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Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions on Well-Being Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Janith Rhodes

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions on Well-Being Following the COVID-19

Pandemic

by

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MA, Walden University, 2015

BS, University of Southern Mississippi, 1989

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

The problem addressed through this study was the decrease in early childhood (EC) teachers' well-being since 2021 at a southeastern school district (SESD, a pseudonym) following the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can support teachers so that they work effectively. The conceptual framework for this study was Seligman's (2016) multidimensional PERMA model, which was found useful for understanding employees' well-being for all employees at work. Data were collected through semistructured interviews of 10 EC teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of the challenges to their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment. EC teachers reported that their professional and personal well-being had been significantly impacted by the pandemic, with inadequate recovery due to insufficient administrative, parental, and community support in meeting student needs and facilitating professional development. The results of this study provide information and understanding for district administrators about the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment and how the school district could provide support for them.

Understanding and Addressing Early Childhood Teachers' Well-Being Following the

COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children: my daughter, Jillian, my daughter, Jessica, and my son, Brandon. The love and support of my children have helped me achieve great things and they are truly why I am here today.

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I would like to acknowledge my doctoral chair, Dr. Salina Shrofel, who has been very supportive throughout this process. Dr. Shrofel has kept me focused and moving forward when many times I wanted to give up.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The importance of early childhood (EC) teachers' personal and professional well-being was brought into focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching is a highly emotional career and can cause high levels of anxiety, which can lead to work dissatisfaction, mental illness, and diminished well-being (Song, 2021). Since the pandemic, district administrators have become increasingly concerned about the well-being of educators and the additional stressors brought on by the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021; Song, 2021).

In a local school district, EC teachers are experiencing challenges to their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment as shown by a district-commissioned audit. The audit revealed deficits in the areas of student support, teaching and learning, community engagement and partnerships, teacher resources, and resource allocation. Due to the demands on teachers to address some of these deficits, the audit outlined a decrease in teacher well-being; both personally and professionally. However, the audit did not provide information about how to provide support for EC teachers' well-being following the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem addressed through this study is the decrease in EC teachers' well-being since 2021 at a southeastern school district (SESD; a pseudonym). The school district does not know how support these teachers in terms of their personal and professional well-being.

Rationale

The well-being of EC teachers is vital for improving the quality of education and student achievement in young children. EC teachers have poorer physical and psychological well-being when compared to other professions due to higher stress levels (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). After the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' everyday stress levels were exacerbated by new work-related demands such as longer hours, numerous new grading and policy changes, and new burdens of meeting the rise in student academic deficits (Froehlich et al., 2022). In a local report after the audit, SEDS's district administrators expressed a desire to identify ways to support EC teachers' personal and professional well-being to prevent teacher burnout and prevent teachers from leaving the district. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can best support teachers so that they work effectively.

Definition of Terms

Pandemic: Refers to a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents (Robinson, 2022).

Personal well-being: Refers to flourishing in one's personal life and setting (Roberts et al., 2019).

Postpandemic: Refers to a period following a pandemic when people in all age groups have contracted the disease and have some immunity to it (Upadhyay & Bhaskar, 2020).

Professional well-being: Refers to a sense of psychological pleasure or a state of high quality of existence achieved by someone in their positions of employment (Lei, 2022).

Stress: Defined as experiences where the environmental demands outweigh a person's perceived psychological and physiological ability to cope with it effectively (Crosswell & Lockwood, 2020).

Teacher well-being: Defined as a teacher's sense that they are flourishing regarding cognitive, emotional, health, and social conditions pertaining to their work and their professions (Dreer, 2022).

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will add to the information and understanding SESD school district administrators have about the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment, and it will provide information about how the school district could provide support for them. Furthermore, the results and analysis could lead to the development of a project that district stakeholders could use when making decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic. This could lead to local social change by providing information about EC teachers' well-being, which could equip stakeholders with skills to improve EC teachers' well-being. Teacher well-being contributes to teacher effectiveness and positive student outcomes (Eadie et al., 2021).

Research Questions

In this study, I answered two research questions:

RQ 1: What are EC teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment (2021-present)?

RQ 2: What are EC teachers' perceptions of how the SEDS administration could better support them in the post-pandemic era in regard to positive emotions, engagement (involvement in the work), relationships, meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment?

Review of the Literature

To search for research-based information to describe the conceptual framework and to explore the research-based literature related to this study, I searched Walden library databases, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO Information Services, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and ProQuest with assistance from Walden librarians. The search terms I used included the following:

teacher personal and professional wellbeing, post pandemic challenges for teachers, lack of academic advancement for teachers, teachers well-being, early childhood education, learning loss, effect of COVID-19, social well-being, mental health, teacher wellness, social emotional behavior, teacher stress, teacher behaviors, learning environments post pandemic, relationship between teachers' well-being and COVID-19, teacher support, classroom environment post pandemic, teachers well-being post pandemic, teacher emotions, PERMA framework on job performance, positive emotions for teachers, positive relationships and its effect on teachers, engagement of teachers, sense of

accomplishment for teachers, teacher effectiveness, teacher effectiveness post pandemic, teacher attrition, teacher attrition post pandemic, and teacher retention and teacher retention post pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that supports this study is Seligman's (2012) multidimensional PERMA model, which highlights that well-being consists of the pursuing and attainment of one or more of the five following elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and sense of accomplishment. This framework is a multi-dimensional approach to defining and measuring well-being that originally begun with just three elements: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, 2002). Seligman developed the PERMA framework of well-being to answer the fundamental questions of what well-being is and what enables it. He argued that different people will derive well-being from each of the model's five components to varying degrees. Seligman also noted that these elements are related to intrinsic values that are essential parts of human nature. Although these five elements do not present an exhaustive list, they are essential for the development of intrinsic aspirations and psychological well-being. Seligman hypothesized that having intrinsic aspirations/goals toward attaining positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment would increase well-being.

Seligman's framework began a shift in psychology from curing mental illness to a more positive psychological focus such as well-being, contentment, hope, optimism, flow, happiness, savoring, human strengths, and resilience (Kun et al., 2017). Positive

psychological focus can bring understanding to factors that build strength and contribute to mental health and well-being (Kun et al., 2017). It was found that all of these factors may underlie optimal human functioning (Kun et al., 2017). For example, Kun et al. (2017) found that the PERMA framework provided an understanding of employees' well-being. The PERMA framework was applied to develop policies and practices to increase the well-being of employees at work. Madson (2017) also indicated a significant alignment between each of the PERMA components and an individual's physical health, vitality, job and life satisfaction, and his/her commitment within an organization. The sections that follow discuss the components of the PERMA framework in more detail.

Positive Emotions

Seligman (2002) asserted that life is about successfully pursuing positive emotions about the present, past, and future. The positive emotions about the past involve satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride, and serenity (Seligman, 2012). Positive emotions about the future consist of hope and optimism, faith, trust, and confidence. When an individual has more positive emotions with little negative emotion and the ability to amplify the intensity and duration of positive emotions, they have a buffer against depression.

Engagement

For Seligman, engagement refers to a psychological state in which individuals feel totally absorbed in the work and are focused on what they are doing. Engagement is also referred to as "flow" or the colloquial feeling of "being in the zone" (Seligman, 2012). High levels of engagement can be characterized by five characteristics: (a) the

presence of clear goals with an intrinsic interest in the task at hand, (b) the presence of a challenge to complete the task at hand with the ability or skill level to meet the challenge, (c) the presence of direct and immediate feedback about the task, (d) the presence of a sense of personal control over the task, and (e) the presence of a merging of action and awareness resulting in complete immersion in the task (Seligman, 2012).

Relationships

Seligman (2012) suggested that relationships are always accompanied by positive emotions, meaning, or accomplishment. He stressed the importance of not assuming that relationships are done for the sake of getting positive emotion or meaning or accomplishment. Rather, relationships are so critical to the success of humans that it has been bolstered with the additional support of the other three elements to ensure that people pursue relationships. Promoting relationships, especially those that are positive, has an overall effect on well-being.

Meaning

Meaning is attained by using one's signature strengths (Seligman, 2012). Seligman (2012) described signature strengths as characteristic activities in which people are especially "good" or "strong." Meaning entails having talents to belong to and serve something that one believes is bigger than the self.

Sense of Accomplishment

Seligman (2012) defined accomplishment in terms of achievement, success, or mastery at the highest level possible within a particular domain. More specifically at the individual level, accomplishment can be defined as reaching a desired state and progress

toward prestated goals. Seligman asserted that in some domains, accomplishment is measured through agreed-upon standards. This is true with sports, business, and education. Seligman stressed that accomplishment is not always tied to winning. It can also be attached to motivation for mastery and competence. The PERMA framework informed the research questions and interview protocol. It also grounded the analysis and the discussion and interpretation of the findings.

Review of the Broader Problem

The following literature review presents and discusses research relevant to the importance of personal and professional well-being for EC teachers. The sections that follow focus specifically on the research about (a) the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' well-being globally and in the US, (b) teachers' perceptions of well-being following the pandemic, (c) teachers' stress following the COVID 19 pandemic, (d) research related to the personal and professional well-being of teachers and (e) research related to the support of teacher personal and professional wellbeing.

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teachers' Well-Being Globally and in the United States

Research has revealed that the COVID-19 world health crisis created profound changes and challenges to the education of young children in schools and the work of teachers (Jalongo, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted nearly 50 million students in the United States (Chan et al., 2021). The teachers of these 50 million students experienced impaired professional health during the pandemic. Most teachers felt emotionally exhausted, faced tremendous workload, and perceived ambiguity in their job

duties frequently during the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021). This resulted in diminished professional functioning, increased teacher attrition rates, and decreased academic achievement among students (Chan et al., 2021). Chan et al. (2021) reported that teacher attrition rates were already high in the US. Without the appropriate support for teachers, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase teacher attrition (Chan et al., 2021).

Jalongo (2021) identified four changes that developed from the COVID-19 pandemic; (a) the quality of teachers' life and wellness was threatened; (b) pressure on families and inequities were intensified; (c) teaching practices and the use of technology for teachers was modified, and (d) higher education was restructured. Two of these changes (threats to the quality of life and wellness and modifications to teaching practices and the use of technology) were identified as particularly challenging for teachers.

The threat to wellness goes beyond physical health such as the absence of disease or injury. Since the pandemic wellness has evolved to mean "a way of life oriented toward optimal health and wellbeing in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community" (Jalongo, 2021, p.765). The pandemic impacted the quality of life and wellness worldwide causing changes for children, families, and teachers (Jalongo, 2021).

Quality of life and wellness influences the well-being of individuals in six areas: (a) income and wealth, (b) employment and access to health services, (c) housing, (d) food environment, (e) education, and (f) safety. The COVID-19 pandemic affected all of these and compromised the physical and mental health of individuals (Jalongo, 2021).

The threats to the quality of life and wellness after the pandemic-imposed

challenges to early childhood education. Lafave et al. (2021) found that teaching practices were impacted as a result of COVID-19. Teachers were expected to adjust and make changes to instruction and the curriculum to support the post-pandemic needs of students. There arose a great need for transformative educational practices with rich and thoughtful technology integration (Aslan et al., 2022). In addition, the post-pandemic needs of students highlighted long-standing and newly emerged challenges for teachers such as a change in duties and responsibilities for teachers (Aslan et al., 2022). For example, teacher duties and responsibilities evolved to include more conferences with their students to assess how the students were doing with learning tasks, to check on students' mental states, and to keep them in a positive mindset. Teachers were also asked to do more tutoring in the post-pandemic era (Aslan et al., 2022).

COVID-19 also had an impact on the mental health of school counselors, teachers, school social workers, and students (Correa & First, 2021). Correa and First (2021) reported that students displayed a variety of distress behavior ranging from fearfulness, loss of temper, and peer problems. Teachers and staff experienced a decreased confidence in supporting these particular needs of students which presented a challenge for teachers that were not prevalent before the pandemic.

The Covid 19 pandemic took an emotional toll on EC teachers. Steiner et al. (2022) reported that teacher well-being post-pandemic was worse than other working adults. Five changes arose from the impact of COVID-19 on teachers, parents, counselors, school social workers, and students (Timmons et al., 2021). They were equity considerations, synchronous versus asynchronous teaching and learning, social and

emotional effects on students, academic impacts, and effects on parents/families.

Timmons et al. (2021) argued that consideration by district policymakers of these five changes from the research could assist with information to support teachers following the pandemic.

Teachers' Perceptions of Well-Being Following the Pandemic

Dreer (2022) noted that teachers' well-being is critical for school and educational systems. Research shows that teacher well-being is directly linked to a teacher's ability to undertake appropriate academic strategies and methods which can bring about improved student participation and academic achievement (Dreer, 2022; Song, 2021).

Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) documented the significance of the relationship between EC teachers' well-being and classroom practices, teacher-child interactions, instruction, and communication with families, as well as young children's learning and development. EC teachers who experience positive well-being have been shown to be more attentive to the classroom environment and have the psychological resources to foster positive interactions with young children (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Additionally, Eadie et al. (2021) highlighted that supporting EC teachers' well-being is essential for retaining an effective workforce, and for promoting quality educator-child relationships which are critical to young children's learning outcomes and development.

Other research by Chan et al., (2021) found that elementary school teachers in the United States experienced challenges such as emotional exhaustion, high levels of task stress, and job ambiguity following the pandemic. Chan et al., (2021) asserted that there

is a critical need to support teachers' health through efforts that strengthen emotional support, autonomy and teaching efficacy. It is also important to understand and identify critical factors that affect teachers' well-being following the pandemic (Chan et al, 2021).

Additionally, Cassidy et al. (2019) indicated that in times of crisis (such as the pandemic), teachers are an important stabilizer for children. When EC teachers are faced with challenges to their own well-being, this stabilizer is at risk as well as children's development. Cassidy et al. (2019) described an important connection between the professional well-being of teachers and their students' emotional well-being and the quality of the classroom environment. Teachers' knowledge, classroom behaviors, and interactions with children are inseparable from teacher well-being.

The challenges EC teachers faced during the pandemic have had long-term effects on their overall physical, psychological, and professional well-being (Kwon et al., 2022). Teachers' perception of the many of the challenges to their well-being during the pandemic remained after the pandemic (Kwon et al., 2022). While many EC teachers have tried to maintain a positive outlook, they still face stressful, challenging work environments.

Teacher Stress Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

It has been long been recognized that EC teachers experience challenging working conditions, leading to high levels of work-related stress and emotional exhaustion (see Eadie et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). The job of an EC teacher is complex and multifaceted and requires a commitment to continuous improvement of strategies and skills to support early childhood students, resilience, and a

willingness to take on many challenges (see Eadie et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). The intricacy of the work of EC teachers can make it difficult for their personal and professional well-being (Song, 2021). Song (2021) found that one-third of educators are anxious with many of them opting to quit their teaching careers within the first 5 years.

In the US, efforts to overhaul the educational systems had begun before the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021). Eadie et al. (2021) highlighted that the goal at the time was to raise the quality of the early childhood workforce. This goal brought on increased demands and expectations for EC teachers (Eadie et al., 2021). The increase in demands and expectations presented challenges to EC teachers' mental health and well-being (Eadie et al., 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges (Eadie et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Additionally, the post-pandemic challenges of burnout, and physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion affecting most U.S. EC teachers has been shown to reduce their capacity to effectively educate and support the development of young children (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022).

Stress is layered across environmental, occupational, and racial factors (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). There is a need to provide some understanding of stress to attend to the well-being of EC teachers in urban settings, especially Black, Latinx, and multiracial ECteachers. Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) highlighted that even prior to COVID-19, 46% of teachers reported notably high levels of daily stress. Given the additional stressors associated with the pandemic and thereafter, Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) recognized that the well-being of EC teachers should be of utmost

importance.

Stress influences the quality of teacher–student interactions and the delivery of instructional support by teachers (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) highlighted that teacher–student interactions and the delivery of instructional support by teachers have an impact on the education and development of young children. Additionally, Crosswell and Lockwood (2020) noted that it is important to distinguish between exposures to stressful events and the responses to these events. Stressful events or stressors evoke cognitive, emotional, and biological stress responses or reactions that can alter or disrupt typical psychological functioning (Crosswell & Lockwood, 2020). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Souto-Manning and Melvin, (2022) reported a higher percentage of EC teachers with more stress and less job satisfaction, depression, physical illness, and burnout.

Hasan et al. (2022) examined the overall effectiveness of resilience-building interventions to address work stress among EC teachers working in the ECE field. Hasan et al. (2022) found that resilience is a key factor needed to best support teachers' personal and professional well-being following the pandemic. Resilience reflects a teacher's ability to utilize their emotional resources and working skills to provide high-quality teaching to young children (Hasan et al., 2022).

In other research, Chen (2022) investigated the lived experience of stress and stress coping among first-year EC teachers in the United States during the COVID-19 era. Chen (2022) found that 91% of EC teachers experienced high levels of emotional stress, issues with mental health, and emotional well-being during this time (36% for

whom the effect was quite extreme). Teachers had to rely on various mechanisms (support from friends, family, or others and self-care) to overcome stress (Chen, 2022). Teachers were able to build resilience to stress through self-compassion and emotional mindfulness (Chen, 2022). The global pandemic induced various challenges for humanity globally with the brunt of those challenges falling on teachers. It caused an increased attention to the nature of stress and stress coping among teachers (Chen, 2022).

Shoshana and Donahue (2021) found that teachers felt an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression post-pandemic with a large percentage noting they were seeking mental health supports. These specific challenges of anxiety and depression highlighted the critical need for districts to address the challenges of mental health in education. Cohen-Fraade and Donahue (2021) recommended exploring the specific challenges of the mental health of teachers following the pandemic in order to expand our understanding of teachers' experiences with mental health and the critical need for districts to address the challenges of mental health and stress in education.

Research Related to Personal and Professional Well-Being of Teachers

There is a wide body of research that indicates a connection between teacher well-being and student outcomes. Eadie et al. (2021) found a direct connection between ECeducators' well-being and quality teacher-child relationships that are essential for young children's learning and development. Additionally, teachers' well-being has influences on children's developmental outcomes.

Hascher et al. (2021) asserted that teacher well-being influences teaching quality, teacher effectiveness, and student outcomes. Hascher et al. (2021) suggested that

identifying predictors and outcomes of teacher well-being could be beneficial to providing support for teachers.

Roberts et al. (2019) found that teachers' well-being and social-emotional competence contribute to the quality of teacher-child relationships and the creation of healthy classroom environments. When high-quality teacher-child relationships and healthy classroom environments are present, the result is higher student academic outcomes (Roberts et al., 2019). Roberts et al. (2019) also found that EC teachers' well-being is a result of high-quality professional learning supports, leadership competencies, practitioner knowledge and competencies, and working conditions.

Rodriguez et al. (2020) described teachers' well-being in relation to students' success and academic outcomes. Rodriguez et al. (2020) noted that teachers' social-emotional competency and well-being are key to providing ongoing support for students. In addition, teachers' social-emotional competency and well-being is a critical component in creating optimal learning environments for young children.

Research Related to the Support of Teachers

Given the importance of teacher well-being to student outcomes, it seems imperative for school districts to explore measures to support teachers' well-being. Chan et al. (2021) suggested district administrators provide clear and concrete expectations for teacher responsibilities for any changes in policies brought on by the pandemic. Explicit efforts should be made to avoid job ambiguity to keep teachers with high teaching efficacy from feeling emotionally exhausted. District administrators should also provide flexibility and autonomy in making decisions. Chan et al. (2021) stressed that schools can

benefit from involving teachers in the decision-making process and giving teachers more autonomy to make changes in their teaching. Reducing teachers' workload through distributing work tasks to other school staff and collaboration among colleagues is crucial for teacher well-being, emotional support, and bonding among colleagues (Chan et al., 2021).

Chan et al. (2021) highlighted specific job characteristics that could be essential to address teacher well-being and to assist teachers in dealing with challenges and changes in teacher practices following the pandemic. They include emotional support, teaching flexibility, school connectedness, and perceived efficacy for teaching (Chan et al., 2021).

Implications

The results of this study led to a project to support school district administrators in addressing the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment. The project provides district stakeholders with information and recommendations to use when making decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic. Support of EC teachers' personal and professional well-being could contribute to social change by positively influencing teacher effectiveness, positive student outcomes, and teacher retention thus positively affecting student academic and personal growth.

Summary

Section 1 of this qualitative study identified the problem: SESD (a pseudonym) school district administrators' lack of information about how to support EC teachers' personal and professional well-being since its decrease in 2021 after the pandemic. The focus of the study was to provide SESD's administrators with information about the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers and how the district administrators could support EC teachers' personal and professional well-being following the pandemic. Hascher and Waber (2021) connected teachers' personal and professional well-being to teacher effectiveness, positive student outcomes, lower teacher attrition rates, and higher teacher retention. Personal and professional teacher well-being is a crucial issue for schools and society. It helps to stabilize how schools function and increases the commitment of teachers (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Hascher and Waber asserted that supporting teachers' personal and professional well-being leads to higher rates of teacher effectiveness and promotes school improvement and educational reforms. Section 1 ended with a description of the implications of the study and its potential contributions to social change. Section 2 provides the methodology of the study and describes the research design and data analysis.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the postpandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can best support teachers so that they work effectively. Qualitative research when done with “conscience and criticality” can generate knowledge and understanding (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 25). A qualitative research design allows the researcher to consider an integration of theories, concepts, goals, contexts, and/or beliefs to shape the topic and key constructs which sets the stage for a rigorous, systematic process of gathering and analyzing data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In selecting a research design, I considered a number of qualitative research designs: action research, case study research, ethnography, grounded theory research, narrative research, phenomenology, and basic qualitative research.

Action Research

Action research is based on a collaborative approach to research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researchers involved act as co-inquirers that take a shared responsibility for the overall research from research questions through data collection and analysis to reporting (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl (2021) described action research as a process of planning, action, observation, and reflection that takes place in a natural setting. Although the process of action research may work well for discovering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers’ personal and professional well-being and how the SEDS school district administrators can best support them, it is not suited for this

research because I am the only researcher. Therefore, action research was rejected as a research design for this study.

Case Study Research

Case study research involves studying a case or multiple cases as a means of understanding a problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), case study research is a mode of inquiry where the goal is to understand a “case.” A case may be a solid entity such as an individual, a group or an organization, or an entity bound by time and place such as a relationship, a community, or a decision-making process. The case study seeks to understand all components of a case: what it is, how it works, and how it interacts with the real world. Case study research tends to employ multiple data sources. As this study will not involve the examination of cases and multiple sources of data, it was not selected as a design for this study.

Ethnography

Ethnography focuses on in-person field studies where a researcher spends a significant amount of time in a setting with participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher is immersed in the environment to gain rich descriptive data. These data are collected through direct observation and field notes, informal interviews, participation in group activities, prolonged immersion in a setting, review of relevant sources of information, and engagement in discussion. Because I did not plan to immerse myself in the setting, I did not select ethnography as a design for my study.

Grounded Theory

Ravitch and Carl (2021) described grounded theory as an approach to qualitative research that involves specific, rigorous procedures to analyze data to produce a formal substantive theory of social phenomena. The goal of this study was to understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on EC teachers' personal and professional well-being and how that understanding might be used to assist SED school administrators in supporting EC teachers. The goal is not to develop a theory, so I did not select grounded theory research as a design for my study.

Narrative Research

Narrative research focuses on the experiences of individuals through the lens of a narrative (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl (2021) asserted that narrative research generally focuses on one or two individuals where data is collected through a "collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences" (p. 21). Although narrative research gives primacy to lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), it presents the challenge of providing only a partial story of the EC teachers' personal and professional well-being after the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, it was rejected as a design for this study.

Phenomenology

The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the essence of a given experience including what was experienced and how it was experienced (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Phenomenological research can include interviews, observations, and field notes. Through phenomenological research, a phenomenon is identified. An example of a

phenomenon is being a parent. As the goal of this research is not to identify a phenomenon, phenomenological research was rejected as a research design.

Basic Qualitative Research

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that basic qualitative design focuses on constructivism with an overall purpose of understanding how people make sense of their lives. In a basic qualitative study, meaning is not discovered but constructed. The researcher explores how people interpret experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Basic qualitative design works well when a researcher is interested in participants' perspectives and there is little qualitative research on the topic, helping the researcher explore the experience, the perspective, and the perceptions of those who have participated in a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). Thus, basic qualitative design is exploratory (Merriam, 2002). Because purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of EC teachers regarding their personal and professional well-being following the COVID-19 pandemic, a topic little researched, I determined that the basic qualitative design was the most appropriate design for this study.

Participants

For this research study, I used a purposeful sample of EC teachers from kindergarten through second grade. The sample was selected from the SEDS school district who were teaching from 2019 to the current school year. The sample teachers were selected from those elementary schools in the SEDS district that had the largest percentage of EC teacher turnover. The data collected provided information on the

personal and professional well-being of EC teachers who had taught from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Purposeful sampling increases the depth of understanding, credibility, trustworthiness, and rigor of the data (Campbell et al., 2020).

I selected 10 licensed EC teachers to conduct semistructured interviews. This number of EC teacher participants allowed for in-depth interviews where I could collect rich, thick detailed data. The collection of rich, thick detailed data allows the researcher to interpret and draw conclusions from the data (Tenny et al., 2022). Additionally, rich thick descriptions will help to establish transferability, which is a valuable element of the trustworthiness of qualitative research and an effective means of achieving external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Description of the Setting

The EC teachers were selected from the SESD school district in the southeastern part of the United States. SESD school district is one of the largest school districts in the southeast consisting of 81 elementary schools with a student enrollment of 177,401 students (U.S. News, 2023). The student population is comprised as follows: Hispanic/Latino, 32.3%; Black or African American, 19.4%; White, 11.2%; Asian or Asian Pacific Islander, 4.1%; two or more races, 0.2 %; Native American; and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In the SESD school district, 35.8% of students are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price meal program, and 22.7% of its students are English language learners. The teacher population consists of 11, 361 teachers of which 96.9% are licensed and 92.8% have 3 or more years of experience.

Access to Participants

When developing a sample for a qualitative study, careful attention is needed to gain access to relevant individuals (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). I used the following steps to gain access to the EC teacher participants.

1. I applied for IRB approval at Walden University to conduct research following the university guidelines (approval number 08-02-23-0383672).
2. After receiving Walden University's IRB approval, I applied for IRB approval from the SESD school district to invite its teachers to participate in my study.
3. After receiving IRB approval from the SESD school district, I obtained a list of names and emails of the EC teachers who teach in grades kindergarten through second in high teacher turnover schools and who have been teaching from 2019 through 2023 in the SESD school district.
4. Once the list was received, I invited the EC teachers to participate in the study. I was careful to ensure that the participants I selected were not teachers of whom I have any authority over.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

Recruiting participants is vital to the success of qualitative research and researchers must identify factors that may interfere with this process (Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). The recruitment of EC teachers in the SESD school district will follow these steps:

1. After gaining approval from the Walden IRB, I contacted the principals of high teacher turnover schools in the SESD school district to obtain a list of

names and email addresses of the EC teachers who teach in grades kindergarten through second grade and who have been teaching from at least 2019 to 2023.

2. After collecting the names of EC teachers who met the criteria, I sent an email inviting them to participate in the study along with a link to sign up for the interview. In the invitation, I provided the following information: the purpose of the study, the reason they were asked to participate, the rights of the participant, information about how their confidentiality will be protected, benefits of the research to the participants, and the informed consent form. I also informed them that they would receive a gift card in the amount of \$25 in appreciation for their participation if they were chosen for the study. They were provided with a link to schedule the interview if they were interested in participating in the study.
3. To ensure that I reached the desired sample of 10 to 12 EC teachers, I emailed the invitation to 100 EC teachers who met the criteria of having worked in the district from 2019 to 2023 along with an informed consent form.

Establishing a Working Relationship With Participants

Rapport is a relationship built on understanding, support, and mutual interest (Horsfall et al., 2021). Building rapport with participants motivates them to participate and to provide accurate statements in interviews (Horsfall et al., 2021). Rapport has a direct impact on the interactions of the researcher and the interviewee and the engagement of the participant (Horsfall et al., 2021). To build rapport, minimize barriers,

and establish a working relationship with participants (see Kraft et al., 2020), I conducted all aspects of the research in a professional manner that was respectful, showed integrity, and maintained confidentiality. My continued work establishing rapport and a working relationship with the participants consisted of the following:

1. Showing interest in the EC teachers' wellbeing by inquiring about their day and how they were feeling.
2. Being open and honest about the purpose of the study.
3. Assuring them of their rights and that they can withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable.
4. Reminding them that their information would remain confidential and that I would ensure this by assigning them a pseudonym.
5. Providing my contact information including my email address and cellphone number and letting the participants know they could contact me at any time.

Role of Researcher

In my role as a researcher, I did have a supervisory role with the participants, but I never had direct contact with the participants prior to the research. I worked to develop a working relationship with the participants by always being open and honest about the research process including the interview and the data analysis.

Consideration of Ethical Issues

Ethics is a method, procedure, or perspective for analyzing complex problems and issues and deciding how to act in response (Resnik, 2020). As a researcher, one must commit to ethical behavior to ensure trust in the research (Resnik, 2020). There are

ethical norms in research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. These norms create boundaries against fabricating, falsifying, or misrepresenting research data (Resnik, 2020). This research involved cooperation and coordination among many different people and could not have happened without the trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness that come about because of ethical norms (Resnik, 2020). In keeping with these ethical norms, I provided participants with an informed consent form that clearly outlined the purpose of the study, communication procedures, and the data collection process. To protect the confidentiality, I did the following: (a) used a pseudonym for the name of the district and the participants; (b) kept all data collected on a password-protected computer; (c) made a plan to keep all data for 5 years before destroying as required by Walden University, and (d) ensured that the final draft does not have information in it that could lead to the identification of participants or the district (see Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Qualitative research helps to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts (Sutton & Zubin, 2015). After I reviewed the link that allowed interested teachers to schedule an interview, I provided the ZOOM link to join the interview. At the start of the interview, I asked for a verbal consent for the interview. I conducted the virtual interview from a private conference room to avoid disruptions and to maintain privacy and confidentiality. I asked the participants to situate themselves in a private space. Before the interviewing process, I reiterated to the participants that our work together would remain confidential and that their names would not be used in the study. I also informed

the participants that all data collected would be de-identified and assigned a number or a pseudonym. Throughout the interview process, I practiced active listening strategies such as giving the interviewee my undivided attention, paying attention to body language, and clarifying and paraphrasing the information provided (Cuncic, 2022). I demonstrated respect by being punctual and staying within the time allotted for the interview.

The Interview Process

Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommended that qualitative interviews focus on the research questions. This will enable the researcher to receive in-depth and detailed answers that will be helpful to explain and to provide descriptions to make the research topic real for readers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The virtual interview was conducted using ZOOM and also recorded with my cell phone in case there were any issues with the zoom recording. I used an interview guide (see Appendix B) which included an introduction and specific and carefully designed open-ended questions to engage the interviewee and to encourage information sharing to collect rich thick data to answer the research questions.

Throughout the interviewing process, I listened intently, paid attention, and responded to body language as well as adhered to a timeline for the interview. To ensure accuracy, I recorded all the interviews using the ZOOM system. I also created a backup recording using my Smartphone. Recording the interview makes it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview content and the verbal prompts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used a reflective journal to record any observations and to document any thoughts or ideas during the interview.

Organizing and Managing Data

Once the interview was completed, I transcribed the information from the interview into a Google document that was password protected on my computer. Each Google document included the date and time of the interview, the participant's pseudonym, the years they have worked before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the grade they taught. After completing the transcription, I analyzed it to ensure that it accurately reflected the recording. Before finalizing the transcript, I sent it to the participant to verify its accuracy. After the transcripts was verified by the participants, I used my journal to record any changes requested by the participants.

Data Analysis Results

This qualitative research study was designed to explore the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can best support teachers so that they can work effectively to meet the needs of students post-pandemically. To answer the two research questions, I interviewed ten kindergarten to second-grade elementary teachers. I began the analysis by reading and rereading the data. Then I coded the data and analyzed the codes to derive categories. Finally, I analyzed the categories to identify codes.

For the first round of coding, I coded the data from each of the transcripts using preliminary codes developed from the research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review (see Appendix C). Bailey (2007) asserted that preliminary codes help to identify recurring or key issues. I read and reread the transcripts multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. I coded each transcript using the preliminary codes.

For the second round of coding, I analyzed the codes to develop the categories.

Then I analyzed the categories which resulted in four themes.

The research questions that were addressed by this qualitative study were:

RQ1: What are EC teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment (2021-present)?

RQ 2: What are EC teachers' perceptions of how the SEDS administration could better support them in the post-pandemic era in regard to positive emotions, engagement (involvement in the work), relationships, meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment?

Analysis of Data From EC Teachers

Data analysis of the SEDS EC teachers' responses revealed four themes: (1) EC teachers perceived that their professional well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover, (2) EC teachers perceived that their personal well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover, (3) EC teachers perceived the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues and support for the work needed to meet student needs is inadequate and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being., and (4) EC teachers perceived that they lacked parental and community support in order to collaboratively meet students' needs and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being.

Table 1 displays the preliminary codes, categories, and the four themes that were the result of the data analysis. Column 1 shows the preliminary codes that were used to

capture segments of data that were significant to answering the research questions.

Column 2 displays the categories developed from the preliminary codes. The categories were created to help classify the segments of data from the preliminary codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships to assist in identifying themes related to the research questions. The third column shows the four themes that were derived from organizing the categories into a theoretical form that answers the research questions.

Table 1*Codes, Categories, and Themes From the EC Teachers' Interview Responses*

Preliminary Code	Categories	Theme
EC Teacher Professional Wellbeing	EC teachers perceived that post-pandemic expectations for teaching, expectations for student achievement, and expectations for teacher knowledge have changed and intensified.	EC teachers perceived that their professional well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover.
EC Teacher Personal Wellbeing	EC teachers perceived that they were feeling stressed, frustrated, and overworked because of extra work because of additional expectations of administration and parents.	EC teachers perceived that their personal well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover.
EC Teacher Need for Administrative Support	EC teachers perceived that they were lacking support to deal with student behavioral issues, engagement, and learning, to meet parental expectations, to build relationships with colleagues, and to build their professional knowledge.	EC teachers perceived the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs is inadequate, and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being.
EC Teacher Need for Parental Support	EC teachers perceived that they lacked effective parental support regarding student behavior, student engagement, and student learning.	EC teachers perceived that they lacked parental and community support to address students' needs and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being.

SESD Theme 1: EC Teachers Perceived That Their Professional Well-Being Was Negatively Affected by the Pandemic and Has Yet to Recover

EC teachers perceived that post-pandemic expectations for teaching, expectations for student achievement, and expectations for teacher knowledge have changed negatively and intensified because of the pandemic. These expectations require teachers to address the needs of students who have learning loss from the pandemic as well as teach the grade level expectations. For example, Participant 1 stated the expectations of her teaching had shifted to a focus on teaching the standard grade level curriculum to students who were not at grade level. Participant 1 stated “The purpose of teaching has shifted because now the purpose is not only on what it was pre-pandemic but there is also a big purpose now on helping these kids who have these huge achievement gaps. There is more work now.”

Participant 2 stated that the expectations for teacher knowledge have changed since the pandemic. For example, it is expected now for teachers to meet the learning needs of more students and to be able to use more interventions for reading and math. Participant 2 stated:

I now differentiate with reading and math groups. I look at the students’ growth from when they started until now. I examine their data. I’m looking at different websites and doing research to come up with different activities that would address the needs of my students to help them achieve. Participant 2 stated, “I just feel now that since the pandemic students really need great teachers to help push them to where they need to be and to help build their foundation.”

Participant 3 conveyed that in the post-pandemic era, she is required to attend more meetings than before. For example, EC teachers have little time during the day to plan for instruction due to the many meetings they are required to attend. Participant 3 stated:

there are big gaps in their learning...So now we're trying to play catch up, and that's exhausting. That's so exhausting. I carry work home because the work is unending.... My day is filled with so many meetings that I have to stay after to prepare for my students. I get to work at 6:30 or 7:00 AM and I stay until 6:00 or 6:30 or 7:00 PM... that's crazy. The salary is low, and I have to use my personal money for supplies. It is stressful, hard, and tough.

Participant 3 also stated that the extra work brings more stress and panic to the job of teaching which affects her well-being. Participant 3 stated:

I'm going to do whatever they ask me to do because I have to keep going. I'm not young enough that I could make a decision to change my life's career. I'm going to try really hard to not let the stress and panic of doing the extra they ask of me affect me to the point where it's going to really affect my health. I'm knocking on the door of retirement. I'm 59. I'll be 60 in December. Despite that, I will keep trying to let each child know that I see them for what they are.

Participant 4 described that her well-being was affected because she is now in an environment where it takes more planning and preparation to get herself ready for students every day. She explained that teachers have to know more instructional strategies to meet students' needs. Participant 4 stated: "I have to make sure I am ready

for my students even if it means I work at home. It becomes frustrating, especially with the group of kids that I teach.”

Participant 5 stated that there is overwhelming pressure to address the learning gaps caused by the pandemic and to support the academic, social, and emotional needs of students in the post-pandemic era. Participant 5 stated:

As a teacher, I have to slow down to teach the whole child which means I have to meet students on a personal level and to get to know them better at an instructional level. I feel like the pressures have been a lot more intense on what is required of teachers to help students, especially to bridge the gap between students and the learning that they missed during the pandemic. This group of students that I have now were in pre-K when the pandemic began. There is so much pressure to catch them up and to address the gap caused by the pandemic.

Participant 5 also stated there is a new curriculum, new standards, new demands to meet the needs of all students, and different student behaviors to deal with which adds more pressure to teaching. Participant 5 stated:

There is pressure from other aspects like a new curriculum and new literacy standards... some students being further behind than others. That pressure feels very heavy sometimes because I feel like sometimes, we are naturally drawn to go to the students who are low or well below to try to catch them back up... It's like a tug of war. Then there are some behaviors to deal with that are a little bit different than before the pandemic. Everyone just really trying to survive.

Participant 6 and Participant 7 reported that expectations to support student

achievement have increased because of learning gaps which puts more pressure on the job of teaching and makes it more stressful. Participant 6 stated, “Because we have a lot of students with no knowledge of the basics, it makes it hard to teach the 1st-grade curriculum. We are teaching both kindergarten and 1st grade standards. We are trying to teach the kindergarten skills they missed while also teaching the first-grade skills.

Participant 7 stated:

Some kids were out for a full year or more. We need a reset. Parents do not understand how much was lost during the pandemic. Since the pandemic, I spend my time supporting students differently. I spend time monitoring growth with students and being strategic about how to spread my time to support students. Trying to catch up these students requires me to be intentional and strategic. I realize that I have to provide grace for growth ... That adds a lot of pressure on me professionally.

Participant 8 expressed that the expectations for teaching have shifted from teaching the 1st-grade level curriculum to teaching the curriculum from preschool and kindergarten due to learning missed during the pandemic. Participant 8 stated:

I have students who have not attended preschool or kindergarten. Because of this, it feels like there are multiple grade levels in one classroom. I am definitely seeing lots of gaps. I am having to plan for where they are and having to make huge adjustments from what we know as a regular first-grade. I have to back up a little bit and think about what skills they do not have. I have to plan for that before I can even get to the first-grade skills. This makes it harder to teach. Participant 9

reported that the expectations for teaching and the expectations for student achievement have changed so much that she is now looking at positions outside of teaching. Participant 9 stated:

I have students in 2nd grade who do not know their alphabet. I want to learn and help them grow. I want them to succeed, but I am not sure what that looks like anymore. I am not sure the goals set for a second grader are attainable for a student who does not know the alphabet. I just feel like the goal keeps getting farther and farther away and it is not attainable. Teaching in these conditions is too much and I am suffering. I feel like I have given all I had left to give. In this current year, I have been doing research on what other positions are available outside of teaching for someone with a teaching degree and with experience.

Participant 10 expressed that teaching has always been a stressful occupation.

However, post-pandemic, the stress is even greater. Participant 10 stated:

Teaching is always going to be harsh and stressful. You have to have a passion and a love for it to maintain. I see students with learning gaps but I am not sure that all of the learning gaps are due to the pandemic.... you will get some students, maybe not an overwhelming amount, but you will get students that will come to 1st grade that have never been to school at all. You will also get students who have never been to pre-K or kindergarten. Those students are already behind students who attended both pre-K and kindergarten. We as teachers have to understand this process in order to support them. I feel like no matter the grade level, we are going to always have students that are behind. ... We have to do

what's achievable and create achievable goals to help the students where they are. I think that if we are able to create those achievable goals and kind of understand the process of it all, then I think that it would help us put our minds at ease a little bit more.

SESD Theme 2: EC Teachers Perceived That Their Personal Well-Being Was Negatively Affected by the Pandemic and Has Yet to Recover

EC teachers perceived that they were feeling stressed, frustrated, and overworked because of the additional responsibilities from administrators to support students who had missed some learning during the pandemic. Participant 1 reported that the additional responsibilities required to address the learning missed by students during the pandemic have caused stress, frustration, and a feeling of being overworked. She stated that many EC teachers are having to work during their personal time and family time to meet the demands of these additional responsibilities. Participant 1 described this as follows:

I think there's pressure for more engagement because there are so many kids who have achievement gaps due to the pandemic...there's a different type of drive because you feel as if you're trying to catch kids up who have these huge achievement gaps... I think pre-pandemic I was all in 100%. I was fully engaged in helping kids. Post-pandemic, I'm still engaged in helping kids, but the work is just different... these kids have those achievement gaps because of a situation that they had no control over...So the engagement changed because empathy is now there and the responsibility is great. I am not putting myself first. I put the well-being of my students first. For instance, I will go to work sick not thinking maybe

I need to take off to rest. I find myself saying, I need to go to work, or I need to go to school really so that I can teach these kids so that they don't have a substitute. When my child plays baseball, I find myself cutting out laminated anchor charts at the game. I remember seeing other teachers at practices grading papers or doing work that was clearly teacher work.

Participant 2 reported that administrators expect teachers to differentiate their teaching of math and reading to meet the needs of students in the post-pandemic era. This expectation to differentiate teaching requires that teachers determine the needs of individual students and develop activities and strategies for individual students.

Participant 2 stated that EC teachers are not being provided the time to plan and prepare for differentiation and this is an added stress to the role of teaching. Participant 2 stated:

I now have to differentiate more with reading and math. I'm looking at different websites and doing research to come up with different activities that would pinpoint the needs of my students to help them achieve. Administrators require us to attend classes or professional learning back-to-back with different speakers coming in. I think this is a waste of my time and unnecessary because these classes and professional learning are on things that I already know since I have been in education a long time. Administrators need to keep in mind that teachers are human too and teachers have families. We need time to plan for these extra things. Don't interrupt our planning time. We already have to give up our planning time for meetings. When they take our planning time, teachers have to bring a lot of work home and this affects our personal well-being.

Participant 3 detailed feeling tired and exhausted because the work required to teach in the post-pandemic era is more demanding. Participant 3 stated, “I am tired. The work is difficult, and the demand is so much. Because I am a conscientious teacher, I feel I have to learn all of these new things and new platforms to teach students now. It’s a little difficult. I think teachers are tired because the demand is so much. It’s exhausting”.

Participant 4 described that the urgent need to accommodate students at their individual levels in the post-pandemic era is of such magnitude that it leaves little room for personal well-being. This circumstance is compounded by diminished parental engagement, thereby necessitating an increased burden on educators. Participant 4 stated:

I get so wrapped up my in my school work and wrapped up into my kids that I forget to take care of myself. It becomes frustrating, especially with the group of kids that I teach. It becomes frustrating because, before COVID, I had more parental involvement. Now after COVID, I see a lack of parental involvement. The students just come as is. There is no accountability for the parents. It all seems like it’s all on the teachers and it becomes frustrating, and I am tired. I’m not excited about going to work, and I feel stressed going to work.

Participant 5 reported that the pressure to teach students is more intense and the expectations for teachers to address learning gaps for students is greater. There are measures that have been put in place to meet students’ emotional needs following the pandemic, but nothing is being done to support teachers’ emotional needs even with the increased expectations placed on teachers to address student learning gaps. Participant 5 stated:

I feel like the pressures have been a lot more intense of what is required of teachers to help bridge the gap for students and the learning that they missed during the pandemic. I am a second-grade teacher, the group I have right now was in pre-K when the pandemic happened. Every grade that I've had since then has been affected. Next year will be the first year of kids that wouldn't have been affected. But the pressures of catching them back up or trying to determine if this is a gap because of COVID or because there's something else going on is intense. I feel like we hear so much talk of whether we are meeting students' emotional needs. Sometimes I just don't always feel like we're meeting teachers' needs. When I think about my day, I arrive before the students arrive. Sometimes, I go all day completely without having a single break. Even when we have planning time, it is taken up with CLT meeting. We walk into these CLT meetings to have these deep, engaging conversations about supporting students who are so needed. But I might have just had a kid have an emotional breakdown 5 minutes prior to the meeting and I'm having to reshift my brain to clear. CLT meetings are very important because I walk away with what I need to support students. Then I have lunch duty and recess duty. It's like we don't ever get a minute to breathe.

Participant 6 described being more exhausted and more worried about how to support students because the students need so much more to be successful. Participant 6 stated:

Because we have a lot students with no knowledge of the basics, it makes it hard to teach the 1st grade curriculum. We are teaching both kindergarten and 1st

grade standards. We are trying to teach the kindergarten skills they missed while also teaching the first-grade skills. I am more exhausted since the pandemic mentally. I am constantly worried about what I need to do to support students. I still like what I do but would love to move a different grade level. I have been teaching 1st grade for 9 years. For the younger students, there is a lot more put on us because we are the foundation for students, and that has become even harder since the pandemic.

Participant 7 explained that educators are confronted with a greater responsibility to provide enhanced support to students in the post-pandemic era. This necessitates a conscientious approach wherein teachers are required to closely monitor student progress and employ strategic actions to facilitate student advancement. Additionally, Participant 7 described academic regression among students due to the pandemic-induced disruptions. These disruptions require teachers to address learning that students missed the pandemic while concurrently addressing current grade-level benchmarks. Such an endeavor, which demands synchronization between bridging academic gaps and adhering to current curricular requirements, can be perceived as unattainable. Participant 7 stated:

Since the pandemic, I have to continually monitor growth with students and be strategic about how to spread my time to support students. Trying to catch students up requires me to be intentional and strategic. I have to provide grace for growth even though they have not reached the goal. Parents and leaders don't understand the work involved in catching kids up and teaching the current standards. Even when you reach out, there is no support. I feel devalued and the

dollar and cents don't add up. They will extend the deadline, but the expectations seem unrealistic...my emotions need support. I am thinking I can do something else besides teaching.

Participant 8 articulated a sense of defeat and heightened stress stemming from the escalated expectations imposed upon educators to provide comprehensive support to students within the post-pandemic context. Administrators, in particular, expect EC teachers to implement substantial instructional adjustments aimed at addressing both the academic deficits accrued during the pandemic and the requisite skill sets pertinent to the respective grade levels. Participant 8 stated:

There are a lot of conversations [about] differentiating activities and lessons and planning to meet student needs. We all have many students in each class that are falling behind. Before the pandemic, there was only one kid that we felt was really falling behind and that was not a big concern. Now after the pandemic, there are 10 or almost half of your class that you feel like are falling behind and needing extra support. It really changes the conversation to how do we get those kids to make a year's worth of growth...That's kind of a huge shift for teachers. Many of us have students that are not expected to be where they should be at the end of first grade... When they come in only knowing a few kindergarten skills, they should leave us with a full year's worth of skills which in that case is kindergarten skills - not kindergarten and first-grade skills. It's hard and stressful and it makes you feel a little defeated because you're not going to get them where you'd like them to be. It's still a year's worth of growth...

Participant 9 stated that teachers have been more stressed since the pandemic because of an increased workload that requires them to attend to students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs in addition to teaching academics. Participant 9 stated:

Teaching has always been stressful and a lot of work and a lot of hours. Now there is additional pressure and stressors and expectations. Before COVID I was, on anti-anxiety medication. Recently my doctor has increased my dosage of that medicine because teaching has just become so much and so overwhelming. Along with meeting the academic needs of the students, there's also, the social, emotional, and behavioral portion of it that we have to address... So not only are we teaching SEL [Social Emotional Learning], but we are also teaching academics. After the pandemic... Teachers are seeing more behaviors and a lot more severe behaviors from students. Personally, I'm very burnt out.

Participant 10 described that administrators had heightened expectations for teachers to lessen the learning deficits caused by the pandemic. However, Participant 10 expressed that these expectations should not prioritize teacher well-being. Participant 10 stated:

I have students who have never been to school because they didn't go to pre-K and they're already behind. [I am] expected to understand the process to support these students. [I] have to figure out what's achievable and create achievable goals to help the students... I know now, like if I don't feel well, I won't go to work versus before if I didn't feel well... I don't really show up as much because I just really believe that you should just stay home and take care of yourself.

SESD Theme 3: EC Teachers Perceived the Administrative Support Regarding Professional Development Opportunities, Meeting Parental Expectations, Building Relationships With Colleagues, and Meeting the Needs of Students Is Inadequate and Negatively Affects Their Professional and Personal Well-Being

EC teachers perceived that there is a need for more professional learning and support from administrators about how to meet parental expectations, how to build relationships with colleagues, and how to address the learning needs of students with learning loss caused by the pandemic. Participant 1 stated that EC teachers need individualized support and professional development since the pandemic. Participant 1 argued that support and professional learning should include compassion, care, empathy, and an understanding of the effect that the new demands for student academic support since the pandemic have had on teachers' well-being. Participant 1 stated:

The purpose has shifted some because now the purpose not only is what it was pre-pandemic, but a big purpose now is to help these kids who have these huge achievement gaps because they were home because they were scared to come to school, or because they had deaths in their families, or because they went through this pandemic. I have to help them close achievement gaps...With this new purpose, teachers need authentic genuine support... Administrators need to know that the pandemic changed me emotionally so I need more compassion, caring, understanding, and empathy. I need individual support and authentic communication...to help me fulfill my purpose as a teacher because the pandemic changed my mindset on a few things.

Participant 2 expressed that teaching and learning resources have to be shared among the teachers because there are not enough for each teacher. Participant 2 stated, “I think that the administrator could give the team some things that are needed in the classroom. Normally when they give things, they just give it to the grade level chair. But they need to make sure [they] provide everything for all of the teachers on the team. Not just the grade level chair.”

Participant 3 experienced a situation after returning to the classroom after the pandemic. Administrators who were displeased with student standardized testing results berated the teachers and blamed them for not doing enough to help students learn. Participant 3 argued that administrators and districts should support teachers rather than berate them when the students do not meet the testing standards of the grade level because leading with fear and intimidation is not what teachers need. Participant 3 stated:

I know every level [in education] has [its] stress and [its] challenges. I mean, I see it with my principal. There is an incredible amount of stress all the time. Some [principals] lead with fear and intimidation. They don't know how to lead... a lot of people don't realize what the heck we did during the pandemic. Then you get back now and there's no forgiveness at all. We got our state test scores back at our school. Our students did not do well. They look at the low test scores and it is all about the scores. Because our scores were so low, we were really reamed. I know they're busy too. I'm not undermining the work that they have to do. As teachers, we never get a chance to even talk about this stuff or share this stuff. And...nobody gets to hear about student behavior that is off the charts... Nobody

gets to hear about the work it takes to do this new core curriculum and all the standardized tests or about all of the stress to keep up.

Participant 3 and Participant 4 stated that there is a lack of support from parents, and it is affecting students and their engagement in school and their success. Teachers need administrative support to build parental and community involvement to help support students. Participant 3 stated:

I'm feeling a big difference between [the situation now and what was happening before] when parents wanted to see the work their child's doing and asking questions [about their work] and getting involved. That has been big. I feel like I'm just in it on my own. I just felt like that partnership with parents is not as genuine anymore, and that kind of makes me sad. It puts all the pressure back on me. It sure would be nice to get some support from parents because it shows the children that school is important. If they don't see their parents valuing it, they're not going to value it. They're not.

Participant 4 stated:

You know, we dumped on the teachers, and it becomes very stressful, but it's like, where do we hold the parents accountable? I send examples home or even a video recording so the parents can see. Then, I saw how many parents actually viewed the video, and it's frustrating. I can only do so much within the seven and a half or eight hours at school...I give the parents the resources to help them at home, but they don't. Most of my parents only worry about behavior anyway. I don't think they really understand the importance of helping their child at home.

Participant 5 reported that there is an expectation for EC teachers to meet the emotional needs of students in addition to their academic needs after the pandemic but there is little administrative support to meet teachers' emotional needs. Participant 5 stated:

If we're being asked to meet students' emotional needs, how are we able to do that if we're not even meeting our own emotional needs...So if we are going to be meeting these students' emotional needs, then we need to make sure that the teachers are in a good mindset...there are a lot of teachers who are not. Some of it's COVID and some of it's just other stuff with the new curriculum and new standards. We're still one person and one human trying to take on a whole load in addition to having a personal family life.

Participant 6 described a perceived disconnect between the expectations of administrators regarding student support post-pandemic and the realities faced by EC teachers in addressing the learning loss caused by the pandemic. Additionally, Participant 6 reported a sentiment wherein administrators seem to delegate the responsibility of student support solely to teachers, thereby denouncing their own role in the process.

Participant 6 stated:

My purpose is still to get the students where they need to be so that can be successful. I think I have done well in making sure that my students show growth, although it is not what it looked like before the pandemic. The work is different now. Sometimes, I feel there is a disconnect between expectations and what is possible with students with these "pandemic gaps". We are in this together.

Administrators have to have patience and understanding that because of the load, we will be frustrated. Teachers may need more mental health days... because the work is different. We are having to teach kindergarten and 1st grade in the same year... Maybe it would be better if [administrators] come in and see what we are experiencing. They need to see the full picture... if the administration could give 30 minutes to help inspire the students once a week - even if it is only 15 minutes. That support would help so much.

Participant 7 communicated that after the pandemic, expectations for EC teachers shifted to a requirement for teaching the whole child. With this shift in expectations for students, Participant 7 shared that there has to be a shift in support for EC teachers such as incentives for working over contract hours, extra personnel to assist with tasks and student behaviors, and providing the necessary resources and supplies. Participant 7 stated:

Academically, we are now teaching the whole child. SEL [Social Emotional Learning] is very important for the students and their growth. The pandemic did a number on their social skills... In turn, students are struggling socially.

Administrators need to be responsive and proactive to support teachers and they can't forget what it is like to be in the classroom. It would be great if they listened to suggestions and gave extra incentives for hours worked after contract hours because there are not enough hours in the day to do all the things needed to support students now. They could offer extra support or extra hands-on deck and have resources and basic supplies available so teachers don't have to come out of

pocket for these things.

Participant 8 reported that she was struggling to support students. Participant 8 expressed a need for administrators to provide guidance and support on what is expected to teach students, the new curriculum, and the new standards in the post-pandemic era.

Participant 8 stated:

I think just being prepared and knowing how to help the students and ...knowing that there's a plan and there's lessons and there's materials and resources. And not feeling so lost...The students are so behind, and administrators know that there's been all these things that the students have missed out on or didn't get the opportunity to participate in...I can make goals for [students] and I can see to the goals being met, but there is now, more pressure on teachers. It is just part of our system now. There are just gaps that we have to fill in. Teachers need the administrators to insert themselves and say this is our expectation. This is where we want you to start. Assess them this way, collect your data, and then once you're done collecting your data. Now you have groups. Then, let's talk about what we're going to do in small groups in any subject, in reading and in math.

Participant 9 described a new workload for teachers that includes supporting students with learning loss caused by the pandemic as well as learning and teaching a new reading curriculum but there is not an effective plan in place on how to implement either of these initiatives. Participant 9 stated:

Administrators need to have a plan created... I think the district and the administrators could just ask the teacher if this is reasonable. I feel like a lot of

people at the top are making a plan, but they have been out of the classroom so long that they don't understand that plan is not going to take the amount of time they think it's going to take or the amount of resources they think it's going to take. Then that expectation or that plan becomes overwhelming.

Participant 10 argued that EC teachers need a solid foundation and individualized support regarding addressing students' gaps in learning in the post-pandemic era.

Participant 10 stated:

Administrators need to provide support for teachers like they want us to provide support for our students with special needs or our students who are language learners. It could be the coaches coming in and leading a small group for you or leading a large group to help you in those ways. It would be not just giving you suggestions, but actively showing you or reaching out to the right people to support you. I've been in a situation several times where the assistant principals reach out to me and they want to have another teacher come to my class to observe me to help them or to support them with different things. That support is more individualized and that's kind of what we try to make sure that students get - support based on their needs. Why aren't teachers treated the same?

SESD Theme 4: EC Teachers Perceived That They Lacked Parental and Community Support to Address Students' Needs and It Negatively Affected Their Professional and Personal Well-Being

EC teachers expressed a need for effective parental collaboration in matters pertaining to student conduct, involvement, and academic progression, since the onset of

the pandemic.

Participant 1 reported that parents did not know how to teach and support their children at home during the pandemic which has caused students to have learning gaps. She perceived that parental is lower than before the pandemic. Participant 1 stated:

I think during the pandemic parents realized they couldn't teach their kids. They realized that teachers really work really hard... These kids have these huge achievement gaps because they were home and parents did not know how to teach them... I have to help them. I have to close those achievement gaps... there's more work now. I felt like during the pandemic, our whole country was kind of like "We're here for each other". Then we came back after the pandemic ... we have little help from parents and the community.

Participant 3 perceived that a portion of the academic regression observed in students can be attributed to deficient parental involvement since the pandemic. Certain parents expressed discomfort in assuming an active role in their children's education during this period. When students resumed in-person instruction, there was a reluctance among parents to engage in the educational process, noticeably impeding the progress of students. Participant 3 stated:

Parents, especially with the lower grades, had to be there assisting students during the pandemic. Many of them were just complaining saying the work was too much and they couldn't keep on this way. That was another thing that the teachers had to do... help the parents as well. Now parents don't want to do anything at home to help their kids. Some parents are saying that's what teachers get paid for.

They get paid to do the work with my child... I feel like I'm just in it on my own for the most part. With this added pressure of trying to get students where they need to be without parental support or as much support as I used to get is overwhelming ...

Participant 4 and Participant 5 articulated that EC teachers are experiencing heightened levels of stress and a diminished desire to fulfill their professional duties due to the noticeable decline in parental involvement since the onset of the pandemic.

Participant 4 stated:

It becomes frustrating, especially with the group of kids that I teach. It becomes frustrating because even before COVID, we had more parental involvement than we do now after COVID. I am seeing a lack of parental involvement. The students just come as is, and there is no accountability from the parents. It seems like it's all on the teachers and it becomes frustrating. I'm not excited about going to work. I feel stressed going to work.

Participant 5 stated:

I feel like the pressures have been a lot more intense of what is required of teachers to help, especially to bridge the gap for students and the learning that they missed and it seems as though the family involvement has gone down. As difficult as COVID was, there were some perks that it did bring out where we could get more parent involvement. Now, it's so different... parent involvement has been really down...Parents are still coming to the [fun] things like dances and stuff, but important things like Open House and Curriculum Night they are not

showing up. In the past two years since the pandemic, I've had three to four families for Curriculum Night. For Open House, where parents meet the teacher, I think only 2/3 of my class came where it used to be like almost 100%... parents don't want to be as involved in school which adds pressure to teachers who are now required to help bridge the gap for students and the learning that they missed.

Participant 10 conveyed that there has been a discernible decrease in parental involvement post-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. Participant 10 emphasized that this decrease is discouraging due to the crucial role of parental support in students' progress and achievement. Participant 10 stated:

I think that I have always been a teacher who has been very active and engaged with parents prior to the pandemic...I can say that after COVID, I feel like that engagement fell off a little bit on the parents' side. Now I can see the [parental] engagement is picking up again...which is good because we see gaps in student knowledge...we need parents' help to address these gaps...

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can best support teachers so that they work effectively in the post pandemic era. In order to address this purpose, I asked two research questions:

RQ1: What are EC teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment (2021-present)?

RQ 2: What are EC teachers' perceptions of how the SEDS administration could better support them in the post-pandemic era in regard to positive emotions, engagement (involvement in the work), relationships, meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment? In what follows, I will discuss how the findings relate to the conceptual framework and how the findings confirm or disconfirm the research presented in the literature review.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that informed this study was Seligman's (2012) multidimensional PERMA model. Seligman argues that employees' wellbeing consists of the pursuing and attainment of one or more of the five following elements: Positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and sense of accomplishment. Seligman (2012) argued that positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment are essential for employees' well-being and that a presence of each of these would increase well-being. Seligman noted that positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment are related to intrinsic values that are essential parts of human nature. Seligman hypothesized that having intrinsic aspirations/goals toward attaining positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment would increase well-being of people in the workplace. Employees with increased well-being achieve more, have greater levels of success within a particular domain. Additionally, Seligman noted that increased well-being builds strength and contributes to mental health and provides a buffer against depression.

Four themes emerged from my study: (1) EC teachers perceived that their professional well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover, (2) EC teachers perceived that their personal well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover, (3) EC teachers perceived the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues and support for the work needed to meet student needs is inadequate and negatively affects their professional and personal well-being and (4) EC teachers perceived that they lacked parental and community support to address students' needs and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being. Each of these themes relate to the five elements of Seligman's (2012) multidimensional PERMA model. Seligman argued these elements are essential for employees' well-being. Additionally, when employees have intrinsic aspirations/goals toward attaining positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment, their well-being is increased (Seligman, 2012). It was found that all of these elements underlie optimal human functioning (Kun et al., 2017). When these elements are not present, the well-being of working people is negatively impacted which can cause depression, job dissatisfaction, a lack of fulfillment and pride in their work, as well as a lack of confidence, contentment, hope, serenity, trust, and feelings of success in their work (Seligman, 2012).

Madeson (2017) argued that there was a significant alignment between each of the PERMA components and an individual's physical health and vitality (personal well-being), job and life satisfaction (professional well-being), and his/her commitment within an organization. My study found that EC teachers' personal and professional well was

negatively affected by the pandemic and that many had considered leaving the teaching profession.

Positive Emotions

When an individual has more positive emotions with little negative emotion and the ability to amplify the intensity and duration of positive emotions, he/she has a buffer against depression (Seligman, 2012). Seligman asserted that life is about successfully pursuing positive emotions about the present, past, and future. These positive emotions can provide satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride, serenity, hope and optimism, faith, trust, and confidence. My study found that EC teachers were feeling stressed, exhausted, and overwhelmed by the expectations from administrators to address student learning gaps caused by the pandemic and the lack of parental support. EC teachers were not feeling satisfied with their jobs as teachers and were open to finding jobs outside of teaching.

Engagement

Engagement occurs when an employee is presented with a challenge to complete a task and has the ability and skill to meet the challenge (Seligman, 2012). In my study, I found that EC teachers perceived that they were unable to meet the challenges or expectations required by administrators for teaching in the post-pandemic era. After the pandemic, teaching now included addressing student learning gaps caused by the pandemic in addition to teaching the curriculum. EC teachers perceived that they needed professional development to meet these expectations.

Relationships

Relationships, especially those that are positive, have an overall effect on employees' well-being (Seligman, 2012). The findings of my study confirmed that EC teachers perceived a need for relationships with their colleagues in order to collaborate to support students. EC teachers recognized that they could not do the work of supporting students after the pandemic without collaboration with each other. EC teachers also perceived that they needed administrative support regarding building relationships with colleagues.

Meaning

Meaning is attained by using one's signature strengths (Seligman, 2012). Seligman described signature strengths as characteristic activities in which people are especially "good" or "strong". My study found that EC teachers perceived that supporting students in the post-pandemic era involved researching and implementing new strategies to address student learning gaps. EC teachers perceived that they were not "good" or "strong" when implementing these new strategies and expressed a need for professional learning and resources to support students.

Sense of Accomplishment

Seligman (2012) defined accomplishment in terms of achievement, success, or mastery at the highest level possible within a particular domain. Seligman stressed that accomplishment is attached to motivation for mastery and competence. EC teachers perceived that their work with students following the pandemic was not providing a sense of accomplishment. Instead, it was causing them to feel stressed and overwhelmed.

Additionally, EC teachers perceived that their success and sense of accomplishment are now tied to their ability to support students with learning gaps caused by the pandemic while also teaching the current grade-level curriculum.

The Literature Review

The literature review showed (a) that COVID-19 negatively affected teachers' well-being, (b) that teachers' well-being is critical for schools and educational systems, (c) that there was an increase in anxiety and depression for EC teachers following the pandemic, and (d) that teachers' well-being is an important component for students' academic outcomes.

COVID-19 Negatively Affected EC Teachers' Well-Being

Jalongo (2021) argued that the pandemic threatened teachers' quality of life and wellness and caused the restructuring of teaching practices to address student learning needs. The threats to the quality of life and wellness after the pandemic-imposed challenges to early childhood education. Lafave et al. (2021) found that teaching practices were negatively affected by the expectations and the need to adjust teaching to support the post-pandemic needs of students. The findings of my study confirmed that EC teachers' practices were negatively affected by the pandemic, and they were expected to do more and to make adjustments to meet the needs of students due to learning loss caused by the pandemic.

Teachers' Well-Being Is Critical for Schools and Educational Systems

Dreer (2022) noted that teachers' well-being is critical for schools and educational systems. Research shows that teacher well-being is directly linked to a teacher's ability to

undertake appropriate academic strategies and methods which can bring about improved student participation and academic achievement (Dreer, 2022; Song,2021). Additionally, Eadie et al. (2021) argued that supporting EC teachers' well-being is essential for retaining teachers. The findings of my study confirmed that EC teachers perceived that the pandemic negatively affected their professional and personal well-being. As a result, EC teachers reported that they do not see themselves remaining in the profession. Furthermore, EC teachers stated that the profession does not attract new teachers because of low pay, lack of community support, and lack of respect for teachers.

An Increase in Anxiety and Depression for EC Teachers Following the Pandemic

Shoshana and Donahue (2021) found that teachers felt an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression post-pandemic with a large percentage noting they were seeking mental health supports. The findings presented in this study confirmed that EC teachers were stressed, overwhelmed, and had symptoms of anxiety after the pandemic. EC teachers perceived that the pressure and demands from administrators to address student learning gaps caused by the pandemic were exhausting and left them feeling defeated.

Teachers' Well-Being Is an Important Component for Students' Academic Outcomes

The research literature shows that teacher well-being is directly linked to a teacher's ability to undertake appropriate academic strategies and methods which can bring about improved student participation and academic achievement (Dreer, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Song,2021). EC teachers who experience positive well-being have been shown to be more attentive to the classroom environment and have the psychological resources to foster positive interactions with young children (Souto-

Manning & Melvin, 2022). The findings of my study confirmed that EC teachers' personal and professional well-being was negatively impacted by the pandemic which resulted in them not being able to provide the appropriate academic strategies and methods to bring about student academic achievement or to provide ongoing support for students or to create optimal learning environments for young children.

In summary, the findings presented in my study confirmed that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs was inadequate and that they needed parental and community support. According to the research in the literature review, support for EC teachers following a major event such as the pandemic is critical. Cassidy et al. (2019) indicated that in times of crisis (such as the pandemic), teachers are an important stabilizer for children. When EC teachers are faced with challenges to their own well-being, this stabilizer is at risk as well as children's development. Cassidy et al. (2019) described an important connection between the professional well-being of teachers and their students' emotional well-being and the quality of the classroom environment. Teachers' knowledge, classroom behaviors, and interactions with children are inseparable from teacher well-being.

The findings of my study revealed four themes. The first theme was that EC teachers perceive that their professional well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover. The second theme was that EC teachers perceive that their personal well-being was negatively affected by the pandemic and has yet to recover. The third theme was that EC teachers perceived the administrative support regarding

professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs is inadequate, and it negatively affects their professional and personal well-being. The fourth theme was that EC teachers perceived that they lacked parental and community support to address students' needs and it negatively affected their professional and personal well-being.

These findings confirmed Seligman's (2012) conceptual framework that positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of purpose are directly linked and are essential for well-being. EC teachers reported feelings of needing support to build relationships with colleagues as well as feelings of not being fully engaged in teaching students and wanting to try another career outside of teaching due to the new expectations after the pandemic. EC teachers stated that these feelings have brought on stress and exhaustion. Seligman suggested that attaining the elements of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment would increase well-being and that EC teachers will derive well-being from each of these five components to varying degrees. In comparison, when these elements are missing or not fully obtained, as found with EC teachers in this study, well-being is negatively affected.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Based on the findings of my study, a policy paper was determined to be the appropriate choice for this project. The policy paper will be presented to district leaders and administrators. A policy paper is beneficial when making recommendations for action to an educational system (Powell, 2012). When used for this purpose, a policy paper can provide recommendations for instructional implementation as well as academic knowledge and pedagogy to address a problem of practice in education (Powell, 2012). Findings of the study indicated that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs was inadequate and that they needed more adequate administrative, parental and community support. The goal of the policy paper is to make recommendations based on findings of the study to help SEDS district leaders and administration support EC teachers in the post-pandemic era in regard to positive emotions, engagement (involvement in the work), relationships, meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment. In this section, I provide an overview of the project for this study. Included in this overview are the rationale for choosing a policy paper, description and goals, a review of literature related to the project, implementation, and evaluation of the project, as well as implications for social change.

Rationale

In SEDS, district leaders and administrators had little knowledge and information regarding the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers

during the post-pandemic teaching environment. Using qualitative research methodology, I conducted semistructured interviews of 10 kindergarten through second grade teachers to explore their experiences in the postpandemic teaching environment. Findings from the data analysis showed that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs was inadequate and that they needed parental and community support. These inadequacies negatively impacted EC teachers personal and professional well-being. The policy paper provides district leaders and administrators with recommendations for making decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic.

Review of the Literature

The following literature review presents and discusses research relevant to the findings of my study and the content of this project that focused on providing recommendations to district leaders and administrators for supporting EC teachers' professional and personal well-being in the post-pandemic teaching environment. The sections that follow focus specifically on the research about (a) the content and structure of policy papers, (b) administrative support of EC teachers following the pandemic, (c) leadership best practices for improving the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers, (d) leadership best practices for teachers who teach students who have learning gaps and (e) leadership best practices for building and improving teacher relationships. To obtain background knowledge to inform my project, I reviewed literature that I found in the following databases provided by the Walden University's Library ProQuest, ERIC,

SAGE Journals, EBSCOHost, and Google Scholar. The following search terms were used for the literature review: *policy paper, position paper, teacher collaboration, administrative support for improving teacher well-being, administrative support for differentiated instruction, differentiated instruction, using data to support students, addressing student learning gaps, professional development opportunities for EC teachers, building relationships with colleagues, administrative support to meet student needs, parental support, community support, improving teaching well-being, support for EC teachers following the pandemic, and post-pandemic EC teacher support*. These search terms helped me to find a comprehensive collection of peer-reviewed articles and texts. I also reviewed literature that I found listed as references by the authors of the peer-reviewed literature.

Research Regarding the Content and Structure of Policy Papers

Powell (2012) described policy papers as “well-reasoned, visually appealing documents that resemble research papers” (p. 96). Policy papers are strategically crafted to garner support for an idea or to drive decision making. Policy papers offer an authoritative perspective to a problem and can provide leaders and decision makers of organizations and systems with an overview of the problem, targeted analysis, and actionable recommendations (Herman, 2013). Research suggests that policy papers can play an important role in promoting recommendations to address a problem identified through research and providing evidence and information from findings for an intended audience (Lyons & Luginland, 2014; Powell, 2012). Although the researcher has authority over the research that has been conducted on the issue or problem, the

researcher should be very attentive to the audience, the professional expectations of the targeted decision makers, and the structure and flow of the argument (Herman, 2013).

Administrative Support of EC Teachers Following the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created substantial challenges for EC teachers throughout the United States. The reduced social interactions and language input resulting from COVID-19 health measures and online instruction during the pandemic brought on socioemotional and academic challenges for young students (Li & Sun, 2023). There was a marked decline in language and literacy growth among young children, and EC teachers were not equipped to support young students affected by this decline (Li & Sun, 2023). There is a need to widen the focus on teachers' knowledge and expertise in language and literacy instructional strategies to support young students (Li & Sun, 2023). Further, teachers have also had to cope with new teaching demands with limited knowledge and resources to do so (McCarthy et al., 2022). Teachers experience increased demands to catch students up to meet educational benchmarks and EC teachers are expected to have the skillset to address the widened inequities in educational outcomes for minoritized students and those from lower-income communities brought on by the pandemic (McCarthy et al., 2022). The rising demands placed on EC teachers has produced traumatic stress levels for teachers, overwhelming them beyond their ability to cope emotionally, mentally, or physically (McCarthy et al., 2022). To provide support for teachers after the pandemic, educational leaders must be attentive to the imbalances in demands and resources that teachers face and the critical need to provide ongoing professional learning on teaching practices, resources and assessment (McCarthy et al.,

2022; Li & Sun, 2023). Much of the research conducted during the pandemic could provide crucial pathways for addressing this support (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Leadership Best Practices for Improving the Professional and Personal Well-Being of EC Teachers

After the pandemic, it is important for district leaders and administrators to support the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers as they face escalating challenges and stress associated with increased workloads to support students (Anderson et al., 2021). Since the pandemic, the typical demands and resources associated with being a teacher have intensified, leading to greater stress for teachers (McCarthy et al., 2022). Supporting the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers begins with district leaders and administrators having an understanding EC teacher stress, understanding how the pandemic exacerbated EC teacher stress, and understanding of what can be done after the pandemic to alleviate EC teacher stress and promote a healthy workplace (Anderson et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2022). A healthy workplace is one in which employees and leaders collaborate to promote an ongoing improvement process to ensure the health, safety of employees and the sustainability of the workplace (Anderson et al., 2021).

To alleviate EC teacher stress and promote a healthy workplace, researchers suggest to (a) recognize, reward and encourage supportive, inclusive team behaviors; (b) ensure employees have the resources to provide the high-quality support that they aspire to deliver; (c) prioritize learning and development opportunities as they are an essential investment in EC teachers' well-being; and (d) give teachers tools for addressing trauma

that they are experiencing from the challenges of the pandemic (Anderson et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2022). Exceptional professional well-being happens when there is a presence of a positive workplace culture, a feeling of satisfaction that comes with providing high-quality services, and the access to professional development opportunities including training and supervision (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Implementing strategies to improve the personal well-being of EC teachers should also be a concern for educational leaders, as this affects their teaching performance and their students' academic achievement (Kim & Gurvitch, 2020). For instance, participating in a sports-based activity program has been shown to have a positive impact on teachers' mental and personal well-being (Chekroud et al., 2018; Kim & Gurvitch, 2020; Puig-Ribera et al., 2015). Another approach to enhance their personal and professional well-being of EC is the implementation of mindfulness and aromatherapy-enhanced mindfulness. Research has shown that consistent use of mindfulness techniques reduces burnout and encourages wellness, self-awareness and self-regulation among teachers (Jennings et al., 2013; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Mindfulness is defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Cauchi & Falzon, 2023, p. 346). When individuals practice mindfulness, they are able to better understand themselves, others, and their surroundings which helps to promote a better social society (Cauchi & Falzon, 2023). Flook et al. (2013) found that when teachers use of mindfulness tools, their stress and burnout levels decrease (Flook et al., 2013).

Leadership Best Practices for Teachers Who Teach Students Who Have Learning Gaps

Students who have learning gaps are a common challenge in education (Scholl, 2024). Scholl (2024) asserted that learning gaps in education occur when students have not obtained the expected learning by a certain point in their education. There is a gap between what students are expected to know and what they know at a specific time (Scholl, 2024). One of the many challenges for district leaders and administrators following the pandemic is supporting EC teachers who teach students who have learning gaps. One approach to meet this challenge is providing EC teachers with professional development on how to serve the “whole person”.

The process for supporting the whole person begins with a deep understanding of the students and their specific strengths, aspirations, and needs (WestEd & Walrond, 2021). WestEd and Walrond (2021) maintained that this understanding should be grounded in data that goes deeper than the accountability data already being collected and include data on their cognitive development as well as their physiological, social, and emotional development. The data should be humanized, taking into account the context and the nuance of the student and family experiences. Additionally, teachers should work to identify strengths-based attributes of student, rather than focusing solely focused on student needs or learning gaps (WestEd & Walrond, 2021). For example, if a student is very proficient in technology use, then allowing that student to use technology to show his or her understanding of a concept instead of having the student submit to showing understanding using the standard assessment method.

Qu and Ogunkunle (2021) suggested that in order to enhance learning effectiveness of students, adaptive learning platform software may have to become a priority. Qu and Ogunkunle (2021) defined adaptive learning platform software as software that has the ability to assess a student's knowledge in a targeted subject and used the information from that assessment to identify learning gaps and to provide relevant learning materials to support the student's learning. Adaptive learning platform software has the ability to customize learning to address student learning gaps (Qu & Ogunkunle, 2021). However, Qu and Ogunkunle (2021) stressed that it is important to ensure that the adaptive learning platform software chosen is one that is capable of incorporating multiple learning resources such as video, audio, testing, objective test questions, exercises, and case studies into the curriculum to address multiple student learning attributes.

Zhang et al. (2020) affirmed that a major aim and reform effort across the contemporary education system is centered around Personalized Learning (PL). Personalized Learning is defined as efforts made by educational systems to personalize learning to address the increasing student diversity and to provide quality education for all students (Zhang et al., 2020). Early implementation of Personalized Learning emphasized student self-pacing, mastery-learning, and small-group tutoring (Zhang et al., 2020). Recent implementation of Personalized Learning in the United States can be seen with the most recent federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) which encourages schools to increase the access to rigorous, personalized learning for all learners. ESSA (2015) recommends that leaders create innovative personalized

learning environments to address each student's needs that includes the use of modern technology, the implementation of flexible instructional practices, and the alignment to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Zhang et al., 2020). Svensson et al. (2022) argued that learning gaps could be bridged by greater focus on professional learning and by strengthening collaboration among teachers.

Leadership Best Practices for Improving Parental and Community Support

Parental attitudes and support are pivotal factors in influencing educational outcomes and the general learning atmosphere (Ji, 2024). Ji (2024) asserted that pedagogical methodologies, educator assistance, and students' academic achievements are substantially influenced by parental attitudes toward child upbringing and parental engagement with school. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) has recognized reciprocal parent-teacher partnerships as essential to ensuring successful academic outcomes and wellbeing for young children. In practice, however, teachers are often unprepared to partner with parents due to economic and cultural backgrounds that differ from their own (Brennan & Packard, 2022). This can hinder the development of authentic and reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers (Brennan & Packard, 2022).

To circumvent this hindrance to the development of authentic and reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers, Brennan and Packard (2022) suggested that district leaders and administrators embed professional learning about family communication particularly about listening-focused conversations. Learning-focused conversations help teachers learn from parents (Brennan & Packard, 2022). Brennan and

Packard (2022) described learning-focused conversations as those that consist of teachers interviewing parents to discover ways to support their child. Learning-focused conversations have been shown to be a successful model for teacher-parent communication (Brennan & Packard, 2022). The need for this type of professional learning is more evident now because millions of children missed out on some or all of school during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brennan & Packard, 2022). Brennan and Packard (2022) argued that school-family partnerships are a critical component to help teachers navigate the challenges to supporting students after the pandemic time.

Additionally, Brennan and Packard (2022) asserted that to better support teachers to partner with families, district leaders and principals need to provide professional learning for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of how to care for young children after trauma such as that endured by students during the pandemic. Professional development is also needed for teachers on how to support students with inequities related to ability and how to develop strong family-school connections. Brennan and Packard (2022) argued that strong family-school connections that are inclusive of all families and that are centered on trust-building and the co-creation of goals and decisions are critical to support young children.

Similarly, to parental support, community support plays a critical part in child development (Ji, 2024). Strong community support happens when there is access to quality education, the availability of extracurricular activities, and safe neighborhood settings (Ji, 2024). Strong community support promotes higher academic performance, social skills, and a decreased likelihood of delinquent behavior (Ji, 2024). To improve the

impact of community support on students' academic performance and success, district leaders and administrators should offer extracurricular programs, tutoring services, and access to educational technologies (Ji, 2024). This improvement would promote a feeling of affiliation and interconnectivity within the community thereby implementing a "robust communal backing" (Ji, 2024, p5). Robust communal backing and strong community support has been found to positively impact student motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy, which ultimately results in enhanced academic performance and learning outcomes (Melzi et al., 2023; Ji, 2024).

Fatonah (2020) concluded that there exists a belief by many parents that it is the teacher's responsibility to teach their children and that the parent's responsibility lies only with supporting the child's needs at home (Fatonah, 2020). Fatonah (2020) argued that parents are the first teacher for their children and that continual parental engagement is important to support the children learning throughout their educational journeys. Fatonah (2020) found that to improve parental engagement, district leaders and administrators need to: (1) provide support to parents to help them perform literacy activities with their child; (2) develop initiatives to increase parents' motivation because it is directly related to parents' involvement; (3) provide an environment rich with communication, ongoing learning and collaboration between the parents and school where parents can learn and recognize the importance of being involve in their child's school. Parents have to be a pivotal part in developing children's literacy (Fatonah, 2020).

Leadership Best Practices for Building and Improving Teacher Relationships

Research has shown that happiness at work is a great predictor of workplace success (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Happiness at work happens when there are positive work relationships (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Seppala and McNichols (2022) asserted that trust is the key element in healthy work relationships. Seppala and McNichols (2022) define a healthy work relationship as one that has clear, consistent, honest, open communication and, more importantly, trust. To begin the process of building trust, Seppala and McNichols (2022) suggested incorporating five principles of healthy work relationships into the work culture. These five principles are transparency and authenticity, inspiration, emotional intelligence, self-care, and values. They were derived from the literature on social psychology into interpersonal relationships (Seppala & McNichols, 2022).

The first principle suggested for a healthy work relationship is transparency and authenticity (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Seppala and McNichols (2022) defined the principle of transparency and authenticity as the existence of clear, consistent, honest and open communication in a healthy work relationship. Transparency and authenticity put employees at ease and is critical for making employees feel heard, seen and valued (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). The principle of inspiration states that when employees feel that other employees see the best in them, they are inspired to improve (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Interactions within a work environment where employees are inspiring each other are deeply energizing for employees and can enhance their productivity (Seppala & McNichols, 2022)

A third principle critical for establishing and maintaining healthy work relationships is emotional intelligence. Seppala and McNichols (2022) described emotional intelligence as the ability to regulate emotions and to navigate inevitable conflicts successfully. Relationships thrive when employees are emotionally intelligent (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). The principle of self-care is also essential for establishing and maintaining healthy work relationships. The self-care principle is defined as the ability to maintain a connection with others while also maintaining your own balance and sanity (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Seppala and McNichols (2022) asserted that it is impossible for employees to nurture and honor the mental health of others when they are not attending to their own first. Lastly, the values principle of healthy work relationships asserts that common values among employees creates positive workplaces that yield superior performance, productivity and employee engagement (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Seppala and McNichols (2022) maintained that when employee teams share the same values and approach projects with the same set of expectations and priorities, they perform better.

Seppala and McNichols (2022) argued that teachers' relationships with other educators in a school contribute to professional well-being and serve as protective factors against stress. When teachers have healthy work relationships with each other, they experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and higher levels of personal accomplishment (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Furthermore, when teachers have healthy work relationships with other teachers, collaboration to support students is improved (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Teacher collaboration promotes important

benefits such as improved teacher performance and professional growth, job satisfaction, student achievement, development of collective efficacy beliefs, and increased retention of early career teachers (Seppala & McNichols, 2022).

In order to build relationships among teachers, district leaders and administrators should work to create an environment where transparency and authenticity, inspiration, emotional intelligence, self-care and values can thrive as suggested by Seppala & McNichols (2022). When district leaders and administrators use strategies to promote transparency and authenticity, it will create a work environment where teachers can communicate openly and honestly which will help them to feel heard, seen, and valued (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Without strategies in place to promote transparency and authenticity, teachers will begin to feel disregarded and dehumanized (Seppala & McNichols, 2022).

When district leaders and administrators implement strategies to help teachers learn how to inspire and encourage each other, they create a work environment where employees are motivated to improve (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). When district leaders and administrators implement strategies to improve the emotional intelligence of teachers, the relationships among teachers will be improved. Seppala and McNichols (2022) argued that when employees understand emotions and how to control them, it makes them better able to express how they feel and to understand how others are feeling. This allows employees to communicate more effectively with each other and forge stronger work relationships (Seppala & McNichols, 2022).

When district leaders and administrators promote strategies that encourage self-care, relationships among employees will become stronger (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). To help create an atmosphere where employees are comfortable exercising self-care, leaders need to set aside time during the day for employees to nurture their own energy (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Seppala and McNichols (2022) asserted that it is impossible for an employee to nurture and honor the mental balance and health of others if they are not first attending to their own. Finally, when district leaders and administrators demonstrate strong values such as compassion, generosity and forgiveness when working with teachers, it promotes a positive work environment (Seppala & McNichols, 2022). Leading with compassion, generosity and forgiveness helps teachers feel cared for and nourished (Seppala & McNichols, 2022).

Project Description

A policy paper to be presented to district leaders and administrators was chosen to address the findings of my study. The policy paper describes the findings of my study and make recommendations regarding how to support EC teachers' personal and professional well-being following the pandemic. District leaders and administrators will be provided with a copy of the policy paper which will describe the problem, the history of the problem, evidence of the solution to the problem and recommendations developed from the findings of the study. An email will be sent to district leaders and administrators asking them for permission to present the policy paper. The policy paper will be presented to district leaders and administrators early in the fall semester of 2024.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

District leaders, administrators and others who are invited to attend the presentation will be provided with a copy of the policy paper by email as well as given a hard copy at the time of the presentation. After the presentation, there will be time allotted for questions and answers. A final copy of the policy paper will be provided to the SESD Office of Research along with a copy of the final study to be reviewed and kept on file.

Potential Barriers

A potential barrier may arise if some of the district leaders and administrators are not able to attend the presentation. However, this potential barrier is addressed by providing the invited participants a copy of the policy paper by email prior to the presentation. Another potential barrier of the project is despite the policy paper being well-researched, it may have limited influence if district leaders and administrators are not receptive to the proposed recommendations. Additionally, district leaders and administrators may not have the financial resources, personnel, and institutional support available to effectively implement the recommendations outlined in the policy paper.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Upon receiving CAO approval from Walden University, I will contact the superintendent of the study district to schedule the presentation. My goal, as the researcher, is to distribute the policy paper to the district leaders and administrators near the end of August 2024 and to hold the presentation meeting in September 2024.

Roles and Responsibilities of Researcher and Others

As the researcher, my role is to ensure that a clear explanation of the project is provided. My goal is to provide an in-depth presentation of the recommendations described in the policy paper. The necessary number of copies will be provided for all of the participants, and I will provide extra copies for any other stakeholders who may attend.

Project Evaluation Plan

To evaluate the project, I will determine that the goals of the project are met. To do this, I will ask the participants to complete an outcome-based survey (See Appendix B).

Project Implications

Local District Leaders and Administrators

The policy paper contributes to information available to school district leaders and administrators on how to address the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment. The policy paper provides district leaders and administrators with recommendations that may be useful when making decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic. Chan et al., (2021) asserted that there is a critical need to support teachers' health through efforts that strengthen emotional support, autonomy and teaching efficacy. It is also important to understand and identify critical factors that affect teachers' well-being following the pandemic (Chan et al, 2021).

Social Change

The project contributes to social change by providing information to district administrators regarding the improvement of EC teachers' professional and personal well-being. EC teachers who experience positive well-being have been shown to be more attentive to the classroom environment and have the psychological resources to foster positive interactions with young children (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022).

Additionally, Eadie et al. (2021) highlighted that supporting EC teachers' well-being is essential for retaining an effective workforce, and for promoting quality educator-child relationships which are critical to young children's learning outcomes and development.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

The project developed to address the findings of my study was a policy paper. A strength of this policy paper is that it provides the district leaders and administrators with a thorough analysis of the problem and a summary of the qualitative study's analysis and findings as well as recommendations supported by research, which adds credibility to the proposed solutions and increases the likelihood of their effectiveness. The recommendations proposed in this policy paper are practical to implement and consider factors such as resources, stakeholder involvement, and potential challenges.

The pandemic threatened teachers' quality of life and wellness and caused the restructuring of teaching practices to address student learning needs (Jalongo, 2021). The threats to the quality of life and wellness after the pandemic-imposed challenges to EC education. Teaching practices are negatively affected by the expectations and that there is a need to adjust teaching to support the postpandemic needs of students (Lafave et al., 2021). The findings of my study showed that EC teachers' workload increased as they had to make adjustments to meet the students' needs.

The research literature shows that teacher well-being is directly linked to a teacher's ability to undertake appropriate academic strategies and methods, which can bring about improved student participation and academic achievement (Dreer, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Song, 2021). EC teachers who experience positive well-being have been shown to be more attentive to the classroom environment and have the psychological resources to foster positive interactions with young children (Souto-

Manning & Melvin, 2022). The findings of this study showed that EC teachers' personal and professional well-being were negatively affected by the pandemic, hindering their ability to employ effective academic strategies, offer support and create optimal learning environments for young children.

A limitation of the project is despite the policy paper being well-researched, it may have limited influence if the key decision-makers are not receptive to the proposed recommendations. Additionally, decision-makers may not have the financial resources, personnel, and institutional support available to effectively implement the recommendations outlined in the policy paper. Another limitation of the policy paper is that it will be presented one time to district leaders and principals only. To address this limitation, I will provide a copy of the policy paper to all of the participants who provided data for the study.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach to ensure the policy paper is available to more stakeholders is to present the policy paper using a virtual platform such as ZOOM to allow for participation by leaders or principals who are unable to attend in person. Another approach would be to record the presentation when it is presented to district leaders and administrators so that it can be viewed by other stakeholders at their convenience.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change Scholarship

As a researcher, I now have a deeper understanding of the nuances of qualitative research. Engaging in a comprehensive review of existing literature and theories relevant to my research as well as the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, I gained a richer understanding of the research topic. Developing a policy required another thorough review of existing literature and theories relevant to the research topic which further enhanced my academic knowledge and critical thinking skills as a researcher. By synthesizing the research findings into a policy paper, I gathered new insights and perspectives to contribute to the academic community. Additionally, I am excited about the possibility that my work might inspire further research or challenge existing paradigms within early childhood education.

Project Development and Evaluation

In developing a policy paper, I had to consider practical strategies to address the findings of my study as I worked to provide recommendations. This process required me as the researcher to delve deeper into research to identify possible solutions and potential barriers to implementation. Creating a policy paper also required establishing a process for evaluating the policy paper. The goal of the evaluation of the policy paper and my presentation was to collect feedback on how effective the proposed recommendations might be in addressing the identified issue and to identify areas for refinement or further investigation.

Leadership

As I reflected on leadership in the context of research and the development of the policy paper, I was immediately drawn to leadership in the capacity of effectively communicating the problem and advocating for changes to address the problem. As the researcher, I recognized the importance of my research findings and the need to articulate those findings in a way that would build support for the proposed policy recommendations and engage the stakeholders to garner buy-in. As the researcher, I was able to use the findings from my study and the relative research to make strategic decisions about how to prioritize and allocate resources for policy recommendations. My role as the researcher allowed me to step forward as the leader in the topic of the challenges to EC teachers' professional and personal well-being and how district leaders and principals can best support them in the post-pandemic teaching environment.

Change

As a researcher and student at Walden University, I have learned the importance of adaptive learning and continuous improvement. Through this journey, I have learned to appreciate and welcome feedback from others in the field of education to help me continuously improve, refine, and adjust. I have a better understanding of my role as a scholarly practitioner in the broader academic community and with relevant stakeholders. The findings of this study will add to the information and understanding SESD school district administrators have about the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment and it will provide information about how the school district could provide support for them. Furthermore,

the results and analysis could aid district leaders and administrators when making district policy decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic. Knowing that my work as scholarly practitioner and researcher could contribute to a decision that could improve the teacher experience and ultimately, teacher retention is a great feeling.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

As the researcher of this qualitative study, I gained a greater understanding of the challenges faced by EC teachers and the threats to their personal and professional well-being. The interviews with EC teachers provided an insight that was crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of their well-being both personally and professionally following the pandemic. Review of the data collected from these interviews allowed for the identification of systemic issues that impact the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers. By uncovering underlying patterns and themes across multiple contexts, I was able to identify broader structural challenges such as inadequate resources and professional development needed to support students following the pandemic as well as a lack of administrative, parental and community support. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for improving the professional and personal well-being of teachers and improving the quality of early childhood education as a whole. Supporting EC teachers' well-being is essential for retaining an effective workforce and for promoting quality educator-child relationships, which are critical to young children's learning outcomes and development (Eadie et al., 2021).

The contextual understanding gained from my research played a pivotal role in the development of a policy paper for district leaders and administrators to provide targeted recommendations to address the unique challenges faced by EC teachers following the pandemic. The findings from my study provided rich, detailed insights into the experiences and needs of EC teachers, which may inform evidence-based policies and interventions aimed at supporting EC teachers' professional and personal well-being in the postpandemic environment.

In conclusion, as a scholarly practitioner, I appreciate the opportunity to share the stories and experiences of EC teachers and to advocate for changes to improve their well-being and professional practice. My work conducting this qualitative study served as a powerful tool for fostering and advocating for social change as an educator and to advance our understanding of the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers in the postpandemic teaching environment. By providing deep insights and contextual understanding, my qualitative study has contributed to the knowledge which can be used to create supportive environments that enable EC teachers to thrive and, ultimately, enhances the quality of EC education.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the postpandemic teaching environment to gain an understanding of how the school district can best support teachers so that they work effectively in the postpandemic era. The findings presented in my study confirmed that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional

development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs was inadequate and that they needed parental and community support. According to the research in the literature review, support for EC teachers following a major event such as the pandemic is critical. In times of crisis, such as the pandemic, teachers are an important stabilizer for children (Cassidy et al., 2019). When EC teachers are faced with challenges to their own well-being, this stabilizer is at risk as well as children's development. There is an important connection between the professional well-being of teachers and their students' emotional well-being and the quality of the classroom environment (Cassidy et al., 2019). Teachers' knowledge, classroom behaviors, and interactions with children are inseparable from teacher well-being.

The findings of this study were based on the experiences and perceptions of EC teachers in one local southeastern school district. The results were not generalized beyond the local context. The study was limited to kindergarten through second grade teachers only. Although the findings are not generalizable beyond the study district, it is possible for other school districts to learn from the study. Furthermore, the findings of this study will add to the information and understanding SESD school district administrators have about the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment. It will provide information about how the school district could provide support for EC teachers following the pandemic.

Although the qualitative research method was instrumental in my efforts to explore the challenges to EC teachers personal and professional well-being following the pandemic, there may be a benefit for subsequent research by employing quantitative methods to provide numerical data for statistical analysis which could enhance the depth and breadth of understanding to the challenges to EC teachers personal and professional well-being. The statistical measures employed to analyze quantitative data could help to identify key stressors, coping mechanisms, and support needs among of EC teachers. Understanding these factors could inform the targeted interventions and support systems needed for EC teachers which could ultimately foster improved teacher well-being. Improved teacher well-being positively impacts student achievement outcomes.

Conclusion

The goal of Section 4 was to offer an overview of my reflections of the project study. The findings of a qualitative research study informed the project, which was a policy paper. The qualitative research study was designed to achieve an understanding the challenges to the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers and how district leaders and administrators could best support them in the post-pandemic teaching environment. The findings of the study revealed that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs was inadequate, and they needed parental and community support. These inadequacies in support for EC teachers negatively impacted their personal and professional well-being. The policy paper provides district leaders and administrators with recommendations for

making decisions related to the support of the personal and professional well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic.

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Appendix A: The Project

Supporting the Personal and Professional Well-being of Early Childhood Teachers

Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Policy Paper

by

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Introduction

The Problem

The importance of Early Childhood (EC) teachers' personal and professional well-being was brought into focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching is a highly emotional career and can cause high levels of anxiety which can lead teachers experiencing work dissatisfaction, mental illness, and diminished well-being (Song, 2021). Since the pandemic, district administrators have become increasingly concerned about the well-being of educators and the additional stressors brought on by the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021; Song, 2021).

In this study district, ECteachers are experiencing challenges to their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment as shown by a district-commissioned audit, SEDS Communication Audit Report, in January 2022. The problem addressed through this study is that EC(EC) teachers' well-being in SEDS has been decreasing since 2021.

SESD commissioned an external audit to learn about the personal and professional well-being of teachers and students following the pandemic. The audit revealed deficits in the areas of student support, teaching and learning, community engagement and partnerships, teacher resources, and resource allocation. Due to the demands on teachers and these deficits, the audit outlined a decrease in teacher well-being; both personally and professionally. The audit did not provide information about how to provide support for EC teachers' well-being following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Definition of the Problem

The well-being of EC teachers is vital for improving the quality of education and student achievement in young children. Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) reported that EC teachers had poorer physical and psychological well-being when compared to other professions. Higher stress levels negatively affect early educators' well-being.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' everyday stress levels were exacerbated by new work-related demands such as longer hours, numerous new grading and policy changes, and new burdens of meeting the rise in student academic deficits (Froehlich et al., 2022). After the audit, Gwinnett County Public School's district administrators developed a local report, GCPS Blueprint for the Future. In this report, district administrators expressed a desire to identify ways to support ECteachers' personal and professional well-being to prevent teacher burnout and to prevent teachers from leaving the district.

I conducted a study to explore the challenges to the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment in an attempt to gain an understanding of how district leaders could support EC teachers. I interviewed a sample of EC teachers and explored how they experienced teaching in the post-pandemic environment and the challenges they perceived affected their personal and professional well-being.

Summary of the Analysis and Findings

The study was conducted to explain the perceived challenges to the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers during the post-pandemic teaching environment.

The results of the study indicated that EC teachers experienced a negative impact on their personal and professional well-being following the pandemic and they have not recovered from this negative impact. Additionally, the study revealed that EC teachers experienced a lack of administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support to meet the student's needs, as well as a lack of parental and community support.

Discussion and Recommendations Related to the Findings Leadership Best Practices for Improving the Professional and Personal Well-being of EC Teachers

The COVID-19 pandemic created substantial challenges for EC teachers throughout the US. Li and Sun (2023) asserted that the reduced social interactions resulting from COVID-19 online instruction during the pandemic brought on socioemotional and academic challenges for young students. There was a marked decline in language and literacy growth among young children and EC teachers were not equipped to support young students affected by this decline (Li & Sun, 2023). Li and Sun found that there was a need to widen the focus on teachers' knowledge and expertise in language and literacy instructional strategies to support young students.

McCarthy et al. (2022) found that since the pandemic, teachers have had to cope with new teaching demands with limited knowledge and resources to do so. There are increased demands to catch students up to meet educational benchmarks and EC teachers are expected to have the skill set to address the widened inequities in educational outcomes for marginalized students and those from lower-income communities brought on by the pandemic. The rising demands placed on EC teachers have produced traumatic

stress levels for teachers, overwhelming them beyond their ability to cope emotionally, mentally, or physically (McCarthy et al., 2022). The findings from the study I conducted indicated that the increased demands placed on teachers to support students after the pandemic negatively impacted the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers.

Recommendations Regarding Improving the Professional and Personal Well-being of EC Teachers

It is recommended that district leaders and school administrators develop policies that:

- Recognize and reward EC teachers when they support students.
- Create a collaborative environment where teachers and administrators work together to support students
- Implement measures to develop a positive workplace culture such as mindfulness strategies to combat teachers' stress, team-focused activities for teachers, or sports-based activities for teachers.

Leadership Best Practices for Teachers Who Teach Students Who Have Learning Gaps

One of the many challenges for district leaders and administrators following the pandemic is supporting EC teachers who teach students who have learning gaps. The process of supporting students who have learning gaps requires a deep understanding of the students and their specific strengths, aspirations, and needs (WestEd & Walrond, 2021). WestEd and Walrond maintained that this understanding should be grounded in data that goes deeper than the accountability data already being collected and include

data on their cognitive development as well as their physiological, social, and emotional development. The findings from the study I conducted indicated that EC teachers perceived that they lacked the knowledge and resources needed to support students who have learning gaps, especially those who have learning gaps in math and reading.

Recommendation Regarding Leadership Best Practices for Teachers Who Teach Students Who Have Learning Gaps

It is recommended that district and school administrators develop policies that:

- Create professional development opportunities to improve EC teachers' knowledge of how to support students who have learning gaps.
- Implement resources for EC teachers that can be used to provide high-quality support to students who have learning gaps.
- Implement district-wide initiatives to provide schools with adaptive learning platform software such as iReady, Dreambox Learning, or MobyMax to assist with support of students who have learning gaps.
- Offer tutoring services and access to educational technologies for all students particularly those who have learning gaps.
- Develop programs for parents in literacy and math so that they can help their children who may have learning gaps.

Leadership Best Practices for Improving Parental and Community Support

Parental and community support are pivotal factors in influencing educational outcomes and the general learning atmosphere and are a critical part of child development (Ji, 2024). Ji asserted that pedagogical methodologies, educator assistance,

and students' academic achievements are substantially influenced by parental support. Additionally, Ji asserted that strong community support promotes higher academic performance, social skills, and a decreased likelihood of delinquent behavior. The findings of the study I conducted indicated that EC teachers perceived that they lacked the parental and community support needed to support students following the pandemic.

Recommendations Regarding Leadership Best Practices for Improving Parental and Community Support

It is recommended that district and school administrators develop policies that:

- Develop programs for parents to help them understand the importance of being involved with their child's school.
- Create programs and activities to increase parents' participation in school.
- Implement communication tools such as ParentSquare, Remind, or Classdojo to establish and maintain rich communication between teachers and parents.

Leadership Best Practices for Building and Improving Teacher Relationships

Blair et al. (2023) argued that teachers' relationships with other educators in a school contribute to professional well-being and serve as protective factors against stress. When teachers have strong relationships, they experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and higher levels of personal accomplishment. Furthermore, when teachers have strong relationships, collaboration to support students is improved (Blair et al., 2023). Teacher collaboration promotes important benefits such as improved teacher performance and professional growth, job satisfaction, student achievement, development of collective efficacy beliefs, and increased retention of early

career teachers (Blair et al., 2023). The findings of my study indicated that EC teachers perceived administrative support regarding building relationships was inadequate and this lack of support was negatively affecting their professional and personal well-being.

Recommendations Related Leadership Best Practices for Building and Improving Teacher Relationships

It is recommended that district and school administrators develop policies that:

- Develop a comprehensive guide for EC teachers with information about building and maintaining relationships with fellow teachers.

Conclusion

The goal of this policy paper was to make recommendations based on research findings to district leaders and administrators to support EC teachers' professional and personal well-being following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that EC teachers perceived that the administrative support regarding professional development opportunities, building relationships with colleagues, and support for the work needed to meet student needs is inadequate and negatively affects their professional and personal well-being and that they lacked parental and community support to address students' needs which also negatively affects their professional and personal well-being.

Recommendations regarding leadership actions that the school district leaders could implement to improve the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers were developed from those findings. These recommendations provide district leadership with actions they can take to support the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers following the pandemic.

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Policy Paper Evaluation

I wanted to extend my sincere gratitude for your attendance at the recent presentation of the policy paper entitled, “Supporting the Professional and Personal Well-being of Early Childhood Teachers Following the Pandemic”. Your presence and active engagement contributed meaningful exchange of ideas and insights, and your thoughtful questions and comments added depth to the discussion and provided valuable perspectives that will undoubtedly enrich our ongoing efforts in supporting the personal and professional well-being of ECteachers.

I understand that your time is valuable, and I am grateful that you chose to spend it attending this presentation. I would appreciate it if you could provide feedback by answer a few questions through a Google form. I added the link and QR code on a document that I will give to you. Please know that your feedback and insights are invaluable to me. Feel free to complete the Google form now or later after you have reviewed the policy paper in more detail.

Once again, thank you for your attendance, engagement, and ongoing support. I look forward to our continued collaboration and the positive impact we can achieve together.

Sincerely,

Janith Rhodes

Please select the letter that best represents your opinion about the presentation.

1. The presentation was well-organized and easy to follow.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Somewhat Agree
- C. Neither agree nor disagree
- D. Somewhat Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

2. The policy paper demonstrates the significance of the issue being addressed.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Somewhat Agree
- C. Neither agree nor disagree
- D. Somewhat Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

3. The policy paper covers all relevant aspects of how to support the professional and personal well-being of EC teachers.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Somewhat Agree
- C. Neither agree nor disagree
- D. Somewhat Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

4. How would you rate this research policy paper and the recommendations that were provided?

- A. Highly Effective
- B. Effective
- C. Neither effective nor ineffective
- D. Somewhat Effective
- E. Ineffective

5. Please use the space below to provide any additional comments.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Participant number:

Date:

Time:

Zoom:

Research Questions	Interview Components	Interview Questions and Notes
	Introduction	<p>Hello. I am Janith Rhodes. Thank you for participating in this interview today. I am hoping that this study will help our leaders with providing support for early childhood teachers, like you and me, to improve our personal and professional well-being.</p> <p>This interview should last about 45 to 60 minutes and will be recorded. After the interview, I will examine the recording and my notes with your answers to the interview questions for data analysis purposes. You will be asked to review the transcripts from the interview. I will not identify you in my documents, and no one will be able to identify you by your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time.</p> <p>Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?</p>
RQ1: What are EC teachers' perceptions of how emotions, engagement (involvement in the work),	Question 1	<p>How would you describe your professional well-being?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to</p>

relationships, meaning and purpose and a sense of accomplishment affect their personal and professional well-being during the post-pandemic teaching environment?		share?
	Question 2	<p>How would you describe your personal well-being?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 3	<p>How have your emotions about teaching changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 4	<p>How has your engagement (involvement in work) as far as teaching changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 5	<p>How have your relationships with colleagues changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>

<p>RQ 2: What are EC teachers' perceptions of how the SEDS administration could better support them in the post-pandemic era in regards to emotions, engagement (involvement in the work), relationships, meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment?</p>	Question 6	<p>How has the meaning and purpose of teaching changed for you since the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 7	<p>How has your sense of accomplishment with teaching changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing questions: Are you able to give me an example(s)? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 8	<p>Thinking about your emotions, what administrative support would help you as a teacher following the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing question: Are you able to give me additional examples? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 10	<p>Thinking about engagement (involvement with work), what administrative support would help you as a teacher following the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing question: Are you able to give me additional examples? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to</p>

		share?
	Question 11	<p>Thinking about relationships with your colleagues, what administrative support would help you as a teacher following the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing question: Are you able to give me additional examples? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 12	<p>Thinking about meaning and purpose, what administrative supports would help you as a teacher following the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing question: Are you able to give me additional examples? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Question 13	<p>Thinking about a sense of accomplishment, what administrative support would help you as a teacher following the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Probing question: Are you able to give me additional examples? Could you tell me more about...? Is there anything else you would like to share?</p>
	Close	Thank you for allowing me to interview

		<p>you. Is there anything else you would like to share?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me?</p>
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Appendix C: Preliminary Codes

1	Professional well-being	23	Perception of some leaders
2	Perception of profession	24	Perception of the community
3	School district efforts	25	Perception of teaching
4	Perception of Support Needed	26	Low test scores
5	Personal well-being	27	Small class size
6	Emotions Changed Toward Teaching	28	Perception of administration
7	Engagement	29	Perception student behavior
8	Relationship with colleagues	30	Perceptions of teachers
9	Purpose has changed	31	Perception of what young kids need
10	Administrative support for emotions	32	Perception of teacher requirements
11	Administrative support for engagement	33	Perception of leader support
12	Administrative support for relationships with colleagues	34	Perception of student needs
13	Administrative support for meaning and purpose	35	Perception of students
14	Administrative support for sense of accomplishment	36	Perception of new teachers during the pandemic
15	Engagement different	37	Perception of administrative team
16	Perception parents and parental support	38	Administrative support to build relationships with colleagues
17	New requirements for teaching	39	Perceptions of emotions
18	Emotions during the pandemic	40	Perception of emotions since the pandemic
19	Emotions after the pandemic	41	Perception of teachers from the community
20	Perception of student engagement	42	Perception of purpose
21	Perception of teachers' morale	43	Perception of parent engagement
22	New reading curriculum		