

PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS ON USING ENGLISH
CURRICULUM TO MEET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING GOALS

By

Emilie Brand Throckmorton

Bachelor of Arts in English from University of Michigan, 1996
Master of Arts in Secondary Education from University of Maine, 2007
Certificate of Advanced Study in Writing and the Teaching of Writing
from University of Maine, 2012

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and reviewed by:

Gizelle Luevano, Lead Advisor
University of New England

Evelyn Thomas, Secondary Advisor
University of New England

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Doctor of Education Final Dissertation Approval Form

This Dissertation was reviewed and approved by:

Lead Advisor Signature: *Gizelle Luevano, EdD*

Lead Advisor (print name): Gizelle Luevano, EdD

Secondary Advisor Signature: *Evelyn J. Thomas, EdD*

Secondary Advisory (print name): Evelyn J. Thomas, EdD

Date: October 10, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning (SEL) goals. The problem explored was the rise of adolescents' mental health concerns (CDC, 2019) and the role of secondary schools in attempting to address these concerns. The literature on this topic explored the mental health crisis for adolescents, the history and philosophy of SEL, and how secondary schools are integrating SEL, and how the ELA curriculum may be effective at meeting SEL goals. Six secondary public ELA teachers shared their perceptions through semi-structured interviews. Data from these interviews were coded and analyzed using a 5-step data analysis process developed by Creswell and Poth (2018). The analysis of the findings indicated that participants had an accurate understanding of the definition and goals of SEL. Participants offered multiple examples of strategies and lessons they used to meet SEL goals within their classroom routines and ELA curriculum and found that the ELA curriculum was a natural fit for meeting SEL goals. Additionally, participants believed that it was most effective for their adolescent students to address SEL without calling it SEL. This study is significant because research on adolescent mental health supported the idea that decreasing stigma by normalizing discussion of mental health can have beneficial outcomes for adolescent students. This research has implications for administrators, educators of all content areas, and secondary students.

Keywords: CASEL framework, Mental Health Crisis, Student Mental Health, English Language Arts (ELA), Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional learning (SEL), or teaching students to develop healthy attitudes, manage their emotions, create empathy, and foster relationships (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020), has always held a place in schools, even if not referred to by that name. Educators have been integrating lessons about caring for peers, regulating emotions, and teaching relationship skills since the beginning of time, intentionally or not (Greene, 2019). Through modeling, problem solving, crisis management, or explicit teaching, educators of all levels regularly teach students how to manage their feelings (Greene, 2019; Shafer, 2016; Walker, 2018). Schools serve as a microcosm of society where students learn to juggle relationships, feelings, and stress while managing their academic subjects, so it makes sense that schools have a vested interest in students' social and emotional needs (Shafer, 2016). What has changed in recent years in education is two-fold: student mental health concerns have risen 40% since 2009 (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2019), and schools are being asked to play a more formal and explicit role in addressing those concerns (Prothero, 2020). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling and students' lives, mental illness was on the rise in adolescents: one in five high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019 (CDC, 2019). Exacerbating this already daunting problem are the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that only 20% of children who need treatment for mental health get it, and the social stigmas causing shame in those youth who suffer from mental illness (Abramson, 2022; Ferrari et al., 2020; Turner & Xian, 2022).

Students' mental health falls under the purview of schools (Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018). When the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) passed, schools were given the green light to shift from a strictly core academic focus and more toward "well-rounded" education (Srinivasan,

2019, p. 7). Mental health curriculums, anti-bullying campaigns, suicide prevention initiatives, and advisory programs to include social and emotional components have become commonplace in schools as well as in teachers' professional development workshops (Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018). This heightened attention on social and emotional health, in conjunction with academics, shows progress toward broadening our cultural view of the roles of schools (Abramson, 2022). Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2020) argued this new focus on students' mental health was the missing component in the test-driven culture created by No Child Left Behind.

However, even schools willing to adapt to the changing needs of students face rising expectations to teach the "whole child," (Flook, 2019, para. 3) referring to not only a focus on academics, but also on social and emotional needs (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Prothero, 2020). Not all teachers feel comfortable addressing student mental health issues, and some feel unprepared and undertrained to teach SEL (Schwartz, 2019). High schools have an especially important and delicate job in addressing mental health needs in their students. Adolescent students face higher levels of mental health concerns, and 9th through 12th graders can be skeptical of artificial lessons asking them to address their feelings, resulting in isolated or stand-alone SEL lessons met with reluctance or even disdain (Sawchuk, 2021). However, adolescence is the right time for teachers to affect change in their mindset about their own and others' mental health; teenagers are beginning to explore emerging identities and are highly susceptible to social pressures (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). Teenagers are also poised to develop empathy for others and change their attitudes about people and topics such as mental health. According to Nikolajeva (2019), "Adolescence is a period of human life when the brain, still more intensively than before, learns to recognize and attribute mental states to ourselves as well as other people" (p. 4). With the right approach, high schools have a unique opportunity to affect change for the

better in teenagers' social and emotional health (Nikolajeva, 2019; Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017).

The potential of using literature and writing to facilitate SEL may offer solutions to the demands put on high schools (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). English teachers may have the tools they need to address SEL simply by the nature of their content area; they have a room full of students who are already accustomed to writing, thinking, and talking reflectively about characters, relationships, and feelings (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Texts already taught in many English classes often dovetail naturally with discussions on mental health or serve as vehicles to teach social and emotional skills (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014). Research is clear on the link between literature and empathy, and how stories can help us learn about and connect to other people's experiences (Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Therefore, literature can help to combat the stigma around mental health as well as work as a tool for teachers to get students reflecting and talking about social and emotional health (Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Furthermore, literature can be therapeutic to adolescent students who are looking to understand themselves in the world (Nikolajeva, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals.

Definition of Key Terms

This section provides definitions of key terminology used in this study that may not have a common meaning. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that it is imperative to define all terms central to the study to add precision and clarity of understanding. Furthermore, these definitions

clarify how terms are used specifically in this study, which may differ from other contexts. The following definitions of terms are relevant and will be used throughout this study.

Adolescence: Adolescence is the period of time when a child grows into an adult, from puberty to maturity, characterized by more complex emotions and more independence from parents (CDC, 2019).

Authentic learning: Authentic learning refers to instances when concepts such as social and emotional learning are embedded into academic curriculum rather than added on to students' school day in a way that is disconnected from traditional coursework (Sawchuk, 2021).

CASEL Framework: The CASEL Framework, also known as the "CASEL Five," refers to five areas of social and emotional learning identified by the Collaborate for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationships skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2020).

Curriculum: Curriculum refers to texts, standards, assessments, and material presented in academic courses, as well as the classroom strategies used by teachers to present that material (Burke, 2013).

English Language Arts (ELA): English Language Arts (ELA) refers to reading, writing and oral communication that are included in the State Content Standards for high school (Structure of U.S. Education, n.d.).

Mental health crisis: The mental health crisis refers to the rise of mental health concerns in adolescents, including a 40% increase in students feeling sad or hopeless, and a 44% increase in students making a plan for suicide, over the last decade (CDC, 2019).

Relationship skills: Relationship skills is one of the five goals isolated by the CASEL framework, Relationship Skills include community building, learning to solve problems with

peers, managing conflict, and learning to stand up for themselves and the rights of others (CASEL, 2020).

Reflective writing: Reflective writing is a strategy used in English classrooms that asks students to describe their learning and to reflect on how it has changed; reflective writing assists students in connecting and constructing meaning between the content of the lesson and themselves (Costa & Kallick, 2018).

Responsible decision making: Responsible decision making is one of the five goals isolated by the CASEL framework and acknowledges how our decisions impact others and supporting our collective wellbeing (CASEL, 2020).

Secondary school: Secondary school, also called high school in the United States, refers to grades 9 through 12, or ages approximately from 13-18 years old (Structure of U.S. Education, n.d.).

Self-Awareness: Self-awareness is one of the five goals isolated by the CASEL framework, and includes teaching students to understand their culture, thoughts, feelings and potential, and to have a healthy sense of who they are (CASEL, 2020).

Self-Management: Self-management is one of the five goals isolated by the CASEL framework, and includes how to manage anxiety, stress, and anger, and teaches about persevering through challenges and creating positive change (CASEL, 2020).

Social awareness: Social awareness is one of the five goals isolated by CASEL framework, and includes learning to acknowledge the views of others, creating empathy, understanding different perspectives, and learning about societal norms and stigmas (CASEL, 2019).

Social and emotional health: Social and emotional health refers to the capacity for people to understand and create healthy relationships, and to recognize and regulate emotions (CASEL, 2020).

Social and emotional learning (SEL): Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to educational programming which teaches students - through direct instruction, learning experiences, or teacher modeling- to develop healthy attitudes, manage their emotions, create empathy, and foster supportive relationships (CASEL, 2020).

Whole child: Whole child refers to terminology used to emphasize the balance for schools in educating all aspects of a child, not simply academics, including physical health, mental health, social and emotional climate, and the relationships with home and community (CDC, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored in this study was the rise of adolescents' mental health concerns (CDC, 2019) and the role of secondary schools in attempting to address these concerns. To best meet adolescent students' needs, secondary schools are seeking effective opportunities to embed SEL authentically into their students' school experiences (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Shafer, 2016; Yeager, 2017). As more and more adolescents struggle with mental illness, schools can directly address the social and emotional health and development of their students (Prothero, 2020). Teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school staff not only can recognize and refer students who may be struggling with some mental health issues, but also work towards creating a safe school culture where students' needs are recognized, understood, validated, and heard (Turner & Xian, 2022). There has been a 40% increase in students feeling sad or hopeless, and a 44% increase in students making a plan for suicide, since 2009 (CDC,

2019). However, most mental health conditions are left untreated which can lead to life-long consequences (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The teen years present an especially compelling window of opportunity for schools to help students improve student awareness of emotional and mental health concerns, and to impact their life-long attitudes about mental health (Yeager, 2017).

If done successfully, schools can address students' social and emotional needs both for students already struggling and by improving the school culture (Turner & Xian, 2022). There are only a small number of social workers or counselors in any school who are designated to help kids with emotional and mental health needs. Schools must therefore be innovative in their approaches to helping their students understand and face mental health ailments. Furthermore, schools must support teachers who are uncomfortable or unprepared to deal with students' mental wellness (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Prothero, 2020; Shafer, 2016; Yeager, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals. This research was timely due to the growing demands on schools to address the social and emotional health of students (Abramson, 2020; CASEL, 2020) and to focus not just on academics, but include the "whole child" (Flook, 2019, para. 3). Teachers are not clinicians, therapists, nor social workers, so many teachers feel unprepared or unqualified to talk about emotional and mental needs (Schwartz, 2019). However, due to the content, books taught, reflective writing, and opportunities for class discussions, the ELA curriculum may be poised to align with SEL goals in ways that can benefit individual students as

well as the overall school culture (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). This study filled a gap in the literature around what may be deemed successful SEL strategies -such as teacher-led discussions, reflective writing prompts, group work, and book studies- because the possible impact of teacher instructional practices on long-term positive outcomes on youth has not yet been studied (Taylor et al., 2017).

Research Question and Design

This study sought to explore the perceptions of secondary ELA teachers who may teach SEL in their classrooms. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to collect relevant data on the lived experiences of this study's participants. The following research question was used to guide the study.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers on how they may implement social and emotional learning goals in their ELA curriculum?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework, built by the researcher, is a compilation of ideas, beliefs, and theories that originate from multiple sources (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The personal interest of this researcher connected to this study due to 23 years of experience with teaching ELA in a public high school in Maine. Similarly, this researcher has personal experience with her own mental health concerns and has helped to educate students around mental health issues for two decades. Existing literature that was researched for this study revealed a rising rate of mental health concerns in adolescents (CDC, 2021), as well as the struggles of schools to implement programs such as SEL to address mental health of students (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020; Walker, 2018). The topical research for this study included themes from the literature: (a) Mental Health

Crisis in Adolescents; (b) the History of Social and Emotional Learning, (c) the Philosophy of Social and Emotional Learning in Schools, (d) Challenges for Schools Implementing Social and Emotional Learning, and (e) Social Emotional Learning in Secondary Schools.

The theoretical framework comes from a formal theory that serves as the foundation of the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework that guided this study was the theory of constructivism, which explains that students learn best when actively constructing their own knowledge by assimilating information into existing schemas (Aminineh & Asl, 2015; Juvova et al., 2015; Piaget, 1968). If learning is not framed in a constructivist manner, that is, if content is not introduced with context that supports the integration of the new material, then disequilibrium occurs (Aminineh & Asl, 2015; Juvova et al., 2015; Piaget, 1968). Disequilibrium may also explain why teachers express frustration or feelings of unpreparedness when asked by schools to teach SEL. Constructivism suggests that if schools approach the integration of SEL by helping teachers build upon existing schema, such as using an already established curriculum to meet the goals of SEL, teachers may feel more prepared, successful, and willing to participate (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Juvova et al., 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Assumptions of the researcher, or issues around the topic that the researcher believes to be true before beginning the study, are imperative to acknowledge (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). These premises may end up being proven true or unwarranted as the data is analyzed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For this study, it was assumed that close relationships with students and discussions about mental health would be seen as beneficial and helpful to schools trying to develop their SEL program. Furthermore, it was assumed that adding SEL into the

English curriculum would provide more students with safe places in school to authentically address their social and emotional needs. Modeling open discussion on topics of social and emotional learning and mental health were assumed to be as important as other components of the English curriculum. This researcher assumed that, because of the nature and content in English courses, other English teachers had a unique opportunity to improve student understanding of their own social and emotional health.

There were also assumptions made regarding the participants in the study. Using semi-structured interviews for this study “permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the research participants by focusing on deep lived meanings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 101) of teaching secondary ELA. This method also assumed that this researcher would ask quality questions and that the participants will be active participants who understood the nature of the questions and shared honest and open experiences with how SEL goals may have been met in their curriculum.

Limitations in any study may weaken the outcomes of the study, and qualitative research studies can contain subjectivities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). One possible limitation was the presence of this researcher in the interview process. Because this researcher was also a secondary ELA teacher, participants may have felt insecure about possibly revealing lack of familiarity with ELA content, strategies, or SEL goals as it may have revealed gaps in knowledge. Furthermore, even though the SEL movement is nationwide, this study only focused on public-school teachers from three counties in the state of Maine, and only interviewed six participants. The scope of a research study looks at the depth that the research is explored in relation to timeline and the population studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The scope of this research was limited to six secondary English teachers at one point in time about

their perceptions of how meeting SEL goals in the English curriculum was possible and beneficial.

Rationale and Significance

Adolescents today experience mental illness at higher rates than they are seeking help, sometimes resulting in life-long struggles with mental health, or even avoidable acute disease later in life (CDC, 2019; Prothero, 2020). Significant barriers to students seeking help are a lack of comfort in talking about emotional and mental health needs and embarrassment or perception of stigma that would prevent students from asking for help (Morgan et al., 2019). Stigma around mental and emotional health requires the urgent attention of schools because it is not simply a social phenomenon, but rather an actual determinant of mental health outcomes. Cultivating in students a more positive attitude toward mental health may lead to better outcomes because students will seek help sooner (Ferrari et al., 2020). Research on adolescent mental health supported the idea that simply decreasing stigma by normalizing discussion of mental health can have beneficial outcomes for students, making this study relevant towards helping students with their social and emotional health.

Summary

Schools across the nation are eager to find approaches to address the mental health crisis and to improve school culture around emotional and mental health (Prothero, 2020). Adding SEL lessons at the secondary level is an earnest first step, but until the emotional health is truly integrated with authentic learning in the student's school day, these efforts may not be as effective as they could be (Shafer, 2016; Yeager, 2017). English Language Arts classes, where students already read books, write reflectively, and discuss emotional topics, may present a unique opportunity to embed SEL into the curriculum. (Richmond, 2014). Research suggested

that reading about and discussing characters with mental health issues will build empathy and in turn lessen the stigma felt among students. In sum, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature and provides details about the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The methodology, sampling technique, and data collection will be explained in chapter 3. Chapter 4 will present this study's data. Chapter 5 will conclude this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most consistent messages coming through schools, the media, and various sources of health research is that mental illness among adolescents is at a critical level and rising (Abramson, 2022; Chatterjee, 2022). As reported by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), mental health-related visits to emergency departments nationwide increased by 31% in adolescents ages 12 through 17 during 2020 (Abramson, 2022). The most common disorders that adolescents are struggling with are depression, anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and bipolar disorder, and “the overwhelming majority of those do not have access to any treatment” (Walker, 2018, p.1). This rise in acute need for adolescents means that schools have been thrust into becoming the “de facto mental health providers” (Prothero, 2020, p.1) for teenagers. However, according to the National Education Association (NEA), the U.S. public education system is struggling to adequately address student mental health: “The magnitude of the problem cannot be overstated. At least 10 million students, ages 13 through 18, need some sort of professional help with a mental health condition” (Walker, 2018, p.1).

Student mental health is not an abstract problem; students with mental health struggles are absent from class because they are too anxious to come to school, or avoid classes to hide in the bathrooms, act out with violence against others, or show regressive behavior (Chatterjee, 2022). Students with mental health concerns are crying in school, fighting in the halls, and sitting outside the principal’s office because of misbehavior. Students are also showing signs of mental health struggles in more subtle ways, such as inability to complete coursework, difficulty managing relationships, or feeling isolated and withdrawn in the school setting. Mental health concerns are at the forefront of current discussions among teachers and administrators in education, in terms of classroom management, curriculum design, relationships with parents and

the community, and the ways in which teachers prioritize the content of lessons (Shafer, 2016; Walker, 2018). As addressing mental health becomes increasingly common and comprehensive, schools are beginning to prioritize social and emotional health and helping students in three distinct ways: teaching students skills to better communicate and manage feelings, connecting kids to caring adults such as teachers and counselors, or referring kids with more acute needs to outside therapists or specialists (Turner & Xian, 2022; Yeager, 2015). Schools are scrambling to meet the mental health needs of students by hiring more mental health providers, incorporating mental health lessons into their curriculum, training teachers in basic social and emotional skills, and trying to take an overall preventative approach (Abramson, 2020).

One prominent strategy being utilized in schools nationwide is social and emotional learning (SEL) (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011). Social and emotional learning offers multiple programming, curricular, and interventionist approaches to helping schools teach social and emotional health and address the concerns of our youth (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). The idea of SEL originated in the 1960s, and slowly grew into an educational movement in the 1990s. Educators and researchers began using the term “social and emotional learning” in 1992 (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011, p.2). This relatively new philosophy of educating the “whole child,” (Flook, 2019, para. 3) coupled with the rising mental health crisis among adolescents, has caused SEL to become common language in schools today (Shafer, 2016). However, the landscape in education is changing so quickly that many teachers and administrators feel unprepared for the new demands on schools (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020). Many teachers are overwhelmed with the onset of schools asking them to add SEL into their already packed curriculums, and feel underqualified, or in some cases unwilling, to talk about mental health or social and emotional

issues in the classroom (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020). Research shows that incorporating SEL at the high school level can be particularly problematic unless it is successfully integrated into a whole-school approach or embedded in academic courses, adding to the pressure felt by educators to effectively teach SEL to adolescents (Hamedani & Darling 2015; Lee, 2019; Sawchuk, 2021; Yeager, 2017).

Traditional SEL approaches, where students may have a once-a-week, out of context lesson on a social and emotional skill, are ineffective for all ages (Shafer, 2016). Because of the research linking social and emotional skills, especially empathy for self and others, to the study of literature (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019), the high school ELA classroom may be an environment that allows teachers to integrate SEL goals more naturally into adolescents' school experience. The literature explored for this study included research on the mental health crisis among adolescents, SEL strategies, different school approaches to integrating SEL, how adolescent development impacts SEL approaches, and how the ELA curriculum may facilitate SEL goals.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual and theoretical frameworks bring together theory, research, and personal experience to explore the “relationship between constructs and ideas” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 12). The conceptual framework, comprised of a combination of “concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories” is constructed by the researcher, built by ideas borrowed from multiple sources (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016, p. 5). For 23 years, this researcher has taught English in a large public high school in Maine. When she started teaching, the focus of content and assessments in courses was purely academic in nature; teachers were urged to teach literature, literary theory, grammar, mechanics, and challenging, canonical texts. Over the

course of over two decades in the classroom, this researcher has observed the conversations slowly shift toward the concept of teaching “the whole child,” as well as watched the mental health needs in students become more and more acute, widespread, and complex. This researcher’s love for teaching English and connecting with adolescent students has merged with an interest in mental health awareness, both because of current developments in the expectations of educators and from personal experience. The topical research for this study included themes from the literature: (a) mental health crisis in adolescents; (b) the history of social and emotional learning, (c) the philosophy of social and emotional learning in schools, (d) challenges for schools implementing social and emotional learning, and (e) social emotional learning in secondary schools.

The theoretical framework creates a foundation for the research study on which all knowledge is built (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). These authors argued that the theoretical framework “serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study” and “provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis” (p.12). The theoretical framework chosen to guide a research study must come from a formal theory that “should depend on appropriateness, ease of application, and explanatory power” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 169). Piaget’s (1968) theory of constructivism provided the theoretical framework for this study in two ways, both how students can learn SEL skills in an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, and how teachers can assimilate the addition of SEL to their ELA curriculum.

Constructivism is a theory of learning based on the idea that learning does not occur passively; rather, “it is an active process in which learners negotiate their understanding in the light of what they experience in the new learning situation” (Aminineh & Asl, 2015, p. 10).

Piaget (1968) used the terms *accommodation* and *assimilation* when talking about how people learn. According to Piaget (1968), learners assimilate new information into their existing cognitive schemas, and can only understand new content if accommodated by existing schemas. In this way, Piaget's (1968) constructivist theory supports two key aspects of this research: how secondary students in ELA classrooms may acquire the knowledge of their social and emotional health, if done so via components of the ELA curriculum they are already familiar with; and how secondary ELA teachers may feel more comfortable integrating SEL into their curriculum, if they assimilate the SEL goals into the curriculum they already have mastery over. Using constructivist theory, the logic holds that for SEL content to be successfully integrated into the ELA curriculum, that content must be approached such that the new material can be organized into a coherent structure and integrated with another preexisting knowledge (Aminineh & Asl, 2015).

Cognitive constructivism offers a view of learning that is pivotal in this research due to its impact on teachers. The greatest importance in teaching and learning is not placed on skills or facts, but rather on strategies that allow students (and teachers) to accommodate new material into their existing intellectual framework (*Cognitive Constructivism, GSI Teaching & Resource Center, n.d.*). When schools ask teachers to adapt to the new demands of adding SEL into their curriculum, it is important to remember that “Each learner interprets experiences and information in the light of their extant knowledge [and that] learners...organize their experience to select and transform new information” (*Cognitive Constructivism, GSI Teaching & Resource Center, n.d.*, para. 4). Constructivist theory guides teachers to help their students assimilate “new information to existing knowledge,” and enable them to “make appropriate modifications to their existing intellectual framework to accommodate that information” (*Cognitive Constructivism, GSI*

Teaching & Resource Center, n.d., para. 27). If the same relationship were true between administrators and teachers as constructivists claim is true between teachers and students, then ELA teachers could more effectively integrate SEL into their already-established curriculum if guided to do so in encouraging ways.

Constructivist teaching methods put emphasis on activities that engage and increase students' motivation for learning, as well as opportunities to share mutual communication between teacher and student (Juvova et al., 2015). Group work, reflective writing, and class discussions, which are all typical strategies used by ELA teachers (Burke, 2013), have similar goals and can be considered constructivist in nature. Furthermore, constructivism offers a lens into why teachers may feel frustrated or unprepared to teach SEL (Lee, 2019). Piaget (1968) described that when new knowledge is introduced, learners (teachers in this case) enter a stage of disturbance - also called disequilibrium - and then teachers (administrators in this case) should allow "learners to make sense of the new information by associating it with what [they] already know" (Aminineh & Asl, 2015, p. 10). Disequilibrium causes teachers to be uncomfortable or feel unqualified to teach SEL skills in their classrooms, but with guidance, a teacher can assimilate new learning into existing knowledge and become more comfortable with the subject matter. The theory of constructivism also supports the qualitative methodology of this research due to the open-ended questions that will allow ELA teachers to explore their own curriculum and reflect on the connections they are able to make with SEL (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The process is constructivist because ELA teachers will share their perceptions about how the complexities of SEL are "experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 42), meaning that SEL was embedded into their already-established set of classroom strategies and activities.

Mental Health Crisis in Adolescents

Mental illness for adolescents is rising at significant rates, whereas adolescence is defined as the period from puberty to maturity, characterized by more complex emotions and more independence from parents (CDC, 2019). It was reported that 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10 through 19 years comes from mental illness (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, half of all mental health conditions start by 14 years of age, but most cases are undetected and untreated (WHO, 2020). Also, according to the CDC (2019), more than one in three high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019, representing a 40% increase since 2009; about one in six youth reported making a suicide plan in 2019, a 44% rise in that decade. Mental health rates took a more dramatic turn during the COVID-19 pandemic, which kept most students across the nation out of regular school and struggling with isolation and mounting stress (Turner & Xian, 2022). Shockingly, 37% of high school students experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% persistently felt sad or hopeless during 2020 (CDC, 2021). For children who lived in poverty, or who lost a loved one to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health of adolescents was affected even more acutely (Turner & Xian, 2022).

To complicate this rising need for mental health care in adolescents is the fact that not all children with mental health concerns are seeking help; while one in five children struggle with a mental health disorder, only 20% of those children may receive treatment or care from a mental health provider (Abramson, 2022). Morgan et al. (2019) established that while many mental health concerns first show up during adolescence, young people are not receiving help for their disorders. One barrier that may keep some of those suffering with mental health ailments from seeking help is the social stigma of mental illness (Ferrari et al., 2020). The stigma surrounding

mental health issues keeps kids from talking about mental illness and recognizing these signs and symptoms in themselves and others.

Sometimes students do not know enough to ask for help, or they feel embarrassment or anxiety about what others may think (Morgan et al., 2019). Because adolescence is a critical period of development of many mental health concerns, working to debunk the stigma around mental health is an important goal for schools (Ferrari et al., 2020). The authors also argued in favor of approaches that normalize conversations around mental health, educate students about signs and symptoms, and create school cultures where students feel safe and validated about their mental and emotional health, stating “More positive attitude toward mental illness and help seeking may lead to the earlier detection and delivery of treatment, and the significant improvement of outcomes” (Ferrari et al., 2020, p. 5207). Rather than merely a crisis response to the rising mental health needs among students, schools need a systematic approach to best help students (Walker, 2018). One such systematic approach is SEL, a process used by schools to help students learn skills for creating healthy relationships and managing their emotions (CASEL, 2020).

The History of Social and Emotional Learning

The concept of SEL began in the 1960s in New Haven, Connecticut, where James Comer from the Yale School of Medicine’s Child Study Center, began programs in two underachieving schools to begin teaching more than just academic skills (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011). Alongside the academic programs, Comer created programs in the schools that focused also on social and emotional health as well as behavior problems. When achievement in the two targeted schools improved drastically over the next two decades, educators and researchers sparked a movement to incorporate social and emotional health into all schools; because of Comer’s work, the New Haven Public Schools began to focus on creating programming around

social development (CASEL, 2020). Hence, educators began talking about emotional competence and social and emotional learning within the school setting, and the term “SEL” was born. Coinciding with the rise in popularity of the concept of SEL was the release of the 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, by Goleman (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011). Goleman (1996) argued that the soft skills that make up students’ character can be taught. When the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (2011) was passed at the federal level, SEL became a part of the educational routines of most schools (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011). As a result, SEL grants, teacher training on social and emotional health, and even amended standards for education are an expected part of our nation’s school districts today (CASEL, 2020; George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011).

The Philosophy of Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Multiple studies supported the belief that schools are a key focus for developing a comprehensive mental health program for students. This is true simply because children spend so much of their time in school (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI]; n.d.; O’Reilly et al., 2018; WHO, 2020). Educational settings “offer a unique opportunity for early identification, prevention, and interventions that serve students where they already are” (NAMI, n.d., para 3). Because there is a clear need to increase awareness among young people about mental health, O’Reilly et al. (2018), supported the idea that schools serve as an effective means to promote mental wellness.

Within the last decade, schools across the United States are being urged to acknowledge their roles in the mental health of students and to focus on SEL (Smith, 2020). Schools routinely look at students’ overall health through multiple angles such as curriculum, programing, and

teacher training (Walker, 2018). However, schools must have a systematic approach that goes beyond hiring more counselors or psychologists. Philosophically, secondary schools have tended to focus solely on academics, and the change toward equally prioritizing social and emotional health is especially new for this grade span (Conley, 2018). With the focus primarily on content-area testing, non-cognitive skills were not previously prioritized in secondary schools. The current mental health crisis has forced this conversation about priorities in schools, and Conley (2018) asked, “What if we were equally diligent in gathering and reporting information on both the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning? If we were to see the two terms as equals, the potential importance of the metacognitive would become clearer” (para. 9). The new attention on social and emotional health in conjunction with academics represents a shift in thinking about schooling, some of which can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic (Abramson, 2022). Hamedani and Darling (2020) called support for students’ mental health the “missing piece” in the academic and test-driven culture leftover from No Child Left Behind.

In schools, there are only a small number of social workers or counselors who are designated to provide direct support to children with mental health needs, so creating a school culture that incorporates SEL in authentic ways requires involvement from teachers and other staff as well (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020). These authors also explored the concept of teaching non-cognitive factors or soft skills. Whereas social and emotional learning had typically not been the highest priority in academic settings, schools are now understanding that addressing students’ psychological, social, and emotional needs may aid in their students’ success in and out of the classroom. When schools educate the whole student and consider emotional skills as important as academic skills, students may feel more engaged and supported in school.

Furthermore, Jones and Khan (2017) cited research proving that if classrooms can connect difficult academic challenges with social interaction that kindle emotions, then students may learn more effectively. The main assertion in their work was that learning *is* social and emotional by nature, and a student cannot be a successful student if they have significant emotional deficits, that cognition and emotion cannot be separated in teaching and learning. Even teachers who may argue that they must put emphasis on academics could be convinced by Jones and Khan's research that allowing students opportunities for social and emotional growth in their classrooms may help their students achieve higher levels in their content areas. However, Greene (2019) argued that academic outcomes cannot be the driving force for prioritizing social and emotional health in schools. "Doesn't SEL need to be about more than learning to act like a good person in order to get a grade, a job, and a fatter paycheck?" (Greene, 2019, p. 2). Rather, Greene mentioned that SEL needs to be seen as an opportunity to focus on values such as integrity, empathy, and responsibility.

Challenges for Schools Implementing Social and Emotional Learning

As more attention has been placed on the rising mental health needs of adolescents, more pressure has fallen on schools to provide support and interventions for students (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020). Prothero (2020) acknowledged the difficult situation many schools find themselves in. The unmistakable crisis in mental health of students and the shortage of mental health care providers put an urgent demand on schools for which many are not prepared. Though many educators understand the importance of addressing mental health, "the change in perspective is a formidable culture shift" (Walker, 2018, p. 6) for many schools. O'Reilly et al. (2018) found "limited advancement" of mental health promotion in schools, and that "methods used were of variable quality [with] inconsistency regarding the people chosen to run the

interventions” (p. 658). These findings aligned with other research exploring under-resourced schools, lack of training, and lack of confidence among teaching staff to administer social and emotional health interventions (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020). The findings of O’Reilly et al., (2018) supported the difficulties schools face trying to implement interventions to address student mental health; even when there are promising interventions employed in schools, the effectiveness of these interventions have not been successfully evaluated so long-term results are unclear.

Furthermore, not all teachers are comfortable with the new initiatives to teach the “whole child” nor feel prepared to address social and emotional health (Schwartz, 2019). Lee (2019) reviewed *Education Week* research from a nationwide survey showing that:

nearly half of teachers surveyed felt that their schools did not have adequate staff on hand to support their students’ social and emotional needs—and as a result, were left to intervene on their own but without the appropriate resources to do so. (p. 2)

The report went on to show how unprepared most teachers feel about addressing mental health and social and emotional needs of students. Teachers did not feel they had adequate training or professional development to serve student needs (Lee, 2019). Schwartz (2019) reinforced these feelings in other research, also stating that some teachers believe that training around social and emotional skills is inadequate and lacks practical strategies to use in the classroom. Another conflict faced in implementing SEL includes when parents put pressure on schools to prioritize academics and test scores over social and emotional skills (Wagenheim, 2016). If academics are measured by grades and standardized test scores, and SEL skills are not measured or even measurable, parents are sometimes difficult to convince on the importance of spending class time on mental health or emotional skills (Wagenheim, 2016).

Social Emotional Learning in Secondary Schools

Social Emotional Learning has unique challenges at the secondary level. In grades 9 through 12, adolescents are experiencing so much emotional and physical changes so quickly that developmental mayhem can occur inside their brains (Yeager, 2017). Even though teenagers are facing intense emotions and trying to navigate a more complicated and nuanced social scene, research shows they can learn to make healthier choices, understand themselves better, and have more self-control (Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017). Puberty and the onset of hormonal changes make teenagers especially sensitive and vulnerable (Yeager, 2017), and therefore educators must take unique approaches to this age group.

Integrating Social and Emotional Learning at the Secondary Level

So much of teenagers' focus is on maintaining social status, respect, and acceptance. Therefore, adolescents may be highly motivated in emotional ways by learning situations that allow them to keep that status (Yeager, 2017). Srinivasan (2019) cited research stating that teenagers who learn self-reflection strategies and means to de-stress may show improved and measurable cognition and working memory. In essence, academic success, graduation rates, and college and career readiness can all be improved by integrating SEL into adolescents' lives (Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017).

Aside from teaching teenagers the right skills at the right time to make them healthier people, SEL may positively impact life-long attitudes toward emotional and mental health in adolescence (Nikolajeva, 2019; Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017). Therefore, high school classes may be the optimal venue to put significant energy into social and emotional learning (Yeager, 2017). Several researchers showed that the teenage years, when the brain is tumultuous but still malleable, are the most effective time to help students learn to recognize mental states in

themselves and others which builds on the importance of establishing empathy among students (Nikolajeva, 2019). Pfeifer and Berkman (2018) also argued that developmentally, teenagers are searching for their sense of self and their identity, consciously or not, leading them to form opinions about their own mental and emotional health. Research clearly suggested that if schools want to help to break the stigma around mental health and create more reflective, empathetic, and socially healthier students, then adolescence is a time to influence young minds (Nikolajeva, 2019; Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017).

Even though the research is compelling that adolescence is an optimal time to teach SEL, there are unique challenges of integrating SEL at the high school level, both because of how it may be received by the students and how it may be perceived by some secondary teachers (Sawchuk 2021). The book *SEL Every Day* by Srinivasan (2019) helped to make the bridge between the CASEL framework and academic classes in the secondary level. Teaching lessons in SEL is more commonly associated with elementary and middle school grades, whereas high schools have historically focused primarily on academics and scholarly interests (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Therefore, Srinivasan (2019) implores using a different approach to teaching SEL to adolescent-age students; they argued that SEL must be integrated into the instruction rather than be approached as a stand-alone program. They also acknowledged some of the resistance that teachers may show to being asked to integrate SEL into their assessment-driven, content-based curriculum.

Less is known about the effectiveness of SEL lessons at the high school level than it is in the earlier grades (Sawchuk, 2021). There are few researched SEL programs that have shown effectiveness in secondary schools, and part of the problem is that programs that teach SEL, which may be successful with younger students, can feel disjointed and phony to older students.

Instead, successful approaches to SEL for high school students must be more implicit rather than explicit (Sawchuk, 2021; Srinivasan, 2019). Social and emotional learning lessons that are not connected in a meaningful way to academic content may be less effective. Similarly, if high school SEL approaches are too compartmentalized, they may be less fruitful for students; a short and isolated lesson on managing stress may not have the same impact as a lesson on stress that is embedded into a larger unit of study with a teacher that the students know and trust (Sawchuk, 2021). Social emotional learning should be merged with academic topics, so that students would be authentically learning about and reflecting on social and emotional issues without having it identified as SEL.

Another important element related to SEL at the secondary level is the importance of teacher-student relationships for SEL to be effective (Yeager, 2017). Yeager mentioned that positive classroom climates, where students feel respected by both the teacher and the classmates and where the values specific to teenagers are considered, are imperative. Typical SEL lessons from elementary and middle school levels do not work in high schools; SEL lessons must be significantly more “adult-like” than the typical SEL lessons students may have been exposed to in younger years. Yeager’s research emphasis revolves around creating environments where teenagers feel respected and where their “developmental motivations” (p.75) can be harnessed. Yeager’s work differentiated three approaches to SEL: skills, climates, and mindsets, and presented evidence that the mindset model is most effective because it produces “internalized, lasting change” (p 76). Both Yeager (2017) and Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) concluded in their research that SEL is most effective if a systematic, whole-school approach is adopted, where all teachers and staff members are on board with the tenets and practices of SEL. Shafer (2016) agreed with the whole-school approach and added an additional element involving

the need for administrators to “proactively consider the SEL needs of staff” (p. 4) to have SEL make a lasting impact on students. She argued that unless the staff feels supported and valued emotionally, that the whole-school approach becomes a myth (Shafer, 2016).

An important take-away from Srinivasan’s (2019) work is how teachers can work to normalize mental health concerns and discussions around social and emotional health with what they call “skillful self-disclosure” (p. 71). Srinivasan encouraged teachers to build trust and cooperation among their students by sharing some personal passions, interests, and challenges with their students. This approach may allow students and teachers to build more positive individual relationships, all of which will help students develop SEL skills because they feel safe to explore, reflect, and take risks. Emphasis on relationships supported the idea that SEL cannot exist as various lessons sprinkled in here and there, but must be a systematic approach of how teachers interact with students to build trust and comfort.

Curricular Expectations for Social and Emotional Learning in Maine Secondary Schools

The Maine Department of Education outlines standards and curricular expectations for all school levels in each of eight content areas (Content Standards | Department of Education., n.d.). Known as the Maine Learning Results, these standards include a breakdown of performance expectations for every content area for each grade level, Kindergarten through 5th grade. These standards are then banded together for 6th through 9th and 9th through Diploma. Since they were adopted in 2011 and implemented in 2013, public secondary schools, defined as grades 9 through 12, create their academic curriculum around these standards (Content Standards | Department of Education., n.d.).

In 2021, the Maine Department of Education added the CASEL framework as a set of guidelines to address how all Maine schools are incorporating SEL into the curriculum.

Specifically, the CASEL framework isolates five key areas that schools should cover: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making, collectively known as the CASEL Five (CASEL, 2020). Under the umbrella of Career and Life Development, the CASEL framework provides Maine educators with guidance on how to support student social and emotional health (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.). The Maine Department of Education does not have a prescribed curriculum for SEL but uses the CASEL framework to guide instruction (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.). Because SEL is most successful when embedded into pre-existing curriculum (Srinivasan, 2019), CASEL offers a set of standards and guidelines rather than instruction or assessment.

The Link Between Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and Literature

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which was created in 1994 (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011) identifies five key areas of social and emotional competence that schools should address, including: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2020). Self-awareness includes teaching students to understand their culture, thoughts, feelings and potential, and to have a healthy sense of who they are. Self-management includes how to manage anxiety, stress, and anger, and teaches about persevering through challenges and creating positive change. Social awareness includes learning to acknowledge the views of others, creating empathy, understanding different perspectives, and learning about societal norms and stigmas. Relationship skills include community building, learning to solve problems with peers, managing conflict, and learning to stand up for themselves and the rights of others. Lastly, responsible

decision making refers to putting all these skills together, acknowledging how our decisions impact others and supporting our collective wellbeing (CASEL, 2020).

Researchers and educators, using the CASEL framework, have identified evidence-based strategies for schools to teach SEL. The framework is designed to both teach explicit skills to students and improve school climates (CASEL, 2020). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning describes its framework as one that “takes a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across four key settings: classrooms, schools, homes, and communities” (CASEL, 2020, para. 3). The Maine Department of Education asks teachers to instruct students using this CASEL framework (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.),

Social and emotional learning is a process used by schools to help students understand their identities, manage their emotions, maintain healthy relationships, and achieve empathy for others (CASEL, 2020). The concept of SEL has been researched and packaged in the CASEL framework. Because academic teachers are on the front-lines with students who need CASEL, it is teachers who must actually integrate the CASEL goals. The goals of CASEL may effectively be reached in the classrooms of ELA teachers where students already use books, discussion, and reflective writing to facilitate social and emotional learning in adolescents (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Nikolajeva (2019) argued that books can serve as a tool for students to develop self-knowledge and empathy for others. While their work focused especially on young adult literature, the methods they explored are applicable to many texts taught in high school ELA classes. Similarly, Stansfield and Bunce (2019) published a research study that made the link between reading fiction and creating empathy, explaining how stories can have the same social-cognitive impact as real-world social

experiences. Furthermore, literature may help young adults not only better understand, but also confront the stigma of mental illness, if ELA teachers employ strategies to help students make these connections (Richmond, 2014). When combined, the ideas of increasing empathy in students while decreasing stigma around mental health, mean that the ELA curriculum may be an effective place for teachers to address social and emotional health (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Referring to CASEL's framework, all five key elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020) can be linked to the study of literature or practices that commonly occur in ELA, a core curriculum in Maine schools.

Integrating Social and Emotional Learning into Secondary English Language Arts Curriculum

Multiple researchers identified the potential effectiveness of integrating SEL specifically into high school ELA curriculum due to the multiple opportunities presented through the teaching of literature (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). While Srinivasan's (2019) book was not specific to ELA curriculum—their work covered how SEL can be integrated into all academic disciplines—they gave specific examples from each content area. In the section on ELA, Srinivasan showed how SEL skills can be authentically and implicitly taught through stories; students can identify and reflect on emotional aspects of a fictional character and as a result, increase their emotional literacy as well as feel validation in the ways they may relate to that character. Many novels are ripe with opportunities to observe the social and emotional health of characters, and to talk about mental health struggles and strategies for coping with trauma (Hebert & Kent, 2019). Teachers can use these texts as

vehicles for discussion and reflective writing that may build empathy (Richmond, 2014), which is one of the SEL goals (CASEL, 2020).

Stansfield and Bunce (2019) explored the link between fiction and empathy, which gave bigger-picture psychological support to Srinivasan's (2019) idea about using stories with SEL. Stansfield and Bunce (2019) argued that "fictional stories required readers to understand the different points of view of narrators and protagonists" and went so far as to argue that "people who read a lot of fiction are therefore likely to have highly developed faculties of cognitive empathy" (p. 21). While this research was not explicitly about the ELA curriculum, or even education for that matter, and focused on anyone who reads and engages with fiction, the findings did show a link between literature and emotional growth. These researchers ruled out that the empathy connection comes simply from certain personality types who love to read, and instead proved the correlation between the act of reading fiction and "processes by which individuals infer the mental states of people in the real world" (Stansfield & Bunce, 2019, p. 22). In short, reading can be an effective tool for engaging a person's empathy (Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2016; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019).

Richmond's (2014) research encouraged teachers of English to employ teaching strategies and texts that promote a better understanding of mental illness among high school and college-age students. They began their argument by asserting that a lack of understanding of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia causes students to otherize people who struggle with these disorders. Richmond concluded that mental health should be at the forefront of English education to combat social stigma and bullying around mental illness and suggested that teachers of ELA expand the list of texts commonly taught in English classrooms, and then stressed how to use those texts to increase empathy, combat stigma, and

address the problem of bullying. Richmond mentioned that the concept of empathy sat at the center of the argument about how English teachers can affect change in students' mindsets. Not only should English teachers include texts that tackle mental illness or characters who face psychological challenges, but also discuss and reflect upon how these books and characters can encourage empathy for others in schools and communities. The focus on empathy, Richmond argued, creates better students and better teachers. Their work did not use the now ubiquitous "SEL" terminology, but their explorations of how literature can be used to help students aligned with the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2020). Young adult literature has the potential to help students confront stereotypes and stigmas around mental health; 25% of books written for teens are focused on mental health issues (Richmond, 2014). Additionally, "Fictional stories are simulations, capable of helping us to develop empathy with literary characters" (Richmond, 2014, p. 19). Deshpande (2012) also explored the kinds of impacts fiction can have on readers' sense of the world and themselves. Firstly, readers experience more human experiences than is possible by simply living one life; readers of fiction are exposed to stories which cause them to be more sensitive to other viewpoints, personalities, and life experiences. Secondly, readers can find their "own concealed selves" (Deshpande, 2012, p. 383) in literature and be reminded that they are not alone or abnormal.

Nikolajeva's (2019) research presented context on the adolescent brain and how it is learning to recognize mental states in both self and others, and then to discuss characteristics of young adult literature that make it especially effective in improving empathy. They viewed Young Adult Literature, and what impact it will have on adolescents, through the lens of three key elements: how a young fictional character's mind is represented by an adult author, how texts help their readers access empathy and theory of mind, and how fiction can affect young

people's cognitive and emotional development. Hebert and Kent (2019) provided a slightly different take on how Young Adult Literature can be used with teenage students; they claimed that literature, not just a lens through which students can learn empathy for others, can be therapeutic to students themselves. Theory of mind states that reading literature and witnessing characters can help individuals understand and relate with the struggles of social performance and identity that we all battle (Nikolajeva, 2019). Theory of mind explores how readers are impacted by the emotional attachments they form to fictional characters and how those attachments then impact their relationships in real life.

When students can identify with a character in a book, they may use the experience of reading –facilitated by a teacher– to feel validated in their own adolescent growing pains and to help deal with their own emotional concerns (Nikolajeva, 2019). To this end, English teachers may use books to nurture healthy social and emotional development (Hebert & Kent, 2019). Using books with this approach may not feel like the phony and tacked-on SEL lessons that Sawchuk (2021) warned about. Indeed, students may not even recognize these discussions and reflections around books as SEL because of the potential for authentic learning.

In addition to reading books and the study of literature, other practices common in secondary ELA classrooms may also be successful in meeting SEL goals (CASEL, 2017). Two strategies integral to the ELA curriculum are reflective writing and discussion (Gallagher, 2015), and both may facilitate lessons in SEL (CASEL, 2017). Offering students chances to reflect on their own learning and growth “supports self-awareness and prioritizes students’ insights into their own strengths and challenges” (CASEL, 2022, p. 1). English Language Arts teachers can support students through reflective writing practices and assignments to “see connections between current tasks and personal goals and interests, [to] reflect on their personal aspirations,

goals, and objectives in writing assignments,” to “develop skills for focusing attention, managing stress and anxiety, [and to] develop empathy and perspective-taking in their thinking, reading, and writing processes” (CASEL, 2017, p.2). Similarly, discussion practices in ELA classrooms are connected to SEL goals because speaking, listening, and collaboration skills can meet the needs of both ELA curriculum and SEL goals. Group sharing in ELA classrooms can encourage active listening, encourage empathy, and facilitate deeper learning (Minero, 2017). All five goals of the “CASEL Five,” which include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making could potentially be taught in Secondary ELA classrooms.

Summary

Adolescents are struggling with mental health at increasing rates (Abramson, 2022; CDC, 2019; Chatterjee, 2022; Turner & Xian, 2022; WHO, 2020). Schools are now acknowledging and addressing the fact that addressing students’ psychological, social, and emotional needs can aid in student success overall (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020). However, research showed multiple struggles and challenges as schools pivot to meet students where they are, and work to gain support from all stakeholders in education to make necessary changes (Prothero, 2020; Walker, 2018). Whereas some SEL programs have shown effectiveness in younger children, high school students may see SEL lessons as forced or disconnected to their learning, and therefore limit impact (Sawchuk, 2020). The lens of constructivism, serving as the theoretical framework for this study, informed how students can learn SEL skills in their ELA classrooms, as well as how ELA teachers can assimilate SEL lessons into their already established curriculums. Incorporating SEL at the high school level could be integrated authentically into a student’s school experience or embedded in academic courses to best meet

the complex needs of adolescents (Hamedani & Darling 2015; Sawchuk, 2021; Yeager, 2017).

The following chapter will discuss the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The problem to be explored in this study was the rise of adolescents' mental health concerns (Center for Disease Control [CDC]; 2019) and the role of secondary schools in attempting to address these concerns. To best meet adolescent students' needs, secondary schools are seeking effective opportunities to embed social and emotional learning (SEL) authentically into their students' school experiences (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Shafer, 2016; Yeager, 2017). Kindergarten through 12th grade schools nationwide are responsible for actively including SEL in their curriculum and programming (Abramson, 2020; Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018). However, because of the developmental stages of adolescents, secondary schools have an even more unique opportunity to impact their students' attitudes on social and emotional health, and to improve school culture, thereby positively impacting the mental health of their students, if programming is done effectively (Nikolajeva, 2019; Sawchuk, 2021; Turner & Xian, 2022). Secondary schools must be innovative in finding ways for students to engage with SEL while supporting teachers who may feel uncomfortable with these expectations (Prothero, 2020; Yeager, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals. The five SEL goals identified by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020). Research showed that SEL lessons are most effective when connected to authentic learning and embedded into existing curriculum with trusted teachers, rather than used in stand-alone or pull-out programs (Sawchuk, 2021; Srinivasan, 2019). Therefore, this researcher was interested in ways

that schools can achieve SEL goals using existing curriculum, allowing teachers to capitalize on their strengths and expertise in their subject matter as a starting point to build in SEL.

Specifically, the study of literature and use of reflection and discussion common in English curricula may lead to opportunities for secondary English teachers to meet SEL goals, such as improving empathy for self and peers and reducing social stigmas around mental illness (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019). This research explored the perceptions of secondary English teachers in three counties in the state of Maine about how teaching their ELA curriculum may or may not meet goals of SEL. The research question, which aligned with the problem and purpose, was designed to gain a holistic understanding of participants' perceptions of developing and implementing a secondary ELA curriculum in their classrooms during a time when secondary schools are trying to address the rising rates of adolescent mental health concerns and meeting SEL goals (Abramson, 2020; CDC, 2019; Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018).

The following research question was answered:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers on how they may implement social and emotional learning goals in their ELA curriculum?

This study was qualitative so that this researcher could gather, through semi-structured interviews, relevant data while being open to the differing experiences of participants and their approaches to embedding SEL, whether deliberate or not. Qualitative interviews allowed this researcher to become “immersed in the world of others in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of phenomenon or experience” (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019, p. 42). They stated that the methodology and the theoretical approaches must be in alignment such that they both support the interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the collected data. In the case of this study,

the approach was aligned with the conceptual framework and identified theoretical framework of constructivism because participants were asked to reflect on how their curriculum, of which they are an experienced practitioner, aligned with concepts of SEL, which may have been a newer concept to them. In this chapter, this researcher will present the methodology used for this study, including the research design, site information and demographics, methods of data collection and analysis, limitations, ethical issues, and elements of trustworthiness of the study.

Site Information and Demographics/ Setting

This research study took place within four public secondary schools in Penobscot, Cumberland, and York counties, in Maine. According to the Maine Department of Education, there are 14 public high schools in Penobscot County, 17 public high schools in Cumberland County, and eight public high schools in York County. English Language Arts teachers from any of the Penobscot County public secondary schools were eligible for the study, except for Bangor High School, where this researcher has taught for 23 years, and Hampden Academy, where her family members attended. English Language Arts teachers from any of the Cumberland and York counties public secondary schools were eligible for the study. The Maine Department of Education outlines standards and curricular expectations for all school levels in each of eight content areas (Content Standards | Department of Education., n.d.). but this study focused on the curriculum in secondary schools only, referred to as grades “9 through Diploma” (Content Standards | Department of Education., n.d.). The academic standards are known as the Maine Learning Results and include a breakdown of performance expectations for every content. Since they were adopted in 2011 and implemented in 2013, public secondary schools, defined as grades 9 through 12, create their academic curriculum around these standards (Content Standards | Department of Education., n.d.).

The Maine Department of Education added the CASEL framework in 2021 as a set of guidelines to address how Kindergarten through 12 Maine schools incorporate SEL into the secondary curriculum. The CASEL framework provides Maine educators with guidance on how to support student social and emotional health (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.), but rather than existing as its own standard, CASEL sits under the umbrella of Career and Life Development standard. The Maine Department of Education does not have a prescribed curriculum for SEL but uses the CASEL framework to guide instruction (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.) and schools may interpret the standards and the framework on their own. Because SEL is most successful when embedded into pre-existing curriculum (Srinivasan, 2019), CASEL offers a set of standards and guidelines rather than instruction or assessment.

Participants and Sampling

Because this researcher lived and worked in the state of Maine, participants for this research study were English teachers at secondary public schools in Maine, as this researcher was already familiar with curricular and SEL expectations in this state. As long as they had at least five years of teaching experience, participants from any of the Penobscot, Cumberland, or York County public high schools, with the exception of two high schools where this researcher had conflicts of interest, were eligible for this study. The potential candidates for this study met the following criteria:

1. public secondary teacher in Penobscot, Cumberland or York counties in Maine
2. currently taught Secondary English Language Arts (grades 9 through Diploma) in a public school
3. had taught Secondary English Language Arts in Maine for at least five years

4. was not employed by Bangor High School where this researcher was employed, or Hampden Academy, where this researcher's relatives attended.

To avoid conflict of interest, participants interviewed did not work with this researcher, nor have any affiliation to her. The five-year minimum teaching experience was included as a criterion to ensure each teacher interviewed had been present in a school long enough to experience potential changes to teacher expectations based on SEL programming in Maine. Because of the recent push in schools to include SEL content for students, it was important to collect data from participants who were familiar with SEL goals and had been present in their school when SEL goals were discussed. The Maine Department of Education did not identify the CASEL framework, which outlines SEL goals, until 2021. This means that before 2021, there were no formal guidelines in place to address how Kindergarten through 12 Maine schools should incorporate SEL into the secondary curriculum, and it was important for this study for participants interviewed to have taught before that implementation of SEL was formalized. The five year minimum requirement would allow participants to potentially reflect on whether they taught differently before and after the CASEL framework was introduced to the state standards. Similarly, a teacher with fewer than five years of teaching would not have the breadth of experience to draw from when reflecting on how their curriculum may naturally align with SEL goals, nor have enough familiarity with SEL. Therefore, choosing participants who all work in the same state of Maine, and who have taught secondary English for at least five years, created a purposeful sample, and this selection was “grounded in the value of information-rich cases and emergent, in-depth understanding not available through random sampling” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 186). This researcher created a master list of all participants which was destroyed after member checking was completed.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Potential candidates were identified using a recruitment letter (Appendix A) which was sent via email to secondary English teachers at Penobscot, Cumberland, or York County public high schools around the state, using email addresses that were posted on the websites for public school districts in Maine. The recruitment letter requested that interested participants contact this researcher via email to set up a time for a scheduled interview. The recruitment process began with an initial email sent to the superintendents (Appendix A) of each district. Once permission was granted from superintendents and University of New England's (UNE) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B) and UNE's IRB amendment approval to include York County (Appendix B), emails were sent to principals and then individual English teachers at Penobscot, Cumberland or York County public high schools in Maine, and the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) was attached to the email. The emails were sent again one week later when fewer than six teachers had responded. Once participants responded, possible times to schedule the interview were offered. The recruitment process was open until this researcher had collected six potential participants who met the criteria identified above. As participants responded and were chosen, on a first-come, first-serve basis, this researcher used a master list of eligible participants with identifiable information during the recruitment process, including name of the participant and their email. This master list was destroyed after member checking was complete.

Participants were sent a secure link for the Zoom® interview. Interviews with participants were conducted and recorded via Zoom®, a video conferencing tool (Zoom® Video Communications, 2022). This researcher had her camera on during the interview, and was in a secure location, but participants had the right to turn their cameras off. The interviews were recorded using the recording feature on Zoom®. At the start of each interview, this researcher

first reviewed the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C). The interviews were semi structured allowing for some flexible wording and a mix of structured and unstructured follow-up questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interview questions (Appendix D) stemmed from the research question and were connected to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that shaped this study. Participants had the right to skip or not answer any of the questions. Identifiable information about each participant was removed from the transcription and the data. If any students' names were mentioned in the interviews, pseudonyms were used in place of all names in the transcript. After transcription and verification of each transcript, pseudonyms of participants only were used, and the master list was destroyed. All other data will be destroyed three years after concluding this study.

Data Analysis

Each interview was completed on Zoom® and recorded, transcribed manually, and then reviewed by this researcher to ensure validity and correctness. Transcriptions were checked by listening to the recording while reading them, a best practice recommended by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019). Participants had seven calendar days to review the transcribed interview to account for any mistakes or miscommunications. Participants understood that if this researcher did not hear back from participants on calendar day eight, then the transcript was taken as accurate, and coding would commence. After verification, the following five-step process from Creswell and Poth (2018) was used to analyze the interviews:

1. prepared and organized the data for analysis.
2. reviewed the data and identified emerging concepts.
3. determined codes and then searched for themes.
4. developed interpretation of themes.

5. represented the data through description and narrative.

Coding refers to the process of identifying different segments of the data that are of interest or significance, and then labeling them to organize the data by theme (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). First, coding was done manually by this researcher; transcripts of each interview were analyzed for significant ideas using a combination of descriptive coding, which “summarize the primary topic of the excerpt” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 3). In vivo coding, meaning that the codes were taken directly from the transcript, were done with all six transcripts. Codes were then examined for interesting and significant themes that emerged across all the interviews, and themes were recorded.

Limitations and Delimitations, Ethical Issues

Limitations in any study may weaken the outcomes of the study, and qualitative research studies can contain subjectivities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Limitations are inherent to all research studies, no matter how well the researcher designs and implements the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Delimitations “refer to the initial choices made about the broader, overall design” of the study, and “arise from specific and intentional choices made by the researcher” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 207). Delimitations can clarify boundaries of the study and provide explanations for characteristics that define the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Ethical considerations must be taken at all stages of the research, including data gathering, analysis, and writing of the study, and include issues such as “informed consent and anonymity” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 185).

Limitations

Limitations can include inadequate measures of variables, small sample sizes, and enumerating them can help readers “judge to what extent the findings can or cannot be

generalized to other people and situations” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 200). In this study, possible limitations included presence of the researcher in the interview process, which could inhibit the answers of some of the participants who perceive bias from the interviewer. Because this researcher is also a secondary ELA teacher, participants may feel insecure about possibly revealing lack of familiarity with ELA content, strategies, or SEL goals in case it reveals gaps in knowledge. To account for this bias, this researcher did not discuss her personal experiences with teaching and allowed the participants to share their own experience without comment. Another possible limitation was focusing on only public-school teachers from three counties in the state of Maine rather than interviewing participants from other types of schools or other states. Furthermore, using a small sample size of only six participants may mean that the sample size was not representative (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) of all secondary ELA teachers, and those who responded to participate in the study may have had stronger opinions about the role of ELA curriculum in meeting SEL goals. While there was a possibility to measure ELA teachers’ curriculum with quantitative measures, this researcher decided to use the qualitative approach to better understand the nuances of participants’ experiences and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) about how their curricula can align with the goals of SEL.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to “initial choices made about the broader, overall design” of the study that may reveal and define the boundaries of the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 207). This study showed some delimitations because it focused on public schools only to look at the relationship between the secondary ELA curriculum and SEL, both with criteria outlined from the Maine Department of Education. This study also only used participants who taught ELA to look at characteristics of that content area and explore how they may naturally align with

goals of SEL. Therefore, the nature of this study may only inform ELA teachers, and not secondary schools as a whole.

Ethical Issues

There are basic ethical principles that have been identified for behavioral research that involves human subjects. Ethical issues explored in this study included the three main tenets of the National Research Act (1974). The three tenets are outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The three main principles of that law are: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for Persons

For this study, the relevant aspect of respect for persons was the conviction that “individuals should be treated as autonomous agents” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 4). All participation in the study was voluntary. All participants were presented with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C). Before this researcher began each interview, she reviewed the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) with all participants and reminded them that their interview was voluntary and could be ended at any time, which gave each participant autonomy over their involvement in the research.

Beneficence

The Belmont Report also elaborates on the principle of beneficence, the conviction that “persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979, p. 5). This study was designed to have minimal risks to participants. The semi-structured interview process

was designed to invite participants to reflect on their curriculum while keeping questions open ended to allow for personal reflection in an unthreatening manner. While there was a slight risk that reflecting on curriculum and a school's approach to integrating SEL goals could create emotional stress in the participants, this study was designed to minimize any risk in this area.

Justice

The third principle outlined in the Belmont Report is justice, which looks closely at the question of "Who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens?" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 5). The benefits of this research were potentially for the teachers, students, and overall schools that will learn about the possible effectiveness of using the ELA Curriculum to meet SEL goals. Due to steps taken in this study, the burdens were minimal. All participants in this study received the same recruitment letter via email, were given the same amount of time to respond to the email, were asked the same interview questions, and were given the same opportunity to review their transcript. Each participant was treated equally and fairly to maintain the principle of justice in this study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a way to reassure the reader that a study has significance and value (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study acknowledged the needs of secondary schools to address the rise of mental health concerns and explores how SEL may occur in ELA curriculum. Readers of this study will have a broader understanding of the challenges facing adolescent students and the secondary schools they attend. They will also be offered insight into how the ELA curriculum may align with schools' goals around SEL.

Credibility

Credibility is described as the way a researcher can check to be sure that the participants in the study believe their responses and the researcher's analysis are in alignment (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Credibility checks to be sure that the researcher "accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 202). The participants in this study received an email from this researcher with a copy of the transcript after their interview. Participants then had seven calendar days to review and verify their transcripts for accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability is like "external validity" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 204) in quantitative research, but in qualitative research, has more to do with how clear the researcher has been about whether the data collected from participants will "fit or match" (p. 204) in other contexts. In the case of this study, for example, readers will want to understand whether the responses from participants in Maine about SEL in their schools is transferable to other settings and communities. The rise in mental health concerns is a national issue throughout the US (CDC, 2019). Therefore, respondents from the state of Maine may offer insight into how all secondary educators were working to promote SEL in their secondary schools.

Dependability

Dependability is defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) as how stable and consistent the data is over time, and how clearly the data is connected to the intended research question. This study used semi-structured interviews following the same interview protocol for each participant, such that the study could be duplicated in the future. The interview questions stemmed directly from the problem and purpose of this study. Interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and checked for validity by each participant.

Confirmability

Confirmability acknowledges that qualitative research is not objective in nature. The researcher is expected to trace all data back to its origins and “demonstrate how conclusions have been reached” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 204). In this study, this researcher kept careful field notes from each interview reflecting on participants’ body language and non-verbal cues when answering questions. This researcher also kept transcripts of each interview which were verified for accuracy by each participant.

Summary

This qualitative study sought to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers’ perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals. The chosen site for this study was three counties in the state of Maine, and the participants were secondary English teachers who had taught for at least five years. The research question was designed and a qualitative semi-structured interview method was determined to gain a holistic understanding of participants’ perceptions of how their curriculum could be used during a time when secondary schools are trying to address the rising rates of adolescent mental health concerns (Abramson, 2020; CDC, 2019; Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018). Participants for this study were recruited, with permission from district superintendents, via email, and then interviewed on Zoom®. Transcripts of each interview were analyzed for significant ideas using a combination of descriptive coding and in vivo coding. Possible limitations of this study included presence of this researcher in the interview process and a focus on only public-school teachers. In addition, possible delimitations included a small sample size using only participants who teach ELA. Care was taken in this study to address ethical issues, such as ensuring that participation was voluntary, and all interviews could have been ended at

any time by the participant; the semi-structured interview process was designed to allow for personal reflection by the participants in a low-stress interview format. All participants in this study were treated fairly and equally with consistency in measures such as recruitment, interview questions, and time to review transcriptions. This study was designed with attention to trustworthiness, providing significance and value for schools, educators, and students in the future. The following chapter will present the results and findings of this proposed study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative research study examined secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning (SEL) goals. Six secondary ELA teachers from three counties in the state of Maine participated in the study. The research design used for this study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore and discuss participants' perceptions about how ELA curriculum could be used to meet SEL goals. The qualitative approach to this research study was designed to examine the participants' perceptions and experiences embedding SEL goals into their ELA curriculum, whether deliberate or not.

Analysis Method

Interviews with six participants were completed over Zoom® and the transcripts were created manually by this researcher following each interview. Before beginning each interview, verbal consent of agreement to the details of the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) was obtained for each participant. The interview protocol (Appendix D) was used to solicit an open-ended conversation about each participant's perceptions on how their ELA curriculum may be used to meet the goals of SEL. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on how aspects of their ELA curriculum may meet different goals of SEL. Follow-up questions were used when an answer felt incomplete by this researcher or needed further clarification or explanation. The interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 40 minutes long. All six participants chose to keep their cameras turned on during the Zoom® interview.

Once the transcripts were completed, this researcher listened to the recordings one more time while reading along with the transcript to ensure each line was transcribed correctly. When that process was complete, the transcripts were emailed to the participants who were given seven

calendar days to verify the transcripts. In all six cases, transcripts were verified via a returned email from the participant saying that the transcript was correct. Next, this researcher coded one transcript at a time using Microsoft Word. Coding means identifying segments of the interviews that were of interest or significance to the research topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). First, the transcripts were read several times by this researcher to determine the emerging key words and ideas that were present. Then, codes were labeled in the margins of each transcript (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Two different types of coding were used for this process, both descriptive coding, which relies on summarizing the topic of the excerpt, and in vivo coding, which relies on words taken directly from the transcript (Saldaña, 2016). About 25 codes were identified and written in the margins of the transcripts. After some key words or phrases were eliminated due to redundancy, 18 remaining codes were then written individually onto small pieces of paper, and then this researcher sorted them into groups of similar topics, approximately five codes per group. From those piles, four major groups of codes emerged that were then labeled as themes, all of which synthesized with the themes that had emerged in the literature review and this study's conceptual framework.

Dependability was established by following the same semi-structured interview process and using the same interview questions (Appendix D) for each participant. Confirmability and credibility were both established when the transcripts were verified for accuracy by each participant. Because the rise in mental health needs in adolescents (CDC, 2019) impacts the whole country, these participants from Maine were able to offer insights into how educators across the country may find that the ELA curriculum can be used to reach SEL goals, thereby establishing transferability in the study. The next section will discuss the results and findings of the interviews.

Presentation of Results and Findings

The interviews for this study were completed in May 2023 with six secondary English teachers from three counties in the state of Maine, using a semi-structured format. All participants met the qualifications listed on the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and came from four unique secondary schools in the state of Maine. Each participant had taught ELA at the public secondary level for at least five years, but five out of the six participants had taught for at least 16 years. All six participants obtained advanced degrees. One of the participants identified as male and the other five as female. The following section will discuss background details of the six participants interviewed for this study.

Background Information

The first four questions of the interview protocol (Appendix D) asked participants about their teaching and education background. These questions covered how long participants have been at their current teaching job, how long they have been teaching ELA, and to identify their highest level of education. This information provides background about the teaching experience of each participant. Pseudonyms were designated to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant and mentions of the schools or counties where they teach were removed.

Tom

Tom was a veteran secondary ELA teacher with 16 years of teaching experience, all at his current employer. He taught advanced placement (AP) psychology to juniors and seniors, as well as several English courses, and said, “I teach English 4, so seniors, 17 through 18 years old. And this year I started an AP Language course that is for 16 through 17-year-olds.” He had an educational specialist degree (EdS) and was working towards his doctorate in education.

Sarah

Sarah taught secondary ELA for five years, and four of those were at the one high school. She taught honors English and academic English to sophomores. She added “I also teach a semester long journalism course and a semester long creative writing course, and those are mixed-level courses.” At Sarah’s school, “academic” referred to courses for regular education students who are not designated as “honors.” At the time of her interview, Sarah was one course away from earning a master’s degree in education.

Carrie

Carrie was a veteran secondary ELA teacher who had been teaching for 18 years, all at her current employer. Carrie taught two AP seminar courses, but she also taught in a program called “Pathways” which she explained “is a non-special education alternative education program,” and in this program she taught ELA to 9th through 12th grade students. Her experiences teaching ELA in the “Pathways” program informed her answers to the interview questions. At the time of her interview, Carrie had one master’s degree and was working on her second.

Dana

Dana had been teaching secondary ELA for 16 years, and all but one of them at her current employer. She taught two concurrent enrollment ELA courses that were a mix of juniors and seniors, one section of honors junior English, and two sections of regular junior English. Dana added that she taught five classes, and explained, “Normally we have six but one of my periods is set aside for some gifted and talented (GT) work and to help get our humanities diploma off the ground.” At the time of her interview, Dana had a master’s degree in education and was pursuing an education specialist degree (EdS).

Delaney

Delaney had been teaching secondary ELA for seventeen years and had been at her current employer for the past four years. She taught four sections of sophomore English, one of which was Honors and three were college prep. Delaney explained that the college prep sections “move a little bit more slowly and have more scaffolding than the honors course.” She also taught one section of honors senior English. Delaney had a master’s degree in education.

Rachel

Rachel was the most veteran of the participants this researcher interviewed and had been teaching secondary ELA for 24 years. Twenty-one of those years were at her current employer. Rachel described her teaching assignment as “I teach two sections of AP language and composition, and that is to juniors, so 16 through 17-year-olds” and “two sections of senior concurrent literature and they are 17 through 18 years old.” Rachel had a master’s degree in education. This section discussed this study’s participants background information. The next section will discuss how the first theme, which is how each participant understood the role of SEL in schools.

Theme 1: Participants’ Understanding of Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

The first theme that emerged from coding the data centered around the participants' understanding of SEL and how the participants acquired that understanding. The responses were mostly generated from interview questions 5, 6, and 7 of the interview protocol (Appendix D), that asked about the participants’ familiarity with the term “SEL,” how they would describe SEL, and what professional development they may have received addressing SEL. Each of the six participants discussed their familiarity with SEL and how their understanding of SEL grew from

professional development provided by their school or district, or whether their understandings of SEL came from other sources. The first subtheme discusses how each participant defined SEL.

Defining Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning is defined as educational programming which teaches students - through direct instruction, learning experiences, or teacher modeling - to develop healthy attitudes, manage their emotions, create empathy, and foster supportive relationships (CASEL, 2020). All six participants had some familiarity with SEL and could offer a working definition of it. While their definitions varied in scope, all participants understood that SEL focuses on parts of the student that are separate from academic skills and involve serving the emotional health of the student or monitoring a sense of balance in students. Rachel and Delaney both spoke most directly about how SEL focuses on skills that are separate from academics but can still impact it. Rachel defined SEL as:

Making sure the external and internal factors of a student are able to learn in the classroom, so instead of just taking into consideration what they know about the subject, you're also taking into consideration their physical and mental health and wellness.

Delaney described SEL as “an acknowledgement of the importance of a student’s mental health and emotional wellbeing as they are in the classroom acting as a learner... so just an acknowledgement that students’ experiences at school are not purely academic.” Tom described SEL as a way “to help students to deal with emotional and social issues in school” and “with peers” and “with their own mental health.” Sarah added that SEL is “social and emotional skill building, like how to manage feelings...and how to handle social situations.”

Carrie’s definition was the most nuanced, as she divided her understanding of SEL into four ideas. Carrie explained the first idea was that “there is an equity lens, so social and

emotional learning plays into how well students can access their education.” Carrie’s second idea was that SEL has a “mental health lens” and the need for a “trauma-informed perspective so that we can help our students feel safe enough to take risks to learn and stretch and grow.” Carrie’s third idea identified the “critical thinking and problem-solving, and an awareness of resources that are available to [students],” and her fourth idea explained that “maybe some mindfulness” was included in her definition of SEL. Dana’s definition was more simple but also accurate, that SEL is “about teaching students how to be functional people in the world.” The next subtheme describes how the participants’ employers provided them professional development opportunities to address SEL.

Professional Development on Social and Emotional Learning

All six participants were asked in the interview whether their schools or districts provided training on SEL. Three participants, Delaney, Sarah, and Dana said they had no professional development on SEL that was provided by their employer. Instead, they got their understanding of SEL from outside sources, such as a national conference on education, in their internship year as a student teacher, in graduate school, or from personal readings. Delaney said, “I can’t think of any particular specific SEL training or professional development. I feel like my first exposure to the whole idea of SEL was in my internship year.” Sarah replied simply “No” and Dana replied “Not that I can think of” when asked if their schools provided training on SEL.

The other three participants explained that SEL programming was provided by their schools. Carrie and Tom both recalled that outside speakers came to their schools and gave presentations about SEL during professional development days. This training was provided by their schools; however, Carrie supplemented her understanding of SEL through yoga training in her own time, where she became an SEL facilitator. She said, “[the yoga training] was all geared

around the classroom and how to bring those skills [learning to help students feel safe in order to grow] into a classroom.” Rachel talked about how the discussions around SEL at her school had evolved over the years from focusing on “making your classroom atmosphere friendly and inviting” to “understanding what makes students feel safe.” For example, Rachel attended specific school trainings on Mental Health First Aid ® and suicide prevention through National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and said that her school was also offering recent trainings on “using space and proximity and language toward students and how to help students feel comfortable in your classroom and [to feel] engaged.” The next subtheme will discuss how some participants did not feel that their schools had adequately prepared them to address SEL in the classroom.

Feeling Unprepared to Address Social and Emotional Learning

Three of the six participants mentioned teachers feeling unprepared to address SEL or voiced a desire for more specific SEL training. Tom discussed the “weariness” felt by teachers during SEL training because “without being counselors,” teachers were not comfortable with how they could help students’ mental health and felt that they did not know “at what point [students] need to be turned over to the next professional.” Delaney said that she learned about SEL “the hard way” rather than through specific school training, which to her meant she learned “by making mistakes with students, and then thinking... ‘I wish I knew that about that student before I did x, y, or z.’” Sarah, who received most of her knowledge of SEL through her graduate program, voiced concern that she needed more training to feel qualified to address SEL: “As far as PD [professional development] in my current job, I would say it’s not SEL-focused. I would appreciate more SEL.” Specifically, she wanted “case studies” that show “on a ground level, what people have done, what’s effective, what’s not, what’s appropriate, what’s not.” This theme

dealt with how prepared participants felt in addressing SEL in their classrooms. The next theme looks at what these participants are doing in their curriculum that may be perceived as meeting SEL goals.

Theme 2: How Participants Address Social and Emotional Health of Students

The second theme that emerged from coding the data was the multitude of ways these participants perceived their ability to address their students' social and emotional health, and the answers came from questions 7 through 11 in the interview protocol (Appendix D). These answers were not directly connected to the teaching of ELA specifically. Instead, they represented teaching strategies and approaches that the participants employed in order to meet their students' social and emotional needs. Participants demonstrated the variety of ways that SEL was either deliberately or indirectly addressed in their secondary classrooms. Some of these strategies were linked to academic goals or skills and some were separate, intended to foster healthy relationships or habits with students. While the participants did not always label these approaches as SEL, they met many of the goals of SEL set forth by the CASEL-framework. Those goals are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020). The first subtheme discusses techniques the participants used to create a positive classroom environment for their students.

Creating a Positive Classroom Climate

Jones and Kahn (2017) showed the positive connection between students feeling emotionally safe at school and effective learning. A positive classroom environment can be linked to all five of the CASEL goals, because it offers students a safe and nurturing place to explore all aspects of their social and emotional growth. Four of the participants mentioned a variety of strategies they had employed in order to help students feel safe and supported. Rachel

spoke about an initiative in her school to focus on classroom climate exclusively for the first two days of school. She explained “The first days of school are all SEL team-building days, and so you go to all of your classes, but you don’t do any academics.” The purpose of this initiative, Rachel explained, was to allow students to feel seen and heard:

The first day I’m not going to hand you what we’re going to do for the year. I’m going to find out who you are, what your name is, what you like, what you might struggle with that I should know.

Another commonality some participants shared was an acknowledgement that to get to academic work, time must be spent on non-academic pursuits. For example, Tom spoke about the importance of giving students time to clear their minds before they could move on to their English assignments. He said, “I let them vent, which I don’t think they always get a chance to do. If I notice a dynamic at the beginning of class when they’re upset about something in the school, we have a vent session.” Tom noticed that this time alleviated built-up stress among the students. Tom also said that listening to and having conversations with his students was important because “they are not going to learn unless they feel connected.” Sarah added a different strategy for the same purpose, “I recently brought in some non-hardening play-dough and we did some activities to sort of loosen up before we write.” While Sarah acknowledged this was unconnected to her curriculum, she said, “it’s something that I bring into the classroom because it seems to help students get into their bodies and be able to write.”

Two participants spoke specifically about the importance of creating trust and comfort among the students in the class and described spending time fostering that climate of cooperation, especially at the start of the school year. Sarah talked about the power of sharing, and said that after a free write, she would say, “I want to hear from three people, if you’re

comfortable, [to] share one thing. And we often get a map on the board of what people are thinking and feeling.” Specifically, at the beginning of the school year, Sarah got her students to write about seasonal changes and how they affect people’s mental health. She used this as a tool for building classroom climate. “That is the time of year when we’re really getting to know each other and to build that trust in the classroom. I think it’s nice for them to see what their peers are thinking.” Carrie also started the year with an activity designed to create a positive classroom climate. She shared, “We do a ‘body-bio’ kind of illustration project at the beginning of the year, so students can start to start to think of themselves in symbols.” Body-bios are an activity where students draw and label parts of themselves (or a literary character) using symbols or metaphors, such as labeling the spine with the person’s values, or the heart with a list of key relationships. In Carrie’s classroom, body bios allowed students to introduce themselves with a visual poster and helped the students get to know each other. Carrie also completed a series of prompts for students to respond to which led to a class-bonding activity. She described the exercise where students chose statements they related to, such as, “‘I have anxiety to the point where I have missed out on doing things with friends or family.’ or ‘I or someone close to me has bullied someone else.’” Carrie explained that “each [prompt] comes with [its] own color, so the kids went in, and if a prompt spoke to them, they collected the color.” The students then sat together and put the colors in the middle of the circle to demonstrate all the ways the students were similar. Put together, participants employed many strategies aimed at giving students a classroom space to feel safe to learn and be themselves. The next subtheme explains the ways participants created relationships and connected peers in their classrooms.

Creating Relationships with Peers through Collaboration

The idea of teaching students how to work with other people also emerged from coding the data. Fostering close peer relationships through bonding activities or opportunities for collaboration connects to two of the five CASEL goals: social-awareness and relationship skills. Four of the participants shared specific ways that they worked toward helping students build relationships with their peers in their classrooms. Carrie fostered close relationships with peers through team building activities throughout the year and followed those team building exercises up with a debriefing afterwards. She explained that the debriefing gave students “an opportunity to compliment and be complimented, and get and give feedback, which is a really important part of a relationship.”

For the other three participants, their focus on peer relations came through different strategies around classroom discussions. Delaney explained how book discussions worked in her classroom:

[Students] were put into book groups where for each class they had a certain role to fulfill. And they had to do the scheduling themselves and they had to decide who was going to do what, and they had to run the book discussions and decide who was going to take notes.

Delaney observed that this allowed a framework for students to work productively together. Sarah offered, “Anytime students are talking to each other or having an intentional think-pair-share... they really have to be respectful listeners.” Sarah also used student discussions to teach listening skills and said, “it’s about how we are listening to each other and responding in an aware way that shows we care about what the other person is saying.” In Dana’s classroom, discussion was a large focus of classroom time, and she explained the importance of creating a

means for students to talk, even when they disagreed, “I also think it’s very important for [students] to have the experience of not agreeing with someone in a discussion.” Dana went on to say that:

I let them argue a little longer than I should, but I just think it's so important for them to realize that your judgment of someone or your relationship with someone doesn't have to be based only on disagreements. There is a way to talk to people when you don't agree, and to communicate effectively.

The next subtheme explains strategies that participants used to make conversations around mental health feel more normal and comfortable for students.

Normalizing Conversations about Mental Health

While the above strategies are arguably connected to supporting overall social and emotional health of students, three participants also spoke about the importance of directly normalizing mental health in their classrooms, which is supported by Srinivasan’s (2019) research. These strategies support the goal of self-awareness from the CASEL framework but could also connect to social-awareness and relationship skills. When asked how the participants address anxiety and stress in their students, Dana answered:

[Anxiety and stress] is something we talk about because I’m very open with my students about my own struggles, and I tell them this on the first day: ‘If I come in and I’m having a bad day, I’m going to tell you that I’m having a bad day so that you can know that my responses to you are not personal.’

Dana also added, “I think there is a lot of power in them understanding that what is perceived as a successful, educated, functioning adult” sometimes struggles with anxiety and depression.

Similarly, Carrie also deliberately addressed anxiety in her classrooms so that students could feel

validated and supported. She said, “We try to normalize emotions, we try to normalize anxiety.” She went on to add:

My population [of students] is pretty unique in that most of them struggle with [anxiety], so they’re a little bit more open about it, but I do try to teach some strategies that kids can use that have no props, just so they can help themselves get through the day.

Lastly, Sarah noted that she took time in her classes for a “quick emotional check in” with each of her students at the start of class, and how making time for that increased her rapport with her students. The next subtheme lists some of the ways that participants helped students cope with anxiety in their classrooms.

Teaching Strategies for Coping with Anxiety

Srinivasan (2019) cited important research making the link between teaching teenagers self-reflection and de-stressing strategies as a means toward improved learning. Beyond acknowledging that many people struggle with mental illness, several of the participants went one step further and directly taught strategies for coping with mental health struggles. Tom noticed higher levels of stress in his students, especially toward the end of the school year. He found that students showed higher anxiety about leaving school and graduating and said, “There is very low excitement and very high anxiety.” He described conversations with his students about how to deal with stress. The kids call it “adulting... so I’ve kind of latched onto that because they understand it.” Tom also regularly discussed with his students “how you are currently dealing with stress and anxiety, and how do you plan on dealing with that later in life?”

Carrie also spoke about strategies she used in her classroom to help students deal with stress and anxiety, even though she acknowledged that the strategies were not all connected to academics. She said:

I teach breathing techniques, we've made glitter jars, I teach finger holds and how to regulate body emotions through that. We have a little Zen area in the classroom that students can access, but they have to be able to articulate what they are feeling, so we work with language and what to say.

Rachel described her students as a particularly anxious group, and so she added many de-stressing elements to her classroom to bring out the best in her students. She found that offering toys or fidgets gave them a distraction when they were discussing hard material. She said, "As silly as it seems for these high achieving students, a lot of times they are playing with dinosaurs while we are working." To keep her students engaged, Rachel encouraged her students to close their screens during discussions:

A lot of times they want to hide in their screens or something because it's easy to be a little invisible there, but we shut our screens and a lot of times if we are talking about something or doing something that is hard or that might make them anxious, I find that just having stress balls or Legos or dinosaurs or something that is a little bit of a distraction helps them to do that more easily.

Rachel also used the assignments in her courses to help students manage the stress of tackling larger tasks without becoming overwhelmed. She said:

Sometimes the bigness, or the enormity of the task, like writing a big essay is difficult for them. And I think the SEL part, building that bridge between boosting their morale that they can do it, and letting them actually be successful at it, is really important.

It was important for Rachel to discuss the workload and the potential sense of overwhelm that comes with it to help students succeed. These participants took time away from their academic curriculums to help students understand, discuss, and cope with their mental health

concerns. While this theme looked at teaching strategies the participants used to address SEL, the next theme looks more specifically at aspects of the ELA curriculum that allowed them to meet SEL goals.

Theme 3: Using English Language Arts Curriculum to meet Social and Emotional Learning Goals

The third and most prominent theme that emerged from coding the data constituted the focus of this research, which is how the ELA curriculum, specifically, can be used to meet SEL goals. All six participants shared a variety of activities, exercises, classroom approaches, texts, discussion prompts, and uses for reflective writing that connected to goals of SEL. Some of the content of these answers was derived from curriculum that was consistent across the English department at each school, and other content came from individually created lessons by the participants. Some of the lessons were deliberately intended to meet SEL goals, while other connections between ELA and SEL only occurred to the participants when these questions were asked in the interviews. The first subtheme looks at how participants found books and characters as a tool for teaching empathy to their students.

Using Books and Characters to Foster Empathy

Research has established that “Fictional stories are simulations, capable of helping us to develop empathy with literary characters” (Richmond, 2014, p. 19). The concept of empathy for self and others came up in multiple ways across multiple questions in the interviews with participants and can be linked to the SEL goals of self-awareness and social-awareness (CASEL, 2020). All six participants spoke specifically about how books they taught in their curriculum fostered empathy in their students for self and others. Several of the participants spoke about how empathy is tied into texts chosen or even the overall theme of a curricular unit. Rachel said

that in her world literature course, “we do look at empathy as the thread that goes through our whole year.” Carrie said that “just about every book in the ELA curriculum” can be used to promote empathy. She also specifically used *To Kill a Mockingbird* and prompts that went with it to discuss empathy and added “[empathy] is always there” in her curriculum. Similarly, Sarah said that the concept of empathy is “really baked into [her ELA] curriculum. Every book is another experience that they likely haven’t had.”

Delaney said that the entire unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her department is centered around empathy. She explained that students:

Write an essay about how Scout and Jem through the book develop empathy through their experiences with characters like Boo Radley and Mrs. Dubose, and how Atticus encourages the kids to develop empathy with that classic quote about putting yourself into someone else’s shoes.

Delaney also spoke about the unit she taught on the book *Just Mercy*, and how the main character Walter McMillan gave students a chance to gain some empathy around a situation they have likely not been exposed to. “We talk about Walter McMillan experiencing trauma and depression from being on death row for six years, and the PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] that he experienced when he was finally freed.”

Tom spoke about using *Hamlet* as a tool to talk about decision making and stress, and that it became a tool to facilitate empathy for someone who had lost a parent. Sarah spoke about teaching *Persepolis* and how that increased student empathy toward those experiencing trauma. She also used *The Book Thief* to increase understanding of “World War II, and to be someone who is pursued, and who doesn’t have enough to eat, sort of stepping into each of those experiences.” Lastly, she used *The Things They Carried* to raise empathy for soldiers in wartime,

and *The Crucible* to help her students think “about these young women and what they were experiencing” and to understand “the various causes for what happened to set up these Salem Witch trials... and to subsist in a very severe landscape and what that is like.” Dana spoke most strongly about the role of books in broadening students’ empathy for others or learning about different life experiences. She stated, “That is how I choose books,” meaning that she only chose books for her classes that would expand empathy in her students, because she wanted students to say of her classes, “I read this book about someone who is not the same as me.” Speaking specifically of teaching *The Kite Runner*, Dana said that while some teachers would not teach that text because it was so controversial and includes a rape scene, she insisted on teaching it so that students in her room who have been through something similar feel validated and seen. Dana also used the text *Of Mice and Men* to help students increase empathy for others. She said:

We talk a lot about how might the characters be feeling because...being able to talk about someone else’s struggle is really helpful for teenagers in terms of a) not feeling alone..., but also, b) oftentimes they can identify an emotion in a character that they can’t necessarily in themselves.

The next subtheme explores how participants were able to teach relationship skills through aspects of the books they taught.

Using Books to Foster Relationship Skills

Relationship skills is one of the five SEL goals outlined in the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2020). In the interviews for this study, all participants were asked if there were opportunities in their ELA curriculum to read, write, think, or talk about building or maintaining healthy relationships. Five of the six participants answered in the affirmative and gave multiple examples about how they did so. Carrie responded, “Yes, absolutely!” She spoke about using the

book *Night* to discuss the importance of parent-child relationships and romantic relationships in “some more contemporary books we teach like *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* and *Poet X*.” Tom answered that there were many texts in his curriculum that he chose simply because they gave him the opportunity to cover relationship skills with his students. Tom continued, “I try to [choose texts] that deal with parent-child relations, family relations, sibling relations, and peer relations.” He used *Romeo and Juliet* to talk about how to be in a healthy relationship:

Instead of just focusing on star-crossed lovers, let’s talk about how impetuous these guys are because they are young and they’re in love, and maybe they should have waited a little longer to get into a relationship.

Other texts in Tom’s curriculum allowed him to talk about healthy versus unhealthy relationships, and he added that students love to talk about this topic in his classroom. Another example Tom gave was “Death Cannot Wither,” a piece of folklore that he teaches, which is about infidelity. He described that this text led to rich conversations about trust and blame, and in the end, “we empathize with both characters.” Students loved to talk about “their relationship, and what was broken, and what was wrong about both” people in the relationship.

Sarah also referred to teaching specific texts that fostered discussion around relationship skills, such as *Persepolis* to talk about the main character Marji and her relationship with her parents, and the “expected teenage dynamics” that helped students to make a cross-cultural bridge between Iranian culture and their own. Sarah’s students also analyzed the dynamics of the stepmom Rosa from *The Book Thief* which led to rich discussions among Sarah’s students. Rachel used her work with *The Kite Runner* to approach relationship skills with her students. She began the unit with a conversation about “What does it mean to be a friend?” Students were asked to discuss the friendship of the two main characters, Amir and Hassan, and to look at how

their friendship changed over time due to incidents that happened in the book. Rachel used this relationship in the book they were reading as a parallel to relationships they have with peers in their own school. She explained:

In our town, a lot of students have been here since kindergarten and we're not a huge school, so even within our classroom there are people that used to be friends with each other and then for a variety of reasons aren't friends anymore.

Rachel was able to use the friendship in *The Kite Runner* to help students talk about and reflect on their own changed relationship with their peers. In a different school, Dana also used *The Kite Runner* to teach about relationship skills, noting that that text lent itself to rich discussions about father-son relationships and dynamics. Dana explained that she used *Of Mice and Men* to talk about treatment of women, which she argued gave her a means to talk about gender roles in an authentic way, by talking about the characters in the book rather than talking about themselves. The sixth participant, Delaney, spoke about using books and literature discussions to foster good peer relationships in the classroom through group work, but said that she could not think of any ways that she used content of individual books to discuss relationship skills. While this subtheme explored how books were used to teach relationship skills, the next subtheme explores how participants perceived those books taught in their ELA curriculum led to increased cultural awareness for their students.

Using Books and Characters to Increase Cultural Awareness

Social-awareness is one of the SEL goals outlined by CASEL (2020), and cultural awareness can be considered an off-shoot of social-awareness. Three of the participants in this study made a specific point to discuss how aspects of their ELA curriculum were used to increase cultural awareness in a unique way. Rachel spoke about using the Ted Talk “The

Danger of a Single Story” in her senior world literature class to support students when they encountered something culturally different in a text. She explained, “We talk about the idea that things that are different are not weird or strange, but they’re just different and having to understand them through looking at someone else’s situation or culture or heritage.”

Tom referred to his motto that “Life is literature; literature is life” to capture his opinion that books give teachers the opportunity to talk about all aspects of life and perceptions of people with their students. Sarah made multiple connections about texts that she taught which raised cultural awareness in her students, such as *The Book Thief*, *Persepolis*, and *The Things They Carried*. Participants also found that books and characters in their ELA curriculum could help students develop self-awareness, and the next subtheme explores those perceptions.

Using Books and Characters to Promote Self-Awareness

Self-awareness, one of the five SEL goals outlined by CASEL (2019), came up consistently through all participants’ interviews. When asked what opportunities exist in her ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about creating a strong self-awareness, Carrie said that all the books she taught did that. She expanded:

Pretty much all of [the books]. Right now, I’m teaching *The Glass Castle* and so we’ve been talking about decisions and how moments define us. I have also taught *A Long Way Down*, *On the Come Up*, *Poet X*, and *House on Mango Street*, so we’ve talked a lot about culture, family, and again, decisions and how those things help us become who we are.

In prepping her students for writing their college essays, Rachel found that many of them struggled to write about themselves in a way that would sell their best attributes:

They are very bad at any kind of self-promotion, which is interesting because these are really the top students in the junior class, and they struggle to say something positive about themselves because they are afraid to look show-offy....

She went on to describe her strategy for getting them comfortable with promoting themselves. She shared, “They chose a literary character... and we’re going through the college application process for [that character].” To reiterate the reasoning for her approach, Rachel added:

I think it’s safer for them to [understand how to write college essays] through a character, and then they feel like they have an understanding of what those words and terms mean and then they can apply it better to themselves.

Delaney spoke about how reading and talking about different texts in her classroom gave her the ability to help kids grow their sense of self. She said, “I feel like with every text we read there is always an opportunity given to kind of grow and enrich that sense of self-awareness just through reflecting on characters and character choices.” She added that the entire Grade 9 ELA curriculum at her school was centered around the concept of identity. The same was true at Dana’s school, where the freshman curriculum is built around the theme of identity. Dana said that she used several texts, including *The Kite Runner* and *Just Mercy* to help students question and reflect on their own beliefs.

Rachel spoke of her experience of how a book could create a safe space for students to talk about mental health. One group of Rachel’s students voted to read the book *What Made Maddy Run*, by Kate Faggan. The story is about a college athlete from the University of Pennsylvania who died by suicide. Rachel explained that her students chose this book “because they wanted to be able to have conversations about stress and anxiety...and the [students] were captivated by this book because ...I think they could see themselves in it.” Rachel went on to

describe how the book allowed them to talk about things that would have otherwise been too hard:

Even though [Maddy] wasn't a fictional character, I think it was a safer way to look at [mental illness] because it was a really compelling story, but... they were able to see things that resonated with them. They could see what they would need to do differently in order to make some healthy decisions to deal with their mental health.

While this subtheme discussed the role of books and characters, the next subtheme looks at the role of reflective writing in the ELA classroom, and how it can serve as a tool for meeting SEL goals.

Reflective Writing as a Social Emotional Learning Tool

Besides the study of literature, all six participants talked about how reflective writing assignments and activities in their curriculum offered opportunities for students to meet some SEL goals. Research by CASEL (2020) showed that reflective writing “supports self-awareness and prioritizes students’ insights into their own strengths and challenges” (p.1). Sarah noted that writing provided a lot of opportunities for students to explore self-awareness. During her slam poetry unit, she noticed that students wanted to write about themselves and share. “[Slam poems] lend themselves to really strong feelings and that has brought things up for students.” She went on, “[The poems] are just so visceral. Some of [the students] really wanted to share with me during our individual conferences. And there just seems to be a lot of reflection going on there.” Sarah also said that in some of her ELA courses, she used free-writes at the beginning of each class. She used these writing prompts to “ground [my students] in five sensory awareness,” to reflect on a topic that would help them relate to a character in a book they were reading, or to gather their thoughts on “what is going on with a character in a book.”

Carrie noted that reflective writing in the ELA curriculum gave teachers a glimpse into students' lives. She explained, "There are a lot of times as an English teacher that you get to see these really intimate portraits that they write of their lives." This allowed Carrie to understand what was important to her students and what needed to be addressed in class. Delaney noticed that her students used their poetry unit to share personal stories and feelings, and that students "end up writing about anxiety and stress."

Tom said that he used writing as a consistent tool to help students determine what they think about a topic. Over the years, he said he "allowed more choice, allowed more autonomy" and "encouraged them to find things that they're interested in and passionate about." He also didn't attach a grade to their writing prompts "so there is no pressure with their writing as long as they get a draft." He said that open-ended journaling and free-write journals gave his students an opportunity to "really reflect on what they think about the topic instead of thinking 'what does [the teacher] want to hear about the topic?'" In this way, Tom argued that writing was a tool to help his students get to know themselves. After writing narrative essays, Tom's students were given the chance to share what they wrote with their peers. Tom spoke about the power of students sharing what they had written in his classes. He said, "I think that's how they build empathy, seeing what people have been through and understanding it from a new perspective." Tom concluded that all the different modes of writing, especially expressive writing and creative writing, "allow a little more differentiation and allow students more voice." This theme explored the many strategies that participants employed in their ELA classrooms that aligned with SEL goals. The next theme looks more specifically at how effective these participants believe those strategies to be.

Theme 4: Perceptions that English Language Arts Classes are Effective for Meeting Social and Emotional Learning Goals

The final theme that emerged during the coding of the data was how participants found that the ELA curriculum was an effective means to meet SEL goals. Some of these perceptions came from responses to question 12 in the interview protocol (Appendix D), but other perceptions were found throughout the interviews in responses to all interview questions. All six participants had strong opinions about whether and how the ELA curriculum worked to effectively meet SEL goals, even though many of them agreed it was best to not label these lessons as SEL. Participants weighed in on how the academic setting of ELA courses may be a better approach for secondary students to approach SEL. The first subtheme explores specific reasons why participants believed the ELA curriculum to be an effective means of meeting SEL goals.

Why English Language Arts Classes Are Effective for Meeting Social and Emotional Goals

When participants were asked if it was their perception that the ELA classroom was an effective place to address social and emotional learning, all six participants agreed. Dana answered candidly, “Oh my God, I can’t think of a better place for it to happen.” She went on to explain that discussing books in a classroom allowed her students to “enter those conversations” but to “do it an arm’s length.” And because Dana worked so hard creating a positive classroom environment, students had a range of opportunities to explore:

And if [the students] are comfortable, then they can enter into the book in some way, or put themselves out there, but when they’re not comfortable, they have all of these new friends and new people that they can use to talk about so many different issues.

Tom had a similarly enthusiastic response to the question about whether ELA classrooms were an effective place to meet SEL goals. He said, “Oh goodness, yes. Oh, absolutely. I think the English classroom is the perfect place.” He elaborated about the role of different types of writing that allowed students differentiation and chances to develop their voice, and that the literature “invites those conversations” that deal with SEL goals.

Carrie also saw a connection between ELA classrooms and SEL, and again, both because of the role of books and writing opportunities in ELA courses. When asked if she believed SEL goals can effectively be met in ELA classes, she said:

I think it’s incredibly important, and I think that we do ask [students] to do a lot of introspection. That’s one of the reasons we read, to better understand ourselves and our world, and it’s one of the reasons we write, to be able to share pieces of ourselves with others.

Delaney was also very positive in her response to how the nature of ELA classrooms may prove effective at meeting SEL goals. She said:

The work we do in ELA, asking students to consider other people’s point-of-view and other people’s choices, and asking them to look at how characters’ life experiences influence their choices, and then developing the empathy piece from that, and also being able to self-reflect and think ‘Oh, wow. I’m not alone because this character is dealing with the same thing that I am.’ So, I feel like those are the ways that English can really help to develop SEL.

The question of whether the ELA classroom was an effective place to address SEL goals elicited a more lukewarm answer from Rachel, only because she believed that “there is a perception

sometimes that all we do is talk and write about our feelings.” Rachel was concerned that ELA was seen as less rigorous than other disciplines because of that perception. Rachel went on:

I think that a lot of times [SEL] does naturally happen in [ELA] by the nature of what we do and what we read and the conversations that we have, but I think it’s really important that even if it’s not as easy in other classes, that those things are still part of the conversation.

Her point was that all subject matters should be addressing SEL goals, even if it may be less of a natural fit in some content areas. She certainly agreed that ELA classes were an effective place for SEL, but cautioned that schools should not depend too much on the English departments to facilitate SEL. The following subtheme will address how the participants believed that an indirect approach to teaching SEL was most effective.

Opportunities to Approach Social and Emotional Learning in Indirect Manner

All six participants observed in their interviews that doing SEL without calling it “SEL” was more effective for their students. Dana spoke about how some of her novel units in her ELA classes offered opportunities for students to stretch their beliefs and find self-awareness, but she said, “I don’t name it for the kids, but it happens at least on a weekly basis, mostly through discussion.” Dana meant that she did not label these discussions as “SEL” or “discovering our self-awareness” but SEL was what tended to happen through the book discussions. Dana also said that she could not think of a better place for working on SEL goals to happen authentically than an English classroom. She said:

Yeah, okay, we can have a ‘social/emotional health class,’ but that’s going to be taken about as seriously as sex ed is. It’s going to be in one ear and out the other. It’s almost like you can trick them into [talking about SEL] in English class.

Sarah also spoke about how the English curriculum was effective for addressing SEL, specifically because it was not labeled as SEL. She said, “I think it’s really effective because we are not addressing it head-on.” She said she gets more out of students because “students don’t go in [to her classroom] thinking this is an SEL situation where I can expect a certain type of language.”

Sarah offered her observation that:

There is a resistance to anything when anyone comes on too strong, so in an English classroom, students are not anticipating or expecting that [SEL discussions are] happening, so they can more naturally get involved in it.

Delaney made some very similar observations in her interview. She said that one of the real benefits of the English classroom was the many opportunities for students to reflect, write, and process their thoughts, “And even if a teacher does not call it therapeutic, I think it is therapeutic, and so I think [I am] addressing the concept of SEL without putting a name on it.” Delaney also acknowledged that her choice to include SEL in her classrooms was not necessarily an intentional choice, but rather she just felt that “it’s a natural relationship when you’re talking about books.” Lastly, Delaney also observed that teenagers tend to shy away from programs that are labeled or prescribed. She said, “I feel like high school students are so sensitive to any initiative or program, and so if the kids know that ‘Okay, we are doing SEL,’ it’s not going to be pretty.”

Rachel spoke about how characters in books could be used to help students reflect on themselves without realizing they are doing it. She described how she gave personal writing prompts to her students but started with talking about characters’ experiences first. She said:

A lot of times when we are doing personal writing, I try to usually have them look at [the topic] through a different lens before they look at it themselves because I think they just struggle to come up with ideas about what [they think.]

This section explored the participants' belief that the most effective way to address SEL in the ELA classroom was to do so authentically without labeling the lessons as SEL.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore secondary public school ELA teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals. In the semi-structured interviews, this researcher listened to all six participants share detailed descriptions of their teaching strategies and approaches. Participants also discussed their opinions and perceptions about the effectiveness of using their ELA curriculum to meet SEL goals. That data that was collected, analyzed, coded, and found to be aligned with the themes explored in the literature review and in this study's conceptual framework. The following chapter concludes this study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The literature review in chapter two established that adolescents are struggling with mental health at increasing rates and that schools are expected to address this rising concern (Abramson, 2022; CDC, 2019; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020). To address student mental health, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) established five goals for schools to teach to students, which are, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020). The literature review also revealed the struggles that schools are facing to effectively meet the needs of student mental health (Lee, 2019; Prothero, 2020; Walker, 2018), especially at the secondary level when students may be skeptical or distrusting of social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives (Sawchuk, 2021). Based on the types of activities common in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms (Burke, 2013), and on extensive research on the role of reading in students' lives (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2016; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019), research pointed to the possibility that ELA curriculum may be an effective means to meet SEL goals. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of six participants about whether their curriculum may be meeting SEL goals for their adolescent students. The next section outlines the interpretations and important findings for the research question that guided this study.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

This study conducted six semi-structured interviews to answer the following research question:

What are the perceptions of secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers on how they may implement social and emotional learning goals in their ELA curriculum?

Six participants answered interview questions via semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D). This researcher interviewed six participants to determine if and how their perceptions of using their ELA curriculum met SEL goals aligned with the findings of the literature review. The conceptual framework of this study came from the combination of this researcher's experience teaching secondary ELA for 23 years combined with topical research for this study that included themes from the literature: (a) mental health crisis in adolescents; (b) the history of social and emotional learning, (c) the philosophy of social and emotional learning in schools, (d) challenges for schools implementing social and emotional learning, and (e) social emotional learning in secondary schools. This study was designed with the conceptual framework and formal theory of constructivism as its theoretical framework. Piaget's (1968) theory of constructivism informed this study both in the exploration of how students learn material in the classroom setting and how teachers feel effective and comfortable teaching their own curriculum.

Piaget (1968) believed that learning is not an act that occurs passively in a vacuum, but rather is an active process where students "negotiate their understanding in the light of what they experience in the new learning situation" (Aminineh & Asl, 2015, p. 10). In other words, students assimilate new information into their existing schemas, and only effectively learn new information if it is accommodated or supported by concepts they already understand or feel comfortable navigating. This theory supported the idea that students may more effectively understand concepts of SEL if those concepts were integrated into the curriculum they were already familiar with, such as the ELA curriculum. This study confirmed the reliability of constructivism when participants described the many ways their students increased their understanding of SEL concepts via elements of the ELA curriculum. All six participants described how teaching specific books in their classrooms allowed them to foster empathy in

their students for self and others. Dana spoke about how students “can identify an emotion in a character that they can’t necessarily in themselves.” Five of the six participants explained how they used different books to talk about and teach relationship skills, one of the five SEL goals outlined by CASEL (2020) in their classrooms. Through various texts, the participants were able to engage students in discussing and writing about romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, and elements of friendship. Similarly, teaching literature allowed students to learn about such social and emotional skills as self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and recognizing and understanding mental illness. In support of the theory of constructivism, Carrie explained the positive opportunities for learning about SEL in her classroom because, as she said, “That’s one of the reasons we read, to better understand ourselves and our world.” Delaney also understood that her students accessed SEL more effectively when she used books to allow students to “look at how characters’ life experiences influence their choices.” Tom added that the different types of writing assignments in ELA classrooms “invite those conversations” that deal with SEL goals in an authentic way. Lastly, Dana reflected on how much easier it was to talk about emotional topics through the avenue of books because the students felt more comfortable than talking about themselves. As evidenced by the participants’ explanations, the SEL goals that were embedded into aspects of the ELA curriculum were more readily absorbed by students, as Piaget (1968) asserted, because the new material could be organized into a coherent structure and integrated with the preexisting knowledge that students have around writing and analyzing literature (Aminineh & Asl, 2015).

The second aspect of constructivism that informed this study deals with how participants felt about teaching SEL skills to students when they often perceive themselves as untrained or unqualified to do so (Lee, 2019; Schwartz, 2019). Just as students require a familiar framework

on which to hang new information, teachers will be more successful adding new elements to their curriculum if they do so through a platform with which they are comfortable. Constructivist teaching strategies emphasize activities that increase students' motivation for learning and encourage communication between teacher and student (Juvova et al., 2015). This study confirmed that constructivist approaches such as group work, reflective writing, and class discussions were a part of all six participants' classroom routines. These strategies allowed the participants to embed SEL goals in a natural and authentic way because constructivist approaches were their norm. Piaget (1968) wrote about the state of disequilibrium, when a learner feels uncomfortable or unable to absorb new content, which can be seen in teachers who feel reluctant, unqualified, or underprepared to teach SEL skills to students. Disequilibrium was evident in this study when three of the six participants voiced concern over feeling unprepared to address SEL in their classrooms. Tom, Delaney, and Sarah all expressed their perception that teachers felt uncomfortable or desired more training before they would feel confident in addressing SEL with students. To prove the concept of constructivism, interestingly, none of the participants in this study expressed feeling unqualified to talk about SEL when it was done through the avenue of books or writing prompts, elucidating Piaget's (1968) belief that when concepts are assimilated with familiar schemas, the learner (in this case, the teacher) felt more successful and the learning was more effective.

At the root of this study was an acknowledgement that mental health concerns of adolescents are on the rise (Central for Disease Control [CDC], 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). According to the WHO (2020), half of all mental health conditions start by age 14, but most cases are undetected and untreated. The CDC (2019) also reports that more than one in three high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or

hopelessness in 2019, a 40% increase from ten years prior. This study confirmed that teachers and schools are seeing evidence of a rising rate of mental illness in students and are attempting to address the problem. All six participants acknowledged increased attention on student mental health and wellness. Tom spoke about the “increased anxiety” in his ELA students. Dana spoke about often getting emails from students that stated, “I’m really struggling right now” Sarah noticed that her students were writing more about “really strong feelings” in her Poetry Slam unit and she also spoke about using journaling and free writing to help her students do necessary emotional reflection. Sarah also started addressing the emotional and physical impacts of seasonal changes based on seeing the students’ needs in her classroom. Rachel described one class of juniors as “just super anxious” and described a different class as “the most anxious group of girls that I have had in a long time.” Carrie, who taught in an Alternative Education program, described her students by saying, “most of them struggle with [mental health] and we all know it.” Carrie integrated multiple activities into her classroom designed to directly address her students’ mental illness including group work, writing and discussion prompts, breathing techniques, glitter jars, and finger holds.

Schools in the United States have been forced to address the mental health of students (Conley, 2018), and researchers argued that schools must find ways to integrate SEL for the wellbeing and success of their students (Greene, 2019; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Jones & Kahn, 2017) Many of the schools where the participants worked helped prepare teachers to address student mental health concerns. Rachel’s school offered specific trainings for teachers designed to address student mental health, such as trainings on Mental Health First Aid® and suicide prevention through National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Carrie and Tom also worked in schools that included training for teachers on SEL during professional development

days, showing that three of the schools used in this study were directly acknowledging the rising and changing needs regarding student mental health. The other three participants explained that their schools did not provide adequate training on SEL, but they each had a working knowledge of SEL that they gained from outside sources such as national conferences, graduate school, or personal readings.

Even with the acknowledgment by teachers and schools of the mental health needs of adolescent students, there is still a lack of preparedness in schools on how to best meet those demands (Lee, 2020; Prothero, 2020, Schwartz, 2019). The crisis in mental health for students has put an urgent demand on schools that many feel unprepared for (Prothero, 2020). Many schools face a lack of training, resources, and confidence among teaching staff to integrate SEL (Lee, 2020; Prothero, 2020, Schwartz, 2019). This study confirmed that some participants felt unprepared to teach SEL; three of the six participants expressed a feeling of unpreparedness or voiced a desire for more specific SEL training from their schools. Delaney said that she learned about SEL through trial and error with her students, rather than through school training. Tom described the “weariness” felt by unequipped teachers. And Sarah said that most of the professional development at her school was “not SEL focused” and she wished for more SEL training to help her feel more confident.

One of the key findings of this study was that even when participants admitted to feeling unprepared to teach SEL, or wished for more training, they all could name numerous ways in which their ELA curriculum offered natural opportunities to address SEL, as supported in the literature (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). While some participants said they were unprepared to teach SEL, all six participants named multiple ways that SEL was embedded into their ELA curriculum in authentic ways, such as

through books, writing prompts, and class discussions. None of them mentioned feeling unprepared to teach SEL so long as it was an integral part of their ELA classroom practices and curriculum. Srinivasan (2019) implored that schools do not use stand-alone programs for adolescents, but instead that SEL should be integrated into academic instruction. This study confirmed that teachers had a higher level of comfort when embedding SEL into their own ELA curriculum and could name multiple ways this approach was effective for secondary students. When asked if the ELA classroom was an effective venue to teach SEL, all six participants responded enthusiastically in the affirmative. Dana explained that her work with books in ELA allowed her and her students to talk about mental health more naturally. Tom said that “the English classroom is the perfect place” to address SEL and illustrated his point with explanations of how writing prompts and discussions and texts covered in his classroom allowed him to do so. Delaney explained that the reading and writing she did in ELA allowed her to cover many of the goals of SEL in her classroom. Delaney added that there were many opportunities for students to reflect, write, and process their thoughts in a therapeutic manner the ELA curriculum. Lastly, Dana said, “I can’t think of a better place for [SEL] to happen” than the ELA classroom. These enthusiastic responses, coupled with the many examples to illustrate their practice, showed this researcher that the comfort level around addressing SEL was higher when those lessons were embedded into the curriculum these participants already taught.

Research showed that stand-alone SEL programs are not as effective for adolescent students as they may be for younger ones, according to Sawchuk (2021). Separate programs designed to teach SEL can feel disjointed and phony to older students, and research suggested that successful approaches to SEL for adolescents must be more implicit than explicit (Sawchuk, 2021; Srinivasan, 2019). The data from this study provided teachers’ observations that students

found SEL to be more effective when done in natural and authentic settings such as the ELA classroom, according to the perceptions of the teachers interviewed. Sarah agreed that SEL was more successful when it was rolled into the curriculum. She said, “I think it’s really effective because we are not addressing it head-on.” She said she got more out of students because they do not come into her classroom expecting to talk about their feelings. Supporting the idea that teenagers are turned off by prescribed SEL programs, Sarah observed that teenagers have a resistance when teachers are too strong with programs or initiatives.

To make SEL effective in any setting, but especially in secondary schools, teacher-student relationships and positive classroom climates are key (Yeager, 2017). Yeager argued that SEL lessons at the secondary level must be much more “adult-like” than typical SEL lessons found in primary schools, and emphasized the importance of creating environments where teenagers feel respected and where their “developmental motivations” (p. 75) can be tapped. All six participants in this study confirmed that they put emphasis and effort into building close relationships with their students and creating positive classroom environments, which can be linked to all five of the CASEL goals. Rachel’s school focused exclusively on classroom climate for the first two days of school. The purpose of this initiative, Rachel explained, was to allow students to focus on relationships first and academics second. Tom also spoke about the importance of attending to student emotional needs before moving on to English assignments. Tom understood that listening to and having conversations with his students was important because they could learn and focus better if they felt connected. Sarah also put emphasis on making students feel safe and comfortable before beginning academic tasks, and spent time on community building at the start of the school. Sarah also used student discussions to teach listening skills and explained how important it was to learn to listen to each other to show we

care about the others in the room. Carrie started the year with get-to-know-each other activities and writing prompts designed to create a positive classroom climate. Carrie also used debriefing after activities to solidify the community feel. In Dana's classroom, discussion was a large focus of classroom time because she believed that listening to each other was key to promoting understanding even in the face of disagreements.

Research also argued the importance and benefits of teachers normalizing discussions of mental health in their classrooms and the use of "skillful self-disclosure" where teachers build trust by sharing some personal passions, interests, and challenges with their students (Srinivasan, 2019, p.71). Three participants in this study spoke about the importance of normalizing mental health in their classrooms. Dana explained being open about her own experiences with anxiety, and letting her students see that a functioning adult can also sometimes struggle. Both Carrie and Sarah spoke about normalizing emotions and anxiety and checking in emotionally with their students on a regular basis.

In 2021, The Department of Education in Maine added SEL goals framed by CASEL to their curriculum guidelines (Social Emotional teaching and learning | Department of Education., n.d.); however, none of the participants in this study directly mentioned this addition to the state standards. The five SEL goals identified by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020). None of the participants spoke about CASEL or the five goals of SEL set forth by CASEL in either their definitions of SEL or in their interviews as a whole. In other words, while the participants did not reference CASEL or seem familiar with that framework of SEL, the definitions they extemporaneously provided were in line with the CASEL goals. While some definitions of SEL offered by the

participants were incomplete, none were inaccurate. Only one participant, Rachel, stated that her school expected all teachers to address only SEL during the start of school, and to focus on relationship building for the first two days of classes. Other than Rachel, none of the participants referenced any mandates or even requests by administration to address SEL in the classroom, despite it being in the state standards.

Researchers observed a connection between the goals of CASEL and elements of the ELA curriculum, including the study of literature, reflective writing, and classroom discussions (Hebert & Kent, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). This study confirmed that secondary ELA teachers perceived that ELA curriculum was an effective means to meet SEL goals. All six participants in this study, as evidenced in Chapter 4, named numerous approaches to addressing SEL in their secondary ELA classrooms. All six of them answered affirmatively that their ELA classrooms were an effective venue to meet SEL goals.

Proving the possibilities in the ELA curriculum to address SEL, the link between reading literature and creating empathy for self and others was discussed by multiple researchers. “Fictional stories are simulations, capable of helping us to develop empathy with literary characters” (Richmond, 2014, p. 19). Stansfield and Bunce (2019) argued that “fictional stories required readers to understand the different points of view of narrators and protagonists” (p. 21) and even argued that “people who read a lot of fiction are therefore likely to have highly developed faculties of cognitive empathy” (p. 21). Srinivasan (2019) also argued that SEL can be implicitly and explicitly taught through stories, because students can identify and reflect on emotional states in characters and feel validation in their own feelings. Many novels offer opportunities to observe social and emotional health of characters, to talk about mental health struggles, and to learn coping skills for mental illness (Hebert & Kent, 2019; Richmond, 2014).

This study confirmed the strong relationship between empathy for self and others and the literature when all six participants gave examples of this from their curriculum. Several of the participants spoke about specific texts chosen or curricular units designed to address the theme of empathy. Rachel said that in her world literature course, “we do look at empathy as the thread that goes through our whole year.” Carrie said that “just about every book in the ELA curriculum” can be used to promote empathy. Similarly, Sarah said that the concept of empathy is “really baked into [her ELA] curriculum. Every book is another experience that they likely haven’t had.” Delaney said that the entire unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her department was centered around empathy. Tom used *Hamlet* as a tool to talk about decision making and stress, and to facilitate empathy for someone who had lost a parent. In Sarah’s classroom, the book *Persepolis* increased student empathy toward those experiencing trauma. Dana was passionate about the role of books in broadening students’ empathy for others or learning about different life experiences. She stated, “That is how I choose books.”

Self-awareness, one of the five goals of the CASEL (2020) framework, can be fostered through reading and the study of literature. Adolescence, according to researchers, is the key time to recognize mental states in both self and others, and literature can be a tool to nurture that developmental stage (Clajeva, 2019). Furthermore, literature can be therapeutic to students because reading and witnessing characters can help students understand and relate with the universal struggles with social performance and identity (Nikolajeva, 2019). Readers can find their “own concealed selves” (Deshpande, 2012, p. 383) in literature and be reminded that they are not alone or abnormal. This study confirmed that secondary ELA teachers see the study of books as a key tool in promoting a strong self-awareness in their students. When asked what opportunities exist in her ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about creating

a strong self-awareness, Carrie said: “Pretty much all of [the books].” Delaney believed the books she taught gave her the ability to promote self-awareness. She said, “I feel like with every text we read there is always an opportunity given to kind of grow and enrich that sense of self-awareness just through reflecting on characters and character choices.”

The data collected from the six participants in this study supported the research found in the literature review. This study was able to answer the research question and provide evidence that secondary ELA teachers do perceive that their ELA curriculum can meet SEL goals. Furthermore, the lens of constructivism helped frame this study to better understand how adolescent students can benefit from learning SEL in their ELA classrooms, as well as how secondary teachers can feel more qualified and empowered to integrate SEL into their curricula. The following section provides a summary of the implications for teachers and schools that can be drawn from this study.

Implications

Although all six participants of this study were doing so much to address SEL, both directly and indirectly, the mental health crisis in the United States requires more to be done (Abramson, 2020; O’Reilly et al., 2018; Turner & Xian, 2022). While one in five children struggle with a mental health disorder, only 20% of those children may receive treatment or care from a mental health provider (Abramson, 2022), so there is a clear need to increase awareness among young people about mental health (O’Reilly et al., 2018). If improved mental health of adolescents was not reason enough to address SEL systematically, research has shown that student performance improves when teenagers learn self-reflection strategies and means to de-stress (Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017) as evident in the data from this study’s participants. Adolescence is a key time to debunk stigmas around mental health, and schools can accomplish

this goal by normalizing conversations around mental health and creating school cultures where students feel safe talking about their own and others' emotional health (Ferrari et al., 2020), which in turn may help more young people get the care they need. Tom believed that he did not always know how to help his students get the help they needed but gave multiple examples of how he can facilitate healthy reflection and discussion on mental health in his classroom. This study's participants confirmed that schools have a unique opportunity to help students identify, understand, and access interventions for mental health concerns, and schools are the logical place to promote mental wellness (NAMI, n.d.; O'Reilly et al, 2018). Secondary schools, specifically, can impact student mental health because even though adolescents are in a stage of intense change and emotional turmoil, their brains are poised to learn to make healthier choices, understand themselves better, and show more self-control (Srinivasan, 2019; Yeager, 2017). While all the participants in this study offered examples of multiple ways that they are meeting SEL goals in their individual classrooms, and therefore addressing mental health in their own ways, the school-wide initiatives seemed lacking or disjointed.

For schools looking for approaches to integrate SEL most effectively, this study revealed that schools' efforts should be put toward training teachers to address SEL without necessarily calling it SEL. Research has shown that stand-alone or pull-out programs to address SEL are less effective than an integrated approach to SEL where SEL is not explicitly labeled (Sawchuk, 2021) as mentioned by this study's participants. Teenagers see SEL goals as inauthentic unless they are embedded in an authentic learning experience (Sawchuk, 2021). All participants in this study, without even being directly asked, offered their observations that addressing SEL without calling it SEL was more effective for their teenage students. Dana explained that she did not label book discussions as "SEL" or "discovering our self-awareness" and therefore students were

more open to the social and emotional aspects of books and characters. Sarah also saw the English curriculum as effective for addressing SEL, and specifically made the point that she does not label this work as SEL or address it head-on. Sarah also talked about the resistance that teenagers have to initiatives that come on too strong and believed that students participate in SEL discussions more readily and naturally because they are not anticipating them in ELA classes. None of the participants discussed any pushback from students when addressing SEL in the form of reflective writing prompts or book discussions.

According to this study, the participants felt comfortable addressing SEL with their students, but only when they were doing so within the terms of their curriculum and classroom strategies. Three of the participants spoke early in their interviews about feeling unprepared to address SEL and wanting more specific trainings, but none of the participants admitted to any feelings of being ill-prepared or unqualified once they were talking about addressing SEL through the context of their ELA curriculum. This finding is in line with Piaget's (1968) constructivist theory, showing that new content, in this case SEL skills, is more successfully understood if it is accommodated into their existing schema of knowledge. The greatest importance in teaching and learning is not placed on skills or facts, but rather on strategies that allow students and teachers to accommodate new material into their existing intellectual framework (*Cognitive Constructivism* | *GSI Teaching & Resource Center*, n.d.). Schools can empower teachers to address SEL more confidently if they offer professional development that enables an integrated approach between SEL and academic settings.

Lastly, even without knowing much about the mandates through the Maine Department of Education, or getting sufficient training, the participants in this study showed that they were already doing an impressive amount to address SEL. This researcher found it promising how

easily all six participants could answer questions about how their curriculum addressed creating self-awareness, managing anxiety and stress, fostering empathy for self and others, and building healthy relationships. All six participants could link most of the books they already taught to the SEL goals outlined by CASEL without even doing so intentionally. Delaney acknowledged that her choice to include SEL in her classrooms was not necessarily an intentional choice, but rather she just felt that like a natural relationship when talking about books. The evidence from this study indicates that the ELA classroom is a natural fit for meeting SEL goals for secondary students and implies that other ELA teachers may unintentionally be meeting SEL goals simply by teaching their curriculum.

Recommendations for Action

It is clear from the research and from the data in this study that schools are attempting to integrate SEL to address the mental health needs of students (Conley, 2018; Smith, 2020; Walker, 2018). If secondary schools have created stand-alone or pull-out programs to address SEL, then they should change focus and instead, move toward integrating SEL into academic settings where teacher-student relationships are more established. If schools have not yet started to integrate SEL into their school culture, then showing teachers, perhaps starting with ELA teachers, how to embed SEL into their curriculum is the right place to start. Participants in this study showed evidence of successful and effective strategies embedded within their ELA curriculum, such as book studies, writing prompts, and classroom discussions, that met SEL goals. Furthermore, all the participants in this study integrated SEL into non-academic classroom strategies meant to teach students to connect with each other, reflect on their own social and emotional health, and to alleviate stress, showing the potential for all teachers to embed SEL into their classrooms, regardless of the subject matter. There are few researched SEL programs that

have shown effectiveness in secondary schools, and according to Sawchuk (2021), pull-out or stand-alone programs that teach SEL may be effective in primary schools but may be less effective for adolescents as mentioned by this study's participants. Instead, this study proved that SEL is more impactful for secondary students when positive teacher-student relationships were present and when the focus was on creating environments where teenagers felt respected and where their "developmental motivations" (Yeager, 2017, p. 75) were considered.

As mentioned by this study's participants, to support the concept that schools' emphasis should not be on stand-alone or pull-out programs for SEL, professional development and teacher trainings should be more geared toward specific curriculum and relevant strategies within the context of a teacher's classroom routines. If this occurs, then teachers may have stronger buy-in to teaching SEL in their classrooms. Furthermore, teachers would feel more capable and confident in their ability to embed SEL into their classrooms. While this study focused on ELA teachers and the many opportunities that exist in the ELA curriculum to address SEL goals, the six participants also offered examples of non-academic strategies, such as de-stressing activities and creating a positive classroom climate, that could be implemented by teachers of any academic subject.

Lastly, in secondary schools, SEL should not be called SEL, but offered in a more discreet and integrated manner as mentioned by this study's participants. The research showed evidence that an integrated approach to SEL where SEL is not explicitly labeled is more effective when working with adolescent students (Sawchuk, 2021). Sawchuk (2021) also argued that teenagers view SEL goals negatively unless they are embedded in an authentic learning experience. All six participants in this study observed that their students could more naturally and authentically access material that was considered SEL when they did not call attention to the

fact that they were addressing SEL. While this study proved that the ELA curriculum is ripe with opportunities to teach SEL indirectly, and ELA teachers should be trained to understand the opportunities, teachers of other content areas could also be trained to integrate SEL goals into classroom practices too without labeling them as such.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study explored the perceptions of secondary ELA teachers on using the ELA curriculum to meet SEL goals. The data collected and analyzed into the presented findings from this group of six participants helped to understand how ELA teachers perceive the opportunities that exist in the ELA curriculum to address SEL. Furthermore, this study can inform schools on best practices for addressing student mental health and integrating SEL into the school setting. The impact of this study was limited by the size and scope.

A study with a larger sample representing more secondary schools could provide a clearer picture of how SEL can best be integrated into schools. Despite recruitment efforts that included 37 public high schools in three counties in Maine, the participants in this study only came from four different high schools, potentially narrowing the range of responses shown in the data. A larger participant pool would represent a more broad and diverse range of perceptions and would therefore provide more credibility for the study. This researcher believes that there is need for future studies that include a broader sample size of ELA teachers, but also that include data from school administrators, teachers of other academic content areas, and from students themselves. Furthermore, participants who responded to this study may have had a heightened interest in SEL, so gathering data from a larger population of teachers may include insight from teachers who are less comfortable talking about SEL and may provide a different picture of teacher perceptions on addressing SEL.

Conclusion

Adolescents are struggling with mental health at increasing rates and schools are henceforth expected to address the social and emotional health of students (Abramson, 2022; CDC, 2019; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Many schools in the United States face a lack of training, resources, and confidence among teaching staff to address student mental health and to integrate SEL (Lee, 2020; Prothero, 2020, Schwartz, 2019). Secondary schools must be innovative in finding ways for students to engage with SEL while supporting teachers who may feel uncomfortable with these expectations (Prothero, 2020; Yeager, 2017). Researchers have observed a connection between the goals of CASEL and elements of the ELA curriculum, including the study of literature, reflective writing, and classroom discussions (Hebert & Kent, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Stansfield & Bunce, 2019). Through the exploration of the perceptions of this study's participants, this study affirmed these opportunities that exist in the ELA curriculum are well-suited to address SEL goals naturally and authentically for adolescent students. This study added additional perspective to the body of literature on the association between the ELA curriculum and SEL. This study also provided direction for schools who are looking to improve students' social and emotional health as well as improve teachers' confidence on integrating SEL into their curriculum. As supported by Piaget's (1968) constructivist theory, this study demonstrated that the experience of both secondary students and teachers can be improved by encouraging the integration of SEL into the ELA curriculum.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Materials

4 April 2023

Dear Superintendent _____,

I am seeking your permission to utilize _____ as the research site for my dissertation pursuant to earning a Doctor in Education at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. I am in the process of completing my dissertation, entitled "*Perceptions of Secondary English Teachers on Using English Curriculum to Meet Social and Emotional Learning Goals.*"

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of their ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals.

I am looking for six teachers who are willing to participate in a recorded interview via Zoom®, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Teacher participation is completely voluntary. All teacher interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and will be conducted after contractual hours. The names of all participants, superintendents, districts, and schools collected for this study will remain confidential.

At no time during the study process will any individuals, schools, or districts be identified. Additionally, no cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the attached letter of support (see below) on your district letterhead and return to me via email ethrockmorton@une.edu. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I can also be reached at 207-745-1858. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Emilie Throckmorton
 Doctoral Candidate
 University of New England

Dear UNE IRB,

Ms. Emilie Throckmorton has been granted permission to conduct research in the _____.

The permission is specific to her research at the University of New England entitled "*Perceptions of Secondary English Teachers on Using English Curriculum to Meet Social and Emotional Learning Goals.*"

Sincerely, (your name and title)

1 May 2023

Dear Principal _____,

I have been given permission from your district to use your school as a research site for my dissertation pursuant to earning a Doctor of Education at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. I have had previous communication and approval from the District (See attached). Teacher participation is completely voluntary.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions on their ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning goals from six teachers. I am in the process of completing my dissertation, entitled "Perceptions of Secondary English Teachers on Using English Curriculum to Meet Social and Emotional Learning Goals."

Teacher participation is completely voluntary and will consist of a recorded interview via Zoom®, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at a mutual agreeable time and will be conducted after contractual hours. No cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district.

Because I have permission from the district, I will begin recruiting teachers from your school, via email, within the next few days. The names of all participants, superintendents, districts, and schools collected for this study will remain confidential. At no time during the study process will any individuals, schools or districts be identified.

Additionally, no cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I can be reached at ethrockmorton@une.edu or by calling (207) 745-1858.

Regards,

Emilie Throckmorton
Doctoral Candidate
University of New England

1 May 2023

Hello fellow Secondary English Teacher,

My name is Emilie Throckmorton. I have been teaching secondary English for 23 years in Maine, and I am a student at the University of New England in the Doctor of Education program. I am hoping you will consider participating in my dissertation research. To be a participant in this study, you must be a 9-12 public English Language Arts teacher who has been teaching English for at least five years. I have had previous communication and approval from your district. Teacher participation is completely voluntary, and I am looking for six participants.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' perceptions of implementing ELA curriculum as it may relate to social and emotional learning. I am in the process of completing my dissertation, entitled "Perceptions of Secondary English Teachers on Using English Curriculum to Meet Social and Emotional Learning Goals." I am interested in your experiences and thoughts about using texts, reflection, and discussion in your ELA classroom and how those things may or may not meet the goals of Social and Emotional Learning.

If you agree to participate, I will invite you to participate in an interview, scheduled at a time of your choosing, through Zoom®, which will take around 30-45 minutes. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed, and all identifiable information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym. After reading over the transcripts of all interviews, I will identify common themes from the interviews and email them to all participants to give all participants a chance to verify if my understanding and interpretation is accurate. I will give you seven calendar days to review your transcript, and if I do not hear back from you, I will proceed to code the transcript as is.

The Participant Information Sheet, which is attached, provides information regarding your privacy and confidentiality in participating in this study. Please be sure to review the Information Sheet. I will ask you to provide verbal consent before we start the interview. If you are interested in being a potential participant in this study, please email me at ethrockmorton@une.edu.

Thank you,

Emilie Throckmorton
Doctoral Candidate
University of New England

APPENDIX B

University of New England's Institutional Review Board Approval Letter and Amendment

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: April 27, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Emilie Throckmorton
FACULTY ADVISOR: Gizelle Luevano, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 0423-22
RECORD NUMBER: 0423-22-01

PROJECT TITLE: PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS ON USING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO MEET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING GOALS

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: April 26, 2023

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: April 27, 2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2i

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: May 03, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Emilie Throckmorton
FACULTY ADVISOR: Gizelle Luevano, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0423-22
RECORD NUMBER: 0423-22-02 (Amendment #1)
REVIEW TYPE: Administrative

PROJECT TITLE: PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS ON USING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO MEET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING GOALS

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment
SUBMISSION DATE: May 03, 2023

DECISION: Acknowledged
DECISION DATE: May 03, 2023

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced amendment and has acknowledged this submission. No further action is required at this time.

The changes requested as part of this amendment include the following:

- The study team is adding York County in Maine as the third county for recruitment, in order to increase their recruitment pool. LOS from principal in York County was also provided.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX C

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	<i>4/27/23</i>
IRB Project #:	<i>0043-22</i>
Title of Project:	PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS ON USING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO MEET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING GOALS
Principal Investigator (PI):	<i>Emilie Throckmorton</i>
PI Contact Information:	<i>ethrockmorton@une.edu 207-745-1858</i>

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this research project is to explore secondary public school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers’ perceptions of using the English Language Arts curriculum as it relates to meeting Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) goals. There will be six participants in this study. This study is being conducted as part of a dissertation for a doctorate in Education.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are a 9-12 English Language Arts teacher who has taught for at least five years in the state of Maine. You are participating because you can offer your perceptions on how your English Language Arts curriculum may meet some of the state of Maine’s goals for including Social and Emotional Learning in schools.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in an approximately 30-45 minute interview about your experience teaching English Language Arts at the secondary level.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.

- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom®.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy.
- You will have seven calendar days to respond. If the PI does not hear back from you on calendar day eight, the PI will assume that you have no comments, and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by using pseudonyms for each of the participants' names and by eliminating any identifying information from the study. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and will be given the choice to have their cameras off during the interview. Participants have the right to skip or not answer any questions for any reason.

Please see the “WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?” section below for additional steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand possible links between secondary English Language Arts curriculum and Social and Emotional Learning.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom®, no information will be taken without participant consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by participants for accuracy before they are added to the study.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- Participants are given the option to turn off their camera during Zoom® interview.
- Once member checking of the transcribed interview is complete the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants, the master list of personal information will be destroyed. Transcripts, recordings, and the master list will be stored on the principal investigator's password protected computer until the time they are to be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected computer accessible only by the principal investigator.
- No data, deidentified or in aggregate, will be shared with the site (school district) leadership.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you and the interview will be destroyed when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions/Protocol

Project Title: PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS ON USING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO MEET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING GOALS

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me about what ages and courses you teach.
2. How long you've been teaching Secondary English?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. How long have you taught at your current school?
5. Are you familiar with social and emotional learning, also known as SEL?
6. How would you describe it?
7. Tell me about any professional development you have received on SEL and how it has prepared you for working with students.
8. What are the opportunities in your ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about creating a strong self-awareness?
9. What are the opportunities in your ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about managing anxiety or stress?

10. What are the opportunities in your ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about creating empathy for others or learning about different experiences?
11. What opportunities do you provide in your ELA curriculum for students to think, talk, read, or write about building or maintaining healthy relationships?
12. Is it your perception that the English classroom is an effective place to address social and emotional learning? Why or why not?
13. Is there anything you'd like to add about the connection between the ELA curriculum and SEL?
14. Follow up questions as needed.