

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS WITH
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DISABILITIES (SED) IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION
SETTINGS

Dissertation in Practice

Submitted to

The School of Education and Health Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

William Bryant Shaw

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Dayton, Ohio

August 2023

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Name: Shaw, William Bryant

APPROVED BY:

E. Essex, PhD
Committee Chair
Lecturer
Department of Educational Administration
University of Dayton

M. Ziskin, PhD
Committee Member
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Administration
University of Dayton

S. Toussaint, EdD
Committee Member
NE Learning Community Director
Aurora Public Schools

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2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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SETTINGS

Name: Bryant, William Shaw
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth Essex

The purpose of this study was to identify and develop an action plan for addressing the role of implicit biases in SED student experiences in the general education setting at Happy Valley Middle School. This study followed a qualitative case study design, where data was collected from 14 participants at Happy Valley Middle School. It was collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group; ten participants were recruited for the semi-structured interviews, and four were recruited for the focus group. Each of the participants was asked the same open-ended questions.

The findings showed that through building authentic relationships, teachers could influence students' SEL development in several ways beyond providing direct instruction. It was also noted that student interruptions hindered the ability to build relationships due to the limited time teachers have with all students, as well as needing skills to engage with students that have support needs outside of the typical student. The study uncovered the need to provide teachers with an opportunity to understand their biases and support the development of the skills they may need to support all students. The limitation of this study is rooted in the small sample size used during the research. Recommendations for further research could be made once teachers understand their biases and attention is given to the depth of relationships between teachers and students.

This is dedicated to my parents. The values of hard work and seeing the good in all people is why I do the work that I do. I also dedicate this to my beautiful daughters that continue to chase their dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The journey that I started many years ago has resulted in my growth and development as a leader, learner, and citizen in society. This could not have been done without the support and guidance of countless people, too many to name individually. I would like to begin by thanking my family for their patience as I fell off the grid for the last few years as I immersed myself in this work. The level of understanding and patience shown while I missed holidays and events was a display of unconditional love that always gave me the gentle push to keep going. I am grateful for my coaches, mentors, and professors that always gave me words of encouragement and wisdom when I needed it the most. Lastly, I would like to thank the profession of education. This journey would not have been possible, had the door never been open to the experiences I have been afforded.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Statement of the Problem

Topic

This study examined teacher perceptions of and interactions with students who had social-emotional disabilities (SED) and were educated in general education settings. Research showed that teacher biases created barriers to the full inclusion of SED students in general education settings (Johnson, 2020), as students with SED found it challenging to interpret individuals' emotional responses and connect with their teachers and peers. How teachers respond and work with SED students could be influenced by unconscious biases inhibiting classroom and learning environments (Sanger, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and develop an action plan for addressing the role of implicit biases in SED student experiences in the general education setting at Happy Valley Middle School.

The Problem of Practice

The problem being studied was how teachers perceived and interacted with students with SED who were educated in general education settings (Broussard-Harshaw, 2019; Canges et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2021). There was a need to understand and address implicit biases' role in SED student experiences in general education settings to create more inclusive schools (Dematthews, 2018). Students with SED find it challenging to relate to others; these students struggle to interpret the emotional responses of their teachers and peers and to make healthy inferences about identified affective behaviors (Anaby et al., 2019). Due to their inability to properly convey initiative, respect for peers,

and respond to directions, students diagnosed with SED are frequently isolated and rejected by their peers (Wright & Wachs, 2019). This is problematic in a middle school setting, as students who have a SED are typically placed in general education settings to reduce instances of absenteeism (Gilmour, 2018) and develop more vital skills in reading and mathematics (Campbell et al., 2018) while experiencing more robust levels of socialization with their peers (Valiente et al., 2020). However, previous research indicated that students diagnosed with SED experience many drawbacks when learning in general education environments, such as decreased one-on-one attention, the experience of more distractions, feeling singled out by their teachers and peers, and a cookie-cutter model of learning (Trach et al., 2018).

Implicit biases are defined as individual perceptions and attitudes toward other people based on stereotypes that are not necessarily within the realm of consciousness (Dickter et al., 2020). Teachers' perceptions of students diagnosed with SEDs can be problematic; how teachers work with and respond to SED students can be based on unconscious biases that could inhibit the classroom and learning environments (Sanger, 2020). Therefore, it was essential to explore teachers' perceptions concerning how they perceived and interacted with students diagnosed with SED to determine the extent to which implicit biases were present (İnan-Kaya & Rubie-Davies, 2022).

From a local perspective, Happy Valley Middle School (pseudonym), located in Pleasantville, Colorado (pseudonym), had over 17% of its students diagnosed with SED. Shiny Mountain Public School District (pseudonym) aims to provide students who receive support in *affective needs* programs with comprehensive social-emotional and academic instruction. According to the Shiny Mountain Public School District Affective

Needs Guidebook, students who receive support from affective needs programming require a minimum of two blocks of social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction outside of the general education environment at the elementary school level and at least one block of SEL at the middle school level. Although this model aims to support the needs of these students, previous research has indicated that placing these students outside of a general education setting interferes with fostering a sense of belonging for students (Kluth, 2020).

I was employed at Happy Valley Middle School as an administrator and observed responses regarding teacher interactions with SED students. These responses included informal conversations with staff, students, and guardians and mediation during conflicts. From a quantitative perspective, school districts all over the metropolitan area were working to address the disproportionality of data connected to marginalized students.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study aimed to identify and develop an action plan for addressing the role of implicit biases in SED experiences in general education settings at Happy Valley Middle School. There was a need to understand and address implicit biases' role in SED student experiences in general education settings to create more inclusive schools (Dematthews, 2018). Upon completing the study, I created a professional development program for Happy Valley Middle School that they could use to educate their teachers on how implicit biases could hinder the learning environments of students diagnosed with SEDs.

Justification of the Problem

Including students identified with SED in general education provides students with opportunities to build relationships, improve social skills, and access the same education curriculum as a student without a disability (Stankovska et al., 2015). Students identified under SED special education classification are much more likely to be educated in separate and isolated educational settings. While 62.6% of all students receiving special education services are educated in a general education setting 80% or more of the time, only 46.2% of students with educational disabilities (ED) are educated in a general education setting 80% or more of the time (Mitchell, 2017). Goodenow (1993a) defined belonging in educational environments as students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and the student as an individual.

Research suggested that a sense of belonging was positively associated with academic success and motivation (Freeman et al., 2007). According to the Shiny Mountain Public Schools Affective Needs Guidebook (2021), students who receive support from affective needs programming require at least two blocks of social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction outside of the general education environment at the elementary school level and at least one block of SEL at the middle school level. Although this model aims to support the needs of these students, previous research indicated that removing students from the general education setting interfered with fostering a sense of belonging for students (Kluth, 2020). These students carry a label that identifies them

with the intent to support; however, teacher bias and interactions in the learning environment can potentially prevent them from having the same learning experiences as other students.

Deficiencies in the Organizational Knowledge Record

Audience

Different stakeholders interested in this study included teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Teachers at Happy Valley Middle School could benefit from professional development opportunities informed by the findings from this study that contribute to a more robust understanding of implicit biases. The findings of this study could help teachers understand how to better interact with students who display SEDs, which could assist them in better managing their classrooms and learning opportunities for the students. Administrators could also benefit from the more profound understanding of implicit bias provided by this study. The results could assist them in informing better classroom practices and professional development opportunities for teachers who work with students diagnosed with SED. This could assist them in providing better structures for SED students in general education settings.

Furthermore, parents and students could also benefit indirectly as administrators and teachers deepen their understanding and seek to provide a more robust and streamlined educational experience in general education. This in turn may lead to improved behaviors and academic grades and deeper learning in an environment with reduced biases.

Overview of Theoretical Framework/Methods/Research Questions

The theoretical framework of critical pedagogy guided this study. Critical pedagogy provides a philosophy of understanding power relationships in a classroom (Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2018). Critical pedagogy can also identify biases and oppressive structures that undermine learning processes and alienate students (Kincheloe et al., 2018). One of the central tenets of critical pedagogy is that of inclusive teaching. Inclusive teaching is a pedagogy where teachers aim to work effectively with all students, despite differences in backgrounds, identities, and disabilities, while supporting their engagement in the classroom with appropriate materials (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). Therefore, critical pedagogy was appropriate to guide this study. The aim was to understand teachers' biases amidst oppressive structures in general education settings while understanding teachers' interactions with students diagnosed with SEDs.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive students with SED when working within a general education setting?

RQ2: How do teachers describe their interactions with students with SED when working within a general education setting?

RQ3: How do teachers perceive their implicit biases as influencing their interactions with students with SED in general education?

This study followed a qualitative case study design, where I collected data from approximately 14 participants at Happy Valley Middle School. I collected data via semi-structured interviews and a focus group; ten participants were recruited for the semi-structured interviews, and four were recruited for the focus group. Each of the

participants was asked the same open-ended questions. After conducting semi-structured interviews and the focus group, I completed a thematic data analysis, uncovering themes from the dataset. This information was used to determine solutions to address teacher biases toward students with SEDs in a general education setting.

Limitations

This study's limitation included the study's population being researched. Because this study is conducted at Happy Valley Middle School in Pleasantville, Colorado, the results may not generalize to other populations and geographical regions. Therefore, future research would need to be conducted to understand this phenomenon better with different schools outside of this region. A secondary limitation was that the participants might be unaware or unable to discuss implicit biases. This was because implicit biases may be unconscious or out of an individual's awareness. Additionally, individuals may have felt uncomfortable discussing biases while working in a school setting and could fear retribution (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Social-Emotional Disorders in Education and Intervention Development

Today, one in every five students in a typical classroom has one or more social or mental health disorders (Daley & McCarthy, 2021). Depression, anxiety, and eating disorders commonly comprise *social-emotional disorders*, which become apparent between adolescence and adulthood (Veeraraghavan, 2022). Continuous identity formation may raise sensitivity to social-emotional disorders, but such issues may also limit identity formation (Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019). Increased awareness of any connection between identity development and social-

emotional problems may aid in developing more effective preventative and intervention strategies for these challenges (Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019).

However, intervention development is still in its infancy; to improve the discipline, comprehensive evaluations that synthesize current fundamental research on these disorders among the youth are required. According to extensive prospective cohort studies, 40 to 50% of school-aged children, from adolescence to young adulthood, fulfill the diagnostic criteria for a mental condition (Dimolareva et al., 2018; Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019). Numerous additional adolescents endure subthreshold symptoms, which can cause discomfort and impairment and eventually result in clinical need. Depressive, anxiety, and eating disorders are more prevalent during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Dimolareva et al., 2018; Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019).

Researchers have identified phenotypic overlaps between depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (e.g., increased emotionality and social sensitivity). It has been hypothesized that these disorders could be conceptualized collectively as social-emotional disorders with common etiological and maintenance factors (Dimolareva et al., 2018; Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019). According to developmental psychopathologists, comprehending typical teenage and emerging adult development might shed light on the mechanisms that result in or perpetuate social-emotional problems during these life stages, affecting their educational experiences and successes. One such normal developmental process for adolescents and emerging adults is self-identity building. Throughout these phases of life, young people seek answers to

concerns about who they are and who they want to be in various areas of life, but these disorders can affect their ability to embrace who they are and be confident in their abilities, thereby affecting their academic journeys (Dimolareva et al., 2018; Potterton et al., 2021; Rapee et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2019).

The Needs of SED Students in Education

Educators traditionally focused on academic subjects increasingly consider students' social and emotional needs (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Teachers may need to deliberate how students learn to regulate their emotions (Blyth et al., 2017). It is common for children to have many of the same sentiments as adults, yet their reasoning abilities are often lacking. Anger, frustration, embarrassment, and anxiousness are common emotions that children and adults experience from time to time. Instead of expressing their feelings verbally like adults, children may communicate their emotions via their bodies, sometimes resorting to tantrums and outbursts to express their frustration and anger (Bostic et al., 2021). Children with self-esteem difficulties benefit from educational experiences that emphasize positive conduct and foster the development of skills that may be applied outside of the classroom. The more social and emotional skills a pupil is taught, the more likely they will succeed in school (Nauert, 2018). Different approaches to social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation in the classroom are possible; they can be taught as a separate program or incorporated into core academic subjects (Collie et al., 2015; Collie & Perry, 2019). It is the responsibility of school employees to provide an environment where children's voices are valued and respected (Pettway, 2019).

At a young age, children learn emotional behaviors that shape the course of their future emotional reactions with the help of their primary caregivers (Blyth et al., 2017).

Children become increasingly self-reliant when they start school and engage with their teachers and classmates. A negative early experience might hurt their self-esteem and academic achievement if they demonstrate inappropriate SED classroom behaviors (Blyth et al., 2017). Sociocultural theory suggests that adults in a society should engage in challenging and meaningful activities (Abrahams et al., 2019; Siddiqui & Ventista, 2018). The cognitive development theory of Vygotsky (1978) holds that infants may learn cultural interpretations and proper reactions to ordinary experiences through informal and formal conversations with adults (Blyth et al., 2017).

Social-Emotional Disorders in General Education Settings

Teachers in general education settings play a significant role in helping students manage social and emotional challenges and disorders. Unfortunately, those in the academic profession can also exacerbate these challenges and disorders. General education classroom instructors sometimes do not meet the everyday academic and social-emotional needs of a classroom, as class sizes average between 25 to 30 children from various backgrounds in one single classroom (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019; Capp et al., 2018; Hansen, 2019; Tan et al., 2018). Tense situations triggered by students' social and emotional issues can be exacerbated if teachers react angrily or inappropriately to students' social and emotional outbursts in the classroom (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019; Capp et al., 2018; Hansen, 2019; Tan et al., 2018). However, when teachers can respond to students' negative social and emotional outbursts with healthy social and emotional patterns, they may help students manage SEL in the context of their current situation (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019; Capp et al., 2018; Hansen, 2019; Tan et al., 2018).

Today, the American public understands the need to provide non-academic skills, such as social and emotional development, to students in school (Gayl, 2018). Ogg et al. (2017) proposed that students should have planned changes in the classroom to practice social and emotional skills as they do with mathematics and reading. School workers are responsible for cultivating a learning atmosphere that values and respects children's voices (Rusk et al., 2013). Social and emotional skills significantly determine student outcomes, such as academic performance and preparation for the job (Abamu, 2018).

An Ohio school principal introduced a school-wide social and emotional learning program in 2014 and noticed a boost in students' academic and social/emotional ability. The school-wide social and emotional endeavor developed avenues for students to express their concerns to teachers and administrators and time for instructors to practice conflict resolution and anxiety management techniques with students during the school day. Students at this school benefitted from a whole-child approach to education since their school's administration enlisted the help of teachers, employees, and the community (Gayl, 2018). Teaching with a whole-child approach fosters responsibility for every student in every community to access a safe, supportive learning environment and a quality academic program (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Del Carmen Esper, 2021; Trifone, 2021).

Teacher Biases and Social-Emotional Disorders

Students are regularly referred to mental health services by their teachers, who base their recommendations on their perceptions of students' mental health needs. Because teachers are often untrained in mental health, their assessments of their students' behavioral issues can be wrong. Additionally, when teaching social and emotional skills,

teachers are sometimes unfamiliar with the terminology or acronyms used to describe the development of these skills (Haymovitz et al., 2018; Teeters et al., 2021). Teaching students about their self-esteem and self-control requires a calm, professional demeanor, and great attention to the intricacies of each situation. Social and emotional skills can be developed in some people naturally, while in others, they must be taught and practiced (Doyle et al., 2018).

Teachers can better serve students with social and emotional challenges in the classroom by learning more about the development of SED abilities. Children must learn to control their anger and other inappropriate social and emotional behaviors to improve their quality of life and academic performance (Blyth et al., 2017). However, robust research demonstrates that teachers are, often, undertrained and not equipped, with their personal biases getting in the way (St Evens, 2022).

According to Ziomek-Daigle and Heckman (2019), teachers should be aware of the numerous SED concerns and the evidence-based interventions to help students deal with these difficulties. Parents may help their children's teachers become more aware of the importance of SED by establishing clear expectations for teachers on their children's social and emotional needs (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019). In the first three to five years of their careers, half of all new teachers in the United States quit the field, mainly because of a high level of job-related stress blamed on their student's social and emotional behaviors (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019).

Strahan and Poteat (2020) observed that instructors struggle to balance academic accomplishment and control students' social and emotional difficulties, primarily due to student communities and family backgrounds. Dealing with a family crisis as a learner

may be disastrous if there are no integrated and coordinated support mechanisms inside the family or immediate family living environment. This then drives instructors to implement instructional strategies that assist learners and, in some cases, entire communities in coping with social and emotional difficulties.

SEL is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as the "process through which children and adults learn and effectively use the information, attitudes, and abilities" necessary to manage their social and emotional well-being (Mutsvara, 2021; Williams, 2017). SEL skills are lifetime abilities critical in developing a well-rounded student, citizen, worker, and responsible parent. At its heart is the schools' and teachers' responsibility in offering educational advice and psychological support to the student (Mutsvara, 2021; Williams, 2017). Therefore, it is critical that teachers should be better trained to understand biases in their approach to working with SED students so they can find a strong balance between academic accomplishments and their student's social and emotional needs.

Teacher professional development programs can assist teachers in recognizing any biases so that they can better overcome social and emotional challenges within the classroom (Neitzel, 2018). Professional development opportunities can ensure that teachers and administrators are critical in developing social and emotional learning abilities to complement their students' daily environment and make it more educationally appropriate (Mutsvara, 2021; Williams, 2017).

Teacher Implicit Biases and SED in General Education Settings

Biases can be effectively regulated and immobilized if people become aware of their prejudices (Flannery, 2015). Educators need to become self-aware, which may help

them modify their perspectives and provide a basis for impartiality when dealing with students. Students perform better when their teachers believe they can succeed, regardless of their abilities. Educators' unconscious biases may influence students' expectations. It is said that implicit biases are beliefs or prejudices formed unconsciously and spontaneously (Mutsvara, 2021; Williams, 2017). We all have ingrained biases that we are unaware of; punitive discipline, for example, maybe the result of certain preconceptions.

When creating a secure learning environment, it is not enough to enforce punishments, keep the school in order, and enable students to make their own decisions. Research has recently concluded that teachers and administrators must focus on equity and culture when implementing SEL in their schools (Mahoney et al., 2020). When attaining a healthy level of social, emotional, and academic well-being for all children, Simmons et al. (2019) identified five barriers that stood in the way of equal access to high-quality SEL instruction. These included "poverty, exclusionary discipline techniques and regulations, lack of trauma-informed processes, implicit bias among school staff, and teacher stress and tiredness" (p. 855).

Restricting students' freedom of choice and degrading their quality of life are the consequences of exclusionary disciplinary measures like school suspension or expulsion (Simmons et al., 2019). Because these strategies are not used consistently, unfair outcomes often result (Simmons et al., 2019). Black students are suspended and expelled three and a half times more frequently and penalized more harshly than white students (Simmons et al., 2019).

Teachers who want to implement complete SEL practices must first connect with their students. Education is a process that requires instructors to empathize with students' difficulties, which can be an issue if there is a sizable socio-demographic disparity between teachers and their students (Main & O'Neil, 2018). It may also be challenging to form excellent relationships may also be challenging if teachers and students are of different ethnicities. Teachers must understand the significance of supporting students' growth in their SEL and have the required skills to do so (Main & O'Neil, 2018).

Instructors often rely on their childhood experiences when they cannot respond favorably to their students' in-class SEL concerns. Educators are taught a variety of teaching strategies in college, but less attention is paid to satisfying students' social and emotional needs in the classroom (Wood et al., 2016). Research has been conducted to determine whether future instructors can enhance social and emotional learning (SEL) in their students. Most instructors completed a written self-assessment on hypothetical emotional situations (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2020; Stillman et al., 2018). With a focus on teaching SEL skills to students in the classroom, they found the benefit of professional development for teachers. However, teachers currently lack these opportunities, allowing their biases to continue (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2020; Stillman et al., 2018).

A Dallas high school administration offered teachers specific education on responding to students' social and emotional outbursts during the summer. The training focused on using Mood Meter technology to help the entire child (Pettway, 2019). In the event of a crisis, the Mood Meter is a tool that teaches pupils how to use the reflective technique to recognize emotions.

There are several ways to enhance social and emotional learning. It was suggested that material should never be taught in isolation from SEL abilities since they are crucial for academic achievement (Pettway, 2019). As a result, new concepts should be introduced gradually, building on the child's current skills. They also concluded that teachers should constantly be ready to assist students experiencing problems, a process known as scaffolding, while fostering students' independence (Pettway, 2019).

Additionally, instructors must ensure that students' talents and skills continue to grow by gradually expanding the borders and increasing the difficulty of the activities when they use the zone of proximal development in the classroom. Peer interactions can help students connect ideas since research shows that exposure to new knowledge in various circumstances and formats aids learning. Everyday interactions positively impact students' social and emotional skills (Pettway, 2019).

Despite its importance, SEL may appear as "another item" on a teacher's to-do list. District-level measures must prioritize student needs and experiences to ensure that an SEL emphasis is implemented consistently and has intrinsic value for children and families. Measurements for both adults and children (e.g., well-being, sense of belonging, and work satisfaction) should be included in the design process of district leaders' measures (e Pettway, 2019).

In the same way that students' conduct affects other areas of classroom learning, so does SEL. School administrators, teachers, and other school personnel must be given the opportunity and support to examine their attitudes, beliefs about the world, and actions to see how they might help or hinder the implementation of good social-emotional learning (Pettway, 2019). A significant and long-lasting impact on children can

only be achieved by adults prioritizing the development of their own social and emotional well-being and employing strategies and behaviors that increase the sense of community among the adults in their workplace, whether district or school. District officials' desire to meet state and federal accountability goals and objectives often blocks student and adult learning and restricts the collaborative co-creation of inclusive learning spaces (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jagers et al., 2018; Halberstadt et al., 2018). Students or student groups disproportionately affected by the current system (i.e., Black, indigenous, people of color) must be prioritized by district and school authorities. To ensure that all children have equitable access to identity-safe learning environments, as well as to equity-centered SEL programs, curricula, and initiatives, historically marginalizing policies, protocols, and practices must be modified and extended (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jagers et al., 2018; Halberstadt et al., 2018).

Other minority students have also been shown to be victims of inequitable treatment in school punishments (Simmons et al., 2019). Exclusionary punishment techniques and procedures cannot be changed, but teachers can arrange their classrooms to limit those restrictions. There are several ways to identify implicit bias in teachers' thinking. According to Randles (2019), teachers have established attitudes or preconceptions that influence their knowledge, behaviors, and decisions in unconscious ways. Teachers may have difficulties creating connections with people who look different despite their formal training. As humans, it is natural to build relationships with similar individuals; yet educators must grow and endeavor to comprehend all cultures, which is best achieved through partnerships with people from varied cultural backgrounds. Outside of school, educators who create relationships with children and families will

understand their cultures and what makes them who they are (Randles, 2019). Despite their busy work and personal schedules, teachers may make a big difference in the classroom by attending one of their students' sporting activities. Deconstructing implicit bias requires more work than what these suggestions provide. However, educators who address their implicit prejudice will find that classroom management and relationships improve, as does the frequency they must send students to administrators (Chin et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Pit-ten Cate, 2019).

According to researchers, including students from various cultural backgrounds can help educators create more equitable and inclusive classrooms to avoid implicit biases. They concluded that the classroom might be more inclusive in various ways (Chin et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Pit-ten Cate, 2019). The researchers suggested that, as a first step, a school should ensure the school library has a collection of books written by a diversity of authors with an inclusive diversity of characters. Students like developing relationships with characters in novels, but it can be challenging for students from different backgrounds if they cannot "see" themselves in the characters. The authors added that there should also be a wide range of skin tones and health conditions represented in any photographs displayed in the space (Chin et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Pit-ten Cate, 2019).

Teachers are called to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, feel at ease in the classroom by incorporating representations of many cultures. Students' individual needs and comfort levels should be considered while designing the educational environment. A friendly, comfortable setting for all students may be created by reading IEPs or 504s, getting to know each student personally, and being aware of the tools that

the student needs (Deaton & Goering, 2020; Smith, 2020). There is information that teachers need to help students with disabilities feel safe, comfortable, and welcomed in the classroom, ready for SEL challenges (Deaton & Goering, 2020; Smith, 2020).

SED Student Barriers to Success in General Education Settings

During the last decade, educational officials and school administrators have been more concerned about the scarcity of SEL implementation training for teachers (Greenberg et al., 2017). A survey of American teachers, dubbed "The Missing Piece," found that many want to incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) into their curriculum. Around 95% of teachers felt social and emotional skills could be taught and incorporated into the school curriculum (Bridgeland et al., 2013). However, in the United States, education stakeholders and politicians do not prioritize SEL (Carlson, 2019; McGee et al., 2022).

Glennie et al. (2017) focused on teachers' experiences with SED in the classrooms. Most of the teachers who participated in the study were familiar with obtaining information about students' social and emotional development. Teacher experiences and perspectives on dealing with students with SED issues were gathered through a focus group in this study. The research participants were also asked to share their strategies for SED student success with the rest of the group (Glennie et al., 2017). To begin the inquiry, teachers were asked to complete a survey regarding the characteristics of their schools. Twenty-eight teachers participated in the research group. Only two instructors had fewer than 11 years of teaching experience; the rest were seasoned professionals. Moreover, half of the respondents worked in suburban schools, while a quarter worked in urban schools, and a quarter worked in rural schools, according

to the study results. Teachers in schools with 1,500 or more pupils comprised less than a quarter of those polled, with the majority working in secondary schools (Glennie et al., 2017).

Instructors reviewed teaching methods in a focus group, including cooperative learning and coaching, to help students succeed academically and socially (Mira-Galvan & Gilar-Corbi, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Some teachers advocated implementing character education programs at all school levels to help students learn about and put their SEL skills into practice. Teachers at a high school detailed how they implemented social-emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms. The school's approach sought to build strong ties with students through student-led voice teams (Mira-Galvan & Gilar-Corbi, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As a result of student-led advocacy groups, schools could engage students in decision-making. To hear from students on issues impacting the school and classrooms biweekly, the school built a forum for them to use. Researchers have proposed that professors allow students to repeat assignments, quizzes, or tests more frequently to encourage students to persevere in their education. Teachers and counselors have suggested that schedule flexibility might help students build relationships by meeting in small groups and engaging with one another (Mira-Galvan & Gilar-Corbi, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Conclusion

The literature review showed that while most teachers agreed that fostering better social and emotional connections between students and teachers is best to improve student-teacher relations, they are under-trained and have personal biases affecting how they manage their students' needs in their general classrooms. SEL might be hindered

from time to time by school testing regulations, which mandate that a specific amount of academic information be taught before test dates, leaving little time for managing students' social and emotional needs. Educators are also confronted by a dearth of resources and chances for continuing education to support students who struggle with social and emotional learning and address their implicit biases. These findings showed that teachers could influence students' SEL development in several ways beyond providing direct instruction. To provide one example, when students observe an engaging teacher who demonstrates these traits, they gain a sense of belonging in school.

Along with SEL training, instructors may help foster students' development mindsets by encouraging critical thinking and supporting them to comprehend concepts. The review highlighted the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, as much research highlighted how issues of social justice and democracy should not be separate from teaching and learning. For example, research has concluded that teachers and administrators must focus on equity and culture when implementing SEL into their schools or meeting the needs of SED students. Therefore, gaining insights into biases is essential for teachers and administrators. This is better achieved by professional development that can not only train teachers to meet the needs of all students, including those with SED, but also understand how biases can act as a barrier for inclusion and equity in educational processes.

Action Research Design and Methods

This section will discuss the study's action research design and methods. This section began by discussing the selected research method and design, identifying the site and population selection, and discussing the importance of my positionality within this

study. This section then identified ethical and political considerations and data collection methods. I concluded this section by discussing how trustworthiness was maintained throughout the research process.

Research Method and Design

I followed a qualitative method that utilized a case study design. A qualitative method was selected for this study as the aim was to have teachers provide their perceptions and experiences on how they interact with students with SED being taught in general education settings. Additionally, teachers were encouraged to discuss any implicit biases experienced in general education settings. Therefore, a qualitative method was aligned with this proposed study, as its purpose was to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon being explored (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, qualitative research aimed to understand first-hand accounts through the truthful reporting of participants through a narrative form (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Unlike its quantitative counterpart, qualitative research allows individuals to provide the researcher with what they deem necessary and essential through their eyes, highlighting a more comprehensive understanding of their worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Fryer et al., 2018).

Additionally, a case study design was utilized. The purpose of a case study design was to explore a complex phenomenon so that different factors could be identified that interact with each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The main benefit of a case study design is that it allowed me to collect data via more than one method. In this study, I was able to collect data via interviews and a focus group. Because a case study allows the researcher to explore a complex phenomenon, more profound levels of understanding are required, which can only be achieved by collecting data from more than two methods

(Creswell & Poth, 2016). Case studies also allow for triangulation, where the researcher can study the collected data to increase the reliability and credibility of the results (Renz et al., 2018). Therefore, a qualitative case study design was selected for this proposed study.

Site or Population Selection

This study was conducted at Happy Valley Middle School in Pleasantville, Colorado. The school had approximately 465 students, consisting of 17.3% of students with disabilities and 54% of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Concerning the school's personnel, the staff comprised 53 staff members, including itinerant teachers. The school developed intentional teams to support its vision and mission. The researcher's target population was teachers working at Happy Valley Middle School. When recruiting individuals for this study, I followed a purposive sampling strategy. A purposive sampling strategy is when the researcher selects individuals to join the study based on his judgments and criteria (Etikan et al., 2016). Therefore, to participate in this study, individuals were required to meet the following criteria:

- Each participant was employed at Happy Valley Middle School.
- Each participant had been a certified teacher in the State of Colorado.
- Each teacher had taught within a general education setting that included SED students.
- Each participant had worked in their position for a minimum of one year.

Individuals who did not meet all criteria were not included in the study.

Researcher Role and Positionality

As an African American male educator who could have fallen into the overrepresented group due to demonstrated behaviors at a young age, I identified directly

with the participants in the research articles. I considered myself to be both an insider and an outsider.

The need to be aware of a potential power imbalance due to my position as a building administrator I interviewed participants was at the forefront of the design of this study. For this reason, recruiting participants with different experiences and roles was a priority. There was also an awareness regarding the balance of power due to my position as a building administrator as I interviewed participants. Allowing participants to remain anonymous, keeping the data confidential, and obtaining informed consent were critical steps in creating an authentic space.

The need to recognize biases and assumptions that may be brought into the research was essential to maintain the integrity of the research. They were addressed through practices that supported my awareness and attention to subjectivity. Scholars, including Peshkin (1988), reported the importance of researchers being attentive to their subjectivity. One of the methods used by Peshkin (1988) involved a reflective practice using journaling with a notecard. Cheater (1987) stated, "We cannot rid ourselves of this subjectivity, nor should we wish to; but we ought, perhaps, to pay it very much more attention...." (p.172). To pay attention to subjectivity, I memoed during the research process. During the interview and focus group process with the participants, I wrote a memo following each contact with the participants and reflected on how my biases may have impacted interpretations of the information collected. Memoring also provided space for noting any emerging themes to be explored after the data had been analyzed. To ensure that the analysis focused on also incorporated member checking, a process where I provided each participant with a copy of the transcription of their interview or focus

group to check for accuracy (Candela, 2019). This ensures that the data analysis would be based on exactly what each participant said.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Some ethical and political considerations were considered for this study. First, I sought approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district where I conducted the study. I did not begin prior to these approvals being received. Second, I asked study participants to review and sign an informed consent form before participating. The consent form highlighted the purpose of the study, what was expected of the participants, how confidentiality was to be protected, how the participants could remove themselves from the study at any time and without any repercussions, and the risk associated with participating in this study. Individuals who did not sign the consent form were not invited to participate in the study.

For the purposes of confidentiality, the participants' identities were protected by only referring to them in numerical order (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). Additionally, I minimized the collection of any identifying information from the participants. The only demographic information collected was gender, experience, level of education, and age range when collecting data. Because of the confidential information in this study, all information was stored on a password-protected removable flash drive, and all paper documents were secured in a locked filing cabinet inside my residence. Access to the data was limited to only me, and I agreed to delete all data after three years, which aligns with the university's IRB policies and procedures.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews and a focus group were used to collect data. I planned to collect data from 20 Happy Valley Middle School teachers using purposive sampling. A purposive sampling method is when a researcher recruits individuals based on his judgment and specific criteria (Etikan et al., 2016). Out of the teacher participants, ten teachers were selected for the semi-structured interviews, and four teachers for the focus group. The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, which occurred once I experienced redundancy in the semi-structured interviews. The final number of participants for the semi-structured interviews was ten, and an additional four for the focus group.

When recruiting individuals for the study and after obtaining approval from the university's IRB and school district, emails were sent to all teachers working with students with a SED and operating within a general education setting. The recruitment email provided the teachers with the purpose of the study, what was required of the participants, the criteria needed to participate, and my contact information. Therefore, to participate in this study, I ensured that all participants met the following criteria:

- Each participant was currently a teacher at Happy Valley Middle School in Pleasantville, Colorado.
- Each participant worked within a general education setting.
- Each participant currently worked with students who have been diagnosed with a SED.
- Each participant had been working within their position for at least one year.

Individuals who did not meet all criteria were prohibited from participating in the study.

Individuals were recruited on a first-come-first-served basis. Once interested individuals responded to the recruitment email and checked their eligibility criteria, an informed consent form was sent to the participants. The informed consent highlighted the purpose of the study, what was expected of the participants, how confidentiality was protected, how the participants could remove themselves from the study at any time and without any repercussions, and the risk associated with participating in this study. The teacher participants were required to sign the informed consent, scan the document, and return it via email. After receiving the participant's signed informed consent form, appointment times were scheduled for a semi-structured interview or a focus group. It is important to note that the participants who completed a semi-structured interview could not participate in the focus group and vice versa. The two data collection methods included different participants.

Before the semi-structured interviews, a list of 10 open-ended questions was developed for each participant. The ten open-ended questions aligned with the study's problem, purpose, theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology. A panel of experts reviewed the semi-structured interview questions to ensure alignment with the hope of limiting researcher bias. The panel of experts included three individuals with similar professional and educational experiences related to the Dissertation in Practice. If any panel members reported any misalignment between the semi-structured interview questions in the study, they recommended changes, which they then discussed with my university's Chair. Each semi-structured interview was conducted in person or via Zoom video conferencing, which aligned with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidelines of social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The

participant provided a convenient time for them to meet to complete their private interview. Each semi-structured interview took 45 to 60 minutes.

During each semi-structured interview, each participant was asked the same ten open-ended questions in the same manner. Each participant answered the questions in any manner that they saw fit. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify or encourage the participants to expand their responses. Each semi-structured interview was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. Upon the transcription of the interviews, they were shared with the participant to review the document. The participants were encouraged to review the document for accuracy and report any inaccuracies or errors in the transcripts. If any inaccuracies or errors are identified, changes were made to the transcript to reflect precisely what the participant said.

Before the focus group, a list of eight open-ended questions was developed for the participants. The open-ended questions aligned with the study's problem, purpose, theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology. The same panel of experts reviewed the focus group questions to ensure alignment with the hope of limiting researcher bias. The focus group was conducted in a conferencing format and took place at a convenient time for all participants to meet. The focus group was scheduled for 60 minutes. To ensure that the time was convenient for all group members, the focus group members were sent a series of times available to meet; I then selected the time that was identified as convenient by all focus group members.

During the focus group, each participant was asked the same eight questions; however, participants were encouraged to respond to each other, generating a group discussion. Each participant could answer the questions in any manner that they see fit.

The focus group was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. Once I transcribed each interview, I shared the transcript with the participants to review the document. Like the semi-structured interviews, if any inaccuracies or errors were identified, the transcript was changed to reflect precisely what the focus group said.

Data Analysis Procedures

A thematic content analysis was followed to complete the data analysis. A thematic content analysis allowed me to identify commonly used words, phrases, ideas, and sentences from the participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, I utilized an inductive coding process, where codes are derived from the data (Chandra & Shang, 2019). I continued to break down codes and moved them into thematic categories that constituted the findings of this study. NVivo Pro and a qualitative codebook will assist the researcher in identifying codes and recording them appropriately. NVivo Pro is a qualitative data management program that aids researchers in storing data and determining codes. A qualitative codebook assisted in recording the themes concerning each research question, identifying the participants who contributed to each theme, and exact quotations demonstrating support for the findings. I used the same data analysis procedures for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative action research, trustworthiness is defined as the accuracy of the research study, the data, and the findings (Shufutinsky, 2020). When discussing trustworthiness in this study, I addressed four constructs: (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, (c) transferability, and (d) dependability.

Credibility

Credibility is confidence in the study's findings (Shufutinsky, 2020). Therefore, I selected participants that met specific criteria to ensure credibility in this study. This ensured that all selected participants had the education and experience to answer the research questions. Other ways that credibility was maintained was through the triangulation process of the two data collection methods and having complete memoing through the research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality of the study's findings (Kyrngäs et al., 2020). The findings must be based on the participants' responses and not on the perceptions or opinions of the researcher. Therefore, I completed member checking with the participants to address confirmability in this study. Member checking allowed the participants to review their semi-structured interview and focus group transcripts to ensure they reflected precisely what was said.

Transferability

Transferability refers to how the study's findings can be transferable to other settings (Kyrngäs et al., 2020). It is important to note that because this study focused on a middle school setting, the results may not be transferable or generalizable to other populations and geographical settings. However, the research included descriptions of the site and the interview and focus group data to allow readers to determine the transferability of findings to other contexts.

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which other researchers could repeat this study (Kyrngäs et al., 2020). In this study, I documented the procedures followed in completing

this research; future researchers will follow these steps to replicate this study with different populations and geographical regions.

CHAPTER TWO

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The problem being studied was how teachers perceived and interacted with students with SED who were educated in general education settings (Broussard-Harshaw, 2019; Canges et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2021). There was a need to better understand and address the role of implicit biases in SED student experiences in general education settings to create more inclusive schools (Dematthews, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and develop an action plan for addressing the role of implicit biases in SED student experiences in the general education setting at Happy Valley Middle School.

This chapter started by reporting the descriptive statistics of the participants' demographic characteristics and then continues by reporting and presenting the qualitative results. When reporting the qualitative results, I reviewed how the data was analyzed and identified the themes that emerged from the data collected from the participants. When presenting the qualitative results, I reported the findings in relation to each research question that guided this study, while providing specific participant quotations that substantiate each theme. This chapter then concludes with my discussion of the implementation and assessment plan.

Reporting Descriptive Statistics

I collected data from semi-structured interviews with ten participants and a focus group with 4 participants from Happy Valley Middle School in Pleasantville, Colorado. Table 1 below highlights the demographic characteristics that the participants identified when presenting to the study.

Table 1:*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

	Gender	Age Range	Education Level	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Female	30-39	Master's	15
Participant 2	Female	50-59	Master's	15
Participant 3	Female	30-39	Master's	9
Participant 4	Female	50-59	Master's	15
Participant 5	Female	50-59	Master's	15
Participant 6	Male	60+	Doctorate	34
Participant 7	Female	40-49	Master's	15
Participant 8	Male	30-39	Master's	11
Participant 9	Male	40-49	Master's	20
Participant 10	Female	50-59	Master's	20
Focus Group Participant 1	Male	40-49	Master's	12
Focus Group Participant 2	Female	30-39	Master's	7
Focus Group Participant 3	Female	50-59	Doctorate	20

	Gender	Age Range	Education Level	Years of Experience
Focus Group Participant 4	Male	40-49	Doctorate	20

As depicted in Table 1, from the semi-structured interview participants, seven participants identified as female, and three participants identified as male. When it came to the participants' ages, three participants reported being between 30 to 39 years of age; two participants reported being between 40 to 49 years of age; four participants reported being between 50 and 59 years of age, and one participant reported being older than 60. Nine of the participants reported having a master's degree, while one participant stated that he had a doctorate (e.g., PhD). All participants reported varying years of experience that ranged between nine years and 34 years. The mean years of experience of the participants was that of 16.9 years.

The focus group participants also presented with varying demographic characteristics. For example, two focus group participants identified as male, while the other two identified as female. Two of the participants reported being between the ages of 40-49 years; one identified as being between 50-59 years; one participant reported that they were between 30-39 years. Two focus group participants reported that they had a doctorate degree, while the other two stated that they had a master's degree. Finally, two focus group participants stated that they had 20 years of experience, while one reported having 12 years of experience and the other stating that they had seven years of

experience. The mean number of years of experience for the focus group was that of 14.75 years.

Reporting Qualitative Results

I followed a thematic content analysis when completing the data analysis. A thematic content analysis allowed me to identify commonly used words, phrases, ideas, and sentences from the participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, I utilized an inductive coding process, where codes were derived from the data (Chandra & Shang, 2019). I continued breaking down codes and moving them into thematic categories that constituted the findings of this study. NVivo Pro and a qualitative codebook assisted in identifying codes and recording them appropriately. NVivo Pro is a qualitative data management program that aids researchers in storing data, documenting analyses, and organizing codes. A qualitative codebook also assisted in recording the themes in relation to each research question and identifying the participants who contributed to each theme and exact quotations that demonstrated support of the findings. I used the same data analysis procedures for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

When conducting the analysis, it was important to ensure that the process was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive students with SED when working within a general education setting?

RQ2: How do teachers describe their interactions with students with SED when working within a general education setting?

RQ3: How do teachers perceive their implicit biases as influencing their interactions with students with SED within a general education setting?

This section will report the qualitative findings in relation to each of the research questions.

RQ1: How do teachers perceive students with SED when working within a general education setting?

The first research question aimed to understand how teachers perceived students with SED when working within a general education setting. Within this research question, two themes emerged from the dataset: (a) inconsistent interruptions and (b) relationship building difficulties.

Theme 1: Inconsistent Interruptions (unpredictable, *outside the norm of expectations*)

The first theme that emerged from the dataset was that the participants reported that students with SED tend to provide inconsistent interruptions when it comes to their everyday classroom activities. Table 2 depicts the codes that created this thematic category.

Table 2:

Themes Codes 1

Theme 1: Inconsistent Interruptions
Difficulties
Difficulty controlling
Regulate
Predictable
Struggle
Classroom community
Refusal
Extreme challenge
Unable to follow classroom norms
Impacts
Severity
Defiant behaviors
Struggle with maintaining consistent control

The participants were able to provide examples of how students with SED influenced inconsistent interruptions when it came to their classroom. For example, Participant 1 (P1) was able to discuss how students with SED tend to have problems with controlling their behaviors and actions:

Someone who may have difficulty communicating their needs, may have trouble controlling and regulating their actions and emotions to fit with societal expectations of behavior in different settings, and/or having trouble reading other people's emotions/reactions. (P1)

Participant 2 (P2) discussed how SED students tend to struggle with behaviors as they demonstrate defiance and an inability to follow behavior norms:

Social-emotional disorders present themselves in students in their inability to maintain the equilibrium necessary to have academic success in school. It often presents as defiance and an inability to follow behavior norms. (P2)

Participant 3 (P3) was able to discuss different behaviors that they had experience with their students with SED:

Something I've noticed that is relatively consistent amongst these students is that a predictable or routine stimulus from a teacher or peer can produce an incongruous or - by society's norms - an unnecessary response. It can be as innocuous a bit over-enthusiastic or, on the other end, despondent response. Other times, it can be more explosive or severe. With the students I have worked with, I feel like these behaviors depend on what their disorder may be centered upon, hyper-sensitivity, emotional dysregulation, impulse control, etc. (P3)

Similarly, Participant 4 (P4) reported that because of specific behaviors, students with SED influence repeated interruptions to classroom activities:

I sometimes have students who struggle to figure out how to be a part of a classroom community. This can manifest in the form of mean behavior - cruel teasing, physical intimidation, physical harm. It can manifest in the form of refusal to attempt assignments.

It can manifest in the form of repeated interruptions to class activities. (P4)

Participant 5 (P5) discussed how students with SED can bring unpredictability to the classroom:

All students are different, of course, but the similarities I've noticed among those with SED include inappropriate language and gestures, outsized reactions, and unpredictability. (P5)

Participant 7 (P7) discussed how many students with SED find it difficult to understand or to follow classroom norms:

They are unsure of or unable to follow general classroom norms. They often have very low academic confidence, self-confidence, and academic stamina and their relationships with their peers are strained, often because their peers don't understand their disorders and the behaviors that often accompany these disorders. (P7)

Participant 8 (P8) was able to describe the experiences that they had with students with SED:

Typically, these students struggle to interact “normally” with peers, especially those outside of their close friend group. Being in a large class setting frequently creates stress and/or anxiety for them and they can sometimes be quite a challenge classroom management-wise. (P8)

Participant 10 (P10) discussed how behaviors are difficult because students with SED cannot necessarily control their feelings or emotions:

In general, my experiences are varied depending on the students' condition and level of social-emotional disorders. For example, I have worked with students who exhibit one or more conditions [of SED], who struggle with maintaining a consistent control of their emotions and feelings. (P10)

Finally, one focus group participant identified within this theme, as they were able to directly discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic brought about additional interruptions, such as feelings of trauma. These experiences of trauma brought about additional aggression of students. Focus Group Participant 2 (FGP2) stated:

As we returned to in person learning after the pandemic, there was very little, if any time committed for a real re-entry for students and parents. The band-aids

were ripped off and we were told everyone is suffering from learning loss and there was urgency around acceleration to close gaps. The social piece was not overlooked, but it may have been an intended consequence. Everyone was impacted by trauma in some capacity and people did not have time to process and heal and this is showing up in staff (burnout and leaving the profession), students (aggressive behavior), parents (questionable comments and behavior). (FGP2)

Theme 2: Relationship Building Difficulties

The second theme that emerged from the dataset was that the participants reported that they experienced relationship building difficulties with students with SED. Table 3 depicts the codes that created this thematic category.

Table 3:

Theme 2 Codes

Codes
Theme 2: Relationship building difficulties
Individualizing
Relationship
Relationships
Relationship-building
Chemistry
Strong, positive, relationships
Social interactions
Language barriers
Communicate
Communication

The participants in this theme were able to discuss how they experienced difficulties in building relationships with students with SED. For example, P3 reported

that having many students in the classroom hinders their ability to build individualized relationships with SED students:

The biggest obstacles in doing so effectively are class sizes and manpower. With classes of 26+ and only one teacher, it can be a challenge to make sure that these needs are being met in addition to individualizing and actualizing the experiences for the 25+ other students in class as well. I think of when I co-taught with an ELD teacher, five of our six English Language Arts (ELA) classes had another educator in the room skilled in differentiation with similar educational philosophy made an absolute world of difference in helping students feel self-efficacy, progress, and achievement in class. (P3)

P6 was able to discuss difficulties in building relationships due to non-verbal behaviors and the lack of chemistry that can be formed between themselves and the student with SED:

Obstacles to working with students come in all shapes and sizes, depending on the student and their unique challenges, and depending on the chemistry between me and the student in question. Obstacles can be in my control and subtle, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, or they can be out of my control and huge such as student trauma or lived experiences picked up outside the classroom. As stated earlier, obstacles come in all shapes and sizes and can be unseen and very subtle or conspicuous and stunning, in my control or out. (P6)

P7 discussed that building positive relationships with students with SED takes time, and they do not necessarily have time in a general education classroom setting:

Building strong, positive, relationships takes time. Time is always a limiting factor in a general education classroom, particularly in middle school when so many students have high needs, particularly as we recover from the COVID pandemic. Oftentimes, building content knowledge and skills takes a backburner to just supporting students as they figure out how to navigate in their environment. (P7)

P8 reported that building positive relationships with teachers is not the only challenge, but also with other students in a general education setting:

The biggest obstacles seem to be around social interactions with peers in group settings and in how they deal with setbacks/frustrations. In my science class, we run collaborative table groups, typically of 3-4 students as it's a hands-on, interactive curriculum. Typically, students with social-emotional disorders can do just fine working in these groups but when conflicts arise in the social dynamics of the group, they often don't have the ability to deal with the issue in an appropriate way. Academically, they also typically struggle to push through setbacks and frustrations in their academic work. Like any other student, they thrive when making progress and growth they can see but have a much harder time coming back and reengaging when things get tough or something unexpected happens. (P8)

P10 reported language barriers can make it difficult to create positive relationships with students with SED:

Another challenge is when a student has a language barrier and no adults with whom they can easily communicate how they feel. (P10).

Finally, FGP4 contributed to this theme as they were able to discuss difficulties with students wanting to build relationships with teachers. FGP4 reported:

When layering the technology aspect with isolation, there is a natural inclination to be siloed. Some students do not want to interact with peers, let alone a teacher that is trying to teach them something that they do not deem fun or important to them. Some of this can be mitigated using our PLCs (Professional Learning Community) to leverage strategies that others are using and that are working for students that struggle. It is a challenge sometimes as a teacher when a student can demonstrate expected behaviors for a colleague, but not for others, especially when you're "the other" because you have to ask what am I doing wrong that is not working? Oftentimes, we as teachers forget to try and look at the interaction behind the eyes of the child. (FGP4)

RQ2: How do teachers describe their interactions with students with SED when working within a general education setting?

The second research question aimed to understand how teachers described their interactions with students with SED when working in a general education setting. Within this research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: (a) Building strong, positive, and individualized relationships.

Theme 3: Building Strong, Positive, and Individualized Relationships

The third theme that emerged from the data within the second research questions, highlighted that the participants reported that they do their best to build strong, positive, and individualized relationships with students with SED. Although the previous theme discussed this as being a challenge or barrier, the participants reported that they strived to

do this at Happy Valley Middle School. Table 4 depicts the codes that created this thematic category.

Table 4:

Theme 3 Codes

Codes	
Theme 3: Building Strong, Positive, and Individualized Relationships	Respond Student needs Establishing relationship Rapport Engage Engage the kid Strong, positive, relationships Feel welcome Making a connection

As depicted in Table 6, nine of the participants contributed to this theme (90%). Many of the participants were able to discuss how important it is to build strong, positive, and individualized relationships with students with SED. For example, P1 stated:

Trying to prevent an escalation of behavior from myself or the student. It's important to respond in a way that is not going to cause a student's behavior to escalate. Also, since every student and their needs are different, it can be challenging to accommodate all the needs appropriately and consistently in the

classroom, especially when there is more than one student with a diagnosed social-emotional disorder. (P1)

P2 reported that by building positive and strong relationships with the SED students, they can then help them be more successful in a general education setting:

Initially, establishing a relationship and rapport with the student so I am able to work with them. That relationship then gives me what I need to moderate their behaviors in a gen ed setting. (P2)

P3 was able to discuss how they build strong, positive, and individualized relationships with their students with SED:

Every day, I greet all my students by name and ask how they're doing, but I make extra effort to check in with our students with SE disorders. I try to make sure that there are no additional barriers to their success for the day (are they hungry, thirsty, or tired? Do they need a charger or device for the day? do they need to debrief about a previous class or any questions before we get started?) and then try to clear any that may exist at the moment. (P3)

P4 reported that by building positive, strong, and individualized relationships with their students, they can help engage the student and disrupt any negative patterns:

I try to use everything I know, to engage the kid and disrupt negative patterns. Sometimes I am explicit, sharing my observations with the student and trying to help them think through different strategies. Sometimes I am more subtle, rewarding desired behaviors with candy or praise. I try pairing the student with different partners/table groups to see if I can influence their behavior in this way. I make counseling referrals, meet with parents, and suggest activities. Mostly I try

to be hypervigilant and thoughtful about what I say and do -- I'm kind of like this anyway in the classroom, but more so with a kid whose needs in this area are extreme. I know it's a cliché, but teaching is all about relationships, no matter where a kid is on the social-emotional spectrum. (P4)

Similarly, P5 stated:

I try to be consistent, firm, and neutral. I work hard at not allowing my own emotions and reactions to heighten in response to the behavior of the student(s) with SED. (P5)

P7 discussed why they build strong, positive, and individualized relationships with their students with SED:

My first focus is on building strong, positive relationships with students. I want them to know that I have their back and I want to help them navigate the classroom environment and figure out the content and skills that we are focusing on. (P7)

P8 reported that it takes more effort to build strong, positive, and individualized relationships with SED students:

While I strive to treat these students like any other student as much as possible, students with social emotional disorders typically can require much more one on one work and support. This might be to help them with class work when telling them in front of the class to keep working and that I am coming over as I do with other students, checking in and making a connection or discussing why the work is meaningful might help them engage more. (P8)

P9 stated:

Making them feel welcome and seeing the good in them allows them to let their guard down, to de-escalate. It is important to be consistent, levelheaded, and to never be surprised with things go well. (P9)

Finally, FGP 3 was able to discuss the need for students to continue learning intrapersonal and interpersonal social skills so that strong relationships can be built.

FGP3 stated:

The proverbial iceberg has expanded underneath the surface when thinking about building relationships with students. The time students lost to interact with peers and read facial expressions has eroded the ability for students to read a room and make decisions that impact others. Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills need to be developed to help students navigate relationships with adults and peers alike. As teachers we must find and model a healthy balance between getting to know students and them getting to know us. (FGP3)

RQ3: How do teachers perceive their implicit biases as influencing their interactions with students with SED within a general education setting?

The third research question aimed to understand how teachers perceived their implicit biases as influencing their interactions with students with SED in a general education setting. Under this research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: (a) lumping all SED students together.

Theme 4: Lumping all SED Students Together

The fourth theme that emerged from the dataset, highlighted how the participants perceived that many students with SED are lumped together. Table 5 depicts the codes that created this thematic category.

Table 5:

Theme 4 Codes

Codes
Theme 4: Lumping all SED students together
Lump
Lump students
Don't even realize
Influences
Label
Being on the offense
Not all students
Expect the worse
Attitude

Within this theme, the participants were able to discuss how implicit biases can lead many teachers in lumping students with SED together, which does not help in attending to the problematic or disruptive behaviors that can occur. For example, P1 stated:

I think a lot of teachers lump students who have been diagnosed with social-emotional disorders into one group and assume they are “bad” students. I’ve seen a lot of teachers have biases against certain students due to who their siblings were when they went through our school. It is important to remember that all students, including those with a social-emotional disorder, are treated as unique individuals and it is our job as teachers to support their individual needs. (P1)

P2 reported that major stereotypes can contribute to lumping students with SED together:

The major stereotype that I think many adults have been that they believe that their behavior is a choice rather than a disorder that is beyond their ability to control. (P2)

P3 reported that it is important for teachers to deconstruct stereotypes so that students with SED can experience individualized instruction and relationships:

Implicit biases are like smoke that we don't even realize we're breathing; they're shaped and changed and unshaped and reformed and changed time and time again as more experiences build a schema in our minds. Although it's important to come prepared with the tools required to make sure every student grows personally and academically each year, it's also important to deconstruct biases and "single stories" that could influence the way we choose to champion for and love our kids. Every year, month, week, and day is a new chance with every student. (P3)

P4 discussed the importance of understanding the resources and supports that students with SED require:

There doesn't always seem to be much rhyme or reason to why some students are diagnosed as requiring special education services and others are not. I feel this is true across the board (for academic as well as social-emotional disabilities) and in part it relates to our school district's inequitable response to the overrepresentation of students of color in our special education programs. It is currently the policy of our district to avoid placing students of color in special education at all costs. (P4)

P8 discussed what happens when teachers lump SED students together in a general education classroom setting:

Teachers will immediately begin to interact with these students in a controlling way. Something to the effect of it being a battle and that if the teacher doesn't lay down the law immediately and establish dominance, the student is going to blow up and cause a scene. Therefore, I think so many teacher interactions with these types of students come from a place of already being on the offense so that a student doesn't have a chance to get escalated. On the other hand, teachers also take the opposite approach and feel that the slightest thing might set the student off, so they simply ignore them rather than risk some type of situation in their class. (P8)

P9 reported that to limit implicit biases, it is important to remember that not every student with SED exhibits the same behaviors or symptoms:

I would say that there is the bias that kids with social emotional orders will be withdrawn or that they will exhibit challenging behaviors. Not all students will struggle with impulse control - these are perhaps the most noticeable behaviors that define our perceptions and attitudes. (P9)

P9 concluded:

It's easy for teachers to expect the worst from students with identified social-emotional behaviors. I think it can often lead to teachers having an attitude of "here we go again" when they see identified students on their rosters. Teachers need to keep this in check. No student should ever become "the enemy." (P9)

In addition, three focus group participants were able to contribute to this theme. For example, FGP1 was able to discuss the importance of leadership addressing lumping students together:

Having leadership that can have a clear definition of the vision, the skill to communicate that plan and provide the necessary support to ensure the priorities remain prioritized. Understanding the needs of the building and communicating these with central administration as well as advocating to protect time and not getting bogged down by the “flavor of the month” initiatives. (FGP1)

FGP2 reported that it is imperative that time and resources are provided to teachers so that they can be appropriately supported:

Embedding language, rituals, and routines as a norm to create a welcoming culture of the building throughout. This isn't a one and done professional development that the staff takes part in and then is forgotten about. It must be strategic, and intentional. Time and resources must be committed to ensure it gets the traction needed for it to be relevant. We teachers have enough on our plates, things that we could stop doing in place of this work could support buy-in. (FGP2)

Finally, FGP4 discussed how it is important that teachers have a safe space where they can reflect before working with many students of different abilities all at once:

Providing a psychologically safe space for teachers to reflect and focus without judgment. This profession is very personal and hopefully, no teacher goes into the profession with the intent on doing harm to students. As time goes by, and with all the changes in education, a lot of us have been in survival mode. Having time

to take a step back, breathe, and ask, “who am I and how do I enter this space” to serve all kids is daunting because of the pressure for students to “succeed” (FGP4)

Connecting the Findings to the Theoretical Framework

The critical pedagogy framework analyzes societal structures, including education, with a critical eye toward identifying and addressing power, privilege, and oppression issues (Cavanagh et al., 2019). This framework can be beneficial in the context of relationship-building difficulties, interruptions, and grouping students with social-emotional disorders (SED) together, as it can help to uncover the systemic and institutional biases that underlie these problems. For instance, students with SED may have trouble forming positive relationships with educators due to a lack of support and understanding from teachers who may not be adequately trained to meet their unique needs (Spörer et al., 2020). Inconsistencies in classroom management and disruptions may also be symptomatic of broader issues like inadequate funding or resources for teacher training and support (Tattum, 2022). Similarly, grouping students with SED may stem from biases and stereotypes based on their disability status (Chung & Kim, 2022). Employing the critical pedagogy framework makes it possible to pinpoint the structural factors and power dynamics contributing to these issues. This can lead to more tailored interventions for students with SED, as well as the implementation of policies and practices that are more equitable and inclusive in the field of education.

From an educator's standpoint, it is natural to experience empathy and worry for students grappling with SED while facing prejudice. It is critical to acknowledge that everyone is entitled to dignity and respect. There are policies in place to support the

prevention of discrimination for people with specific needs. Educating ourselves about SED and methods to overcome bias can foster a more united and supportive educational environment. It is incumbent upon me to develop systems that enable others to act as advocates and facilitate the creation of a more inclusive and accepting atmospheres for all students. On a personal level, I think about the biases I am subjected to in public settings based on my outward appearances. My capacity to interact and respond to negative experiences has developed over time. I recall struggles in my teens around acceptance by others.

This moment of reflection has brought me to a recent event involving a student with significant needs transferring from another school district. It is a common practice to review the student's accommodations to schedule which adults can support them best based on teacher skills. The level of need for this student was high based on documentation. Prior to the student entering the new school, the level of anxiety that was relayed by the staff was high, and the likelihood for the student to be successful was stifled by adult biases. Through a back-and-forth process to get the support he needed in place, he was able to start school. The student had a limited stay on the campus due to unfortunate events that transpired. However, several adults, mainly ones that knew very little about him, commented positively about the interactions they had with the young man.

Implementation and Assessment Plan

The problem being studied was how teachers perceived and interacted with students with SED who were educated in general education settings (Broussard-Harshaw, 2019; Changes et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2021). There was a need to understand and

address implicit biases' role in SED student experiences in general education settings to create more inclusive schools (Dematthews, 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to identify and develop an action plan for addressing the role of implicit biases in SED student experiences in the general education setting at Happy Valley Middle School.

I started this chapter by reporting the descriptive statistics of the participants' demographic characteristics and then continued by reporting and presenting the qualitative results. When reporting the qualitative results, I reviewed how the data was analyzed and identified the themes that emerged from the data collected from the participants. When presenting the qualitative results, the findings were reported concerning each research question that guided this study while providing specific participant quotations that substantiate each theme. Within this study, four themes emerged from the dataset: (a) inconsistent interruptions, (b) relationship-building difficulties, (c) building strong, positive, and individualized relationships, and (d) lumping all SED students together. This chapter then concluded with a discussion of my implementation and assessment plan.

This action research study aimed to uncover adult biases and connect them to understand better how these interactions impact learning dynamics. The expression, "People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care," is often expressed regarding the working relationship between students and teachers. Students in educational preparation programs commit to countless hours of instructional pedagogy development and understanding of content. However, very few prospective educators are intentionally exposed to skill development connected to relationship building. This

obstacle could be addressed and potentially removed by uncovering biases to find ways to serve students best.

CHAPTER THREE

ACTION PLAN

Description of Change Process

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic which began in 2020, school districts across the country wrestled with addressing disproportionality and other challenges connected to equity and access for marginalized students.

This was a challenge currently being addressed in the district I serve at the district level and in schools. As a leader in a school, equitable practices, creating systems, and supporting students and educators is a priority that should not be overlooked. When looking at the data and reflecting on experiences and stories, I cannot help but wonder if bias plays a role in adult decisions and whether bias influences the decisions.

A Need For Urgency

Every year, this great country celebrates its birthday in July. Its existence as we know it would be different if movements to address inequities that have plagued the nation for an extended period were not addressed. Decades ago, civil rights activists forged ahead to obtain the rights given to them by the Constitution but denied by those in power. While their efforts have resulted in a change on a small scale, there is yet work to be done in the name of those on the margins of the power structure. The new age activist can connect to the globe due to their efforts to bring awareness to the masses. This could provide a lens that lays the groundwork for sustainable change. Principles taken from the book *Cultural Proficiency*, (Lindsey, et al.,2018) detailed perspectives needed to enact change.

Nurturing a Vibrant Culture: The Key to Sustainable Growth and Success

There is a saying in the education field (it originated in the management field) that is often used when initiatives or changes are trying to be implemented in an organization: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." As an educator, this resonates with me upon personal and professional reflection. Understanding how culture is created to be inclusive is rooted in awareness. Those at the top of the hierarchical structure frequently are unaware of what opportunities, access, and other privileges have been given to them due to their position. "People in dominant groups often say that they do not notice culture. Moreover, that is the main point. If you are in the dominant group, you do not have to pay attention to cultural norms and expectations" (Lindsey et al., 2018, p.120).

The cultural blindness created by being an insider can often lead to a level of assumption and entitlement. Structures like these can perpetuate conflict cycles with those outside the norm. Negative stereotypes and denied access to quality instruction in education are unintended consequences that can be mitigated by explicitly teaching norms and language for all stakeholders. Other strategies that could be used would involve removing assumptions and being transparent about how they negatively impact marginalized groups. This is supported through a common language that is accessible to all, systems for accountability, and shared values that are in alignment with community needs.

In *The Speed of Trust*, Covey (2008) discussed Kotter's eight-step change model that lays out an intentional process that supports the development of an action plan. In this case, an intentional sequence must be followed with fidelity in order to successfully implement change.

Figure 1

Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model



Retrieved from: <https://www.dreamendstate.com/2021/02/16/john-kotters-8-stages-of-change-management/>

Principle of Cultural Sensitivity: Respecting and Catering to the Unique Cultural Needs of Each Group

As the country becomes more diverse, those in positions of power must be aware of the needs of everyone due to a one size fits all approach not yielding positive outcomes. The way the needs are to be addressed should be differentiated. "There was a time in educational practices when all children were expected to dress, talk, and respond to their teachers in the same way" (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 123). This philosophy is outdated and oppressive, particularly for students from different backgrounds who are not prepared to exist successfully based on norms currently present in the education system. My philosophical approach to education is unconventional at times. There have been

leadership moves that my peers have questioned that have yielded positive results. There is a need to go against the grain when systems are not serving the community in the manner they were created for. The explanation that we have always done it this way is a direct call to leadership to enact change. Shifting practices that help develop skills to support what students need in comparison to this is how I teach and lead. Small wins and significant gains can be materialized through collaboration from the students, guardians, and staff members to foster a culture that supports all stakeholders. The creation of this type of culture is in direct control of leadership.

The ability to develop inclusive leadership skills is a focus Russell Reynolds and Associates (Abbatiello et al., 2019) aligned research directly to. Their work has provided insight into what organizations may look like and how change can be supported. With the anticipation of the country's workforce changing rapidly, the four competencies: Awareness and clarity, Courageous accountability, Empowering others, and Innovative collaboration, must be skills that are developed and have to be demonstrated regularly (Abbatiello et al., 2019). This behavior may be uncomfortable in the early stages of development. However, the benefits of staff retention and high-performing teams outweigh the desire to remain comfortable.

Action Plan

It is essential to recognize the existence of adult bias as it relates to student interactions. A developmental approach will be taken. Jacob & McGovern (2015) discuss the importance of intentional processes to develop educators in a manner that would yield better results when individualized and not connected to quick fix professional development. The purpose behind this type of approach would be to minimize shame or

guilt as adults begin to understand the meanings behind biases. Space has to be given in order for work to bridge gaps they may have based on needs to be met.

Addressing adult implicit biases requires a comprehensive approach encompassing training, policy development, and ongoing monitoring. Within general education, particularly with students presenting Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED), several measures can be implemented to tackle adult implicit biases effectively. First, offering professional development opportunities will be crucial to enhance the awareness and comprehension of staff members regarding implicit biases and their implications on student outcomes. These opportunities may include workshops, seminars, and online training, which will equip educators with strategies to identify, understand, and mitigate implicit biases.

Second, formulating policies and guidelines that advocate for equity and inclusivity within the classroom is paramount. Such policies should explicitly forbid discrimination based on ethnicity, race, disability, religion, or sexual orientation. Corresponding guidelines encourage the creation of classroom environments that embrace and celebrate students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Third, it is essential to foster a culture of cultural humility among staff, fostering an environment that promotes openness towards learning about and embracing individual differences among students. This approach will encourage educators to appreciate and value each student's unique perspectives and characteristics.

Fourth, establishing data collection and analysis systems to monitor bias and disparities in discipline, academic achievement, and access to services is vital. By collecting and analyzing data on disciplinary actions against students with SED,

educational institutions can identify and address potential biases that may be present. Fifth, incorporating student input and feedback into decision-making processes is also critical. Engaging with students with SED enables educators to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives within the classroom, utilizing this information to inform and enhance policies and practices. Finally, fostering a culture of continuous improvement is imperative. Regularly reviewing and assessing policies, procedures, and practices ensures effectiveness, inclusivity, and equity. This ongoing evaluation and adjustment process is essential for cultivating an environment that promotes equitable and inclusive learning for all students, including those with SED. A building leader can leverage planning time during learning community meetings, district professional development time, evaluation meetings, and informal discussions to intentionally guide this work.

Table 6:

Action Plan

Objectives and Outcomes (What)	Tasks (How)	Person(s) (Who)	Time (When)	Location (Where)	Resource	Funds
Create professional development and training that will build teacher efficacy by identifying gaps in professional learning.	-Interview staff members and identify trends. -Analyze school data. -Identify professional organizations that currently engage in PD rooted in	-Bryant/me -Staff	Professional development will be conducted throughout the year.	On School Campus. Conferences across the country	Human capital. District funds.	Accessed through building PD budget. Leverage district resources

Objectives and Outcomes (What)	Tasks (How)	Person(s) (Who)	Time (When)	Location (Where)	Resource	Funds
	determined needs.					
Raise the awareness of teachers regarding bias and how it impacts the educational setting.	-Present data and themes to the staff interviewed -Provide an overview to the entire staff to clarify consistency in themes.	Admin/Staff	Fall 2023	School Campus		

Main Objective

The primary objective for the next steps is to raise the awareness adults have in regard to their biases. This is a critical step that needs to be taken in order to support those in positions of power when they assert authority. Once these biases are identified, working to establish a culture by creating a common language and providing needed skills for teachers by conducting professional development and ongoing training once awareness is raised. By providing training to build teacher efficacy, student achievement could be directly impacted positively. John Hattie (2009) has synthesized over 800 meta-analyses that are connected to student achievement. It is stated in Hattie's book *Visible Learning* that teacher actions are an integral part of student learning:

When these professionals see learning occurring or not, they intervene in calculated and meaningful ways to alter the direction of learning to attain various shared, specific, and challenging goals. (Hattie pg. 22, 2009)

Defining Organizational Change

Organizational change in distinctive organizations is implemented to meet particular groups' needs. Research has been connected to understanding why and how change occurs. Organizations are often reevaluating systems and structures that support their success. Typically, distinctive organizations fall into three categories. Clark (1972) recognizes them as new organizations finding their way, an organization in crisis and need of change, and being established, not in crisis but not in need of change. Oftentimes, a particular event puts organizations in a state of crisis and drives the need for change. This rests on leadership's shoulders and ability to recognize a need for change and potential barriers that can impede the process, take advantage of opportunities and resources, and provide clarity (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Hyde (2012) found that threats to organizations put them in a state that forces a change to survive, which can serve as a point of entry to act. This involves stakeholder input, audits, working with outside consultants, and constant communication with all impacted by the change.

Change is not a simple pivot or implementation of initiatives or directives.

Managing Transitions found that "One of the persistent problems during transitions is the difficulty experienced by those making and implementing decisions in remaining clear on the precise impact of the decisions and actions they've taken" (Bridges & Bridges, 2017, p. 54). The process must be intentional and connected to a vision or values the stakeholders believe in. This supports buy-in and connects the change to systems and not

people. When change is tied to humans and their personalities, traction can be lost if the people involved in the work are removed. Connection to the vision provides clarity and direction as organizations progress.

The country's educational system has experienced several overhauls since its inception. Pressure for schools to perform well in standardized tests has created a state of panic in school districts that are not doing as well as their counterparts. "The past decade of education reform has pressed districts to increase test scores and close gaps between subgroups of students. Few have succeeded over the long haul," (David, p.1, 2013). The public education system could fall under the crisis category and benefit from change through a lens of equity. Recognizing that schools serve a diverse population is overlooked too often. School districts adopt and implement curricula and create environments that focus primarily on metrics, losing sight of the human capital and skills its stakeholders have. While data is still being collected, surveys have shown that educators are leaving the profession at an alarming rate (Kohn, 2000). When looking at some of the equity traps created unintentionally, addressing the seeing of only deficits stands out as a lever to support equity. "Once school staff gets to know students and their families through positive exchanges, it is much easier to see the assets or funds of knowledge students and their families possess" (Skrla et al., 2009, p.104).

The policies from the past have influenced the culture of schools and directly impact how people experience school. These experiences play a role in how stakeholders trust learning organizations. Regardless of the intended or unintended consequences, the system has created stakeholders that sometimes feel at the mercy of the system (Gonzales

et al., 2018). As a community-facing organization, the connection from home to school is a relationship that must be rooted in patience and empathy. (Gonzales et al., 2018).

In *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Lipsky discusses the role of street-level bureaucrats as "expected to be advocates, that is, to use their knowledge, skill, and position to secure for clients the best treatment or position consistent with the constraints of the service" (Lipsky, p.72, 2010). School districts have grappled for decades to find a balanced resolution to committing to systemic change that bridges the gap between homes and schools. This work has been connected to equitable practices that distinctive organizations practice regularly. Human connection is at the heart of schools.

In my time as a leader, I have found that leaders who do not create time to be accessible and allow the community to know who they are, and learn about the community, are doing a disservice to those they serve. It has been a priority for me to have an understanding of students' backgrounds in order to understand them and build authentic relationships. This is particularly important when managing discipline. Students that are subjected to negative biases lack a connection, miss more school, have higher suspension and retention rates, lower achievement scores, and negative experiences at school. These factors can also impact their lives in adulthood contributing to poor health (Gonzales et al., 2018).

Equity-Oriented Theories and Concepts with Organizational Change

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the framework of critical pedagogy provides a philosophy of understanding power relationships in a classroom (Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2018). Critical pedagogy can also identify biases and oppressive structures

that undermine learning processes and alienate students (Kincheloe et al., 2018). One of the central tenets of critical pedagogy is that of inclusive teaching. By being intentional with creating spaces where inclusion is the norm, leveraging stakeholders' strengths, providing access and information, transparency, direct involvement in decision-making, and a flattened power structure, an environment can be created that allows for all stakeholders to thrive. This approach requires being open to feedback and critique to serve the community's needs. Islam (2019) speaks explicitly about the process of using feedback to improve systems and outcomes through a qualitative analysis. If one stakeholder feels like an outsider and it is expressed, action is required to address the matter. However, paying attention to specific trends or patterns in feedback can also be a call to respond. The Marianist principles (2014), providing integral quality education and educating for adaptation and change, are embedded in this framework upon reflection. This is modeled by constantly refining practices that yield the results needed to support stakeholders.

Operational Definition

John Hattie's research focuses on schools' connections to their students' homes. His meta-analysis outlines the effect size has and how it contributes to accelerating student achievement (Hattie, 2008). This, in practice, entails home visits to students having and seeking out resources families may not have. Creating a formal and informal process to dialogue with the community is critical to establishing relationships.

Professional Code of Ethics

While working to initiate change, the ethics of care framework that is deeply embedded in Noddings (1984) work is a critical element regarding education. According

to Martin, (as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) the three Cs of caring, concern, and connection are components that cannot be left out of successful learning organizations. The central concepts of relationships, trust, loyalty, and empowerment can flourish within the school system by prioritizing connections, well-being, and multiple voices. This could look like town hall discussions, surveys, and sharing the intention to implement the data collection process with an intended outcome. Creating an oversight committee to ensure the people's voice is heard and the proper work is done could support trust building. Applying Rawls' (1999) theories of justice, specifically the Liberty Principle and the Difference Principle could help provide clarity as to why the school took its approach to support students; the principles state, "Each person has a right to the most extensive systems of basic liberties that is compatible with everyone else's right to the same thing" and "Inequalities in social and economic institutions are justified only if allowing them maximally benefits the people who are worst off" (Lindemann, 2005, p. 78). Using these in conjunction with the reflective equilibrium method, a balanced, reasonable approach evaluates contradictions and ensures the process is morally aligned. In both table seven and eight, (Lindsey et al., 2018) explains the difference between both a healthy and unhealthy culture from a lens of equity.

Table 7:

Results in a Reactive/Unhealthy Culture

Cultural Proficiency Continuum	Cultural Blindness	Cultural Incapacity	Cultural Destructiveness

Behaviors	Unaware of insensitive comments made.	Subtle negative comments toward groups that are different.	Systemic oppression, violence.
Attitudes	The system is exemplary. People should take responsibility for their actions; they are the problem.	Lower expectations for groups, unlike them. Take care of their own first.	Non-dominant groups are expendable and think they are superior.
Beliefs	Differences are not recognized. Everyone is the same; opportunity is there if you work hard enough.	Separation is for the good of all groups.	“My” group is better than “yours.” This group does not belong.
Values	Their perception of fairness.	Maintaining the status quo.	Domination, Winning at the expense of others.

Table 8:

Results in a Transformative/Healthy Culture

Cultural Proficiency Continuum	Cultural Pre-Competence	Cultural Competence	Cultural Proficiency
Behaviors	Theory and word-based not as much action.	Adapts to meet the needs of marginalized groups. Seeks to gain a better understanding by developing knowledge and skill	Address negative behaviors that impact culture and marginalized groups. Advocate as an upstander.
Attitudes	Inquiry-based. Tolerant	Inclusive, Engaged	Compassionate, Kindness

Beliefs	Things are not as they should be, but how to change them is the obstacle	Everyone has differences. Everyone should have access.	Culture is a priority. Everyone belongs
Values	Acceptance	Inclusion, Human/Civil Rights	Connectedness. Inclusion, Liberation

Creating systems, structures, and supports to reflect and address top/primary behavior incident events is critical each quarter. This will provide insight into what changes (increasing or decreasing) are noticed. Understanding what occurs will allow for proactive measures and individualized support for staff and students. The building will take part in root cause analysis to determine the following:

- Why did these changes occur?
- What changes (increasing or decreasing) do you notice?
- What stands out to you, and what actions are currently being taken to address any areas of concern potentially rooted in bias?

Conclusion

After conducting research and analysis, I have had the opportunity to engage with stakeholders around the importance of the needed work that could support the development of the current generation. As future leaders and contributors to our society, it is critical that we shepherd these students by providing an environment where all students can thrive. It can be concluded that biases during middle school can have a detrimental effect on student learning and achievement. Biases are prevalent in the classroom and can harm students by limiting their opportunities and creating an unfair learning environment. I have listened to multiple stories on the impact of negative

experiences. Students missing extended amounts of instructional time, guardians of the students having their work schedule disrupted, guardians losing wages and sometimes their jobs are some examples of mentioned experiences. These biases can also perpetuate stereotypes and restrict students' ability to succeed in their future endeavors. It is essential for educators and school administrators to become aware of their biases and work towards eliminating them to provide a fair and equitable learning experience for all students. By taking action to address biases, schools can create more inclusive and positive learning environments that support student growth and achievement. Education is a social interaction. With that being said, there must be intention behind creating systems and structures that contribute positively for all stakeholders through the development of skills and environments.

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