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Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on the Challenges of Teaching Students Who Lack Age-Appropriate Social and Emotional Skills

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Rachel Stewart

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' Perspectives on the Challenges of Teaching Students Who
Lack Age-Appropriate Social and Emotional Skills

by

Rachel Stewart

MA, Concordia University, 2015

BA, University of Windsor, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the significant increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills (SES), which has become a concern, especially for teachers. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. The conceptual framework that guided this study consisted of Bandura's social learning theory. The focus of the research questions was early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believe would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Data were collected using one-on-one semistructured interviews with 12 early childhood K-1 teachers via Zoom. Braun and Clarke's six-step process for thematic analysis of the data included open and axial coding. Four themes emerged from the data: (a) teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges; (b) teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety; (c) teachers need effective strategies and professional development; and (d) teachers need administrative and parental support. This study contributes to positive social change by informing professional development specialists and administrators regarding how they might assist those teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Jamie. Thank you for being a source of support and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. I could not have reached this milestone without your unwavering love and support. I also dedicate this work to my family. I come from a proud Italian immigrant family. My grandparents and parents have been constant sources of support and encouragement in my pursuit of further education. I dedicate this to them and the sacrifices they made for our family. I would also like to dedicate this to the incredible teachers and mentors that have crossed my path. Each of you inspired me to keep challenging myself to better the field of education. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation in honor of Cynthia Postons, my mother-in-law and kidney transplant donor. Thank you for giving me a second chance in life to achieve this goal. I vow to continue to strive to use that gift to create positive social change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Students in early childhood build a foundation for effective socialization. Early childhood students' experiences form their social, emotional, and behavioral patterns (Guo et al., 2022). However, there is a significant increase in a lack of age-appropriate social and emotional skills (SES) among early childhood students in the United States, often leading to challenging behaviors (Egan et al., 2021; J. Wang & Barrett, 2021). The rise in the deficiency of age-appropriate SES in students has become a challenge for early childhood teachers in the classroom (Rosati & Lynch, 2023), who need to use strategies that focus on students' social, emotional, and academic growth (Reyes & Gilliam, 2021).

In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them meet the challenges of working with these students in the classroom. The findings of this study contribute to positive social change by informing professional development specialists and administrators regarding how they might assist those teaching students who lack SES.

Chapter 1 contains the background of the study, a statement of the problem that will be addressed, and its purpose. I outline the conceptual framework, list the research questions (RQs), discuss the nature of the study, and define the terms used. I also identify the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of this research.

Background

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been researched for decades (Crowder et al., 2019). SEL is the ability to understand and express emotions appropriately, set and

achieve positive goals, feel empathy and concern for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Crowder et al., 2019). A student's academic success depends on the development of SES (Aksoy, 2019). The SES of young students are influenced by their learning environment, making schools the ideal setting to assess them and encourage the prosocial skills that make students successful (Aksoy, 2019). However, there has been an increase in students who lack age-appropriate SES, causing difficulties for teachers (Griffith et al., 2020). A lack of age-appropriate SES has also contributed to potentially long-term behavioral concerns (Nygaard et al., 2022). The decline of a student's SES in early childhood directly affects this form of learning throughout adolescence (Napolitano et al., 2021). Students deficient in age-appropriate SES in early childhood are more likely to demonstrate lifelong challenging behaviors (Crowder et al., 2019; Daunic et al., 2023).

The increase in the lack of age-appropriate SES justifies the need for timely intervention for early childhood students (Morgan et al., 2022). Teachers should address the need for these skills in addition to focusing on cognitive abilities (Crowder et al., 2019). Early intervention has been one of the most effective ways of helping students with their overall health and academic, social, and emotional success (Mondi et al., 2021).

The gap in practice was that teachers in the United States had been expected to implement practices that assist students in developing age-appropriate SES, but they are not always able to meet this obligation (see Zieher et al., 2021). When students can maintain positive relationships and manage their emotions, they are more likely to excel

academically, become engaged in school, and be less likely to misbehave (McGuire & Meadan, 2020). Schools focus on SES and student academic engagement while also preparing them for the social world (Morgan et al., 2022).

This study was needed because the increase in students who do not exhibit age-appropriate SES is concerning (see Blewitt et al., 2020). Studies have shown a direct link between an early childhood student's SES, later success, and physical and mental health (Aksoy, 2019; Ray et al., 2020). The rise in the lack of age-appropriate SES in students has become a challenge for teachers in the classroom (Rosati & Lynch, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the problems teachers face, with many identifying that the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES, an added workload, and a lack of support have forced them to leave the classroom (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Currie-Knight (2020) found that due to these challenges, teachers are choosing less conventional instructional environments that put SES at the forefront of the curriculum. Because of these conditions, it was necessary to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges they face teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom.

Problem Statement

Between 9.5% and 14.2% of early childhood students have experienced severe emotional and behavioral problems due to a lack of age-appropriate SES (Blewitt et al., 2020). The increase in students who exhibit a deficiency in age-appropriate SES has become a concern, especially for teachers (Griffith et al., 2020). In education, there has

been a focus on the academic component of school readiness and its effect on students' SES if their developmental needs are unmet (Le et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded concerns regarding students who lack these skills (Egan et al., 2021).

Although schools continue to emphasize students' academic achievements, there have been fewer discussions on how to support students who struggle with their social-emotional development and mental health (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant socioemotional stress for students and teachers across the United States, creating challenges for teachers who instructed students without age-appropriate SES (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Teachers believe in and recognize the importance of SES, their connection to holistic success, and their role in teaching age-appropriate SES, but their knowledge and skills are limited (Morgan et al., 2022). There was a need to obtain early childhood teachers' perspectives on working with students who lack age-appropriate SES (Murano et al., 2021). Researchers identified the need for early intervention to develop effective SES; however, early childhood teachers' viewpoints have often been overlooked (Murano et al., 2021). Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives was necessary to understand the challenges they face when teaching students who exhibit a lack of age-appropriate SES and to identify the support they need to help these students in the classroom. Research by Crowder et al. (2019) demonstrated the need for studies to address this significant gap in practice as teachers have been expected to implement practices that help students develop age-appropriate SES, but they are not always able to meet this obligation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believe would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Research indicated that classroom SEL skills can be improved through teaching (Aksoy, 2019). The number of children who do not have age-appropriate SES as well as behavioral problems has steadily increased, which presents teachers with difficulties in the classroom (Blewitt et al., 2020). Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives through the interview process allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges and what support they believed would help them. In this study, I also identified the challenges a lack of age-appropriate SES creates.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom?

RQ2: What support do early childhood teachers believe would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Bandura explained that emotional skills, such as self-regulation, can be taught through observation; however, these have received the least attention in education, presenting problems for teachers (Graham, 2022). According to Ahn et al. (2020), social learning theory includes four critical observational learning processes: attention,

retention, motor reproduction, and motivation and reinforcement. Social learning theory is essential for understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives and identifying their challenges in instructing students who lack age-appropriate SES (Raicevic et al., 2017).

In social learning, new SES and behavior patterns can be learned by observing others or through direct experience (Bandura, 1977). Because external reinforcement affects skills and behaviors, teachers have a role in modeling these to help students develop effective SES (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's social learning theory is one of the most influential theories of human behavior and has significantly affected educational research on student behavior and the development of SES (Raicevic et al., 2017). Social learning theory supports and informs the understanding of patterns of behavior and the development of SES in early childhood (Raicevic et al., 2017).

Bandura (1977) suggested that the environment is critical to how SES and behavior patterns develop. In social learning theory, learning can be a means for individuals to retain new information and behaviors from role models and the environment (Abdullah et al., 2020). Bandura's social learning theory explains how students often model their behaviors after those around them (Abdullah et al., 2020). The classroom environment has the potential to be a significant influence on the student's development of SES and behavior. Ata (2018) explained that students learn what to do (or not do), how to use their environment, and how to be motivated through behavior observation. Although parents contribute to a student's SES and overall behaviors, teachers have a prominent role in helping them achieve age-appropriate SES in the classroom environment. The more consistent and exemplary the SES and modeling of

positive behaviors of early childhood teachers, the stronger the connection and interactions are for students developing SES (Ata, 2018). Teachers are critical for behavior imitation and role models for students' development of SES (Bandura, 1977).

Social learning theory is also centered on the concept of a locus of control. Guskey (2021) defined an internal locus of control as a person's belief in their ability to influence and direct themselves in situations. Alternatively, people with an external locus of control believe that what happens around them and the actions of others are events they cannot affect or influence. Yildirim et al. (2020) explored how social learning theory, applied in an educational setting, helped students develop effective healthy behaviors. Findings indicated a significant positive influence on students' locus of control regarding their health and perceptions of health and behaviors when instruction and the learning environment contained effective modeling (Yildirim et al., 2020). In the current study, I explored the perspectives of experienced early childhood teachers to identify areas in which they felt they were struggling when working with students who lack age-appropriate SES and the challenges these create in the classroom.

The conceptual framework's key elements based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory were used to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on teaching students who lacked age-appropriate SES. I used social learning theory to develop the RQs regarding these challenges and the support teachers needed to instruct these students effectively. Social learning theory was also considered when selecting a basic qualitative design with interviews, as these are social interactions. The results of this study could be used by educators to assist them in finding solutions to help students further develop their

SES and identify support to help early childhood teachers in the classroom. I analyzed the data through the lens of social learning theory by identifying themes that emerged from the early childhood teachers' perspectives. Chapter 2 includes a more thorough and detailed explanation of the framework.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a basic qualitative research design to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on their challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. A basic qualitative design requires the researcher to use various data collection methods, such as interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lodico et al., 2010). Semistructured interviews provided the data necessary to explore the challenges of early childhood teachers working with students who lack age-appropriate SES.

I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews using Zoom. The participants were recruited using the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teacher social media sites, and snowball sampling. I recruited 12 early childhood teachers teaching K-1 with at least 5 years' experience. Feeney et al. (2022) explained that teachers do not reach maturity in knowledge and experience until the fifth year of teaching. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. Coding allowed me to assign meaning to the data collected (see Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process allowed me to identify themes that emerged from the data. Once I assigned open codes from the

interview transcripts, I used axial coding, the process of grouping codes with other codes that share similar meanings into categories (see Locke et al., 2020). The categories were grouped and rearranged to identify emerging themes to answer the RQs. I examined the initial themes and identified any that collapsed into a single theme or expanded into separate themes. I reviewed the data until no new themes emerged. I continued reviewing themes by checking and rechecking my interpretations against the interview data.

Definitions

Persistent challenging behavior: Behavior that can result from a lack of school readiness or social-emotional delays, which can also lead to a potentially negative effect on children's educational development in school with life-long consequences (McGuire & Meadan, 2020).

SEL: The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined SEL using five domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Crowder et al., 2019).

SES: Individual characteristics from either environmental factors or biological predispositions that manifest into consistent patterns of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts (Murano et al., 2021). These patterns are developed through students' formal and informal experiences that affect them throughout their lives (Murano et al., 2021).

Social-emotional competence (SEC): A skillset required to incorporate SEL into a classroom setting. SEC skills that should be considered in SEL school programs focusing on children's holistic development include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Aguilar et al., 2019).

Assumptions

The first assumption for this study was that all participants would answer the interview questions openly and honestly. I also assumed the participants would be familiar with age-appropriate SES for K–1 students so they could answer the interview questions effectively. Another assumption was that the early childhood teachers would provide responses that stemmed from their practices, experiences, and beliefs. I assumed all responses from the early childhood teachers would be unbiased and that they would recount their experiences fairly. I had no connection to the study participants; therefore, I assumed they volunteered out of interest in the subject without any conflict of interest or ulterior motive. These assumptions were necessary to achieve objective results and provide an understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives on teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I explored the challenges early childhood teachers experience in working with students who exhibited a lack of age-appropriate SES. I selected this subject after examining the research. Several studies addressed the increase in students who lacked age-appropriate SES as well as the connection to future overall well-being, academic success, mental health, and the concern this poses for the profession due to high turnover rates (Nygaard et al., 2022; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020; Rosati & Lynch, 2023). I considered using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as researchers often use it to explore the connection between cognitive development and its relationship to integrating social, cultural, and biological elements into learning (see Rahmatirad, 2020).

I decided not to use this theory because although I have identified in the research that there is an increase in students who lack age-appropriate SES, the focus of this study was not on why these skills were absent or how these behaviors and academic achievement were affected. I did not seek to identify a cognitive connection to social and emotional development. My focus was on teachers' perspectives, not their behaviors or those of their students.

Participants included 12 early childhood teachers teaching K–1 in the United States with at least 5 years of teaching experience. It was important to explore the perspectives of those with experience in the field to understand the challenges they faced and what support could help them instruct these students. I did not explore the perspectives of school administrators, counselors, social workers, or teachers who worked with students beyond K–1. I used one-on-one semistructured interviews to collect data. The findings of this study may be useful to other early childhood professionals working with students lacking age-appropriate SES and facing challenges when trying to meet their needs.

Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that the researcher should clearly describe the participants and the research process to enable the reader to assess whether the findings are transferable to their setting. I ensured that these descriptions were clear so the readers of my study could use transferability judgment in relation to their classroom settings. This study may also be transferable or generalizable to other contexts, settings, or demographics. Lodico et al. (2010) explained that transferability is how well a study has made it possible for readers to determine whether using similar methods would be

feasible for research in their communities by providing an understanding of how these can be used at the research site. Rich details illustrate to the reader how the case may differ and how future transferability is possible if similar situations are studied (Lodico et al., 2010). The findings of this study help support the development of appropriate professional learning for early childhood teachers in several communities with these challenges. In this study, I also identified the support that could help teachers when working with these students in the classroom.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included difficulties in recruiting participants, resulting in a small sample size. Providing information about the time required to participate in this study may have helped the potential participants make an informed decision to participate. Many teachers try to achieve a work-life balance, and extra roles or opportunities to volunteer, for example, in a research study, may not have been as welcome as before the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have limited time and may have found it difficult to set aside time to take part in a study requiring them to participate in an hour-long interview. This topic was one many teachers were interested in discussing, but I was mindful of their time as a limiting factor in participation. I was clear about what the study entailed and communicated what was expected of the potential participants. I was flexible and followed up so they knew their participation had positively contributed to my study.

My personal biases could have potentially affected the outcome of this study; therefore, I took precautions not to allow my perspectives or thoughts to interfere with

this research. I took notes regarding any bias I experienced regarding a participant's response throughout the study process. I also reviewed the interview transcripts to check for any biases I may have exhibited during questioning. I kept notes on my reflections in a researcher journal to ensure that any biases I had did not interfere with the study, which aided the dependability of the findings. Reflexivity requires the researcher to be consistently aware of any bias and allows them to examine the information critically to deduce meaning and properly represent the data (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018).

Significance

Throughout the United States, researchers have had concerns regarding the increased lack of age-appropriate SES among students (Egan et al., 2021; Rosati & Lynch, 2023). I explored the challenges early childhood teachers faced working with students who did not have these skills and what support could help them in the classroom. The study's findings may be used to inform educators and parents of the challenges teachers face in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support might help them meet the challenges of working with these students in the classroom.

A student's SES has been linked to poor academic and mental health outcomes. Students with academic, SES, and behavioral challenges often continue this problematic trajectory into middle school while also suffering from increased mental health issues (Nygaard et al., 2022). This study provided a better understanding of teachers' perspectives that can be used to inform administrators and parents on practice and policy in early childhood education. Developing a deeper understanding of teachers' challenges helps inform best practices and policies that could promote better support for teachers.

This research and its findings will be accessible to the early childhood education community. This study contributes to positive social change by providing educational leaders with teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Positive social change was achieved by providing information contributing to the professional conversation as a basis for any needed changes in early childhood classrooms and what support might alleviate these challenges.

Summary

There has been a significant increase in early childhood students in the United States who have exhibited a lack of age-appropriate SES (Blewitt et al., 2020; Rosati & Lynch, 2023). Early childhood teachers have found it challenging to help students develop age-appropriate SES and manage the problematic behaviors resulting from poorly developed SES (Murano et al., 2019). In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them meet these challenges in the classroom.

In this chapter, I provided background regarding the need for this study and the gap in practice. I identified the problem that the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES is rising and the challenges this has created for teachers. I demonstrated the importance of using the early childhood teachers' perspectives to better understand their challenges and what support they may need to help teach students who lack age-appropriate SES. I discussed the purpose of the study, listed the RQs, outlined the conceptual framework, and stated the nature of the study. I also provided definitions of

terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations to explain the study's boundaries. Finally, I noted the significance of the research and its potential for positive social change.

In Chapter 2, I outline the search strategy for finding peer-reviewed literature. I discuss the study's conceptual framework, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, in more detail. I also explain and analyze the current research that includes SEL and skills, the effect of the lack of age-appropriate SES, the significance of the teacher's role in developing SEL, SEL and overall outcomes, and teachers' perspectives on SEL.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Many young students in the United States spend much of their time in early childhood settings. Several U.S. states offer early education programs to provide care for students, reduce future academic failure, and foster school readiness (Ghandour et al., 2021). Early childhood teachers have a responsibility to help prepare children for future success; therefore, they must be equipped to create supportive environments that encourage positive, age-appropriate SES, such as using SEL in their classrooms (Corbin et al., 2019). The increase in early childhood students who lack age-appropriate SES has made teaching more challenging and become a concern to teachers (Guo et al., 2022; McGuire & Meadan, 2020). Caregivers and medical and public health professionals are also apprehensive because a deficiency in age-appropriate SES is one of the most significant contributors to potentially long-term behavioral problems (Morgan et al., 2022). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom.

I begin this chapter by discussing the literature search strategy for this study. Next, I outline the conceptual framework based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. In the review of the current literature that follows, I address (a) SEL and skills, (b) the effect of the lack of age-appropriate SES, (c) the significance of the teacher's role in developing SES, (d) SES and school readiness, and (e) teachers' perspectives on SES.

Literature Search Strategy

For this literature review, I used books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and internet sources to investigate early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges they face in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. I searched Walden University Library databases and Google Scholar for literature on preschool teachers' perspectives on these challenges. The education databases included Academic Search Complete, EBSCOHost, Education Resource Information Center, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, and SAGE Journals. I used Google Scholar to locate books and additional scholarly resources. I focused on the topics of preschool and SES, challenging SES and behaviors, SEL, mental health and preschool students, and teachers' perspectives. I conducted an initial search of these databases using the key terms: *social and emotional learning, teacher perspectives, early childhood teachers, challenging behaviors, early childhood, and SES*. Search parameters included research documents, peer-reviewed journals, and scholarly publications. The Boolean phrase *preschool teacher AND SES AND challenges* yielded numerous results. Using ResearchGate, I requested email updates on current research on early childhood teachers and SES. I focused my search primarily on articles published within the last 5 years, except for the seminal works of various theorists. In addition, I used a seminal work from Bandura (1977) and consulted reference lists and textbooks to find information on the topic of study. I had no difficulty finding research using the key terms and phrases selected. I accessed and examined additional research not included in this review to

ensure I had a variety of sources and, therefore, selected the most relevant and current literature connected to my study.

Conceptual Framework

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory formed the conceptual framework for this study. In social learning, new SES and behavior patterns can be attained by observing others or through direct experience. Because external reinforcements affect skills and behaviors, teachers have a role in modeling these to help students develop effective SES (Bandura, 1977). Bandura also suggested that the environment is critical to how SES and behavior patterns develop. Bandura described teachers as critical for behavior imitation and role models for students' development of SES. Through observation, students can learn emotional skills and responses, such as self-regulation. Bandura acknowledged that SES and behavioral dispositions are directly affected by the models and environments in which students interact.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provided a basis for understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES (Raicevic et al., 2017). Early childhood teachers cope daily with the challenges of teaching students who lack these skills. Campbell et al. (2022) explained that teachers are leaders in the classroom. Using social learning theory helps researchers understand teachers' perspectives and their role in developing skills that build community in the classroom. Building a classroom community requires development of age-appropriate SES, and teachers are the foundation upon which these spaces are built (Mahoney et al., 2021). Using Bandura's social learning theory helped to create a better

understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom.

Using Bandura's social learning theory, Raicevic et al. (2017) identified three forms of student learning: learning by imitation, learning by identification, and learning of social roles. The forms differ in complexity, type, and degree of behavior. Learning by imitation includes externally visible behaviors that do not have to connect to emotional responses, such as facial expressions or gestures. Oliveira et al. (2021) argued that the social skills training movement, based on Bandura's social learning theory, inspired the development of the current understanding of self-regulation and the importance of interpersonal relationships.

Age-appropriate SES includes students' external and often nonverbal interactions through direct or indirect experiences. Learning by identification is associated with the internal characteristics of personality, which is more effective in connection with SES (Raicevic et al., 2017). SES were more permanent and included attitudes or behaviors in particular situations or with certain people. Learning social roles and SES through modeling involves adopting specific characteristics or behaviors based on societal roles or positions (Hu et al., 2021). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory emphasizes an adult's influence on the personality development of young students through modeling behaviors. The early childhood years provide a foundation for effective socialization; these earliest experiences, in turn, form social, emotional, and behavioral patterns that occur through social learning (Fisher & Frey, 2019).

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory was pertinent to this study because it emphasizes the role of SEL. When students lack skills such as stimulus control, cognitive control, and reinforcement control, it can be challenging for teachers to provide effective instruction (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory was used to help establish the importance of the role of the teacher in the development of students' SES. Campbell et al. (2022) noted that teachers are leaders in the classroom; using social learning theory can help researchers understand teachers' perspectives and the role they play in developing skills that build community in the classroom. Building a classroom community requires the development of age-appropriate SEL, and teachers are the basis upon which these communities are created (Mahoney et al., 2021). I used social learning theory to better understand early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SEL and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Background on SEL and Skills

SEL is defined as the process through which students and adults learn and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020). Through research, SEL has been shown to be one of the most effective intervention strategies to promote student development and well-being (CASEL, 2020). CASEL has been at the forefront of SEL research that has informed and provided

teachers and families with evidence-based strategies to help students succeed.

Development of SEL has been identified as what has been neglected and missing from the curriculum in American education (Mehta, 2020). Goleman (1994), one of the founders of CASEL, brought attention to the idea that schools should focus not just on academic performance but also on a student's emotional intelligence and well-being. Goleman explained that skills such as empathy, self-awareness, respect, being a good listener, and problem-solving are necessary for students to learn to achieve lifelong success. Goleman believed that schools were the best place for these skills to be learned and that these skillsets should be embedded into the curriculum. When schools encourage the development of SEL, it can affect the classroom environment as well as the student's academic and overall well-being. Goldman's research has informed decades of evidence-based practices of SEL.

SEL comprises five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Crowder et al., 2019). Another term used when referring to SEL is SEC. SEL is the process in which SEC develops (Aguilar et al., 2019). SEC are defined as individual characteristics that develop from environmental factors or biological predispositions that manifest into consistent patterns of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts (Murano et al., 2021). These patterns are developed through a student's formal and informal experiences that affect them for life (Murano et al., 2021). Students without age-appropriate SEC often have persistent challenging behaviors that affect their SEL. Persistent challenging behaviors can result from a lack of school readiness or social-emotional delays. Challenging behaviors can

also potentially harm children's educational development in school and have lifelong consequences (McGuire & Meadan, 2020).

Multiple studies have linked a student's lack of age-appropriate SES with outcomes such as mental health issues, lack of school readiness, disruptive or challenging behaviors, poor academic success, as well as an increase in substance abuse, delinquency, and drugs throughout adulthood (Aksoy, 2019; Burchinal et al., 2021; Zolkoski et al., 2020). Aksoy (2019) specifically argued that schools are the ideal setting to encourage better SES outcomes for students because their development of SES is influenced by the learning environment. Durlak et al. (2022) found that when early childhood teachers emphasized the development of SEL in their curriculum, there was not only a substantial increase in the students' age-appropriate SEL but a decrease in previous problem behaviors. Zolkoski et al. (2020) agreed that adding SEL into early childhood classrooms has contributed to better academic outcomes and decreased mental health problems and conduct behaviors.

The rise in problems associated with a lack of age-appropriate SEL has posed challenges for teachers working with an increased number of these students. Lebrun-Harris et al. (2022) found that between 2016 and 2020, there have been concerning trends in the rising number of students who lack age-appropriate SEL, have mental health issues, and have diagnosable behavioral and conduct disorders. These increases have added further challenges by creating teacher and caregiver mental health problems (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022).

The Effect of the Lack of Age-Appropriate SES

SES begins in infancy and continues into adulthood as students learn to connect and grow in their relationships. Students who lack age-appropriate SES are at risk of beginning kindergarten at a disadvantage in several key areas, which include a decrease in school readiness, academic skills, physical health (e.g., nutrition), and SEC (McGuire & Meadan, 2020). These factors create long-term social, emotional, educational, and health disparities (Ferreira et al., 2021).

The number of children entering early childhood classrooms who lack age-appropriate SES has increased (Morgan et al., 2022). SES are essential to promote positive adjustment in students and reduce potential future risks of negative behaviors and concerning academic outcomes (Guo et al., 2022). Incorporating SES into the curriculum is one of the most effective intervention strategies, especially for at-risk students (Crowder et al., 2019). Martinsone et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study that showed a connection between students' interpersonal skills in kindergarten and adult outcomes. The better a student's SES were in kindergarten, the less likely they were to need public assistance as adults or be involved in criminal activity and substance abuse. Robson et al. (2020) found that when SES, such as learning self-regulation, were added into classroom settings, there was a decrease in students' aggressive or criminal behaviors and mental health concerns.

Researchers have also found that excessive screen time contributes to a student's ability or lack of ability to develop effective age-appropriate SES. Hongbin et al. (2024) found that screen time affected students' SES skills, such as self-regulation and self-

efficacy, and caused an increase in problematic behaviors. The more screen time students had, the more likely they were to have behavioral problems (Hongbin et al., 2024).

Panjeti-Madan and Ranganathan (2023) indicated that when students are exposed to too much screen time, it can have negative outcomes such as technology addiction, the reduction of physical activities, an increase in stress levels, lack of sleep, emotional distress, relationship issues, and behavioral problems. Too much screen time directly correlates to a lack of age-appropriate SES, including problem behaviors. Hongbin et al. found that when students spend excessive time on screens, it limits their ability to interact socially, which is critical to their ability to develop effective age-appropriate SES.

Other studies have linked students who lack age-appropriate SES to health concerns (Blewitt et al., 2020; Ghandour et al., 2021). Ghandour et al. (2021) found that students living in poverty were at risk for mental, behavioral, and emotional problems and an increased risk of inadequate nutrition, which could lead to long-term chronic illnesses. An epidemiological study by Blewitt et al. (2020) indicated that 9.5% to 14.2% of early childhood students had experienced serious behavioral and emotional disturbances. The study's results also showed a complexity between environmental and genetic factors that affected students' social and emotional development (Blewitt et al., 2020). A mental health and well-being survey showed that 13.6% of students between the ages of 4 and 11 met the diagnostic criteria for a mental health disorder (Blewitt et al., 2020). These included anxiety disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, major depressive disorder, and conduct disorder (Blewitt et al., 2020). The increase in early childhood students who lack age-appropriate SES has directly contributed to academic

problems and mental health and well-being concerns. This has created challenges for teachers working with these students, who require these skills for future success.

Students in early childhood classrooms have shown increased externalizing and internalizing behaviors that put them at risk of not developing age-appropriate SES (Conroy et al., 2022). Many of these persistent, challenging behaviors have contributed to later academic and behavioral difficulties that last into adulthood (Conroy et al., 2022). There are significant negative consequences for these students, which can lead to problematic conduct in preschool and later in life, including failure in school, social rejection, substance abuse, mental health problems, and juvenile delinquency (Hunnikin et al., 2020). Hoskins and Schweig (2024) found that the quality of SEL programs largely depended on whether the learning environment was safe. In this study, school safety was defined as an absence of violence, crime, and aggressive behaviors like bullying. When students feel safe, they are less fearful and more likely to develop more effective age-appropriate SES (Hoskins & Schweig, 2024).

Research has shown that implementing SEL into the early childhood curriculum fosters positive attitudes toward school and academic success (Ferreira et al., 2021). Students who exhibit a lack of age-appropriate SES have problematic external and internal behaviors; however, it is often the internal behaviors, such as anxiety or depression, that have been overlooked (Ferreira et al., 2021). Programs in early childhood made to aid in the development of student's age-appropriate SES, such as self-regulation, have been shown to successfully decrease behavioral conduct difficulties (Rademacher et al., 2022). Kaya and Deniz (2020) noted that without intervening early in a student's life,

they would become more susceptible to lifelong mental and psychological problems, such as depression, a negative sense of self, and a lack of SES. Early childhood teachers play a crucial role in reducing the gap for students who need support in developing SES required for lifelong health and well-being.

Mondi et al. (2021) argued that using SEL programs that promote the development of SES for young students should be viewed as an early intervention approach. SEL has been shown to improve students' confidence, increase their engagement in learning, improve grades and test scores, reduce conduct problems, and increase prosocial or age-appropriate SES (Crowder et al., 2019). Aksoy (2019) evaluated different preventative SEL preschool programs, such as You Can Do It! Education, Tools of the Mind, and Conscious Discipline, and found that each supported early intervention in a student's life for the best results.

Students with strong SES are more likely to see long-term benefits, including career success, being prepared for college, positive relationships, and better mental health outcomes (Guo et al., 2022). Mahoney et al. (2021) stated that the increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES has contributed to the rise in mental health problems, and that this should be a cause for alarm for public health. Blewitt et al. (2021) found that using SEL practices to help students develop their SES should be more than an educational approach but adopted as an overall public health initiative. Jones et al. (2019) researched the need for implementing SEL within the larger scope of the public health framework for education as a preventative tool to mitigate future negative health outcomes for students. Jones et al. argued there is a strong body of evidence that

documents not just the positive academic outcomes of incorporating SES into classrooms but overwhelming support for the positive long-term mental and physical well-being it has throughout a student's lifetime.

Providing schools with this common framework promotes student well-being and school success and prevents mental health disorders (Blewitt et al., 2020). These outcomes have a measurable and long-term effect on the trajectory of students' lives (Blewitt et al., 2020). These deficits create challenges for teachers working with children without age-appropriate SES and lifelong challenges for students' health and overall well-being.

Significance of the Teacher's Role in Developing SES

Upon reviewing the current literature, a substantial amount of research indicated the importance of the teacher's role in helping students develop age-appropriate SES. Alzahrani et al. (2019) found that students are more likely to engage in positive behaviors and less likely to misbehave when they have a teacher who promotes a supportive classroom environment. Students who have experienced a lack of support have decreased positive interactions and even regressed in their social and emotional development (Crowder et al., 2019), which suggests that the teacher plays a critical role in developing and maintaining the SES young students acquire.

Murano et al. (2019) argued that many teachers have limited training and confidence in their abilities to support SEL in the classroom. The rise of students who lack age-appropriate SES coincides with teachers leaving the profession due to stress (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Twenty-five percent of teachers in the United States leave

the profession before their third year, noting the pressure of the workload and student demands as the reasons (Mérida-López et al., 2020). According to Grant et al. (2019), teachers experience less well-being and higher stress than most professions. Stress, due to the demands of students, is one of the main reasons teachers are leaving the field; students who exhibit a lack of age-appropriate SES are creating challenges for teachers in the classroom (Grant et al., 2019). Einav et al. (2024) found that effective professional and social support for teachers can mitigate teacher burnout. Liu et al. (2024) demonstrated that when teachers developed trust with their administrators, they reported feeling safer and more relaxed at work, which contributed to overall well-being and job satisfaction. H. L. W. Pan et al. (2023) explained that when administrators prioritized teacher well-being intervention and resource strategies it also increased job satisfaction even when teachers reported challenges. When teachers have support and can rely on their colleagues and administrators, this can reduce and protect them from the damaging outcomes of burnout. Kim et al. (2020) found a stable relationship with a teacher promotes children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Due to the high stress levels, many teachers are leaving the field, creating a high turnover rate. This affects students' SES, as a consistent relationship with a teacher has been shown to improve and promote students' SES (Kim et al., 2020). A teacher's well-being and SEC are important and connected to improving the overall classroom climate and students' SES (Grant et al., 2019). Teacher and student well-being is important for improving overall classroom climate and developmental outcomes (Grant et al., 2019). The research supports the connection between the teacher's role and the effectiveness of a student's SES. When

students lack age-appropriate SES, it adds to teacher workloads, which has been linked to increased burnout, stress, and job dissatisfaction associated with more long-term mental health concerns for teachers (Y. Wang, 2024). The increase in the demands of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES has created challenges for teachers and the profession as they are leaving the field altogether.

Aspelin (2019) noted that in the United States and internationally, a growing body of research supports the importance of the teacher-student relationship in student success. A student's SES or relational competence development has been shown to increase when a teacher models skills such as empathy, respect, and tolerance (Corbin et al., 2019). Vitiello et al. (2022) found that, especially in kindergarten, the teacher-student relationship must be a foundation that provides students with a supportive model to effectively develop age-appropriate SES. Ferreira et al. (2021) stated that the student-teacher relationship or the teacher's role in helping the student form attachments is the foundation of the development of SES. When students have both secure and positive attachments with their teachers, this allows them to develop SES, including empathy, cooperation, respect, turn-taking, and problem solving (Ferreira et al., 2021). Although teachers are the means of providing effective SEL programs that improve students' SES in the classroom, little research has been done to identify the challenges for teachers regarding their well-being in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES (Kim et al., 2020).

Virmani et al. (2020) stated that the teacher's role is so vital to the success of the development of students' SES that the research must keep up with the needs and

challenges teachers have in working with the increase in students lacking age-appropriate SES. Strategies to utilize SEL in the classroom have been provided to teachers, but little has been done to explore teachers' perspectives on the challenges they face (Virmani et al., 2020). Rudasill et al. (2022) found that positive student-teacher interactions not only improved students' development of SEL but also contributed to their adjustment to school, resilience, and success in later academic performance. Strategies such as mindfulness and reflection were found to assist teaching practices that provided more effective student-teacher interactions, leading to better SEL outcomes (Virmani et al., 2020). These strategies helped teachers develop their SEL and SEL, but the research did not account for the specific challenges they faced when teaching students who lacked age-appropriate SEL.

Narea et al. (2022) found that early childhood students' nurturing and responsive relationships with their teachers are essential to social and emotional development. When teachers provide supportive, responsive classroom environments, students are more successful academically and in developing SEL (Narea et al., 2022). Research has shown that teachers have had limited training and support in implementing SEL in their classrooms and, therefore, have demonstrated a low level of effectiveness in diminishing problem behaviors, resulting in a lack of age-appropriate SEL (Morgan et al., 2022). Research findings have also indicated that teachers need further training to successfully implement SEL, which increases students' prosocial skills (Rakap et al., Virmani et al., 2020). The importance of the teacher's role is supported in the research; however, the

perspectives regarding the challenges teachers face are noticeably missing in the literature.

SES and School Readiness

School readiness is the minimum level of a student's preparedness for meeting the multitude of demands at school (Wall-Wieler et al., 2019). These demands include physical health and well-being, social and emotional development, language comprehension and skills, general knowledge, and cognition. Upon entering school, students who display high SES have been found to have greater academic success (Wall-Wieler et al., 2019). School readiness has been identified as the strongest predictor of future academic achievement and educational adjustment into adulthood (Q. Pan et al., 2019). There is a direct correlation between students with age-appropriate SES and school readiness; however, students who lack age-appropriate SES tend to have a more difficult time transitioning into school (Sulik et al., 2023).

Ghandour et al. (2021) stated that the educational success of young students is often shaped before they begin kindergarten due to the critical period of development beginning at infancy. Students come to school with various experiences and skills that affect all areas of development. Using the Healthy and Ready to Learn pilot program, Ghandour et al. measured the number of early childhood students who were on track for school readiness and those who needed support before entering school. Findings showed that early learning skills, self-regulation, and SES development were the areas where students needed help. Miller and Kehl (2019) found that strong SES, such as self-regulation, helped preschool students resolve conflicts, be attentive to learning, and

develop positive relationships. Students who struggle with these skills inevitably have difficulty succeeding in school. The results of the research by Ghandour et al. and Miller and Kehl suggested that early intervention in early childhood is necessary for young students, as they lack age-appropriate SES before entering school, which does not prepare them to be successful.

Kerker et al. (2023) explained how the recent COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded the need for more social and emotional support for teachers and students in the classroom, specifically early childhood students entering school. Research still needs to be done on how this has affected this cohort of students and what support they and their teachers need to move forward most effectively (Kerker et al., 2023). Hernández and Jabbari (2022) agreed that many aspects of the pandemic, including isolation, have significantly affected young students and their natural development of social skills that would aid them in being ready for school, which teachers have noticed. The research has shown a steady increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES; the crisis and trauma from the pandemic created significant social limitations that affected students' school readiness, overall well-being, and ability to cope with stress (Shoshani & Kor, 2022). A growing number of students lack age-appropriate SES, causing challenges for teachers. Lacey et al. (2024) noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic closures, teachers indicated that the home-school partnership was seriously affected and disrupted. Aside from a higher workload, teachers found a shift in the home-school partnership, and there was concern that the shift would not be rectified (Lacey et al., 2024).

Sulik et al. (2023) found that early childhood students with age-appropriate SES scored higher in behavioral regulation and social skills and performed better in literacy and engagement learning. Students who struggled with SES had trouble with classroom engagement and concentration, leading to school readiness concerns (Sulik et al., 2023). Alzahrani et al. (2019) noted that SES are fundamental to a child's SEC. SES has led to school readiness and has also been linked to better academic achievement and future success. The increase in preschool students who lack age-appropriate SES has been found to be problematic. The research findings demonstrated a clear connection between young students' SES and future outcomes, such as school readiness, overall school success, well-being, and the ability to maintain and manage good behaviors and relationships (Alzahrani et al., 2019).

Other researchers have been critical of kindergarten programs, debating the balance between academic rigor and a play-based curriculum. Le et al. (2019) noted that critics often express concern about the increase in students who are not school ready and the expectations for them regarding advanced academic content in kindergarten programs. Le et al. explored if there was a connection between implementing an advanced academic curriculum in kindergarten programs and the decrease in students' SES and development. The results demonstrated that implementing advanced academic content into these programs did not negatively affect a student's SES. On the contrary, when students were appropriately challenged, their skills increased, including SES. Bernier et al. (2020) found a link between age-appropriate SES skills and school readiness, indicating that students' environmental influences and role models for SES

contributed to future academic achievement. Quality of programming, the environment, teacher responsiveness, and relationships with students were the determining factors for the successful development of SES, as students who enter school with lower SES require more support than those who already have the age-appropriate SES associated with school readiness (Kaya & Deniz, 2020).

Another theme prevalent in the literature was the cost of SEL programs to aid students in achieving the skills needed for school readiness. Lawson et al. (2019) stated that there has been an increase in universal SEL programs in schools to increase academic achievement and aid in the development of SES. Crowder et al. (2019) noted that educational institutions have limited resources and support, and objective methods must be used to determine what programs are effective for school readiness intervention but are also cost-effective. Various SEL programs are available; however, feasibility and affordability must be considered when implementing an SEL program in a school or school district. The increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES causes challenges for teachers as well as the lack of available resources that could be used in the classroom. Oliveira et al. (2021) noted that SEL programs had received international attention and argued for investing in these, as the outcomes positively affect students' school readiness and well into adulthood. Studies have shown that programs' quality and timing significantly influence their effectiveness and should be considered when choosing an SEL program as well as its cost (Lawson et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021).

Schweinhart (2005) reviewed a well-known study that showed the importance of quality preschool for school readiness and other facets that have led to student success. The High/Scope Perry Preschool study was longitudinal and followed the lives of a cohort of preschool students from two groups. The study's results indicated a direct correlation between a high-quality preschool and positive future outcomes, including school readiness. The cost-benefit analysis was one of the most notable findings that informed future research. Schweinhart noted that the High/Scope Perry Preschool study showed a significant return on investment. The economic return to society for the program was \$258,888 per participant on an investment of \$15,166 each, or \$17.07 per dollar invested. Investing in implementing high-quality preschool programs contributed to school readiness and positively affected SES, health, and well-being. Overall academic and future success also provided a solid return on investment, benefiting society's economic growth.

Teachers' Perspectives on SES

Researchers have recently explored teachers' perspectives of SES and their views on SEL programs nationally and internationally. Katz et al. (2020) found that many researchers have addressed teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs concerning using SEL in the classroom. Katz et al. concluded that although there has been improvement in educating teachers about SEL, there are still significant flaws in the lack of consistent knowledge teachers gain about SEL in their education training. Guo et al. (2022) found that many teachers agreed that abilities such as self-awareness, empathy, self-management, and building relationships were critical in developing a student's SES;

when those skills increased or were higher, the children did better academically. Aguilar et al. (2019) established that teachers' perspectives on students who lacked age-appropriate SES affected their behaviors as well as the teachers and students around them. These antisocial behaviors (e.g., being disruptive) created challenges for the entire classroom (Aguilar et al., 2019).

Zolkoski et al. (2020) explored teachers' perceptions of the skills and knowledge required to implement SEL in rural classrooms. Zolkoski et al. argued that teachers have become increasingly concerned about students' mental health, which is often observed in the behaviors of young students. In addition, teachers have perceived a deficiency in age-appropriate SES. Many stated they felt overwhelmed by increased demands in the classroom, and several spoke about teacher training that did not provide enough details or give them the knowledge or direction on how to implement SEL in their classrooms (Zolkoski et al., 2020). The rise in the lack of age-appropriate SES has created challenges for teachers who feel overwhelmed by these demands and do not have enough knowledge to help students in their classrooms. Katz et al. (2020) noted that teachers' perceptions of school climate and their own SES have been essential to adopting SEL in the classroom or school. If teachers feel they have the support they need, they are more likely to implement SEL effectively to improve students' SES and academic and future success.

Zinsser et al. (2022) found that in the United States, early childhood preschool expulsion rates exceed those in K-12 settings. This has not only concerned teachers but has also created challenges and stress that have affected their well-being (Zinsser et al., 2022). Teachers shared that the reasons for expelling a child from an early childhood

preschool often included a variety of factors, including the student's behavior or lack of SES that resulted in aggression, a lack of administrative support and classroom resources, as well as the teacher's ability to manage these challenges. The increasing number of students lacking age-appropriate SES has caused problems not only for teachers but for early childhood learning overall. In a study by Corbin et al. (2019), teachers noted that their interactions with children who struggled with SES, including aggressive behaviors, had been emotionally damaging as they often felt ineffective in connecting with these students.

Jeon et al. (2019) examined teachers' perceptions of their stress in relation to their students lacking age-appropriate SES or persistent challenging behaviors. Jeon et al. found that when teachers reported high stress levels, children demonstrated elevated levels of anger-aggression. In addition, when teachers experienced a high level of stress, they became less tolerant of the children's behaviors resulting from a lack of age-appropriate SES. This also caused a change in the classroom environment (Jeon et al., 2019). Corbin et al. (2019) found a connection between teachers' difficulties in creating positive interactions and relationships with students and their own ability to develop SES. Specifically, teachers' perceptions of their emotions in the classroom directly affected the classroom climate. According to Corbin et al., this was associated with emotional exhaustion and teacher burnout, as they felt unprepared to manage the number of students who lacked age-appropriate SES or had challenging behaviors.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I reviewed current research literature on SES and SEL. I discussed SEL and skills, the possible effect on students who lack age-appropriate SES, the significance of the teacher's role in developing SES, the connection SES has on school readiness, and the value of early childhood teachers' perspectives. Researchers have found that by implementing SEL programs in early childhood classrooms, students' SES and academic success improved (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022). In addition, high-quality early childhood education programs that focus on students' development of age-appropriate SES have been shown to benefit the economy when these students succeed in adulthood (Schweinhart, 2005). Other research demonstrated that students who lacked age-appropriate SES were at risk for severe mental health issues, long-term chronic health problems, increased violence, aggression, and crime later in life (Blewitt et al., 2020).

Some researchers have criticized and noted limitations in implementing SEL programs in early childhood classrooms, stating that finding cost-effective programs and teachers with enough knowledge and training has impeded using SEL in classrooms (Aksoy, 2019; Crowder et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2022). Teachers' SES and mental health has been shown to directly affect a student's SES and well-being as well as classroom climate (Corbin et al., 2019). These limitations suggested the need to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives to pinpoint their challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support may assist them.

Several researchers focused on the connection between school readiness and students who lacked age-appropriate SES (Ghandour et al., 2021; Sulik et al., 2023; Wall-Wieler et al., 2019). Kaya and Deniz (2020) found that the quality of programming, the environment, teacher responsiveness, and relationships with students were the determining factors in developing successful SES, as students who come to school with lower SES require more support than those who already have the age-appropriate SES associated with school readiness. Age-appropriate SES has led to school readiness and has also been linked to better academic achievement and future success (Miller & Kehl, 2019).

Research on the teachers' perspectives indicated that persistent challenging behaviors, often due to students who lack age-appropriate SES, have caused teacher burnout much faster (Jeon et al., 2019). Teachers noted that their interactions with students who struggled with SES was emotionally exhausting and damaging to them as they often felt ineffective in their abilities to connect with these students (Corbin et al., 2019). Aguilar et al. (2019) found that the teachers' perspectives on students who lack age-appropriate SES affected the behaviors of all teachers and students around them; these antisocial behaviors created a disruptive environment that challenged teachers and the entire classroom dynamic.

The gap in practice in the literature was that teachers in the United States had been expected to implement practices that help students develop age-appropriate SES, but they have not always been able to meet this obligation. Few researchers have examined early childhood teachers' perspectives regarding their challenges working with students

who lack age-appropriate SES. Additional research was needed to explore these perspectives, the challenges this causes teachers, and what support has helped them. I designed this basic qualitative study to gain a deeper understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives in these areas.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, its rationale, and my role as the researcher. Next, I provide details of the methodology for the study, including instrumentation, procedures for participant recruitment, participation, and data collection, and a data analysis plan. Finally, I address the study's trustworthiness and ethical procedures to be followed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Qualitative research involves field work that addresses the significance of the problem and informs a study (Lodico et al., 2010). Qualitative methodology gives the researcher the opportunity to explore and connect with the world in the participants' natural settings and through their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives helped me identify the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Chapter 3 includes a description of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology to be used, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The following RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom?

RQ2: What support do early childhood teachers believe would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom?

A basic qualitative research design with one-on-one semistructured interviews was used to collect data. According to Creswell and Poth (2016) and Lodico et al. (2010), participant interviews are used to collect data by creating purposeful conversations. A basic qualitative design was the most effective approach for this study because it allowed

me to obtain detailed information, insight, and an understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives. Twelve participants were recruited to help achieve an in-depth understanding of the study's topic, as this number is typical for a basic qualitative research design (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). Using a quantitative design would not accomplish my goal for this research as it involves numerical descriptions. A quantitative approach would not allow me to obtain the in-depth perspectives I explored in this study.

I considered using other qualitative research designs before choosing a basic qualitative approach. I contemplated a qualitative case study, where the researcher conducts a detailed exploration of a subject in its natural setting (see Priya, 2021). Case studies allow the researcher to collect data using a variety of methods and sources that align with the purpose of the study, such as observation, documents, and artifacts, in addition to interviews (Priya, 2021). In my study, I only collected data from participant interviews; therefore, a case study would not have been appropriate.

Another design I considered was grounded theory. The purpose of my research was not to develop a theory but to understand the experiences of early childhood teachers who worked with students who lacked age-appropriate SES and its challenges. In a study with a grounded theory design, data collection involves interviews with a larger sample than I used for this study (see Chun Tie et al., 2019). After evaluating the different qualitative designs, I selected a basic qualitative approach, using one-on-one semistructured interviews to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher, I was responsible for all aspects of this study. I was an observer-participant in this process, observing the participants during the interviews as well as conducting them. My role was to objectively collect and analyze the data from the participants and to accurately relay my findings. Because I reside in a small community in Ontario, Canada, and am familiar with many local early childhood educators, I decided to complete this research in the United States. I had no connection or conflict of interest with any of the early childhood educator participants.

I was an early childhood and elementary school teacher for 6 years before I became a full-time instructor in an early childhood education program. I work with future early childhood educators who will be employed in childcare and school systems, mainly in Ontario, Canada. I recruited participants for my study from the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood education social media sites, and snowball sampling. As an early childhood education instructor currently teaching the next generation of educators, I was interested in the perspectives of early childhood educators who teach children lacking age-appropriate SES and the challenges this may cause. My current position prompted my interest in the development of this study as it may help inform the teaching practices I could implement into my curriculum.

My background as a teacher, my current role as an early childhood education instructor, and my experience using SEL in my classrooms could have created biases regarding the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Roger et al. (2018) explained that the researcher must be able to describe relevant biases, make

assumptions transparent, and detail expectations and experiences when conducting a study. Biases influence a research study, and reflexivity should be a substantial part of qualitative methodology. Roger et al. argued that the researcher must understand their biases and the importance of introspection and reflexivity throughout the research process. Journal writing is a tool for researchers to use consistently to reflect on their perceptions, feelings, and interpretations during the study (Lodico et al., 2010). I used a researcher journal to continuously reflect on my biases, personal experiences, and the data generated and analyzed.

Methodology

Participant Selection

My study population was early childhood teachers who met the participation criteria. First, all participants had a 4-year degree, were state certified (holding a teaching certificate), and taught K-1 students. Second, the respondents must have been currently teaching in K-1 classrooms. Third, the participants must have taught in an early childhood classroom for at least 5 years. Administrators and teachers who taught other grades were not asked to participate because the focus of this study was on early childhood teachers' perspectives.

Sampling refers to identifying a smaller group of individuals from a larger population who can provide data for the study (Lodico et al., 2010). I used purposeful sampling to recruit 12 teachers on a voluntary basis. Purposeful sampling helped me recruit participants with knowledge and experience in relation to the purpose of this study (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). I selected potential participants from the Walden University

Participant Pool and early childhood teacher social media sites. I also used snowball sampling to obtain enough teachers for this study. I posted invitations on the Walden University Participant Pool website and social media. I also asked participants to share information with others who met the criteria to obtain the necessary sample size.

I ensured that the participants met the criteria for this study by making the requirements clear in the invitation and confirming that these were met via email before providing a consent form. The feasibility of the study required enough participants who met the research criteria (see Abrahamsen et al., 2022). Twelve early childhood teachers was an adequate sample size for data saturation (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). Saturation is the most common guiding principle for assessing the adequacy of purposive samples in qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Instrumentation

In this basic qualitative study, I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews using an interview protocol as the instrument to collect data. Interviews are often the focus of qualitative studies because they provide an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts and experiences on a topic (Lodico et al., 2010). I interviewed each early childhood teacher participant and recorded their responses on the online platform Zoom (audio only). Phone interviews were originally an option, but all participants selected the virtual format. Recording interviews ensured accuracy in representing the participants' responses and an opportunity for member checking (see Lodico et al., 2010). I created the interview questions to assist in understanding teachers' perspectives on the challenges of working with students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support may

help them. My research journal also assisted with data collection, as I recorded ongoing reflections or biases to effectively document the research process.

Interview questions were created to elicit responses from the participants to answer the RQs. They were designed to explore the early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. To address content validity, I asked three nonparticipating early childhood teachers to review the interview questions to ensure they were clear and that their design would allow for the RQs to be answered effectively. I also conducted mock interviews with nonparticipants to become familiar with the technology and interview protocol guide. Conducting mock interviews helped me to become comfortable with the interview protocol.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The study consisted of 12 early childhood teacher participants who met the established criteria. Participants were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teacher social media groups. Snowball sampling was used to obtain additional participants. Participants were from across the United States and had a broad range of backgrounds and teaching experiences.

After approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I recruited participants by posting information about my study on the Walden University Participant Pool website and early childhood teacher social media groups. A description

of the study was included, along with the requirements to participate, and instructions to respond to my posted email.

Once potential participants responded to my invitation, I verified they met the study's criteria via email and provided the consent form to allow them to review the study details before they agreed to participate. Early childhood teachers who agreed replied that they consented via email. I sent all early childhood teachers who agreed to participate a thank you email that included a consent form with sample interview questions and interview schedule options so they could select the most convenient date and time. I conducted the interviews as scheduled, using specific interview questions from the interview protocol guide.

I collected data from one-on-one semistructured interviews using specifically designed interview questions (see Appendix A) through Zoom, using the interview protocol guide (see Appendix B) as the instrument to collect data. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, I conducted one interview with each early childhood teacher participant virtually and in my home office. Each interview took 45 to 60 minutes. I obtained data from the participants' interview responses, which I recorded using Zoom (audio only). Recording the interviews ensured the responses were accurately reflected and reliable (see Oliffe et al., 2021). After each interview, I thanked the participant for their time and informed them I would send them a two-page summary of the study findings to verify that I accurately captured their responses and meanings.

Using the current research literature and the conceptual framework consisting of social learning theory, I created interview questions to help facilitate an understanding of

early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believe would help them when working with these students in the classroom. I used a journal to record demographic data and details of the individual interviews. I asked each participant the same questions in identical order to ensure consistency. I also asked follow-up questions, if necessary, throughout the interview process. My goal was that the interviews would elicit responses from the participants that contained the information required to answer the RQs.

Data Analysis Plan

The interview questions were designed using the literature in Chapter 2 and social learning theory to obtain information to answer the RQs. Interview Questions 1 through 4 were developed to assist in answering RQ1. Interview Questions 5 through 8 were created to help answer RQ2. After completing the interviews, I used Transkriptor, an online software program, to generate interview transcripts. To confirm accuracy, I reviewed each transcript. The transcripts allowed me to properly analyze the data from each participant line by line.

After analysis, I used member checking by sending participants a two-page summary of the findings. Ravitch and Carl (2019) stated that researchers should look for alternative explanations, possible misinterpretations, and discrepant findings in their data. Discrepant findings can point a researcher to potential flaws in the construction of instruments and result in unintended ambiguity or insufficient depth in the participants' responses (DiLoreto & Gaines, 2016). I identified and discussed any discrepant findings

in detail. I also included participant quotes from the interviews when presenting the results to provide insight into the participants' lived experiences.

A detailed account of each participant's interview assisted me in analyzing the data. Data analysis in qualitative research brings meaning to the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Transcription allows the researcher to become familiar with the data, which deepens their understanding of the participants' perspectives (Lester et al., 2020).

After receiving the transcripts of the participants' interview responses, I began data analysis. I used open coding for the initial data analysis. I read the transcript line-by-line and coded keywords and phrases (see Lester et al., 2020). I then use different colored markers or highlighters to distinguish the open codes. In the following rounds of open coding, I focused specifically on components of the RQs until I coded all data (see Williams & Moser, 2019). I used open codes to help organize my data into chunks or manageable units to help discover new concepts or ideas through analysis of the written texts (see Williams & Moser, 2019).

Once I identified the open codes, I used axial coding, the process of grouping codes with other codes that share similar meanings into categories (see Locke et al., 2020). I coded chunks of data to determine if these codes formed categories (see Locke et al., 2020). Once I developed categories, I examined them and looked for emerging themes. I examined the initial themes and identified any that collapsed into a single theme. I used thematic analysis to develop themes utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. These steps included familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and summarization. I completed an exhaustive data

review until no new patterns or themes emerged. I continued critically reviewing my themes by checking and rechecking my interpretations against the data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical in qualitative research and reflects the study's credibility and believability of the findings and, therefore, the overall quality of the research (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Validity in a qualitative study means that the researcher checks the findings using procedures to ensure the accuracy of the data and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The steps a qualitative researcher takes to ensure validity lead to trustworthiness (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability will help ensure its validity.

Credibility

Credibility refers to whether the participants' perceptions of the setting match the researcher's portrayal of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In other words, credibility is how well the researcher has accurately represented the thoughts and feelings of the participants along with the processes that may have influenced their thoughts and feelings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I established credibility in this study by ensuring the participants had at least 5 years of experience teaching in early childhood education classrooms. I checked the interview transcripts for accuracy, used a reflective journal, made audio recordings of interviews, and performed member checks with a two-page summary of the findings. Member checks are typically used with all participants to increase the credibility of a study (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of the findings over time (Elo et al., 2014). I ensured dependability in this study through member checks—a process researchers use to ensure their bias does not influence the participants' perspectives. Researchers use member checking by sharing either the transcribed interviews or a summary of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). After data analysis, I emailed all participants a two-page summary of my findings to read and requested that they email me if they had any questions or concerns. No participants responded, and I concluded that they agreed with my findings. I used the interview protocol and asked the interview questions in the same order to further create dependability.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the potential for extrapolation in research (Elo et al., 2014). Transferability occurs when findings from research can be transferred or generalized to other professions, settings, or situations (Elo et al., 2014). By providing a detailed description of the data and the context of this research, readers can compare or judge the appropriateness of transferring my findings to future research contexts (see Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Confirmability

Confirmability of a study is when it can be corroborated by other research, and that interpretations of the findings can be traced back to the data (Nguyen et al., 2021). I achieved confirmability through reflexivity, documenting in my journal a critical analysis of my biases, responses, and role in the research process, as well as any adjustments I

made to the study based on my reflections and analysis (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). I also used Transkriptor to transcribe the interview responses and manually coded them to achieve an involved understanding of the perspectives and intentions of the participants. This process mitigated any bias that could have influenced the results.

Ethical Procedures

I completed all necessary IRB (Approval No. 09-14-23-0557339) forms and requirements to ensure that my study included ethical procedures to reduce any potential problems that might surface regarding the treatment of human subjects. According to Sabati (2019), research ethics is a relatively new concept in the United States. The National Research Act of 1974 set in motion policies at the federal level to maintain ethical research standards with human subjects that required universities and research institutions to establish IRBs to uphold these regulations (Sabati, 2019). I followed the ethical requirements of Walden University's IRB. There were no ethical concerns during the recruitment or data collection process.

Beneficence is doing good for others, an important and basic psychological need for human beings (Dendle et al., 2022). This is connected to research in that researchers should always have good intentions to keep the well-being of their participants at the forefront and not cause harm in any way. I did not anticipate that my study would cause harm to the participants. I had no personal or professional affiliations with the early childhood teachers or the schools in which they teach. I reassured participants that my role was that of a researcher only, and that their participation may help students and early childhood teachers. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary. I

reiterated that all responses will be kept confidential and that no one else will know their identity.

Before beginning data collection, I emailed each potential participant the consent form and thank you. Participants voluntarily and explicitly indicated their consent and email through email. The consent form also contained a description of the data collection procedures, confidentiality protection, and time required for the interview. Before we began the interview, I reviewed the participants' rights and confidentiality procedures with them. All participants were informed that they could stop at any time during the interview process. Participants were also told they could drop out of the study at any time without consequences or penalties. I clearly communicated this information beforehand to minimize any potential psychological risk. Before the interview began, I stated the purpose of the study and that it was not an evaluation of the participants or their practice. I paused periodically throughout the interview to check if the participants were comfortable enough to continue.

I kept all data confidential. I used alphanumeric identifiers, such as P1, P2, and P3, to protect participants' identities. I stored all data from the semistructured interviews in my home office on a password-protected computer. I will keep data for 5 years, as required by the University, and to avoid future risks to confidentiality. Recorded materials will be erased after 5 years following final approval by the research committee. Hard copies of data will be shredded, and computer files deleted after 5 years.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the methodology used in this research study and the rationale for selecting a basic qualitative design. I described the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. The chapter included a description of the data analysis plan and strategies to improve the study's trustworthiness. I outlined measures for the ethical protection of the participants and the data. Chapter 4 includes the study's setting, data collection process, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Two RQs guided this study. RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom? RQ2: What support do early childhood teachers believe would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom? No conditions influenced the participants or their experiences at the time of this study. Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting, a discussion regarding data collection and analysis, the results of the study, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

For this basic qualitative study, semistructured interviews were used to explore the perspectives of 12 K–1 early childhood education teachers. I used the Walden University Participant Pool, teacher social media groups, and snowball sampling to recruit participants. All interviews were conducted from my home office. All participants agreed to have their interviews conducted via Zoom. Each was given an alphanumeric identifier to protect their identity. The participants' years as an early childhood education teacher ranged from 8 to 38. Table 1 is a summary of the participants' highest level of education, years of teaching in education, and the grades they taught.

Table 1*Demographics*

Research participants	Degree	Years of teaching experience	Grade taught
P1	Doctorate	20	K–2
P2	Master’s	27	First
P3	Doctorate	20	Kindergarten
P4	Bachelor’s	16	Kindergarten
P5	Master’s	15	Kindergarten
P6	Master’s	17	Kindergarten
P7	Master’s	8	Kindergarten
P8	Master’s	10	Kindergarten
P9	Bachelor’s	20	Kindergarten
P10	Master’s	38	Kindergarten
P11	Master’s	35	Kindergarten
P12	Bachelor’s	23	Kindergarten

Data Collection

Once I received approval from Walden University’s IRB, I began the data collection process. To obtain participants, I posted information about my study to the Walden University Participant Pool and various teacher social media groups, specifically for K–1 teachers. Snowball sampling was used to obtain additional participants to reach data saturation. Once a potential participant expressed interest in participating in the study, I sent them a copy of the consent form to review. Participants were asked to respond with confirmation of their consent to proceed with the study. Next, they were

sent a list of interview days and times to select what worked best for their schedules. The data collection process took 7 weeks to complete. All 12 participants agreed to complete the interview via Zoom. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Each participant was asked the same interview questions in identical order.

At the beginning of each interview, I thanked and welcomed the participants. Using the interview protocol guide, I stated the purpose of the study and briefly introduced myself. I then reviewed the consent form as a reminder that participating in the study would not pose any risks and that each participant had the right to end the interview at any time. I explained that the information would only be used for this study and remain confidential. A reflective journal was kept, documenting my thoughts throughout each interview to manage potential bias. Before beginning the interview questions, I asked the participants if they had any questions. Only the Zoom audio recording was used to protect the identity of the participants.

Once the interview began, each participant was asked three demographic questions to discover their highest level of education, how many years they had been teaching, and what grade they currently taught. I continued by asking the eight interview questions. After completing the interview, I thanked the participants for sharing their perspectives. I also informed them that once the data analysis was complete, I would provide a two-page summary of the findings for their review and comment.

Transkriptor was used as the software to transcribe the audio recordings. Once each interview was transcribed, I reviewed each line-by-line for accuracy. Corrections were made to any transcripts that required this to ensure accuracy. All audio recordings

were stored on a secure, password-protected computer in my home office. After 5 years, all data collected will be destroyed. There were no variations in the data collection process.

Data Analysis

For this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Using semistructured interviews, I asked each participant eight open-ended questions in the same order. After conducting the interviews, I uploaded the audio recordings into Transkriptor for transcription and reviewed each for accuracy. Throughout this process, I familiarized myself with the data collected from each participant.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Myself With the Data

All participants were given an alphanumeric identifier to protect their identity. Audio recordings and transcripts were reviewed carefully multiple times to ensure the data collected from each participant were accurate. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that in this phase, the researcher must immerse themselves in the data. Immersion involves repeatedly reading the data while noting meaning or patterns. I reviewed notes that were taken throughout the interview and, when needed, made additional notes as I continued to immerse myself in the data.

Phase 2: Generating Codes

Open and axial coding were used to inductively analyze the data collected from the interviews. When open coding, I first carefully read all transcripts. Next, I reread each

transcript line-by-line, identifying and highlighting key phrases, words, or concepts connected to the RQs, conceptual framework, and literature review. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 2 begins when the researcher has read and familiarized themselves with the data and generated an initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them. The transcripts were made into Word documents in which each transcript had highlighted open codes, using text boxes as identifiers. The open codes were documented in an Excel-based codebook template. This included details such as the participant identifier, the open code, and the number of times the same open code was used. Through this process, a total of 182 open codes were identified. Examples of open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Examples of Open Codes*

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Lack of time	P1	“So, I'd say lack of time is probably one of the number one problem.”
	P6	“Oh my gosh, like, yeah, I feel that that is the biggest struggle because they need more, more, more, and there's less time in the day because there's so many of them that I can't get around to all of them.”
More classroom support	P7	“I mean, by now, I figured out certain triggers for certain children, but just someone that can come in and help support me because I don't always have the answers, so not having that in place is really, really challenging and just having a more hands-on, supportive admin. would be really nice.”
	P11	“More hands. Just more hands. If there's more help in the classroom, honestly.”
Disrupts learning	P2	“When you spend, when you have 60 minutes to teach math, but 30 minutes of it, you had to keep stopping to say, ‘Stop rolling around the floor, get back in your chair, look, and listen.’”
	P9	“Because it only takes one; it only takes one student who doesn't have it together in a significant way to completely disrupt the entire class, and even your most socially aware students can't ignore what's going on in the classroom.”
Students are scared	P5	“So, especially with the three extreme cases next door, those children are scared for their safety, and they also are talking about it.”
	P8	“But with one of my students, anytime he would yell or throw or shove something, they would, like, flinch. And like that is not normal. Like that is not a normal reaction that should be happening in school when you have kids that are scared.”
Parent education	P4	“Oh, parent advocacy groups like parent home school outreach, where we have workshops for parents.”
	P12	“I think we need to teach the parents, right?”
Parental support needed	P3	“But my primary focus would be on the parent.”
	P6	“How do we help them want to come to school when school's hard, or you have parents that don't support it, so you're fending for yourself every day?”
Identify through observation	P7	“I think just by their behaviors of what they're doing in the class. I mean, it's just, you know, the second that you meet them and that they walk in, you're observing them.”
	P10	“Oh, through observation and conversation.”

Once the open coding was complete, I used axial coding to group the open codes into categories. I thoroughly organized, examined, and reviewed the open codes to identify any connections they had with each other. Using the codebook from the initial open coding process, I created a new Excel spreadsheet to organize the open codes into the appropriate categories, reviewing them and revising where necessary. I identified 12 categories during axial coding. Table 3 contains samples of the categories and open codes created from the participants' responses.

Table 3*Examples of Open Codes and Categories*

Category	Open code	Participant	Excerpt
School safety	Environment unsafe	P2	“It was incredibly scary and definitely not safe for the other children.”
	Students are scared	P12	“You know, they don't want to play with them, or they're kind of afraid of them approaching them.”
Parental support and education	Parental support needed	P9	But for some people, that is the biggest obstacle, is parents who are not supportive, parents who won't see what's going on, parents who don't want to work with the school, parents who see the school as the enemy.”
	Parent education	P11	“So, you know, helping to educate parents a little bit more about what's out there to help their child.”
Challenges for learning	Disrupts learning	P2	“Those students that are, you know, not able to maintain that behavioral expectation, they really disrupt that.”
	High classroom needs	P8	“The needs are so high that everybody is stretched so thin that they cannot be, and you can't put all of those kiddos in one room.”
Classroom supports needed	More classroom support	P4	“So, I think you know more paraprofessionals, more educational support professionals.”
	Provide individual support	P6	“They need so much small group like one-on-one, small group role-playing, social skills, station time with Legos and just talking to each other when they come in weak like that.”
Challenges for teachers	Lack of time	P4	“So, time is certainly a challenge.”
	Teachers are exhausted	P7	“You know, I just feel exhausted at the end of the day.”
Student obstacles to SES	Screen time	P4	“I mean, for me, it's keeping them off screens. It's getting them outside.”
	COVID pandemic	P8	“Post-COVID, like a lot of those kids either weren't in preschool, [they] didn't go. The parents were home, so they didn't get that social piece.”
Classroom SES strategies	Use read aloud	P5	“We also read a lot of books at the beginning of the school year; a lot of children's books with scenarios and different things.”
	Use peer mentors	P9	“I try to partner them as much as possible with a peer who can be more of a role model for them.”

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Once axial coding was complete, I analyzed the categories to detect any emerging themes from the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that in Phase 3, the researcher begins to analyze their codes and consider how different codes may combine to form a theme. Each of the categories was grouped according to similar characteristics or meanings. Four themes were derived from the analysis: (a) teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges; (b) teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety; (c) teachers need effective strategies and professional development; and (d) teachers need administrative and parental support. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and emerging themes that answered the RQs.

Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes

In Phase 4, I examined the themes several times to ensure they represented the axial codes appropriately. Next, I created a final list of the themes. Themes were organized according to the RQs. This method allowed me to identify any missing information from earlier analysis phases that may have been overlooked. I also ensured my interpretations matched the participants' responses through member checking. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that at the end of this phase, it should be clear what the themes are, how they fit together, and the overall story of the data.

Phase 5: Defining and Labeling Themes

After making a list of the themes and defining them, I made any needed revisions necessary. I expanded and collapsed some themes to get the most accurate data. Four

themes emerged from the data analysis process. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that by the end of this phase, the researcher should be able to clearly define what the themes are and what they are not. Two themes answered RQ1, and two answered RQ2. Table 4 provides a sample of the categories and themes developed during thematic analysis related to the RQs.

Table 4

RQs, Categories, and Themes

RQ	Category	Theme
RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom?	Challenges for learning Challenges for teachers In-class support Learning loss Classroom distractions	Theme 1: Teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges.
	School safety Aggressive behaviors Violent behaviors Screen time COVID-19 pandemic Student obstacles to SES	Theme 2: Teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety.
RQ2: What support do early childhood teachers believe would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom?	Inadequate training Classroom SES strategies Relevant professional development Better resources	Theme 3: Teachers need effective strategies and professional development.
	Experienced administration Parental support and education Classroom support needed Supportive administration	Theme 4: Teachers need administrative and parental support.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The last analysis phase was to complete a summary of the themes and write the findings in the final report. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that the report must provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. After concluding the data

analysis, I ensured the themes answered the RQs. Two discrepant cases among the findings were further analyzed. The themes answered the RQs.

Results

In this basic qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Data were collected from 12 interviews with early childhood teachers who taught Grades K–1. I asked eight open-ended questions to answer the RQs. Interview Questions 1 through 4 were developed to understand the teachers' perspectives to answer RQ1. Interview Questions 5 through 8 were created to answer RQ2.

Almost every participant indicated that students who lack age-appropriate SES affect the classroom and that more support is needed. The participants also indicated how the number of challenges affected their mental health and well-being. All participants expressed there were several challenges teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES, such as constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support. The participants conveyed challenges with student obstacles and school safety when teaching SES. Participants also identified the need for more effective strategies for students who lack age-appropriate SES. Lastly, participants stated that early childhood teachers need more administrative and parental support when working with students lacking age-appropriate SES.

RQ1 for this study was as follows: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom? The themes that answered RQ1 were as follows: (a) teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges; and (b) teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety. RQ2 for this study was as follows: What support do early childhood teachers believe would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom? The themes that answered RQ2 were the following: (c) teachers need effective strategies and professional development, and (d) teachers need administrative and parental support.

Theme 1: Teachers Identified Constant Disruptions, a Lack of Time, and a Lack of Support as Challenges

Constant Disruptions

When early childhood teachers were asked about the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES, they identified several challenges. One of the most reported challenges was the constant disruptions this caused for learning in the classroom. P2 discussed how these interfered with teaching time:

When you spend when you have 60 minutes to teach math, but 30 minutes of it, you had to keep stopping to say, "Stop rolling around the floor, get back in your chair, look, and listen. Please sit up and look. Sit up. Sit up and look. You know, I don't think you're ready." Show me what ready looks like. And you're saying these things over and over and over again, and little chants 123 eyes on me. And you know you just lost every single time you have to stop. You're losing teaching

minutes, and sadly, the ones who weren't, you know, inattentive, and they were; they're sitting there waiting, too.

Teachers explained that they felt extra pressure due to constant disruptions and how this affected their ability to provide classroom instruction and learning. Every participant, except one, noted constant disruptions as the biggest challenge in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and explained how this affected the classroom. P6 shared their experience:

I feel like it's really hard to teach. It's really hard to get through an entire lesson because I'm constantly putting out fires, and then I start teaching again, and then, you know, something else happened. So, then I put that fire out, and then by then, I've lost them all. So, I feel like in 46 days of teaching, I haven't gotten through one lesson without being interrupted multiple times.

Teachers indicated that when they have to consistently stop teaching due to a lack of age-appropriate SES among students, it hinders their ability to not only teach lessons but creates stress among teachers because they feel they cannot get through the curriculum material they are required to teach.

P12 identified how students who lack age-appropriate SES affected the classroom and learning of other students as well. Teachers expressed that they cannot do their jobs and teach students due to the constant disruptions caused by students who lack age-appropriate SES. P12 noted,

Well, I mean, it's disruptive, right. And it kind of not ruins the flow of the lesson or whatever, but you know, if you're constantly having to put out fires or, you

know, be the intermediary, it kind of distracts the rest of the kids who are attending and being on task.

P12 continued, “Those students that are, you know, not able to maintain that behavioral expectation, they really disrupt that. And I think it's unfair to the other children, and it's unfair to me.” P1 explained that “we have a lot of expectations in cases because we're having to stop a lot of times because of their lack of social-emotional skills. You know, it interrupts the learning environment, and students have to be removed.” The participants' responses demonstrated that when teaching stops due to a student's lack of age-appropriate SES, the student may need to be removed. This challenge connects to another part of this theme in that often, teachers have little to no support; therefore, the disruption continues and can even escalate. P9 shared their thoughts on the effect on other students: “Because it only takes one; it only takes one student who doesn't have it together in a significant way to completely disrupt the entire class, and even your most socially aware students can't ignore what's going on in the classroom.” Participants explained that keeping students on track with the constant disruptions this lack of age-appropriate SES creates in the classroom was difficult. The early childhood teachers expressed concern that the constant disruptions were interfering with teaching time and learning for the entire class.

Eleven out of the 12 participants noted that constant disruptions due to students who lack age-appropriate SES were a substantial challenge for them. One discrepant case in this theme came from the data that P3 provided. When asked about challenges, P3

stated that students who lack age-appropriate SES had a minor effect on the classroom and did not cause significant challenges for them:

I'm going to say it has little to no effect. I mean, it has an effect, but a little effect, you know, the students have. I try not to push. I find if I push too much, they'll push back and it becomes, it can become a negative situation.

When asked a clarifying question about this, P3 shared that they have a full-time classroom assistant who is tasked with removing students from the classrooms who are causing disruptions:

I have an assistant, so when that happens, she knows how I feel about that. They are instructed to take the child to a quieter environment to come and to figure out what the problem is so it does not affect the classroom.

P3 acknowledged that without the classroom support, they could understand how this would be challenging and cause disruption to their ability to teach: "I could see that it could potentially affect the classroom environment, but because I have an assistant, we work together and remove the student." Although this response was discrepant, it shows that a teacher's perspective on the challenges may change with classroom support. All other participants shared that constant disruptions due to students who lack age-appropriate SES was one of their biggest challenges.

Lack of Time

The participants also discussed challenges with a lack of time due to the increased needs of students who lack age-appropriate SES and how this affected the classroom. P6 explained,

Oh my gosh, like, yeah. I feel that that is the biggest struggle because they need more, more, more. And there's less time in the day because there's so many of them that I can't get around to all of them.

Teachers shared that students who lack age-appropriate SES created disruptions, which inevitably created another challenge in that they felt they lacked time to teach the curriculum effectively. Participants explained that a student's lack of age-appropriate SES directly affected their time teaching core curriculum content. P1 shared,

So, I'd say lack of time is probably one of the number one problems. Because in isolation I can teach social-emotional skills, you know, but I'm also tasked with making sure that the students can read and do math and write. And often times, those social-emotional skills have to be embedded rather than let's just take this 30-minute time and do a social-emotional lesson.

P1 also explained that it would be easier to accomplish if time was allotted to teach SES. However, teachers are tasked with ensuring students are at grade level for reading, writing, and math. Due to this lack of time, teachers often feel they must embed SES rather than prioritize it because there is pressure to teach core curriculum content over SES. P8 stated, "There's so much we do in a day, and we don't have all this time."

P8 discussed the many tasks and roles they complete in a day that affects the amount of time they have to teach. P4 also identified the reality of the spectrum of ability, especially in a kindergarten classroom:

So that's a challenge like the time it takes. The spread of these really high achieving kids who maybe are coming to kindergarten right where they like

should be, where they have some skills. And then students who come to kindergarten like, oh my goodness, they don't know anything. So, time is certainly a challenge.

All the participants described feeling overwhelmed by the number of challenges, including feeling frustrated by the lack of time due to students who lack age-appropriate SES and how this affects the classroom.

Lack of Support

Participants also expressed that a lack of support was a challenge in addressing the increased needs of students who lack age-appropriate SES. Teachers stated they needed more in-classroom support, including paraprofessionals and other educational professionals who could provide the support and resources to meet the challenges of teaching these students. P10 felt they were alone in this situation:

Another thing I thought that I don't have in my current situation, I don't have, like, a school counselor in my building. There are very few resource people. You're pretty much on your own. For example, when my “friend” [a disruptive child] is being my “friend,” I can't pick up the phone and call my principal. Because she's normally teaching a class, eighth grade math or fifth grade English or so, she's not available.

P10 was not the only participant who felt “being on your own.” The resources available to teachers varied among states and districts. Some had school counselors and a response team to call upon when needed; others had few options or support available. Many

participants agreed that there was often no one to call when they required support, so it was challenging. P8 stated,

We are in a staff shortage for substitutes. We have no subs in our school. So when a para. is out, those kids don't have support. Because, I mean, again, curriculum is only going to do so much. And without us, without people to help implement those ideas and practices, they're never happening.

P8 noted that the staffing shortage was concerning because nothing can be properly or effectively implemented without enough support in the classroom. P5 expressed the difficulty in getting help:

We're pleading. We just had a meeting on Friday. Huge behavioral portion of our meeting, just pleading for help. Like, we need to know the steps on how to get everyone on the same page of what kind of system we're going to do in order to help these children and teachers. Like teachers are at their wit's end with the behavior as well.

P5 was emotional when asked about the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what supports may help them. P5 shared that the teachers at their school had begun to ask for more help and support as the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES has increased, and teachers are at a breaking point with the number of behaviors they must address. Teachers need more consistent in-classroom support to help with this trend. P8 agreed that the needs of students have steadily risen:

The needs are so high that everybody is stretched so thin that they cannot be, and you can't put all of those kiddos in one room. So, they're stretched so thin, and

they're trying to help support that. What ends up happening is the response team gets called. Well, who's on the response team? One of the special ed. teachers, the OT [occupational therapist], the speech teacher, the resource teacher, the reading teacher. Like all these people who have groups of kids themselves are now having to drop and come rotate.

P8 shared that all teachers are overwhelmed by the level of student needs. Even when a school has implemented a response team, this is not always an effective solution as they are not always available to respond. Other participants shared that because of their years of experience, they understood that the kind of support offered matters. P6 agreed,

Like, I don't know how else to describe it. Like, every day, I'm like, this is my life. This is what I'm doing. I just feel like, yeah, they just they need so much that it's mentally and emotionally exhausting for us as teachers. I can't teach them until their needs are being met, but I can't meet their needs as one person with 24 kids.

Teachers shared that they felt burned out and that the lack of support coupled with increased needs due to students' lack of age-appropriate SES created challenges for themselves and the entire classroom. The word “exhausted” was used as the participants shared emotional stories and how the lack of support affected them personally and professionally. The participants expressed a need for more support from administration, paraprofessionals, and all other resources that could alleviate the challenges in the classroom. Theme 1 addressed RQ1, which focused on teachers’ perspectives on their challenges teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom, indicating that these included constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support.

Theme 2: Teachers Are Challenged by Student Obstacles and School Safety

Student Obstacles to SES

The participants voiced concerns and challenges regarding student obstacles to SES such as the COVID-19 pandemic and screen time. The participants identified the pandemic as one of the obstacles that have affected a student's ability to develop these skills. P7 shared their difficulty with student attention deficits:

So, I have so many attention issues. The attention issues are out of control in my classroom this year. They can't focus and stay on task at all. It's frightening, and I just, I haven't seen anything like it this year so I don't know if it's, you know, COVID. I don't know. My thought is it could be from a lot of video games.

There's this, they just have this constant, like, sensory thing going on, and they just, you know, nothing is you're fighting against that to try to teach and just do, you know. You know, we try to make our lessons fun and engaging, but you're constantly fighting against, you know. Again, like the video games and this, like, sensory experience, and they just, it's just hard. It's just very challenging to teach in this age group.

The participants consistently viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as one reason they saw deficits in age-appropriate SES among students, which they considered an obstacle to developing SES. P8 explained, "Post-COVID, like a lot of those kids either weren't in preschool, [they] didn't go. The parents were home, so they didn't get that social piece." The participants stated that their kindergarten students were toddlers during the height of the pandemic and missed many opportunities to interact with their world and socialize

beyond their families. As P8 discussed, many students did not get a chance to attend preschool or go to public places such as grocery stores or libraries. Participants explained that a student's social experiences are an important part of their overall development and provide them with foundational SES that are essential to attain before kindergarten. P9 shared,

I mean, we kind of thought that we dodged the whole COVID thing because our kids wouldn't have been in school anyway. So, they didn't really miss a year because they weren't. And I think we're just shocked that the life things that they missed, the going to the park, the going to restaurants, going to the movies, whatever it might be, seeing their cousins, that we are feeling it so much more than we thought we were going to.

P12 also noted the effect on the children's missed social opportunities at school:

Well, you have to make it a priority, right? And that's why, you know, because these kids that have been through COVID, and they didn't go to preschool. They don't have these social-emotional skills, so where are they going to learn it if they can't engage and play with their peers, right?

The participants discussed another obstacle, screen time, as being connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students were exposed to more of it than usual due to being isolated with their families. Participants shared that screen time affected student self-regulation and attention span. When asked about these challenges, P4 discussed the need for students to have more play and less time on devices: "I mean, for me, it's keeping them off screens, it's getting them outside, playing unstructured like we have

restructured a lot of our day, but also providing them with unstructured playtime, so outside and inside, so it's choice time.” P6 shared their frustration with students’ lack of attention:

You know, like it's a constant. I feel like a drill sergeant, like, “Knock it off, stop talking, look at me, pay attention.” Because they're not used to having to sit and pay attention. I feel like they're so used to having a device in front of their face that they don't know what it means to sit still and listen to someone else speak and take turns talking.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the amount of screen time were both obstacles for students trying to develop age-appropriate SES, which has caused challenges for teachers.

School Safety

School safety was also identified as a concern for early childhood teachers of students who lack age-appropriate SES. The participants voiced their challenges with school safety when students lack age-appropriate SES and how this affected the classroom. Teachers shared stories, specifically about students who displayed aggressive behaviors in the classroom and how this made them and their students feel fearful and unsafe. P2 discussed the behaviors she witnessed:

I had children who had never, ever been inside the walls of the school. I had one crawling around under tables, throwing himself on the floor, yelling and screaming, running through the room, throwing chairs. It, it was, it was absolutely horrifying, and I didn't have the answers. It was incredibly scary and definitely

not safe for the other children. And we're talking about half my class was behaving this way, and reaching out to their parents was no help.

P2 explained that she and the students were frightened when there were instances of aggressive behaviors due to a lack of age-appropriate SES and that the classroom was not a safe place for any of them. P8 spoke of the fear students felt in the classroom:

But with one of my students, anytime he would yell or throw or shove something, they [students] would, like, flinch. And, like, that is not normal. Like that is not a normal reaction that should be happening in school, And, when you have kids that are scared in their classroom where we preach as a teacher to make your classroom a loving and caring and a safe environment, where in reality of where we are, and I'm in the United States, of like, that is the reality. We as teachers are worried about every day what could happen at school and we don't show that to our kids. But our kids shouldn't be scared of coming to our classroom because of another student in the room.

P8 also shared a story regarding a school shooting by a student who lacked age-appropriate SES: "Last year, there was a teacher I know who was shot by a 6-year-old. How, how do you come to school every day after that?" Participants explained that students and teachers should feel safe when they come to school, but many in my study stated that their classrooms were unsafe due to students lacking age-appropriate SES. P10 noted that in these cases, her students do not know how to react:

Others are afraid of them. And so, they, those are the ones that do physically come closer to me. I have one of those rugs, typical rugs. It's got all the colors and

the squares on it, whatever. And if I'm instructing, like, in front of the board or in the chair or in, like, a whole group setting, all of a sudden, I'll realize there are little ones sliding closer to me because they don't know what to do. They don't know what to do with that, and it's scary because that's not what they do.

P4 discussed the physical behavior of some students in kindergarten:

We have table flippers and chair throwers, and my least favorite, elopers. So, I mean, are they ready for school? That's a huge safety thing. That's my least favorite. Yeah. So, there's a lot of challenges. And in fact, it can also scare the students, right? When somebody is a table flipper, it's scary. Yeah. I've seen it all.

Participants shared they were concerned that kindergarten-aged students were already displaying increased aggression and violence and worried about what this meant for potential future student outcomes if not properly addressed. P5 shared their experience with a violent student:

So, especially with the three extreme cases next door. Those children are scared for their safety and they also are talking about it. We had to, the last week, they had to evacuate the classroom and come to our room through the bathroom; we have like a Jack and Jill bathroom. So, we heard the commotion, and we're, like, "Get your kids out. They need to come. They can't have a chair thrown at them." Like, that's unacceptable, and it was during lunch when kids were sitting and eating and he was literally trying to flip chairs and take the kids off them to throw them. And so that is very scary and traumatizing.

P5 was emotional in sharing their perspective and concerned for their safety and that of their students. This kind of environment was traumatizing for students and teachers and not acceptable in classrooms. P9 added,

But you know, this was one of those situations where because she's throwing things and you can't make her leave, the rest of the class has to leave the classroom so that she can continue to have her behaviors. And then nobody's learning at all. And that is something that definitely happens every year in one or two classes where kids are so just not able to cope that they become a danger to everyone else.

P9 agreed with other participants that students who lack age-appropriate SES to the point of aggressive behaviors are dangerous to the well-being of everyone in the classroom. There were several stories of teachers having to evacuate the classroom with their class so the aggressive student would not harm anyone else. Several participants shared that when there are students with aggressive behaviors due to a lack of age-appropriate SES. Theme 2 addressed RQ1, which focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. The results indicated that student obstacles to SES, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and screen time, were factors, as was school safety.

Theme 3: Teachers Need Effective Strategies and Professional Development

Effective Strategies

In response to the interview questions designed to answer RQ2, participants shared that more effective strategies and more relevant and meaningful professional

development would provide them with the support they need to help students who lack age-appropriate SES. The participants identified several SEL strategies and programs they implemented for students who lack age-appropriate SES in their classrooms; however, they discussed the need for more practical strategies and resources. P6 explained that their curriculum was lacking:

I feel like we don't have a lot. Yeah. We have a social-emotional curriculum, but it's not developmentally appropriate. Last year, when I used it, it was, like, two lessons a week. But I had to give the Cliff notes because it was so over their head, and it was more talking at them instead of teaching them how to interact together. And I feel that's hard for them because they're already being talked at all day long. They need to be able to interact, but we need the tools and the resources that allow it.

P6 continued, "I find we don't have a lot of resources to be able to teach the social piece of it." All the participants stated that they used a variety of SEL strategies in the classroom and found these strategies can help students develop better SES; however they still need more. P1 shared the types of SEL strategies they used and the students for which they worked best:

My school uses a school-wide SEL program that also has information sent home. My son is a fourth grader at my school, so I also get the stuff as parents, but they send home flyers on ways that you can help build up this capacity. I also use various read-aloud books to address different behaviors. I've even bought a set of books before that, like, had specific social-emotional skills within the set. I think

it was, like, 12 books. So, one book was, like, on cooperation; one book was on sympathy and empathy and those kinds of things using read-alouds. I've also used puppets to model good behavior, and if the behavior is not a physical aggression behavior but just a disruptive behavior, sometimes you can use a peer mentor and the kids will respond better to a peer and teaching that peer mentor. You know, the quiet, verbal or not verbal, but the quiet gestures that they can show the child, you know. Hey, "We're sitting quietly now." And, you know, just touching their lips to show the quiet motion and that kind of thing. And sometimes that does help.

P1 explained that although they use many SEL strategies when students display physical aggression due to a lack of age-appropriate SES, they are not always effective and expressed a need for better strategies and resources. P12 also shared the SEL strategies they used in their classroom and how they facilitated these with students:

So, our school is really fortunate to have the curriculum called Positivity Project, so that's a social-emotional curriculum that has, like, 26 character traits, you know—integrity, perseverance, you know, creativity—all these different kinds of things. And we do it every day for about 10 to 15 minutes. It usually has, like, a book tied in, a literacy tie in, and then we do, like, a little activity. Either a song or a craft, and we just kind of, like, infuse it throughout the day. I do a lot of my yoga practices with mindfulness, you know, the deep breathing focused attention. We do executive functioning games to increase their social-emotional skills and a lot of just conversations. You know, they get to have free choice where they get to

engage with their peers. And you know, I'm sometimes with them, sometimes I'm just being the observer and monitoring their conversations. But I step in as needed if there's some conflict resolution that needs to happen or some dialogue that needs to be facilitated.

P12 shared that they felt fortunate to teach at a school that purchased and provided a SEL program to use each day as not every school has access to these resources and strategies.

P10 had a unique perspective as they have been teaching for 38 years and spoke about how helpful it would be to have an expert to call or connect with to discuss new strategies and what would be effective to use on a situational basis:

But what I would like to have available to me if I could, kind of like a back phone, and I could pick it up at the end of the day and say to some incredibly smart person that knows about childhood development and has strategies: "Okay, so here's what happened today. Here's how I reacted. Did I react correctly? If not, what do I need to fix, and what would be my next steps, and what do I do the next time? It might be with the same child or a different child, but how do I handle it the next time?" I think those conversations with a professional in the field would benefit me the most.

Some participants discussed feeling ill-equipped to handle the severity of students lacking age-appropriate SES. P5 noted the importance of involving someone with behavioral experience at the school:

Can we please put our money into getting a behavioral specialist part-time to come in these rooms and give us tips and strategies on how to deal with these

children? Like me, I have my master's, and, like, I took a smidgen of the special ed. It was a small chunk, but I don't have the qualifications to be teaching these kinds of children with these kinds of behaviors.

The participants' perspectives demonstrated they did not have enough knowledge or strategies to effectively help students lacking in age-appropriate SES. P1 shared their frustration with the lack of strategies for teachers who struggle to teach students who lack age-appropriate SES and avoid follow-up with them to help address these challenges in the classroom:

I think that we have a lot of meetings every week, and almost never. I, like, can't even think of a time that maybe at the beginning of the year when we're, like, talking about capturing kids' hearts or, you know, those kind of things. But we don't ever bring it back up of how do we address these issues in the classroom.

The participants shared their perspectives and stories to help answer RQ2 regarding what strategies they believe would help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. There were no discrepant data in this theme. Although there was a range of years of experience among the participants, all agreed there was an increasing need in the classroom, and more practical strategies and resources would help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Professional Development

The participants also identified the need for meaningful and relevant professional development to help them with their challenges. The participants shared their perspectives on the type of professional development they have received and how it often

did not match what they needed to help meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SEL. P2 discussed the need for practical and updated training:

You know, a lot of these people that are coming out to in-service us haven't been in a classroom in a really long time. And so, they've got high and lofty ideas that aren't practical in the behavioral setting that we're living in these days. My interpretation of this is that what teachers are currently experiencing requires updated training. Students have changed, the world has evolved, and so teachers need more current, relevant, and practical training that will help them meet these challenges.

P5 added, "But just like the certain behaviors you see in children, that kind of training, I would say, would be the most beneficial." P5 explained that better training in understanding students' behaviors and how to aid students in developing effective age-appropriate SEL would be the most helpful for teachers. Participants also expressed that the professional development they received on SEL was inadequate and was often discussed in addition to other training. P8 explained how SEL professional development was delivered:

So, actually, my district has adapted a lot of curriculum [*sic*] that does put a lot of focus on SEL. In our reading program, we use the Wonders Program. There is an SEL component. And, actually, today in our PD [professional development], we discussed how some of the SEL components in our reading program don't necessarily carry over into the actual curriculum that we're teaching. It's just kind of this one piece that they threw in to say, like, "We're teaching SEL."

P8 stated that just adding an SEL component to their reading program was not enough for teachers to believe they were using SEL properly to help students who lack age-appropriate SES.

P4 spoke about not only the need for more training but for administrators to be cognizant of teacher's time and to pay teachers accordingly:

I guess the board would approve policies but then get admin. to implement these social and emotional programs. Like, get your counselor with this, you know, a curriculum, and do social-emotional learning. And that's admin. too; they can do that, yeah. And then provide training, you know, pay for training and give teachers a day off to take them, not on the weekends but during our work week, like professionals.

There is often training offered to teachers, but requiring them to do this on their own time or to pay for it further adds to the problem and often deters them from seeking these opportunities.

P2 explained how the professional development provided for teachers matters and should consider that they must be supported as people. Teachers are struggling with the stress the job entails due to the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. P2 shared their thoughts on the need for more meaningful professional development, especially for experienced teachers, that focused on teacher well-being to sustain them in the profession:

As a teacher of 22 years in first grade, 22 years alone, just in this grade, and with a reading degree, I don't need in-service on how to teach reading and letter

sounds. I don't need that. But I might need an in-service that doesn't leave me crying in the parking lot. I might need something that supports me as a human so that I can come to work with that smile on my face that they're asking me to keep, that allows me to deal with all these behavioral problems, that allows me to coach the parents who are asking for assistance so that I can keep doing that.

Many participants alluded to needing training in more effective strategies and also how to manage teacher well-being during these challenges. Theme 3 addressed RQ2 regarding what support early childhood teachers believed would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom. Findings indicated that more effective strategies and professional development would help them meet the challenges of teaching these students.

Theme 4: Teachers Need Administrative and Parental Support

Administrative

In response to RQ2, early childhood teacher participants shared that one of the biggest means of support they require to meet the challenges of working with students who lack age-appropriate SES is more administrative support. P1 stated the need for this type of help:

I mean, by now, I figured out certain triggers for certain children, but just someone that can come in and help support me because I don't always have the answers, so not having that in place is really, really challenging, and just having a more hands-on, supportive admin. would be really nice.

Participants shared how difficult it was to teach in a school where administrators were not supportive and did not seek additional classroom support for teachers. Participants indicated that having an administrator they felt comfortable talking with about challenges and knowing they would be responsive would immensely help when teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Participants also stated that the administration needed to understand that teachers are already overworked, so adding more work further creates challenges for teachers who are struggling. P2 noted, “So I definitely know that there are only so many minutes a day, right? We need administration to understand that they can't just keep piling on more and not taking something off the plate.”

Participants discussed how difficult it was to manage a student who lacked age-appropriate SES and did not receive parental or administrative support. Teachers shared that this is most challenging when the administration does not support teachers when parents approach them about their child's progress. P4 expressed the wish for administrators to ask parents to interact with the teacher:

You know, I think a lot of teachers would say, like, “Just have the teacher's backs.” You know, when we come to you with a concern or if a parent comes sometimes, very rarely for me, but this does happen. A parent won't bring the concern to me but will go to admin., and I want admin. to say, “Have you spoken to your child's teacher?” And just bounce them right back because that's, just—I don't like when people jump over people and what is admin. going to know? They're not in your child's classroom. It's nonsense. So, admin. can support teachers that way.

Findings in my study indicated that teachers need more leadership and support from the administration, and this included someone they felt comfortable enough to approach when they needed advice or were struggling. P7 did not feel safe or secure in sharing their challenges or concerns with their principal:

So, just someone that I feel comfortable with sharing. Sharing, you know, issues with. My principal is a little tricky, and sometimes, I don't go to her with things because I don't want to be judged. I'm just, I'm looking for help and so she's, she's a little tricky, you know? So that's tough. It would make a world of difference if I felt like I could be honest with her and just say to her that I'm struggling. I would never say that to her. I just wouldn't. So that's hard.

Participants also explained that some administrators did not have enough teaching experience or been out of the field for so long that they could not provide relevant advice or guidance on effectively managing students who lack age-appropriate SES. P1 noted,

And I also think that, and I've recommended this to the administrators, and they will not do it; they need to go in and teach and see how difficult it is. Because both the principal and my assistant principal, she has only taught in a self-contained classroom. So, they have no answers to what it's like to deal with all these social-emotional deficits and stay on pace with all of the academic rigor.

Participants stated that administrators would be more effective leaders in supporting teachers if they had more practical and current experiences in the classroom. P6 agreed, "I feel like administration needs to come in. They need to see the needs of these, these kids. You know, they sit, and they make these rules, and they make these expectations,

but they're not in the trenches.” Teachers stated that students today face challenges different from those years ago. P6 believed it would be helpful for the administration to come into the classroom to see the needs of students and that administrators who set rules and expectations should consider the needs of students in a post-COVID-19 world.

There was one discrepant case in the data for this theme. P11 stated that their administration was supportive and described themselves as fortunate to have this support: “I would go to my admin. to ask them for help, you know. We're lucky that our assistant principal comes down and supports us.” Other participants expressed a need for more administrative support to meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. From the participants' responses, having effective administrative support was not the norm.

Parental Support and Education

Teachers in my study indicated the need for more parental support and education to effectively support teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Participants expressed concern regarding the lack of parental support and how this challenged them in teaching these students. P9 explained the importance of parental involvement:

But for some people, that is the biggest obstacle is parents who are not supportive, parents who won't see what's going on, parents who don't want to work with the school, parents who see the school as the enemy. Yeah, and at the end, if parents say no, then it's not going to happen.

According to the participants, there is a growing divide between school and home. However, teachers expressed the desire to work with parents as partners to better understand and teach students who lack age-appropriate SES.

P3 agreed that parents and teachers need to work as a team to help students struggling with a lack of age-appropriate SES:

But my primary focus would be on the parent. I need to know, and I hate to say this to the parent, but I need to know some of his behaviors and some of the things that you know would trigger a behavior at home to help me understand the child.

Some participants noted the need to hold parents accountable, especially for students who displayed aggressive behaviors in the classroom. P8 agreed,

I think there needs to be some accountability on parents being held because there's only so much you can do as a teacher, and there is only so much admin. can do at a certain point. Like, where do we draw a line? Until parents are inconvenienced, I don't think they're going to truly buy in that there's a behavior problem.

Teachers also believed that parents needed to be answerable for aggressive behaviors that caused harm to others due to a lack of age-appropriate SES. P8 stated that when students who lack age-appropriate cause harm or disrupt other students' learning or well-being, parents should be held accountable because teacher and parental roles are quite different.

Teachers identified the need for more parental support so both could work together. Parent education was also perceived as an effective way to build better partnerships and, therefore, obtain more parental support to help teachers meet these challenges. P11 suggested,

So honestly, educating parents, you don't know what you don't know. You know, if there's some way that we could help educate parents more, and you can push it out and push it out and some of them just don't listen. So, you know, helping to educate parents a little bit more about what's out there to help their child, going to the library and listening to the, you know, story time, you know, that type of thing.

Participants noted that educating parents that too much screen time affects student development and well-being may benefit student outcomes, including age-appropriate SES. Teachers shared that parents may not know the realities of how too much screen time affects their children and how this, in turn, influences them as students and their ability to develop age-appropriate SES. P4 agreed,

Oh, parent advocacy groups like, like Parent Home School Outreach. Like, where we have workshops for parents. Like, “Don't let your kid be on the video games for 10 hours a day because it's impeding their social-emotional learning. Like, please take them off screens every once in a while, and like, have a conversation with them and bring them to the playground so they can see nature.” And, like, just that kind of thing. Parent education.

Participants indicated that parent education programs may provide parents with opportunities to learn better practices for their children while learning ways to understand their role in supporting teachers. P12 noted cultural differences in parenting and how this affected learning:

I think we need to teach the parents, right? I mean, if they had, like, a parenting class that was kind of like mandatory, you know, before children even start school. Our school is very diverse. So, we have students from, you know, many different countries and different cultures. And in some cultures, it's okay, you know, for them [parents] to carry their student into the classroom, you know, or they were still like, hand feeding them. We saw them hand-feeding them, you know, while we were online. Like all of a sudden, a spoon would swoop in and feed the child while we were having class. And we're like, "Oh my goodness." You know, and yes. It was, it was very interesting, and, you know, they dress the children, and, you know, so they don't let them, you know, grow and be independent. So yeah, I think a parenting class would be very nice and helpful.

Participants in this study identified the need to partner with parents and provide support through parent education programs. Teachers shared that parent education topics might include how screen time affects development, the importance of play, outdoor time, family time and connection, as well as positive discipline approaches. Theme 4 addressed RQ2 regarding what support early childhood teachers believed would help them meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate SES in the classroom, indicating that administrative and parental support would help them meet these challenges.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical in qualitative research to establish the findings' scientific and empirical value (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Trustworthiness was achieved in

my study by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I made no changes to the methods outlined in Chapter 3 to achieve trustworthiness in this study. Participants were confirmed to have met the study criteria, all interviews were audio-recorded, notes were made in a reflective journal, and I performed member checking to ensure the trustworthiness of the research results. Two discrepant cases in the data were identified and included in the study because they provided a deeper understanding and context regarding all participants' perspectives.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which the researcher has accurately represented the thoughts and feelings of the participants along with the processes that may have influenced their thoughts and feelings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I interviewed 12 K–1 teachers with at least 5 years of experience. I established credibility through member checking the results by providing participants with a two-page summary. Participants accepted and agreed with the findings of the research. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), 10 to 12 participants are an adequate sample size for data saturation. Saturation is the most common guiding principle for assessing the adequacy of purposive samples in qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). I achieved data saturation after interviewing 12 participants who met the criteria for the study. Two nonparticipating teachers reviewed the interview protocol and provided feedback on the interview questions. I strictly followed the interview protocol and used a reflective journal to identify any bias that may have affected the study during the research process.

Transferability

By providing a detailed description of the data and the context of this research, readers can compare or judge the appropriateness of transferring my findings to future research contexts (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). Through detailed participants' responses and descriptions, researchers can transfer or generalize the study's findings to other settings regarding teachers' perspectives on teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES as well as to other target populations. I also provided information on demographics and the study's setting so readers could judge transferability or make comparisons for themselves.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of the findings over time (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I demonstrated the dependability of the results through audio recording and using Transkriptor to transcribe each of the interviewees' responses to ensure the accurate collection of the data. I kept a reflective journal to prevent bias during data collection or analysis. The interview protocol guide was used to ask the same questions in the matching order. Before each interview, participants were reminded of their right to leave the study. All participants were sent a two-page summary of the findings for member checking to further ensure the dependability of the results. The participants had no further comments after reviewing the summary.

Confirmability

Confirmability is when a study can be corroborated by other research, and interpretations of the findings can be traced back to the data (Nguyen et al., 2021). I

achieved confirmability through reflexivity and documenting any biases in my journal. Confirmability was established by ensuring a lack of bias as the researcher so that data only reflected the participant's perspectives. I also maintained reflexivity by transcribing the interviews verbatim, using Transkriptor, and checking each transcript for accuracy.

Summary

Chapter 4 included a detailed explanation of the data collected and analyzed, using direct quotes from the participants. Semistructured interviews were conducted to obtain 12 K–1 teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what supports they believe would help them. I also kept a reflective journal throughout the research process. I used open and axial coding by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Four themes emerged from the data to answer the two RQs: (a) teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges; (b) teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety; (c) teachers need effective strategies and professional development; and (d) teachers need administrative and parental support. Themes 1 and 2 answered RQ1. Themes 3 and 4 answered RQ2.

The first theme was that teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges. Theme 1 emerged from the participants' discussion of constant disruptions, which affected their ability to teach curriculum content and often deterred learning. This occurred when teachers had to stop teaching due to the behavior of students who lacked age-appropriate SES. In Theme 1, there was a discrepant case when one participant noted that they did not view this as a disruption and explained that

they had a full-time teaching assistant to remove students who were disruptive so learning could continue. Every other teacher expressed that constant disruptions were a significant challenge in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. These teachers felt they could not complete their lessons, which caused stress by lagging behind in their responsibilities to teach curriculum content. Participants also stated that a lack of time was a challenge when teaching students who lacked age-appropriate SES. Due to an increased number of students who lack age-appropriate SES, they felt overwhelmed by the lack of time to teach content or to properly prepare. Teachers also stated that a lack of support was a perpetual challenge. Participants shared their perspectives and emotional stories about how the lack of classroom support affected them and how students who lacked age-appropriate SES were not receiving proper support, which caused additional challenges in the learning environment.

The second theme was that teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety. Theme 2 emerged as teachers shared they were challenged by obstacles that deterred a student's ability to properly develop age-appropriate SES. Two of the biggest obstacles discussed were the COVID-19 pandemic and screen time. Teachers shared how the pandemic affected students, specifically students' development of age-appropriate SES. Teachers have not only seen an increase in aggressive behaviors due to a lack of age-appropriate SES but also noticed a deficiency in students' SES, creating challenges. The other obstacle was increased screen time, which affected students' ability to develop age-appropriate SES. Teachers expressed concern about increased attention issues among their students and how this negatively affected their ability to develop age-

appropriate SES. These two obstacles created more challenges for teachers teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

School safety was another challenge identified in Theme 2. Participants stated they feared for their safety and that of their students due to the number of students who displayed troubling aggressive behaviors due to their lack of age-appropriate SES and how this affected the classroom environment. Many participants became emotional when sharing stories about themselves and their students being frightened due to the uncertainty and severity of the behavior of students who lack age-appropriate SES and the challenges this created for them to do their jobs effectively.

Theme 3 was teachers need effective strategies and professional development. Participants explained the need for more effective strategies and resources to meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Teachers specifically discussed the need for updated and relevant professional development to equip them with more effective strategies for working with these students. Many teachers expressed they felt overwhelmed by the number of challenges and needed better strategies and professional development to help them meet the high demands of their students. Participants stated that although they were using many SEL strategies in the classroom, they required more intentional and specific SEL training that provided them with better strategies and skills to teach students who lack age-appropriate SES. Teachers also explained the need for professional development that incorporated teacher well-being and relevant and meaningful training to help them meet the challenges of teaching these students.

Theme 4 was that teachers need administrative and parental support. The participants explained the need for more administrative and parental support to help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Many teachers expressed that the lack of administrative support was an ongoing challenge and did not have anyone to turn to when struggling. In this theme, there was a discrepant case. One participant expressed that they already had enough support from their administration and noted they were fortunate to have that support and the difference it has made. All other participants explained that more support from their administrators would help them teach students who lack age-appropriate SES more effectively. Participants also noted the need for more parental support to help students who lack age-appropriate SES. Many teachers explained parents' role in their students' well-being and development and that the lack of parental support was a challenge. Participants explained that more parental support and education programs would help them build better partnerships with parents and help students lacking age-appropriate SES.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the study's findings, outline its limitations, provide recommendations for further research, and discuss its implications. Also provided is an analysis of each theme, demonstrating their alignment with the RQs and literature review in Chapter 2. I conclude the chapter by indicating how this study can positively affect social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. A student's SES has been linked to poor academic and mental health outcomes. Students with academic, SES, and behavioral challenges often continue this problematic trajectory into middle school while also suffering from increased mental health issues (Nygaard et al., 2022). This study provided a better understanding of teachers' perspectives that can be used to inform administrators and parents on practice and policy in early childhood education. Data for this study were collected by conducting one-on-one semistructured interviews using Zoom with 12 K–12 teacher participants in the United States with between 8 and 38 years of experience. Four themes emerged from data analysis: (a) teachers identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges; (b) teachers are challenged by student obstacles and school safety; (c) teachers need effective strategies and professional development; and (d) teachers need administrative and parental support.

In this chapter, I interpret the study's findings and explore how the results provide an understanding of the challenges teachers face when students lack age-appropriate SES as well as what support would help them meet these challenges. I compare the research findings with current literature and the conceptual framework, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The chapter also includes a description of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a discussion of its implications.

Interpretation of the Findings

After obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB, I began data collection. My participants were recruited using the Walden University Participant Pool, posting to various teacher social media groups, and snowball sampling. I recruited 12 participants for one-on-one semistructured Zoom interviews. For data analysis, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. These steps included (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding and generating categories, (c) identifying emerging themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining themes, (d) and reporting the findings. My interpretation of the findings was grounded in the literature review and the conceptual framework of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. In this section, I describe the four themes based on their corresponding RQs. Themes 1 and 2 answered RQ1, which addressed early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom. Themes 3 and 4 answered RQ2 regarding what early childhood teachers believed would help them meet the challenges of working with these students.

Theme 1: Teachers Identified Constant Disruptions, a Lack of Time, and a Lack of Support as Challenges

In social learning, new SES and behavior patterns can be learned by observing others or through direct experience (Bandura, 1977). In this study, Bandura's social learning theory was pertinent as it supports the idea that students can develop SES by observing not only their teachers but their peers as well. The participants explained that students pay attention to their peers and often imitate what they see, but they can also

experience disruptions caused by students who lack age-appropriate SES. The constant disruptions create challenges for teachers because they cause distractions in the classroom. Bandura stated that the environment is critical to how SES and behavior patterns develop. Similarly, other researchers have agreed that the classroom environment is the most effective space for students to develop SES (Aksoy, 2019; Murano et al., 2021). Students who lack age-appropriate SES affect the behaviors of the teachers and students around them, creating a disruptive environment that challenges the entire classroom dynamic (Aguilar et al., 2019; Zolkoski et al., 2020).

Most participants in this study shared that when students lack age-appropriate SES, it affects classroom learning because of constant disruptions that create the additional challenge of distracting them from teaching time. Participants stated that these continuous disruptions limit their classroom time and increase their workload. This increase has been linked to increased burnout, stress, and job dissatisfaction associated with more long-term mental health concerns for teachers (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Grant et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2020; Y. Wang, 2024).

There has been a rise in the deficiency of age-appropriate SES in students, which has become a challenge for early childhood teachers (Blewitt et al., 2020; Conroy et al., 2022; Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2021; Rosati & Lynch, 2023). Due to the increase in the needs of these students, the participants claimed they were also challenged by a lack of support. P10 shared, “There are very few resource people. You're pretty much on your own.” The rise in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES coincides with teachers leaving the profession due to stress (Amitai & Van Houtte,

2022; Grant et al., 2019). The participants stated that the lack of support with the increase in the needs of these students is challenging and affects their well-being. P7 explained, “I feel exhausted at the end of the day. I have a family, and I'm putting so much effort into my classroom, and I come home, and I feel like they get the crumbs it's not fair.” P7 shared that the lack of support has made them feel exhausted and overworked. The participants stated that constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support created challenges for them when teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Twenty-five percent of teachers in the United States leave the profession before their third year, noting the pressure of the workload and student demands as reasons (Mérida-López et al., 2020). Teachers experience less well-being and higher stress than most professions (Grant et al., 2019; Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022). Participants in my study shared that a lack of support affected their overall well-being. Einav et al. (2024) found that effective support for teachers can mitigate teacher burnout. When teachers believe they have support from colleagues, it can substantially reduce and protect against the damaging outcomes of burnout (Einav et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Support is a factor in preventing teacher burnout and most participants believed their lack of support was a challenge in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. A teacher's well-being is directly linked to more positive student outcomes, including the development of age-appropriate SES (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Grant et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). A positive and consistent relationship with a teacher has been shown to improve and promote students' SES (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Aspelin, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Vitiello et al., 2022). Teacher well-being and SEC are important and connected to improving the overall

classroom climate and students' SES (Ferreira et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2019). The research supports the connection between the teacher's role and well-being and the development of student's age-appropriate SES. The participants identified constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support as challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. The participants shared that these challenges added to their stress and workload.

Theme 2: Teachers Are Challenged by Student Obstacles and School Safety

The participants stated that student obstacles such as excessive screen time, the COVID-19 pandemic, and school safety were also challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Hongbin et al. (2024) found that screen time affected students' SES, including self-regulation and self-efficacy, as well as increased problematic behaviors. The more screen time students engaged in, the more likely they were to have behavioral problems (Hongbin et al., 2024; Panjeti-Madan & Ranganathan, 2023).

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory suggests that the environment is critical to how SES and behavior patterns develop. Ata (2018) stated that students learn what to do (or not do), how to use their environment, and how to be motivated through behavior observation. The participants shared concerns about students who have been exposed to aggressive behaviors and excessive screen time due to the pandemic and that this has increased the number of those who lack age-appropriate SES. Participants explained that the environment and what students come in contact with can create obstacles in developing age-appropriate SES. Student obstacles such as excessive screen time, the

COVID-19 pandemic, and school safety were challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Post-COVID, the participants noticed that screens had become an obstacle to student development of age-appropriate SES, specifically how it affected behavior and attention spans in the classroom. P9 shared, “They can't attend to me because they have only been watching a screen, so there's just no ability to focus on anything.” Panjeti-Madan and Ranganathan (2023) explained that when students are overly exposed to screen time, it can have negative outcomes such as technology addiction, the reduction of physical activities, an increase in stress levels, lack of sleep, emotional distress, relationship issues, and behavioral problems. Too much screen time directly correlates to a lack of age-appropriate SES, including problem behaviors. Hongbin et al. (2024) found that when students spent excessive amounts of time on screens, it limited their ability to interact socially, and these social experiences are critical to a student's ability to develop effective age-appropriate SES. P4 expressed, “Please take them off screens every once in a while and, like, have a conversation with them and bring them to the playground so they can see nature and, like, just that kind of thing.” Participants found that students experienced fewer opportunities to be outdoors and engage in social experiences that would naturally help them develop age-appropriate SES. Most participants agreed that excessive screen time was an obstacle that diminished their students’ ability to develop age-appropriate SES, which is a challenge for teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded concerns regarding students who lack age-appropriate and has contributed to excessive screen time (Amitai & Van Houtte,

2022; Egan et al., 2021; Kerker et al., 2023). The participants in this study also noted that excessive screen time due to the pandemic was an obstacle that created challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Phelps and Sperry (2020) demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant socioemotional stress for students and teachers across the United States, creating challenges for teachers who instruct students without age-appropriate SES. Excessive screen time due to the pandemic was another impediment to student's ability to socialize and explore the world around them. The crisis and trauma from the pandemic created significant social limitations that affected students' school readiness, overall well-being, and ability to cope with stress (Hernández & Jabbari, 2022; Shoshani & Kor, 2022). Participants agreed with these concerns, stating that post-COVID, they have seen an increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES, including a lack of attention due to excessive screen time, which created challenges for them in the classroom. P5 shared, "The behaviors, we are seeing more and more of them. And COVID affected kids." Kerker et al. (2023) explained how the recent COVID-19 pandemic has produced a significant need for more social and emotional support for teachers and students in the classroom, specifically early childhood students entering school. The increase in students who lack age-appropriate SES has contributed to the rise in mental health problems, and this should be a cause for alarm regarding public health (Mahoney et al., 2021; Nygaard et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2020). This is reflected in the participants' responses concerning their challenges and concerns about the increase in screen time and the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES in the post-COVID world.

Teachers also identified school safety as another challenge in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Many participants shared stories of aggressive and violent student behaviors due to a lack of age-appropriate SES that frightened them and their students. P8 noted, “Our kids shouldn't be scared of coming to our classroom because of another student in the room.” Participants described the classroom as unsafe when there were instances of aggressive or violent outbursts from students who lacked age-appropriate SES. Researchers have shown that when young students display a lack of age-appropriate SES, these students are at greater risk for severe mental health issues, long-term chronic health problems, increased violence, aggression, and crime later in life (Blewitt et al., 2020; Ghandour et al., 2021; Robson et al., 2020). Many of these challenging behaviors due to a lack of age-appropriate SES have contributed to later academic and behavioral difficulties that last into adulthood (Conroy et al., 2022; Kaya & Deniz, 2020). There are significant negative consequences for these students, which can lead to problematic future conduct, including failure in school, social rejection, substance abuse, mental health problems, and juvenile delinquency (Hunnikin et al., 2020; Nygaard et al., 2022; Zolkoski et al., 2020). Participants shared that when students lack age-appropriate SES, school safety challenges occur, and learning stops in the classroom. Hoskins and Schweig (2024) found that the quality of learning environments depends on whether the classroom is deemed safe. School safety is the absence of violence, crime, and aggressive behaviors such as bullying. When students feel safe, they are less fearful and, therefore, more likely to develop more effective age-appropriate SES (Durlak et al., 2022; Hoskins & Schweig, 2024).

Theme 3: Teachers Need Effective Strategies and Professional Development

The participants indicated that they require more effective strategies and professional development to support teaching students who lack age-appropriate SEL in the classroom. Participants shared a variety of SEL strategies and programs already being used in their classrooms while sharing their concerns about the need for better strategies and professional development to meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SEL. The development of SEL has been identified as something that has been neglected and missing from the curriculum in American education (Graham, 2022; Mehta, 2020). The participants indicated they needed more effective strategies to meet the specific challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SEL. Participants stated that most of the effective strategies they used were discovered through their own research or by asking colleagues for advice. Several participants claimed they needed more relevant and applicable strategies through better professional development and training to feel more confident in helping students who lack age-appropriate SEL.

Many teachers have limited training and confidence in their abilities to support students in the classroom (Morgan et al., 2022; Murano et al., 2019). Researchers have shown that teachers have limited training and support in implementing SEL strategies in their classrooms, resulting in a low level of effectiveness in diminishing problem behaviors, which contributes to a lack of age-appropriate SEL (Einav et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2022). P5 stated, “I don't have the qualifications to be teaching these kinds of children. We try our best; that's all we can do.” Although there has been improvement in educating teachers about SEL, there are still significant flaws in the lack of consistent

skills and knowledge teachers gain about SEL in their education training (Aksoy, 2019; Crowder et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2022). Educational institutions have limited strategies and training, and objective methods must be used to determine what programs are effective (Crowder et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021).

Research findings have also indicated that teachers need further professional development to successfully implement SEL, which increases students' prosocial skills (Virmani et al., 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2020). Researchers have suggested that providing SEL programs that promote the development of SES for young students should be viewed as an early intervention approach (Mondi et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2022). SEL has been shown to improve students' confidence, increase their engagement in learning, improve grades and test scores, reduce conduct problems, and increase prosocial or age-appropriate SES (Crowder et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2022). Bandura (1977) explained that emotional skills, such as self-regulation, can be taught through observation; however, these have received the least attention in education, presenting challenges for teachers (Graham, 2022). The conceptual framework of social learning theory is essential for understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives and identifying their challenges in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES (Raicevic et al., 2017). Various SEL programs are available; however, feasibility and affordability must be considered when implementing an SEL program in a school or school district. The increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES creates challenges for teachers as well as the lack of available strategies and professional development that could be used in the classroom. SEL programs have received international attention, and there is an argument

for investing in them because outcomes positively affect students' school readiness as well as their adulthood (Aspelin, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021).

The rise in the lack of age-appropriate SES has created challenges for teachers who feel overcome by these demands and do not have enough skills or knowledge to help students in their classrooms. Teachers' perceptions of school climate and their own SES have been essential to adopting SEL in the classroom (Jeon et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020). If teachers believe they have the right strategies and training, they are more likely to implement SEL effectively to improve students' SES and academic and future success. When teachers feel unprepared or do not have the proper strategies or training to teach students who lack age-appropriate SES, it contributes to emotional exhaustion that leads to teacher burnout (Corbin et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2020). P11 explained, "It's very draining. It's hard. Yeah, it's hard, you know. I don't know how to put it into words." Many participants felt overwhelmed by the increased demands in the classroom, and several discussed teacher training that did not provide enough details, skills, knowledge, or direction on how to teach students who lack age-appropriate SES (see Morgan et al., 2022; Zolkoski et al., 2020). The participants shared that the increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES has created challenges for them as teachers and that more effective strategies and better professional development would help them be more successful in teaching these students.

Theme 4: Teachers Need Administrative and Parental Support

The participants stated that they need more administrative and parental support to meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES in the classroom.

The participants explained that administrators need to take the time to understand the unique challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and how this affects teacher well-being and morale. P6 stated, “Administration needs to understand why the morale is so low and why teachers, I feel like, are just like walking zombies because we are mentally exhausted on every level.” The quality and amount of support in schools are critical components when teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES (Hoskins & Schweig, 2024; Zolkoski et al., 2020). Participants identified administrators as the leaders of their schools and that their role was crucial to feeling supported in meeting the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. When teachers believe they are safe and supported by the administration, this develops trust in the workplace and is an indicator of teacher well-being and job satisfaction (Einav et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; H. L. W. Pan et al., 2023). Participants stated that more administrative support would help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Participants also shared that more parental support would help them teach students who lack age-appropriate SES. In social learning theory, learning can be a means for individuals to retain new information and behaviors from role models and the environment (Abdullah et al., 2020; Bandura, 1977). The more consistent and exemplary the SES and modeling of positive behaviors, the stronger the connection and interactions are for students developing SES (Ata, 2018). Parents are students' first role models. Many participants were kindergarten teachers who voiced their concerns about the number of students entering their classes who were not developmentally ready. The discussion of

school readiness focused on a parent's role in helping students develop the necessary SES required to be successful in kindergarten and beyond (see Bernier et al., 2020; Ghandour et al., 2021). The participants explained that the increase in students displaying a lack of age-appropriate SES, including aggressive behaviors, made them question whether these students were ready for kindergarten. P4 shared, "We have table flippers, chair throwers, and my least favorite, elopers. So, I mean, are they ready for school?" Students who lack age-appropriate SES are at risk of beginning kindergarten at a disadvantage in several areas, which include a decrease in school readiness, academic skills, physical health, and increased long-term negative outcomes (Ferreira et al., 2021; McGuire & Meadan, 2020).

The number of children entering early childhood classrooms who lack age-appropriate SES has increased (Martinsone et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022). The educational and SES success of young students is often shaped before they begin kindergarten due to the critical period of development beginning at infancy (Ghandour et al., 2021; Sulik et al., 2023). Parental support is critical because much of a student's SES develops from infancy, and the skills students enter kindergarten with are predictors of future success. School readiness has been identified as the strongest predictor of future academic achievement and educational adjustment into adulthood (Q. Pan et al., 2019; Wall-Wieler et al., 2019).

There is a link between age-appropriate SES skills and school readiness, indicating that students' environmental influences and role models for SES contribute to future academic achievement (Bernier et al., 2020; Kaya & Deniz, 2020). Participants explained that the parents are the first role models and environmental influences that help

students develop age-appropriate SES, so it is critical that there is parental support and education to ensure a student's success. Teachers have noticed a deviation in what the home-school partnership looks like, and there is concern that the shift will not right itself (Lacey et al., 2024; Shoshani & Kor, 2022). The participants identified the need for more parental support, including parent education, to help them teach students who lack age-appropriate SES.

Limitations of the Study

Researcher bias was a potential limitation of this study. My experience as a teacher and early childhood education instructor could have created biases regarding the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Roger et al. (2018) stated the researcher must describe relevant biases, make assumptions transparent, and detail expectations and experiences when conducting a study. I addressed this limitation by taking notes regarding my thoughts and feelings throughout the research process. Using reflexivity in journal writing is a tool for researchers to use consistently to reflect on their perceptions, feelings, and interpretations during the study (Lodico et al., 2010). I used a researcher journal to reflect on my biases and personal experiences and consistently acknowledged any biases, opinions, or feelings while recording and analyzing the data. I sent the participants a two-page summary of the findings to ensure their perspectives were recorded accurately. I achieved data saturation and confirmed discrepant findings to ensure accuracy. Two discrepant cases were found, noted, and further analyzed to obtain a deeper understanding of the findings. Through these measures, I did not allow my thoughts and perspectives to interfere with the objectives or outcomes of the study.

A second limitation was finding enough participants. Many teachers were overwhelmed with their workload and not available to volunteer for extra roles or opportunities such as research studies, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers had limited time and found it difficult to take part in a study requiring them to participate in an hour-long interview. This topic was one many teachers were interested in discussing, but I was mindful of their time as a limiting factor in participation. I was clear about what the study entailed and what was expected. Providing detailed information about the time required and having flexible meeting times addressed this limitation. I obtained participants for the study by using the Walden Participant Pool, teacher social media sites, and snowball sampling. Using these resources, I was able to recruit enough participants to achieve data saturation.

Recommendations

Based on participants' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES, I recommend additional research to examine the specific types of classroom support that would help teachers meet these challenges. Teachers identified that constant disruptions, a lack of time, and a lack of support were challenges for them when teaching these students. Most participants stated that the increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES highlighted their lack of support and contributed to an increased workload and stress. The negative effects of the increase in workload, stress, and the lack of support are supported in the literature (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Mérida-López et al., 2020). Stress due to student demands is one of the main reasons teachers are leaving the field; students who exhibit a lack of age-appropriate SES are

creating challenges for teachers in the classroom (Grant et al., 2019). More support for teachers can mitigate teacher burnout (Einav et al., 2024). Additional research is needed to identify what specific classroom support is required to help teachers meet the challenges while sustaining a healthy teaching workforce.

Most teachers in this study discussed the challenges of student obstacles to SES, including the COVID-19 pandemic, screen time, and school safety. Teachers shared their concerns about how the COVID-19 pandemic and excessive screen time have affected students' ability to develop age-appropriate SES. More research is needed on how these factors have affected the typical progression and development of students and what resources or intervention support are required to alleviate these challenges. School safety was also listed by the participants as a contributor to a student's ability to develop age-appropriate SES. The importance of school safety is supported in the research because the quality of SEL programs largely depends on whether the learning environment is safe (Hoskins & Schweig, 2024). More research is needed to investigate the effects of school safety and how to make schools safer spaces for students to thrive.

The majority of teachers in this study indicated they had inadequate professional development and training. More research is needed to identify effective, current, and relevant professional development to help teachers meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Murano et al. (2021) supported the importance and effectiveness of using SEL as a means of helping students develop better SES and overall well-being and success. Additional research is needed to examine how

administrators can provide ongoing support and training to teachers to help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES.

The teacher participants also identified the need for more parental support, including parent education, to help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. The literature has indicated that the educational and SES success of young students is often shaped before they begin kindergarten due to the critical period of development that begins in infancy (Sulik et al., 2023). Teachers stated that the parents are essential in helping students develop and maintain age-appropriate SES. More research is needed to evaluate what parent education programs would be most effective and beneficial and how to better engage the parents in ways that create partnerships and support for more age-appropriate SES in students.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for early childhood teachers, students, teacher-preparation programs, school administrators, school counselors, and families. Administrators or teacher-preparation programs may use the findings of the study to inform and reflect on the challenges teachers face when teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. They may also use the findings to prioritize the training and support to help teachers meet these challenges. Teachers may use the results to reflect on the challenges they face, how their role contributes to the development of a student's age-appropriate SES in the classroom, and what support may help them. According to Bandura (1977), in social learning, new SES and behavior patterns can be learned by observing others or through direct experience. Teachers have a role in modeling these to

help students develop effective SES. Bandura suggested that the environment is critical to how SES and behavior patterns develop. In social learning theory, learning can be a means for individuals to retain new information and behaviors from role models and the environment (Abdullah et al., 2020). The classroom environment has the potential to be a significant influence on the student's development of SES and behavior. Teachers may also use the study's findings to reflect on the current SEL strategies they use in their classrooms to help students develop age-appropriate SES and what knowledge or skills they may require to meet the needs of their students.

This study may contribute to positive social change related to policy decisions, ongoing professional development, and teacher training programs. The participants explained the importance of administrative support and more relevant and meaningful professional development. Receiving meaningful and relevant professional development concerning effective strategies may provide more consistent support and knowledge for teachers managing students who lack age-appropriate SES. Findings from this study indicated that teachers are overwhelmed by the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES, which affects their workload and well-being. Twenty-five percent of teachers in the United States leave the profession before their third year, noting the pressure of the workload and student demands as the reasons (Mérida-López et al., 2020). The participants emphasized the need for more support and strategies to alleviate the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and to mitigate teacher burnout and a high turnover rate in the profession.

Based on the findings of this study, support needs to be expanded to include more effective strategies for creating parental education programs to increase their support. Improving the professional development teachers receive, as well as the education available to the parents, may support families in helping students develop more age-appropriate SES. Teachers in this study emphasized an increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES and that this has created challenges for them and their profession. Findings suggest that more strategies and support are needed within schools, families, and communities to support these students and their development of SES.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support they believed would help them when working with these students in the classroom. Four themes emerged from the data in this study that answered RQ1. In Theme 1 and Theme 2, participants shared their perspectives on the challenges of working with students who lack age-appropriate SES, including constant disruptions, a lack of time, a lack of support, student obstacles to SES, and school safety. Participants shared their concerns with the increase in the number of students who lack age-appropriate SES and how this affects them, their workload, and their well-being. Teachers shared how screen time and the pandemic affected students, specifically students' development of age-appropriate SES. Teachers feared for their safety and that of their students due to the number of students who displayed troubling, aggressive

behaviors due to their lack of age-appropriate SES and how this affected the classroom environment.

In Theme 4 and Theme 5, which answered RQ2, the participants shared their perspectives on the support they believed would help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Eleven out of 12 participants discussed the need for more effective strategies and professional development as well as more administrative and parental support. Many teachers expressed they felt overwhelmed by the number of challenges and needed better strategies and professional development to help them meet the high demands of their students. Teachers also explained the need for professional development that incorporates teacher well-being. Participants shared that more relevant and meaningful professional development would help them meet the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES. Many teachers explained the role of parents in their students' well-being and development and noted that more parental support and education programs would help them build better partnerships with parents and help students lacking age-appropriate SES.

The study's findings provide insights into early childhood teachers' experiences and perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and the support that would help them to meet these challenges. The results may instigate important discussions on concerns associated with the increase in the number of students displaying a lack of age-appropriate SES and the challenges this creates for teachers and the profession. The findings of this study may provide early childhood teachers, administrators, professional development designers, educational leaders, and parents with

information that can be used when making decisions about supporting early childhood teachers in teaching students who lack age-appropriate SES and what support would help them in sustaining a long, healthy, and fulfilled career.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Participants

Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of age-appropriate social and emotional skills?
2. What teaching strategies do you use to support and further develop a student's social and emotional skills?
3. How do you identify students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills in your classroom?
4. What are some factors that cause challenges for you when students lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?
5. How does a student's lack of age-appropriate social and emotional skills affect the classroom environment?
6. What resources have you used to help students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?
7. What support do you believe would help you meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate social and emotional skills in the classroom?
8. Is there any additional information that you would like to add concerning teaching students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?

Possible follow up prompts:

- What did you mean by.....?
- Tell me more about.....
- You mentioned.....
- What do you mean by.....?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Guide

Interviewee: _____ Location: _____
 Date: _____ Time: _____
 School: _____ Grade level: _____

There has been a significant increase in students who exhibit a deficiency in age-appropriate social and emotional skills, and this has become a concern, especially for teachers. The purpose of the interview is to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills and what support they believe would help them when working with these students in the classroom. The results of my study may benefit students and early childhood professionals in other communities experiencing similar issues.

You have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the perspectives teaching students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills. Your participation in this interview is important and voluntary. This means that I will respect your decision of whether you want to participate. If you decide to participate now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal. I do not intend to inflict any harm. This audio-only recorded interview is scheduled to last about 45-60 minutes.

Introduction and Background Information: Thank you for volunteering to share your insights and experiences concerning teaching students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills. I would like to begin by asking you some background questions to get to know you better.

A. Participant's Background:

How long have you been teaching? _____

What is the highest level of education you have attained? _____

What grade do you currently teach? _____

B. Interview Questions:

1. What is your definition of age-appropriate social-emotional skills?
2. What teaching strategies do you use to support and further develop a student's social and emotional skills?

3. How do you identify students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills in your classroom?
4. What are some factors that cause challenges for you when students lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?
5. How does a student's lack of age-appropriate social and emotional skills affect the classroom environment?
6. What resources have you used to help students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?
7. What support do you believe would help you meet the challenges of working with students lacking age-appropriate social and emotional skills in the classroom?
8. Is there any additional information that you would like to add concerning teaching students who lack age-appropriate social and emotional skills?