections.

Supportive Interactions Enable Social Skills Development

Teachers communicated the value of supportive interactions as a primary step in children's development of positive social skills. For example, some teachers conveyed that a child feeling cared for was a primary component of positive social skill development. Teachers also specified that communicating with children positively and using empathy increased their openness. Further, teachers described the importance of modeling positive behaviors to encourage children's imitation of these behaviors with others. Finally, one teacher communicated the significance of offering acceptance as a primary step in supporting positive social skills development. Essential insights are shared below.

P6 discussed the importance of children feeling cared for as essential to skills development. She contributed:

I really think that most of the kids know that I genuinely care about them. You know, we greet the kids. We're happy to see them. "Oh, you're here today." or "I missed you yesterday". They really feel welcome when they come. They come smiling. I think that, as much as they can, they feel that they're a part of the group. Now, I think it's important for them to feel that way, to develop any kind of skills that we're working on. They have to know that you like them.

P3 explained how children are affected by adult emotions and communication.

She explained:

I guess the way you talk to children, that means a lot too in how they're going to trust you. Your tone, your emotions play a big factor. Because I see it all the time. The kids feed off of emotions. They feed off of vibes. They pick up older people's vibes like crazy. They can pick up if you have a negative vibe without even saying it. And you can clearly tell on them if they are not feeling your emotions. They feed off of that. But if you're coming in and you're positive with them, you're talking, you're listening to them and you're willing to help and willing to understand and, you are empathetic with them, then they tend to open up more and they tend to trust you more. And the communication is much better, too because they work with you.

P8 offered ideas about how modeling, positive social experiences and interactions impacted children. She conveyed:

I feel like if you have a good relationship with the children and you're modeling positive social experiences and interactions with others, they're going to want to copy you. Children, they're mimics, but you have to be careful. They want to be like the people that they admire. So, know if you have a great relationship with the kids and they admire you, they want to emulate you. Then when you're having positive social interactions and you're modeling that behavior; they're paying attention and they're going to act on it. They're going to try and do that.

P2 communicated the significance of making children feel important as a primary step. She related:

Acceptance, understanding who the child is. Making that child feel important that they are someone and that they belong, and I think that's the first step right there. Because if they don't have that, it's going to be hard to even go forth from there. Because without that, it's going to be hard for them to have that respect with the teachers.

Examples of Supportive Interactions

Teachers shared experiences of supportive interactions with children that facilitated their social skills development. Examples included a focus on maintaining contact with students and encouraging social skills through positive dialogue and interactions. In addition, teachers detailed supportive student-teacher interaction, using dialogs, and promoting positive social behavior.

P1 described her experience of offering children emotional validation. She detailed:

Then we say, "I understand that you have this emotion. And that's fine. It's okay that you are sad right now." So, acknowledging how they're feeling is okay, "I'm not trying to change how you're feeling right now because you feel this way because of something that happened" So, acknowledging it and telling them, "If I was in that situation, I would be upset too and I would have a face like this". And you know, just acting it out just showing them and I encourage them to remember what our affirmation is that we say to each other every day.

P3 shared her experience of building and maintaining contact with students. She recalled:

A lot of children, I do have that real close relationship where I still communicate with them now. Or I'll still see them or get a phone call or something like that. I had one, her parents went on vacation for four days and they were able to trust their child here. Yes, it's very gratifying. I have one that will tell him his mom. "I want to talk to her" you know, just video chat me.

P5 shared how she supported social skills. She described:

My relationship specifically? Well, I think for me. You know, I like to focus on the details. So, remembering things about the children and basically giving them an example of "like how do you be a good friend?" Well, one of the ways you can be a friend is remembering things about your friends. "You like the color purple". You know and talking about those things Having conversations with them like you would any friend. I try to model that aspect of friendship, which is having conversations, engaging in dialog. And some days we can go to the block area and play something fun. That's one way that I think I support their social skills.

P2 shared an example of supporting self-help skills positively:

Yes, she was a social butterfly. But she was petrified of the restroom. Because we have the door on the stalls, I noticed that often she would not use the bathroom. I told her "Well Honey, I understand you may not want to use the restroom. What I can do, I could have all the children to come on this side of the restroom. If you need to keep that door open, do whatever makes you feel comfortable". And when I did that, that's when she actually walked slowly over and went to the restroom and used it. She had a smile on her face as she came out and she was like "Thank

you”. And ever since then, she has become so comfortable, and goes to the restroom, no problem at all.

P6 provided a unique perspective by sharing her experience supporting children with special needs as they developed social skills. She described:

I find that a lot of the kids and a lot of parents tell me that I develop a really nice sense of compassion. So, we do encourage them to be by those kids or to give those kids something or can you bring up her name for her. Things like that or we're facilitating it. And just in the normal interactions and then like during play, time is the most time that we can do it, that it seems to make the most sense so that you're trying to include everybody, in an interaction.

Teachers' Insights on Supportive Interactions

During discussions, teachers shared several personal insights regarding how they positively support and how they perceived and supported children's social skills development. Important ideas reflected teachers' beliefs in the value of using flexible approaches, how early interactions can “set the stage,” providing foundations for later learning and socialization. A teacher also expressed that children look to teachers for approval. Other ideas reflected teachers' observations of somewhat challenging behaviors and their possible meanings.

P4 shared her insights on flexibility and meeting children where they are:

We learn through play. I try to meet my children where they are. I'm the type of teacher that's really flexible. Because I'm with the Head Start program, I'm

supposed to follow the curriculum. The curriculum has a focus and, a theme. But if I see my children are interested. in something else, I will drift off there.

P3 offered her understandings of social skills development beginning in infancy.

This starts when they're infants. So, what's going on in the infant room can actually affect how they're going to learn and socialize when they're older. So, if they're not getting that social skill when they're infants, then, you know, by the time you're like four and five-year-olds, because you don't know how to socialize.

P2 shared ideas about the value of including children with the process. She expressed: "Just including them in decisions, like where they are able to help solve problems themselves, and things like that help boost their self-esteem and also develop a positive relationship among first themselves and then their friends".

Finally, two teachers raised similar issues, pointing out children's challenging behaviors and expressing their views about possible meanings.

P5 shared insights regarding children looking to teachers for approval. She stated:

They are wanting that approval. They're wanting the feel of like "good job" But then other times, they're also looking for a more exciting reaction. So, like when they talk about these things like "I'm going to kill the Ninja" or something like that. I think they're aware that some teachers, right off the bat, will react to that in a not so positive way. And that's exciting to them or they want to know why they are reacting that way and someone else isn't reacting way.

P8 communicated thoughts about children trying to comprehend rules:

Some of them are what my grandmother would call fresh. You know, being that they haven't been in a care program before, they don't necessarily know any adults outside their own family. They are for the most part, respectful with all adults. There's always a couple that just see where that line in the sand is. They talk back. But I think that they are just trying to figure out how to talk to adults versus talking to maybe older children that they know or each other. So, you know, the different children are trying to figure out what the rules are, I guess.

Theme 3: Teaching Social Skills to Children

Several vital categories emerged from the results of this theme analysis. The most prominent categories included: 1) Modeling/Role play (3) Facilitating peer interactions, (4) Teacher guided discussion and interactions; and (5) Large group activities. Teachers described a variety of methods to teach or encourage critical social skills to young children. Each technique explained was used in the classroom and involved individuals, small groups, or large groups of children. Categories described in this theme shared the common characteristic of by teachers' descriptions of interactions occurring as they taught or encouraged social skills. Each is discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

Relevant codes included: *Role Play, Individual student-teacher interaction, Teachers acknowledging children's emotions – emotional validation, Modeling positive interactions, Modeling to teach social and language skills, Direct support/Interactions with teacher classroom tools, Direct support/Interactions with teacher classroom tools, Social praise/ positive reinforcement, Modeling, Role playing real-life scenarios, using teacher intervention and discussion to teach social skills, Using peers to encourage skills*

development, Pairing students/teacher intervention teaching social skills, Children review feeling faces together, Teacher discussion and modeling /giving words and real life scenarios, Teacher directed interventions w/ students, Using teaching tools and materials Using classroom areas and teaching tools, Disparate, Mindfulness related activities, Large group activities, My experiences and research to guide teaching.

Modeling and Role Play

Teachers frequently described using modeling and role play as a valuable way to teach social skills to children in classroom settings. Teachers offered additional insights relating to the importance of emotional validation, being respectful of others, having discussions with children about social skills, and using real-life scenarios to encourage social skills.

P1 described her use of modeling to offer children emotional validation. She detailed:

We say “I understand that you have this emotion. And that's fine. It’s okay that you are sad right now”. So, acknowledging how they're feeling is okay, “I'm not trying to change how you're feeling right now because you feel this way because of something that happened. If I were in that situation, I would be upset too and I would have a face like this”. And you know, just acting it out just showing them.

P8 explained how she used modeling to teach social skills. She elaborated:

I think it's a lot about modeling. So, trying to be respectful of them and respectful of the other teachers and adults that come into our classroom, giving them the

words to navigate different situations. Saying to the children, “you know, I see that you want to play with this person. Instead of hurting them. Why don't you ask them if you can play?” You know, giving them very basic words.

P2 Discussed her use of modeling to teach positive social skills. She indicated:

How would I teach and encourage? I do a lot of talking with my children. I do a lot of interaction with my children, a lot of role play. The role play we do is like real life scenarios modeling the positive interactions we have with children.

Because it's not all just through books. I mean, we can read and have activities and everything, but actually seeing it genuinely within the classroom and from the adults providing them with the words and the actions, they need to talk with their peers. They see how with just modeling the behavior how even the adults within school treat each other.

P6 shared her unique experience using role plays with children with special needs.

She elaborated:

I did two different things. I called it rewards and consequences. And the other thing was problems and solutions. I gave them a scenario, like “this is what happened. Somebody took your milk at lunchtime. How are the ways you can respond?” They have to tell me a positive way to respond, a negative way to respond. And then what would be your consequence or your reward for responding in that way? We need to talk through this. We can't just say, “well, you know, sometimes kids take your milk this way”. You have to talk to them and brainstorm about how you can respond. And if you respond in a

certain way, what's going to happen to you. I thought about, people were like, "don't do this. Don't do that". But no one showing the kids how to respond or what to do.

Facilitating Peer Interactions

Facilitating peer interactions and pairing or grouping peers was an additional avenue described to teach social skills to young children in the classroom. Teachers referred to purposefully pairing children, working with paired children, or working with small groups to encourage and facilitate positive social behaviors. Essential highlights are illustrated below.

P1 described children working in pairs to identify feelings. She communicated:

That is amazing early in the school year. But if they are upset, they will go to the interest area, so right now, most of them will take them (classmates) and say, "let's go over here let's go to the mirror" and ask, "You know, how do you feel, look at your face, which face does your face look like the most? Are you sad? And then they kind of review the feeling faces together.

P7 shared her practice of carefully pairing peers to encourage positive social skills:

With myself and then with peers, like I would pick a peer that I know was very compassionate. Because there are kids already born who are naturally very compassionate, and I would make sure that I will pair that child with this child and have them play together. So that child will mirror because we know that children pick up from each other.

P4 described using a different approach. She used peers' conflicts as an opportunity to guide children in learning to settle sharing disputes. She explained:

Sometimes, with social skills, I let my children settle their conflicts. Some teachers see them fighting over a toy and say, "Hey, neither one of, you can have it" With me, I don't intervene like that. A lot of times they like to say, "He's not sharing". So, I break down what does share mean?" This happened the other day. I said "well if sharing means little Johnny is playing with something, and when you want it, you just take it, that's not sharing. Because now, Johnny, won't have anything to play with. Let's see. Maybe if we ask Johnny, if when he gets finished can we play with it?". And it works all the time. Sometimes the child just says no. Sometimes the child says yes.

Teacher Guided Discussion and Interactions

Teachers explained how they used classroom discussions with their students to teach or encourage appropriate social skills. Teachers also described providing words and phrases to address situations children encountered in the classroom and directly facilitating situations occurring between children. Teachers also described one-to-one interactions with students. For instance, P6 explained specifics, stating, "In order to actually teach a social skill or an emotional kind of response, I do a little aside to them. I might, give them a thumbs up for helping".

P3 explained her approach to discussing appropriate social behaviors with children. She expressed:

Sometimes I'll give them examples. I mean, I use my kids as an example or a lot of situations that have happened as examples. And we'll talk to them about

consequences when we're not listening. And there's consequences for things that we don't do that we're supposed to. And they clearly understand that.

P8 shared her method of using teacher-guided discussion to help children move past crying and use words to communicate. She stated:

We've been spending months working on social skills which is typical in preschool. In the beginning of the year, there was a lot of crying. So, we're trying to move past crying and, give them the words to use. So, if someone takes something that you were holding, then instead of screaming and crying and having a tantrum, what should you do instead? You know, say to them, "I was playing with that. I would like it back. You can have a turn when, I am done".

P2 described her use of direct support to help encourage sharing. She elaborated:

And then sometimes you know they do have to reach out to us. I offer suggestions to help them or whatever the case is. When we are playing outside, we had it for the children who want to play with the Wii. So, the children decided, okay how about we count to twenty. I'm like, you know what? That sounds like a good idea, so we'll count to 20. Sometimes the children don't even make it to twenty. They're like "oh here you go it's your turn with Wii", and I'm like WOW! Just seeing them, get that piece. You're acknowledging your friends and you're sharing.

Large Group Activities

Teachers similarly described teaching or encouraging social skills during larger group activities. This technique used specific materials and teaching tools such as books, sensory toys, and visual aids such as puppets to explain and encourage social skills

during large group times. Additional activities involved using classroom areas such as quiet corners and alternative techniques (e.g., mindfulness and music) to teach and promote positive social skills, relaxation, and awareness. Again, unique perspectives described the use of life experience as an influence.

P2 described incorporating puppets and other tools during regular social-emotional activities. She explained:

Every Thursday, we incorporate social, emotional activities. I started to read a story, but I could tell I was losing them. I was like OK you know what? Let me get the puppets. And I got the puppets, and I was reading the story “Harry Hands Off”. The subject was about being gentle with our hands and our friends, being nice, kind. But I was using the puppets and I was able to capture their interest then, acting the story. We use stories. We use puppets, we use all kinds of things.

P5 mentioned innovative techniques involving the use of mindfulness and relaxation. She explained:

You know circle time is kind of a time where it's not really a choice. We need you all to participate. I think the kids are kind of a little bit more mindful of it now. They have what is called Tibetan singing bowls and do like a little more mindfulness as a part of the routine. Other times the chart that comes up is a choice. So, it's up to them to really check in and do the work. “Do I actually need these things or am I going to ignore it because I want to finish playing?” That type of thing.

Using personal experience and professional development were two different approaches considered helpful in teaching social skills. P7 used her own life experiences as a guide. She elaborated:

Well, for me, just I think that it just comes naturally. Yeah, I think what's also playing a part is that they say the way you grew up, it sometimes impacts in your classroom. So, like for me, I had a good childhood. And I know that that has helped me with certain strategies that I use in the classroom. I also keep myself informed with new research, search new resources and talk with my colleagues. It's my passion. It just comes out; naturally, you know?

P3 used professional development, classroom areas and teaching tools to encourage social skills. She commented:

I had to take a lot of special needs training. I have a quiet center or a safe center per se in my classroom where when they are breaking down and I can't talk them out of it, they go to that quiet center where I have social-emotional books. I have posters on the wall with pictures of emotions and interactive charts where they can move their smiley face to pick which emotion that they're feeling.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented details pertaining to the study's setting, demographics and specifying data analysis and data collection procedures. Results of the study and evidence of the study's trustworthiness were also provided. The data analysis process consisted of Thorne's (2016) and Saldaña's (2015) general steps for data analysis and data interpretation. Each method can be used for a variety of research designs and included (1)

becoming familiar with transcripts (2) sorting and organizing the data; (3) begin making sense of observed patterns using 1st and 2nd coding methods; in vivo and pattern coding; and (4) developing additional themes.

Research Question # 1:

The first research question asked: How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children? Results of this analysis identified three themes consisting of: (1) Meaning of appropriate social skills; (2) Important contributors to developing social skills and (3) Important social skills for classroom success. In discussions, teachers explained the meaning of appropriate social skills in terms of teachers' expectations, appropriate and inappropriate social skills, interchanges with students, children's behaviors and emotional skills, and the significance of circumstances and characteristics. The theme describing important contributors to developing social skills, explained, represents teachers' influential role in developing social skills and discussing the value of understanding individual factors involved in social skills development. The significance of parental/sibling and peer influence, giving clear and positive expectations, forming positive relationships, and gaining trust were additional categories explaining this theme.

The final theme related to important social skills for classroom success produced categories in which teachers explained how they supported positive relationships and described both relationship-building social skills and learning related relevant social skills. Additional responses defined the teacher's supporting role; and offered considerations for the inclusion of children with special needs.

Research Question # 2

The second research question asked: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's social skills? Responses to research question # 2 revealed three major themes. These themes consisted of: (1) Development of social skills; (2) Teacher's role in the development of social skills; and (3) Student-teacher relationships. Although each theme was discrete, there were commonalities found between categories when looking across themes. The initial theme describing the development of social skills detailed teachers' observations of the specific social skills children developed, teachers' experiences of social skills through stories of children's development, along with specifying teachers' perceptions of children's developmental progress.

The second theme expressed teachers' role in the development of social skills and discussed how teachers functioned in the skill development process. The final theme focused on the significance of student-teacher relationships, how these relationships impacted children's social skill development and offered examples of how student-teacher relationships supported positive social skills development.

Sub-Question for Research Question 2

This sub-question asked: How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings? First, teachers explained facilitating the development of important social skills in educational settings in terms of their supportive student-teacher interactions. Next, major categories developed from these themes explained teachers' belief that supportive interactions enabled social

skills development. Further, teachers offered specific examples of the supportive interactions used to facilitate children's social skills development. As a final point, teachers shared their insights concerning supporting interactions with students and how these interactions contributed to social skill development. Teachers described several techniques used to teach and facilitate social skills in the classroom, including modeling and role play, facilitating peer interactions, engaging in teacher-guided discussion and interactions with children, and large group activities.

Transition to Chapter 5

Chapter 5 will offer an interpretation of the study's findings and explain the limitations. Further, this chapter will provide recommendations and implications. Finally, the chapter will end with closing thoughts and essential conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This generic qualitative study aimed to describe the experience of social skills development from the perspective of early educators. This study explored how teachers viewed social skills and student-teacher interactions and inquired into techniques used to cultivate social skills in daily classroom activities. Using the generic approach enabled me to explore the participants' lived experiences and listen for original perspectives about the key concepts. This chapter presents an interpretation of the study's findings and discusses how they confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline. Connections to peer-reviewed literature and new research will also be discussed, along with an interpretation of findings. The study's limitations, recommendations, and conclusions will then be presented.

The first research question asked: How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children? In response, teachers described several key social skills deemed critical for success in their classrooms. These included communicating needs, cooperation, respect, kindness, listening, and following directions and routines. In addition, teachers explained the meaning of appropriate social skills in terms of their expectations, interchanges with students, children's behaviors and emotional skills, and the relevance of context and personal characteristics.

The second research question asked: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's social skills? Teachers' responses

indicated that student-teacher relationships were integral to children's social skills development. Teachers provided insights into their observations, role, and interactions with children that impacted social skills development. There were shared ideas concerning student-teacher relationships found between categories and across participants. In each theme, the importance of relationships and connections emerged as a predominant focus. The results consistently pointed out that student-teacher relationships functioned as the lynchpin in children's social skills development and successful classroom participation.

The sub-question asked: How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings? Teachers communicated several techniques to teach and encourage social skills in the classroom, including modeling, imitation, role play, individual interactions, intentional pairing, and facilitating peer interactions. In addition, teachers' descriptions identified supportive interactions and individual student-teacher interactions as essential components of teaching or encouraging children's development of crucial social skills.

Across all research questions, participants' responses painted a rich and diverse picture of how social skills appeared throughout many different aspects of the classroom environment. Teachers' statements about their experiences, what they saw, and how they facilitated social skills were both interrelated and responsive to the child and the circumstance. This was not isolated to a specific time of day, activity, or lesson plan. Instead, it was more like an enduring, opportunistic series of interactions between teachers and their students, with the intention of developing positive and supportive

relations between the two. For instance, P1 illustrated how she used modeling to encourage positive social interactions, stating, “Student-teacher relationships, it is really important, because the reality is, they’re with me, a lot of the time. So, they’re looking at me and seeing how I will react towards my peers or other students.” P6 contributed ideas describing the importance of caring about children and making them feel welcome as a foundation for teaching social skills, sharing, “I think it’s important for them to feel that way to develop any kind of skills that we’re working on. They have to know that you like them.” Each example accentuated the significant role building relationships plays in the social skill development and teaching process.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research in early education recognizes significant associations between preschool children’s social skills and school readiness (Lane et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2010; Raver, 2004; Raver et al., 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2017; Zins et al., 2004) as well as validating the interrelationship between social skills in preschool and subsequent academic success (Arnold et al., 2012). Social skills have been progressively recognized for their significant contribution to education success (Flook et al., 2015). The preschool years are critical to children’s development of early social skills and form the basis for experiences and successes in later life (Maleki et al., 2019).

Previous studies of teacher expectations have been quantitative and focused on older children. While informative, these studies did not address student-teacher relationships, teachers’ experience of social skills, or individual processes involved in facilitating children’s social skills, particularly at the preschool level (Lane et al., 2007;

Lane et al., 2010; Rubie-Davies et al., 2016). Results of this study confirm and extend knowledge in the discipline, in addition to filling in gaps in research related to young children's development of social skills, through descriptions of preschool teachers' beliefs concerning the importance of social-emotional skills, student-teacher relationships, and the teacher's influential role and contributions to developing social skills. In addition, teachers described specific techniques used to support children's social-emotional skills and competence.

Themes Identified in Research Question # 1

Important Social Skills for Early Education Success

Studies like those conducted by Chernyshenko et al. (2018), Mulvey and Jenkins (2020), and Sazak Pinar and Sucuoglu (2013) suggested that more advanced social skills such as language use, cooperation, empathy, respect for others, and assertion were fundamental skills for preschoolers. These more advanced skills may influence relationship formation and eventually more complex social development. What these studies did not include were qualitative components that examined the teacher's perspectives concerning these social skills. Results of this study confirmed and extended research pertaining to teachers' expectations and beliefs about important social skills in preschool children by adding more qualitative components.

Relationship Building and Learning Related Social Skills

During interviews, teachers' descriptions of important social skills for early education success fell into two broad categories that confirmed previous research. Definitions by McClelland and Morrison (2003), Denham (2006), and Arnold et al.

(2012) offered social skills explanations that focused chiefly on learning-related social skills and behaviors (e.g., attention, following directions, peer group participation). Relationship building social skills, a category developed by Gresham (1990, 2008, 2016), emphasizes social skills fundamental to interpersonal relationships such as empathy, assertiveness, sharing, and turn-taking. Teachers in this study confirmed earlier categories, describing corresponding relationship building social skills including communication, using words to express needs, and problem-solving with peers. Conversely, teachers described behaviors such as learning to differentiate situations, communicating ideas and preferences to peers and adults, and following directions as social skills permitting children to operate more effectively in learning situations. Thus, teachers' descriptions confirmed the pertinence of relationship building and learning-related social skills, social skills categories to classroom settings, and their work with young children.

Teacher's Expectations

In this study's results, teachers' expectations were linked to the meaning of appropriate social skills. They described expectations of social skills in several different ways, including how expectations are related to developmental age and capacity to learn, along with the teachers' flexibility. To illustrate, P4 shared her belief that getting along with one another was an important, age-appropriate social skill.

Teachers in this study also described important social skills for success in their classrooms in several ways using full-bodied descriptions and narratives. This was demonstrated by P7, who emphasized the importance of children being respectful, kind,

and getting along with everyone. Similarly, P2 described the value of children establishing a positive relationship with people and their environment. These more holistic, qualitative descriptions both confirmed and extended findings of teachers' expectations completed by Lane et al. (2007), Im et al. (2019), and Teklu and Kumar (2013), where teachers used rating scales to identify expectations and most important social skills.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Behaviors

Specific skills mentioned, such as getting along with others, cooperation, respect, kindness, and caring for others, were considered essential for classroom success, which validated earlier descriptions given by Chernyshenko et al. (2018), Mulvey and Jenkins (2020), and Özbey and Köyceğiz (2019). Teachers' descriptions of appropriate and inappropriate social skills and interchanges also confirmed previous research related to important skills. This extended earlier research focused on important social skills for preschool success (e.g., Chernyshenko et al., 2018; Mulvey & Jenkins, 2020). As an illustration, P1 specified appropriate social skills as sharing, recognizing emotion, and communicating: "Those are the first things that I think of." Offering an additional disparate perspective, P7 related that she did not feel like there actually were inappropriate skills. She thought of them as a "lack of exposure," explaining, "So, I don't see it especially with these kids. So, I guess it depends on a different scenario."

Research Question # 2

Development of Social Skills

Teachers perceived student-teacher relationships and interactions as integral to children's social skills development. This confirms previous research by extending ideas related to teachers and student-teacher relationships enabling the development of social skills (Marlowe, 2011; Rucinski et al., 2018). In each story told by a teacher; the child's development of specific social skills included the teacher's direct involvement with the child in the classroom. For example, when a child presented with difficulty communicating and relating to peers, P1 described spending time developing a relationship and facilitating communication with peers using question cards. P2 described supporting a child who initially had difficulty with self-help skills through individual, targeted interventions, supportive interactions, encouragement, and social support from the class as the child completed the routines. She was then able to complete personal care routines independently. These examples supported previous literature concerning student-teacher interactions and teaching students social skills, communicating how student-teacher relationships have significant influences upon children's classroom behavior (Marlowe, 2011) and social-emotional and academic progress (Rucinski et al., 2018).

Teachers' Role in the Development of Social Skills

Results from this study also confirmed the significant role early education teachers play in helping young children develop social skills. Preschool provides a critical foundation for social skills development, with teachers playing an essential role in this process (Maleki et al., 2019; Özbey & Gözeler, 2020). During interview discussions,

teachers described their role in children's development of social skills in several ways. Some teachers described this role generally as mediators, emotional guides, or advocates. Other teachers explained details of their role as trying to initiate engagement. Specifically, P1 described her role as being a guide and listening to children, while P3 expressed her role as mediator and social-emotional translator and intermediary. Further, P5 depicted her role as creating a safe space and validating children's feelings and ideas. These thoughts confirmed earlier research stating the importance of the teacher's role through communicating the teachers' thoughts on their valuable role in the skill development process.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Positive student-teacher relationships have a beneficial influence upon children's social skill development (Mortensen & Barnett, 2015; Wu et al., 2018). Findings from this study confirmed research related to the significance of student-teacher relationships and children's formation of social skills. Rucinski et al. (2018) stated that student-teacher relationship quality, in addition to the classroom's emotional climate, are associated with children's social-emotional development and academic progress.

Some teachers pointed out how their child-centered, supportive approach, which allowed children to be themselves, contributed to a loving classroom atmosphere and enabled social skill development. Teachers also discussed their encouraging feedback and how giving options facilitated positive relationships with children. To illustrate, P4 explained how she related with her students to enhance relationships and cultivate a positive classroom environment. P1 also illustrated how she used modeling to encourage

positive social interactions to develop relationships and social skills. Throughout their interview discussions, teachers explained ideas about the connection between student-teacher relationships and children's positive social skills development, considering their relationships with students a central component of the teaching process and confirming research by Mortensen and Barnett (2015), Rucinski et al. (2018), and Wu et al. (2018).

Research Sub Question: Enabling Social Skills Development

Results additionally confirmed the importance of student-teacher relationships, with attention to the quality of communication and supportive interactions. Bulotsky Shearer et al. (2020) characterized emotionally supportive interactions as warm, sensitive, responsive, and individualized between teacher and child. In these interactions, teachers may also offer individualized instructional support that promotes learning and social-emotional development.

Teachers in this study communicated the value of supportive interactions as a primary step in children's development of positive social skills. Some teachers conveyed the notion that children feeling cared for was a primary component of positive social skill development. Other teachers emphasized that communicating with children positively and using empathy increased their openness, which in turn encouraged positive social skills. For instance, P8 illustrated warmth, sensitivity, and attention to children's needs in her discussion of the importance of children feeling cared for as essential to skill development. P3 discussed the importance of communication and demonstrating empathy, explaining how children are affected by adult emotions and communication and emphasizing the importance of characteristics such as a teacher's tone of voice,

positivity, and use of empathy, crediting these behaviors with helping develop trust and positive relationships with young children. During interviews, teachers' descriptions of their interactions reflected attributes of warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness, confirming previous research by Bulotsky Shearer et al. (2020) and Pakarinen et al. (2020), who affirmed the value of teachers' emotional support in relation to social skills in preschool classrooms.

Interpretation of Findings: Theoretical Frameworks

Attachment Theory

Similar to relationships with parents, the student-teacher relationship may be characterized by varying degrees of attachment. Attachment plays an important role in socialization and helping children develop social skills (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Both Bergin and Bergin (2009) and Granot, (2014) asserted that a child's relationship with their teacher may also be characterized as: a) secure, b) avoidant, c) resistant, d) disorganized; and e) general (near secure) types of attachment. Teachers in this study confirmed the importance of developing a secure, positive relationship with students to enable their social skills development. For instance, P 8 affirmed the importance of developing a secure, positive relationship with children and communicating caring feelings prior to teaching skills in any area. Whereas P3 discussed the importance of showing understanding and empathy to engender a lasting relationship; and provide a foundation for future relationships. These caring student-teacher relationships contain optimal levels of warmth, closeness, responsiveness, and unrestricted communication (Pianta, 1999; Vatou et al., 2020; Verschueren, & Koomen, 2012). As a result, children

acquire the necessary security to explore the classroom environment; and pursue relationships with peers.

Outcomes in this study were consistent with the principles identified in Ainsworth (1991), and Bowlby's (1969, 1982), attachment theories and demonstrated their relevance through teachers' descriptions of supportive interactions while teaching and encouraging social skills. Teachers discussed their relationships with children and described interactions characterized by levels of warmth, closeness, and open communication resembling descriptions by Vatou et al. (2020), who stated that higher levels of emotional support contributed to increased social competence in preschool children. To demonstrate, P 1 described her experience offering children emotional validation. Likewise, P5 discussed her role of creating a safe space and validating children's feelings and ideas. She also recognized the importance of helping children feel valued and loved through her communication and interactions.

Several explorations have examined the significance of teacher-child relationships from psychological, and educational standpoints. These studies have explained the effects of secure teacher-child attachments upon children's learning and development (Pianta et al., 2003; Quan-McGimpsey et al., 2015; Riley, 2012). Many of these studies were grounded in attachment theory (e.g., Cyr, & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Schuengel, 2012; Sierra, 2012), since teacher -child relationships play an essential role in guiding children's motivation, school adjustment and acquisition of social skills (Ertürk Kara et al., 2017; Lee, & Bierman, 2015; Pianta et al., 2003; Spilt et al., 2012).

This study's outcomes substantiated attachment-based research by Sierra (2012), Verschueren and Koomen (2012), as well as Gregoriadis and Grammatikopoulos (2014), who described the essential role of early education teachers as attachment figures. In this critical role, teachers possess the potential to encourage an atmosphere of security and consistent emotional support that cultivates the child's feeling loved and cared for. P8 related these ideas, regarding, forming positive relationships, developing primary trust, and developing relationships prior to teaching students.

Experiencing a secure, supportive, affective relationship with an early education teacher may also successfully reduce challenging behaviors in young children (Poulou, 2015), enable school readiness and support adjustment beyond school settings (Hughes, & Kwok, 2007; Kidwell et al., 2010; Schuengel, 2012). Further, when combined with high quality adult-child interactions that provide a consistent base of support, this protective relationship may mediate developmental risk and decrease undesirable behaviors for the young child (Gregoriadis, & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Schuengel, 2012; Silver et al., 2005).

In this study, teachers' responses corroborated these evidence-based ideas. Teachers related to the development of social skills and reducing undesirable behaviors, while facilitating positive relationships, with children. For example, P4 described the noticeable changes of a child who reduced tantrums and began communicating and interacting appropriately, with support and positive reinforcement. Whereas P5 shared an example describing the importance of teacher engagement and high-quality interactions with children. Studies by Commodari (2013), Poulou (2015), Schuengel (2012) and Wu

et al. (2018) accentuated the relationship between attachment and the development of positive student-teacher relationships; along with offering evidence of the significant impact teachers have upon young children's social skills and overall development across multiple domains.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory explains how a young learner's integration of socially observed information may occur through exposure to models, verbal dialogs, along with specific teaching techniques (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Grusec, 1992). Modeling is a central concept within Bandura's (1977, 1986) broader theory of observational learning, which also discusses children's learning through modeling, observation, and imitation of others in their environment (Özbey & Gözeler, 2020). Bandura (1977b) placed great value on instructional modeling and observational learning as teaching tools to support learning and changes in behavior. Further, Bandura (1969, 1977) described the use of social models such as teachers as an indispensable part of transmitting and modifying behavior, especially in learning situations. Results of this study were consistent with Bandura's (1977b) thoughts on modeling, observational learning, and similar techniques such as role play in order to teach social skills through teachers' descriptions of teaching and encouraging social skills.

This study's results identified several important themes: 1) Modeling/role play (2) Facilitating peer interactions, and (3) Teacher guided discussion and interactions. Teachers frequently described modeling, role playing and grouping students as means used to teach social skills in classroom settings. Teachers offered additional insights

describing the importance of emotional validation, being respectful of others, having discussions with children about social skills; in addition to using real life scenarios to encourage social skills. P 2 discussed her use of modeling to teach positive social skills, using role play with students and modeling positive interactions. Likewise, P 7 described how she consistently shadowed a shy, unassertive child during interactions. During this time, she purposely modeled and scaffolded assertive responses to peers' aggressive behaviors. Consequently, the child began to imitate the assertive behaviors with the teacher present, and then eventually on her own until it was the newly developed skill. These examples are consistent with recent research by Lalli (2020) who applied Bandura's concept of social learning with young children, emphasizing how Bandura and Walters' (1963) concepts of observational learning and modeling can be used to encourage positive social behaviors during student-teacher interactions in school-based settings. Examples by P2 and P7 also supported Bandura's (1963/1977b) concept of social learning through teachers' use of observational learning, modeling and role play to encourage children's acquisition of new skills and behavior patterns.

Modeling/Role Play in Small and Large Group Activities

Small and large group activities were used to teach and encourage social skills. These activities allowed children to learn from social modeling and observational learning through activities with their teacher and peers. Teachers described teaching and encouraging social skills in groups of young children, confirming the usefulness of Bandura's (1968, 1977b) concepts of modeling, role play and observational learning (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015). Role plays and teacher guided discussions were additional

approaches that applied principles of social learning theory. P6 described this technique through role play in a unique approach with children with special needs. Using a specific form of role play called “rewards and consequences”, this teacher gave children an everyday scenario and asked, “what ways can you respond?” Each student told a positive and a negative way to respond. This role play technique corroborated recent research by Mitsch et al. (2020) who identified forms of modeling as a means of responding to young children’s social-emotional needs and teaching valuable social skills to young children with special needs.

Peer Interactions

Finally, teacher’s facilitation of peer interactions and pairing or grouping peers confirmed ideas presented in Bandura’s (1968, 1977b) social learning theory, further making use of modeling, imitation, and observational learning (Özbeý & Gözeler, 2020). Teachers described purposefully pairing children, working with paired children, or working with small groups to encourage and facilitate positive behaviors. P1 shared important highlights and described children in her classroom working in pairs to identify their feelings at the mirror or looking at feeling faces to identify their feelings. Similarly, P7 shared her practice of carefully pairing peers to encourage positive social interactions, because she knew that children acquired skills such as compassion from each other. These methods support social learning theory as a theoretical framework and are examples of imbedded concepts describing how children learn important social skills in social situations.

Limitations of the Study: Issues of Trustworthiness

Transferability

Limitations to the study were identified in areas concerning transferability and dependability. Transferability relates to how the reader is able to transfer the findings from the study to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In executing the study, I addressed issues of transferability in several ways. I effectively used a maximum variation sampling strategy to provide a wide and varied sample, enabling detailed descriptions and revealing shared patterns based upon heterogeneous characteristics (Patton, 2015). Teachers came from diverse program types and had a range of credentials and years of experience with children. This allowed wide-ranging perspectives concerning teachers' experience of young children's social skills, student-teacher relationships and teaching social skills to young children. In addition, I provided explicit descriptions of contextual factors, including the type of early education programs, ages of children, teachers' credentialing and experience; along with rich accounts and accounts of individual experience (Shenton, 2004). These were described in demographics and mentioned throughout participants' responses to interview questions. I provided detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of social skills in the review of literature, definitions and in results in order to give context and allow comparisons (Guba, 1981).

It should be noted that there was only one special education teacher in the sample. This initially raised a concern about her being discrepant. In spite of this, during data analysis her responses were not found discrepant and followed the consistent themes presented by other teachers. Further, several other regular education teachers had children

with special needs in their classes. This provided additional consistency in responses. However, because of the focus of the study, it would go beyond the bounds of acceptable transferability to consider these findings directly applicable to special education classes.

Finally, transferability was addressed through interview techniques. I worked to develop a positive rapport with all teachers to enrich results. During the interview process, I encouraged participants to share their experiences, sincere feelings, and perceptions. This produced rich, thick descriptions in response to the study's guiding interview questions. In addition, I used informed participants, good quality interviewing skills and a flexible, yet responsive interviewing style. Throughout interviews, I implemented useful interview techniques, such as establishing an initial rapport, using a friendly and supportive tone to encourage trust; along with using several probes and follow up questions and encouraged personal narratives and relevant examples (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This resulted in teachers offering lengthy narratives, personal stories, and responses to all interview questions.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the long-term constancy of outcomes (Bitsch, 2005). I addressed issues of dependability in numerous ways. Dependability was addressed using Saldaña's (2015) comprehensive, code-recode strategy during data analysis. This strategy was advantageous in identifying major, reoccurring, patterns, consistent and discriminant themes, along with relevant codes and categories. During data analysis, this process helped to clarify coherent responses and common areas across interviews, which contributed to detailed, reliable outcomes. Dependability was also addressed through

explicit detail that meticulously and sequentially described the research design and implementation in chapters 3 and 4 (Shenton, 2004). Each chapter specifically and sequentially described particular steps in the research process with regard to sampling, strategies, recruitment, interview, data collection and data analysis processes occurring during each phase of the research process.

Finally, I used reflexive appraisals of the overall research study in effort to evaluate the efficacy of this investigation and increase dependability. I described the operational details of data collection; with attention to the intricacies of all that was done during each step of the process. While reporting results, I provided a reflective appraisal of the investigation, in order to assess its overall effectiveness (Shenton, 2004).

Recommendations

Replication

A primary recommendation for future research would be to replicate this study with special education teachers. A replication of this study with special education teachers might expand a focus on the significance of student-teacher relationships and the process of teaching social skills, while incorporating elements of attachment theory. Coyne et al. (2016) pointed out that conceptual replications were more feasible than exact replications in research focused on special education. For this reason, replicating this study to include early childhood special educators who share experiences about how they develop relationships with young children and teach important social skills, might produce additional concepts and insights into teachers' experiences of social skills for early education success with children who have special needs, or function on varied

emotional levels. This approach to research would also follow the qualitative research tradition by focusing on narratives, rich descriptions and process elements related to student-teacher relationships and teaching social skills (Coyne et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Further, this approach follows the practice in special education research of discovering and applying the most useful interventions and evidence-based practices for young children with special needs (Odom et al., 2005; Woodhouse, 2018) and adding valuable new insights to early childhood special education research.

It is noted that all teachers in this study taught children who had special needs, although they were not located in a specialized program or taught in a self-contained special education classroom. This offered transferability to children who were both typically developed and those with special needs. However, replicating the study with teachers of children with special needs might provide additional insights into social skills development and allow results to be applied to inclusion programs and other special education contexts with children who have a broader array of special needs; thereby strengthening transferability (Anney, 2014).

Case Study Approach

Teachers in the current study described working with several children from programs serving families experiencing significant social, and or financial hardships (e.g., Head Start). Future studies might examine this area more closely, with attention to how forming an attachment bond, and/or social skills development may become more difficult in the presence of adverse circumstances such as family challenges, destabilized family situations or a paucity of financial resources. This area of study might also be

explored using a case study approach in order to delve into the relationship dynamics between teacher and child and might uncover any avoidant or disorganized patterns of attachment described by teachers (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

A case study approach involves intensive research that might include interviews, observations, and field work (Patton, 2015). A case study would also provide the reader with deep insights into the lived experience of the teacher and isolate several significant factors concerning student-teacher relationships from an attachment perspective, with intent to develop interventions for teachers and other practitioners working with young children with behavioral and other challenges (Patton, 2015; Woodhouse, 2018).

Additional benefits of a case study might include deeper insights into teachers as attachment figures, as well as interventions and approaches to promote more secure attachment relationships (Woodhouse, 2018). The case study approach might also serve the purpose of developing helpful techniques or interventions to support young children who may have challenges developing or sustaining attachments with caregivers; while adding to growing research and intervention models in this area (Steele & Steele, 2018).

Assessment

A final recommendation would be to use findings to develop assessment instruments appropriate for young children. The assessment of young children's social-emotional skills has been considered a challenging undertaking. Many assessments are focused on older children (Whitcomb, 2018; Whitcomb & Kemp, 2020). Abrahams et al. (2019) described the need for newer approaches to assessment to guide further research

and practice and guide the assessment and monitoring of social skills, as well as helping to identify risks for challenging behaviors.

Future studies in this area might be used to build upon findings to develop more sensitive social skills assessment instruments based upon themes found in this study. These themes might offer more insightful social skills descriptions, with applications for younger children. Taking findings to develop a questionnaire that is more sensitive than the checklists or simple rating scales often used to describe social skills; possibly as part of a multi-method approach to early childhood assessment, as recommended by Whitcomb and Kemp (2020) would increase possible choices of assessment appropriate for younger children.

Implications

Positive Social Change

It was my goal to bring my study to the teaching profession, early education, and educational psychology due to its potential for effecting positive social change on many levels. Through teachers' rich descriptions of their experiences encouraging children's social skills, other teachers may be informed and recognize their own unique experiences in these areas. This is also a way of supporting teachers' professional development and further study.

Contributing to existing research is an area has marked potential for contributing to positive social change in early education. Ribaeus et al. (2020) discussed a gap existing between theory and practice in professional development for early education teachers. They suggested that filling this gap will require a greater exploration of how early

education teachers and students connect theory to practice as they gain experience. Contributing relevant information from the field in a way that is easily understandable, assists teachers with making integral connections between theory and practice. This can also fill information gaps, which contributes to ongoing positive social change in early education.

At the individual level, descriptions of specific influences and characteristics impacting children's development of social skills may be useful for teachers, parents and all others working with a child to develop social skills in early education settings. Teachers' narratives and accounts of techniques used to encourage social skills may provide ideas and best practices that support those working directly with young children in their efforts to teach or encourage social skills and possibly reduce challenging behavior. Information from the study's literature review may inform teachers who seek to use a focused, individualized approach or explore targeted interventions, developed with the explicit needs of an individual child, while benefiting the overall classroom environment.

Additionally, on an individual level this information can be used to inform teachers and those who work directly with children about important social skills to support early education success, as well as the significance of the student-teacher relationship. With this information teachers and paraprofessionals may become better informed about current best practices for working with young children as they develop social skills and peer relationships. As a final point, teachers' stories may inspire self-reflection and encourage teachers to examine their own current practices with young

children to see what is working or where additional support and information may be beneficial.

On an organization level, positive social change can occur through sharing information about supporting young children's social skills among childcare professionals. Information contained in results related to teachers' narratives can enhance professional practice and give professionals outside of the classroom an idea of process elements involved in teaching social skills to young children and in building positive student-teacher relationships. Moreover, descriptions of teaching techniques can be shared with newer teachers by administrators or instructional coaches seeking to help teachers develop skills for working with young children. Further, administrators who seek to inform teachers and promote positive behavior support in preschool classrooms may also use information from the study's literature review and theoretical frameworks as the basis for further study in their efforts to develop classroom and school wide behavioral supports for young children, families, and teachers.

On a societal level, positive social change can occur through additional qualitative research. Additional qualitative research in early education can inform evidence-based and best practices supporting young children's development (Kozleski, 2017). Though a small study with modest claims, this study adds to the knowledge base of qualitative early education research. Using results to develop teaching modules for professional development, best practices or developing assessment guidelines that support healthy social skills and student-teacher relationships promotes positive social change and early education professional development. On a social or policy level, additional qualitative

early education research can inform and influence the direction of new educational policy; leading to positive social change (Kozleski, 2017). Results may also inform stakeholders and decision makers who enact policy at the state and federal government levels in programs such as Head Start of current classroom practices.

Finally, results from this investigation may assist educational and developmental psychology's researchers and practitioners to begin developing more comprehensive, current, evidence-based professional development modules and specific teaching methods geared toward helping teachers increase their understanding of child development, and the dynamics of positive student-teacher relationships. As a result, wide-ranging positive social change through education is possible.

Methodological, Theoretical, and/or Empirical Implications

Theoretical implications include contributing to teachers enhanced understanding of each theory and implementing these ideas in classroom settings. In essence, helping teachers recognize how to strengthen their understanding of how attachment and social learning theory can be applied in daily situations with their children. From this standpoint, teachers may also be helped to see the theoretical significance and practical applications of attachment theory to early education as it relates to their work with children. This understanding may enhance their experiences as they work to establish and maintain positive relationships.

Recommendations for Practice

Greater emphasis on supporting teachers in developing relationships with children and maintain high-quality contact with children through play, play-based learning

experiences and professional development would be beneficial for both early educators and children. Play is a language in which children are fluent and relies upon meaningful interactions with peers and adults, such as teachers. Early education research acknowledges the vital relationship between play interactions and young children's learning (Nilsson et al., 2018). Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) reported early education teachers' belief that play enhances a young child's social-emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and even their holistic development.

Further, Dominguez and Trawick-Smith, 2018, Önder (2018), and Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) described play as a vital component of children's learning and development; with teachers playing a critical role in this process. Positive and supportive student-teacher relationships are a central component of successful play-based learning. During interactions, the teacher acts as a focal point and model for children as they learn through observation, modeling, and imitation (Bandura, 1977b). Eventually, children will repeat this behavior with peers and resultantly develop a broader array of social skills such as self-regulation, empathy, and self-control (Dominguez, & Trawick-Smith, 2018; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

Conclusion

During their initial five years, the teacher and consequent student-teacher relationship have a profound impact upon children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). As more parents work outside the home, children are spending more time in early care and education programs (Veríssimo et al., 2017). In these settings, teachers serve as primary caregivers during early years

when children begin forming significant attachments. Consequently, there is a growing need to focus on cultivating high-quality, positive student-teacher relationships in daily experiences. The quality of these early relationships and interactions substantially influences the direction of children's development, and the formation of peer relationships, later school adjustment; and future academic success (Baker et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2007; Verschueren et al., 2012).

In addition to the emphasis currently placed upon cognitive skills and development, children also need educational experiences based upon positive, healthy relationships with teachers and caregivers. Competent teachers and positive student-teacher relations hold great potential for helping young children develop abilities for autonomous functioning and critical social skills development through providing a secure base, scaffolding and play experiences (Sierra, 2012, Veríssimo et al., 2017).

For this reason, greater emphasis on supporting teachers in developing securely attached and high-quality relationships with children through meaningful interactions, play-based learning experiences and ongoing professional development would be a useful direction for early education. With greater importance placed upon supporting healthy student-teacher relations through positive and supportive interactions, young children can develop positive relationship models, enhanced social skills and opportunities to develop cognitively; with increased potential for achieving later success (McNally, & Slutsky, 2018; Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004b).

Student-teacher relations and teaching social skills are interwoven processes. Rather than occurring independently, these two are mutually influential. More research

and information highlighting the intricacies of these processes would be useful and equip teachers with additional knowledge to enrich their practice with young children.

Additional qualitative and quantitative research in this area will add to the understanding of significant process elements of student-teacher relationship development such as using warmth and supportive interactions, along with cultivating children's development of positive social skills in daily activities. More information in these areas can contribute the children's development of positive social skills and continually enhance the teachers' experience.

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Appendix A: Invitation Flyer



Volunteers Wanted for Research Study

CONTACT INFORMATION

To find out more about this study, please contact:

- XXXXXXXXXX

This study is part of a doctoral degree

The Preschool Teachers' Experience of Social Skills in Young Children.

Principal Investigator:

The purpose of this research study is to examine early educator's experiences of social skills in young children.

To participate in this research, you must:

- Be a current early education teacher of children between 2.6-6 years old.
- Have 3 or more years teaching experience with young children

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You may withdraw at any time.

Participation in this study involves:

- A time commitment of 60-90 minutes
- Ongoing communication with researcher
- You will receive a gift card to amazon.com for your participation

Principal Investigator:

email

Appendix B: Letter of Agreement i



11/1/18
XXXXXX

To Whom It May Concern:

As part of her dissertation study _____ has requested permission to obtain names and e mail addresses of child development centers and early education teachers in the DC Child Carte Connections Database. I have been informed of the purposes of the study and the nature of the research procedures. I have also been given an opportunity to ask questions of the researcher.

As a representative of DC Child Care Connections/Kids Comprehensive Services , I am authorized to grant permission to have the researcher recruit research participants from our providers/teachers _____ is also permitted to recruit for her study research data [during professional development trainings via flyers distributed during meetings at our agency office(s) if necessary].

If you have any questions, please contact me at _____(XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

Project Manager

Appendix C: Teachers' Recruitment Email for Research Study: The Pre-School Teacher
Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success

Dear Early Education Teacher,

[REDACTED], Walden University doctoral student is seeking current early education teachers with three or more years of experience to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine early education teachers' experiences with social skills and developing positive relationships with young children. Participation is voluntary, teachers may withdraw at any time.

Participation in this study involves:

- Participating in an in-depth audio recorded, interview discussing your experience of teaching social skills to young children
- The anticipated time of the onetime interview is approximately from 60-90 minutes long
- Reviewing a summary of interview results by email (Estimated 20 minutes)
- Communicating with the researcher by email to confirm accuracy of the interview summary

For more information about this study, please review the attached flyer and contact the principal investigator, [REDACTED], by phone at [REDACTED] or email at:

Thank you,

Principal Investigator

Study Title: The Pre-School Teacher Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success.

Appendix D: Director's Recruitment Email for Research Study:

The Pre-School Teacher Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success

Dear Early Education Professional,

■■■■■, a Walden University doctoral student is seeking current early education teachers with three or more years of experience to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of social skills development from the perspective of early educators. Participation is voluntary, teachers may withdraw at any time.

Participation in this study involves:

- Participating in an in-depth audio recorded, interview discussing teachers' experience of teaching social skills to young children
- The anticipated time of the onetime interview is approximately from 60-90 minutes long
- Reviewing a summary of interview results by email (Estimated 20 minutes)
- Communicating with the researcher by email to confirm accuracy of the interview summary

If you have teachers on staff who fit this criterion, please forward this e mail to them.

For more information about this study, please contact the principal investigator, ■■■■■, by phone at ■■■■■ or email at ■■■■■

Thank you,

■■■■■
Principal Investigator

Study Title: The Pre-School Teacher Experience of Social Skills for Early Education Success.

Appendix E: Summary of Data Analysis Process

Themes	No. of participants	No. references from transcripts	Research question alignment	Central concepts/theoretical frameworks alignment	Example quotes
RQ 1 How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?					
Appropriate social skills meaning	8	36		Social skills for early education; Development of special skills	I would not expect the same dialogue or talk as I would from a 10-year-old as I would from a three-year-old. I expect a three-year-old to come see a toy or see something they want and just take it. I would not expect a ten-year-old that doesn't have a learning disability to go, over and just snatch a toy. I would expect a three-year-old to do that.
Children with special needs	2	15			Well, we don't have anybody who is diagnosed with anything. The majority of the children, this is their first foray into the group setting. They haven't been in day care. They weren't in any preschool or childcare program before this. So, this is the first experience of people saying, "hmm I don't know if this is typical behavior". We might need to have an evaluation about that. So that's kind of where we are now as teachers.

Curriculum model	7	27			Our curriculum that we use is Creative curriculum.
Curriculum model addressing social skills	5	8			Yes, so within the public school. We use Second Step. We use it because it's more developmentally appropriate, but as the school system itself, we are a PBIS school which is a Positive Behavior Intervention System I believe are the acronyms
Curriculum model or philosophy	2	2			Under the Head Start umbrella we use the head start school readiness goals. We utilize creative curriculum. We utilize early childhood learning standards. And basically, our mission is to support the family and children, regardless of their race or educational background.

RQ 2. What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?

Development of Social Skills	8	47	RQ 2. What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?	Development of special skills	They don't leave the same way they come in. They learn how to interact with one another. How to interact with their peers, their teachers. They learn skills that they need to know.
Teacher's role	7	24	RQ 2: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?	Development of social skills, Student-teacher relationships (attachment SLT)	I think my major role is to figure out these guys and what they need. You know that they're not all just going to be easy. You know, there's going to be different ways to respond to them.

Home visits family interactions	1	3	RQ 2: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's social skills?	Attachment- student-teacher relationships	One thing we do at Head Start which I love is we conduct home visits. I'm actually able to go into the homes of the children and the families. And I love that I do that because I really get to know the individual child and the families
Imitation and modeling social skills	2	4	RQ 2	Development of social skills, social learning theory	Children they think like, "oh I want to be like adults in class" so when they see us modeling, it makes more of an impact.
Important contributors to developing social skills	8	32	**RQ 1 How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?	Social skills for early education, Development of social skills - Social learning theory	Forming a relationship with the teacher the adults or the peers and being able to form some type of relationship, some positive relationship.
Important social skills for classroom success	8	69	RQ 1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?	Social skills for early education	In my classroom, it's using their words. When they have to communicate with their peers, I want my children to be independent and learn how to solve basic problems among their peers, without fighting and whining.
Inappropriate interchanges	7	20	RQ/1/2	Social skills for early education, Development of social skills, SLT	Physical aggression, it could be physical aggression to themselves, or someone else.
Appropriate social Interactions	6	11	RQ 1. How do early education teachers describe the important social	Social skills for early education SLT	So, the appropriate social skills are having kids communicate with one another.

Mental health consultation social skills	2	4	<p>skills for early education success in young children? RQ 1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?</p>	Social skills for early education SLT	We have a mental health specialist that will come in and provide us with different strategies so that we can use it to help the child.
Relationships/ Interactions with other children	8	51	<p>RQ 1. How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children RQ2 What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?</p>	Attachment, SLT, Social skills for early education	I will say they are very apologetic with one another when one makes a mistake. Some of them are still learning how to do that. But I have caught a couple of them, especially within the last two weeks, where they'll see somebody fall, and they'll rush over and help them. and they hit someone, and they're like, oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that.
Relationships with adults	8	44	<p>RQ#2 What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills? Sub Q A How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of</p>	Attachment SLT	They are for the most part respectful with all adults. There's always a couple that just see where that line in the sand is.

Social skills mastered	8	<p>important social skills?</p> <p>48 **RQ 1 How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children?</p> <p>RQ#2</p> <p>Sub Questions # 2</p> <p>Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills?</p>	Social skills for early education	My children that are in my classroom, they are good at telling other people the other children how they feel.
Social skills not yet mastered	6	<p>36 **RQ 1 How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young. Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills?</p>	Social skills for early education	I think probably sharing is really hard for them. That's something that we're working on quite a bit.

Social skills struggling with	8	40	**RQ 1 How do early education teachers describe the important social skills for early education success in young children? Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills?	Social skills for early education	Something that we are working on is forgiveness and just understanding that each one has feelings. But acknowledging each other's feelings is something that they're still struggling on. You know that's a challenge.
Student characteristics	8	38			
Student-teacher relationships	3	10	RQ 2: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?	Student-teacher relationships. Development of social skills. Attachment, SLT	They are very loving my class. When they come in the morning. I'm not there. So, most of all, my kids are here in the classroom. But when I come in, they get up "Hello Ms. Sabrina" Give me a hug.
Student-teacher relationships impacting social skills development	7	31	RQ 2: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?	Student-teacher relationships	I think being honest and transparent like when they do something that I don't like I tell them you know like "that really hurt my feelings."
Student-teacher supportive interactions	7	81	RQ2: What is the role of the student-teacher relationship in the development of young children's' social skills?	Student-teacher relationships, Attachment	If you're coming in and you're positive with them and, you're talking, you're listening to them and you're willing to help and you're willing to understand and you're empathetic with them, then they tend to open up

					more and then they tend to trust you more.
System of observation	8	25			I have a little small notebook when I see something on the spot. I just jot it down.
Teacher insights and perceptions	2	8			So, I think my perspective isn't for somebody to come and say, "oh good job." No, my thing is, that if I see that a child can go into the world, being kind and respectful and understanding somebody else's perspective, then they have gained their social skills.
Teacher years' experience	8	11	Demographics		So, I've been working in early childhood for 25 years.
<hr/>					
Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills?					
Teaching social skills to children	8	103	Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of important social skills in early education settings?	SLT, Attachment, Social skills for early childhood	We are really big on role playing. They love us being them in role plays. So, I will get my teacher's assistant to role play with me.
Typical day structure- Classroom routines	8	48	Sub Q a How do early education teachers describe facilitating the development of		We have a daily schedule that we follow. So, we have to have two hours of uninterrupted play time, just being able to go to interest areas and then we

important social
skills?

have an hour of outdoor gross motor
play.
