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Teachers Using Social Emotional Learning: Meeting Student Needs during COVID-19

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Abstract

Unique challenges arose for teachers during COVID-19 to be effective not just academically, but also in providing social-emotional support. Through a case study of 23 novice teachers prepared by our college we examined teachers' perception about the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) in their teaching, strategies for impacting student learning and development, and challenges faced due to online or hybrid teaching modalities. Results indicated that teachers felt a great need to focus on fostering supporting relationships with students, building trust, creating a positive classroom climate, acknowledging the trauma students had been through, and building strong home-school connections. Their biggest concern was increasing student engagement and motivation and reducing stress in the academic setting. Fostering a sense of classroom community and peer interactions was especially important when more than half the class was online. Teachers incorporated interactive methods and hands-on learning to make instruction engaging for students, focused on soft skills, and used formative assessments to address student learning needs. The study showed that SEL is critically important in the context of COVID-19 to include trauma-informed pedagogies, teacher self-care, and need for SEL related professional development.

Introduction

COVID-19 brought with it two years of uncertainty and turmoil in the lives of children in the US and all around the world, not just as a public health threat, but also with dire implications for emotional well-being, mental health, as well as academic growth (Corcoran, & O'Flaherty, 2022). By the end of May 2021, students had experienced more than 18 months of school closures and social isolation, engaged in learning online or in hybrid modalities, or in some cases, were left at home without necessary support and resources (Vestall, 2021).

In the face of sickness and personal loss among families, grief, anxiety, and depression became far too prevalent in the last two years during the pandemic, especially among the low-income populations. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns that the pandemic-related decline in child and adolescent mental health has become a national emergency, 140,000 children in the country lost a primary or secondary caregiver, with youth of color disproportionately impacted (Kidman, et al., 2021; Vestall, 2021). The resulting sadness, fear, social isolation, and family instability has had a significant impact on children's learning and engagement in schools (Bhatnagar

& Many, 2022). In addition, missed instructional input during the pandemic has created specific academic needs that have exacerbated stress around school and developing grade appropriate academic proficiencies (Dorn et al., 2021).

Thus, the circumstances created by COVID-19 have led teachers to reassess their role and responsibility in teaching students dealing with trauma (Brown, Correll, & Stormer, 2021; Hebebe, Bertiz, & Alan, 2020; Jackowicz & Sahin, 2021; Reddig & Vanlone, 2022; Sahin & Shelley, 2020) and effectively meet student needs who may be joining class in-person or online. Unique challenges arose for teachers to be effective not just academically, but also in providing social-emotional support, strengthening partnerships with families, and building a classroom community (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). Through a case study of 23 novice teachers prepared by our college of education we examined teachers' perceptions about impact of the pandemic on their teaching strategies, student learning and development, and challenges faced. Our research questions were:

- What strategies did teachers find effective for impacting student learning and development?
- What challenges did teachers face during the pandemic, which impacted their effectiveness?

Literature Review

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young adults has been profound, especially for the children who came from vulnerable communities and were already not being served well by the system (Vestall, 2021). School shutdowns and social isolation further caused harm to students' mental and emotional well-being. Families had to take on the role of teacher, while also grappling with economic impact of the pandemic (Dorn, et al., 2021). Similarly, teachers and administrators across the country had to deal with new challenges of teaching during the pandemic, learn new technologies, and develop skills to address social and emotional wellbeing of students in addition to supporting academic needs (Decker & Beltran, 2021; Zieher et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have shown that P–12 student learning was significantly impacted by the pandemic, causing some students to fall behind five months in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year (Dorn, et al., 2021; Feng Teng & Wu, 2021; Vestall, 2021). The preexisting opportunity and achievement gaps worsened during the pandemic, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest, for example, students in majority Black schools ended the year six months behind, and students in low-income schools were seven months behind (Dorn et al., 2021).

During the 2020–21 school year, only 40 % P–12 students were in districts that offered any in-person instruction (Dorn, et al., 2021). Districts opted for a variety of instructional strategies like virtual, hybrid, and in-person learning as they attempted to keep students and staff safe while continuing with teaching and learning (Vestall, 2021). Schooling in this period was fraught with *Zoom fatigue*, loss of motivation, student absence, and isolation. Given these conditions, researchers have used the term *unfinished learning* (Dorn, et al., 2021) to describe how students across the board learned less than they would have in a typical school year. This created a unique situation for teachers who would now have to address learning needs of students who had been promoted to the next grade without the necessary building blocks of knowledge (Sahlberg, 2021; Yang, 2021).

The trauma and learning needs created by this unique year led teachers to recognize the need to focus on social emotional learning (SEL) (Michalec, et al., 2021). Teachers have focused on building relationships with students, despite challenges posed by online teaching, shown empathy and resilience, and strengthened connections with families and communities as a priority to holistically support all students (CASEL, 2021; Reddig & Vanlone, 2022; Yang, 2021). Five broad competencies for SEL focused instruction include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Important facets of SEL are a focus on creating a safe learning environment in the classroom, building trust with students, and affirming student identities and cultures in a positive manner in the classroom (CASEL, 2021; Corcoran & O’Flaherty, 2022). Other recent research expands on the importance of SEL, in promoting perspective taking, managing emotions, exhibiting care and concern, developing relationships, and promoting higher order reasoning and critical thinking skills among students (Reddig & Vanlone, 2022). SEL also brings focus on soft-skills and promoting classroom engagement and participation of students so that students become active participants in their own learning (Katz, Mahfouz, & Romas, 2020).

A critical piece in the establishment of SEL routines is teachers’ own social-emotional competence and wellbeing, especially in a climate where teachers may also be facing trauma and loss in personal lives, in addition to the increased stress originating from teaching during the pandemic (Reddig & Vanlone, 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2021). Social and emotional competencies of teachers are important to consider and support so that they may better navigate their own feelings of frustration, fatigue, and burnout (Corcoran & O’Flaherty, 2022). Thus, it is equally important to recognize the importance of teachers’ balance and self-care when they may be facing excessive stress and burnout in the current context (Yang, 2021).

Method

The research study included 23 initial teacher education completers from our College of Education and Human Development located in a large urban research university in southeastern United States. The participants had completed their teacher preparation one or two years ago and were novice teachers employed in high-needs schools (defined as 50% or more students on free-reduced lunch) across seven different school districts in our state. Our college aims to prepare educators who would take up jobs in high-needs schools and undergo a rigorous preparation to meet the needs of unserved P-12 populations. The demographics of our participants included: 6 Males, 17 Females; 11 Black, 8 White, 2 Asian, 1 Multiracial, and 1 unreported. We conducted 30-45 minute, semi-structured phone interviews which were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Teachers in our study detailed their experiences of teaching in the 2020-2021 academic year including the strategies that helped them positively impact student learning and development, and instances where they felt challenged in being effective. Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo through open coding and axial coding following a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

The data analysis about teachers’ instructional practices in the year 2020-2021 revealed four major themes as

shown in Figure 1. Below we elaborate on each one of these themes to showcase teachers' insights on the student learning needs, what worked for them, and the challenges they faced in impacting student learning and development. Each theme had categories that we also expand upon in the following sections.



Figure 1. Experiences of Novice Teachers During the Pandemic

Building a Safe Learning Environment

One aspect of being a teacher who focuses on SEL is creating a safe learning environment. This includes building trust with students as well as parents, teachers' in-depth understanding of students' backgrounds and interests, and bringing in aspects of student identity into their classroom. Increasing parent engagement also fostered the home-school connections and created a safe learning space for all students where they could share their opinions and feelings.

Building Trust

Teachers emphasized building trust with students and establishing mutual relationships and connections. One teacher mentioned using a popular video game as a reference in his lessons, learning about student interests and incorporating slang in his conversations made students comfortable around him and connected with him at a personal level. This created a level of trust in the teacher and the students were more inclined to learn in his classroom.

Because I will joke with them because they like it. Everybody plays video games and probably one of the most popular video games, "Call of Duty". So, I would, I would joke with them about my feelings, I know y'all. I incorporate terms, hip hop terms in my in my lessons, trying to get them to connect with the listener. I know, video games, music is the main way to get to them. And you know just be culturally relevant about what they was popular with them you know even sometimes the slang that I kind of taught like sometimes try to make sure. And that builds a trust, like, so, "I could trust him, I can learn from him. Teach me". You know, so, "I'm comfortable with him teaching me." (math, middle grades teacher)

Another strategy mentioned by a high school teacher to build trust was to incorporate music and slang in class. Using references to popular culture and hip-hop terms helped students connect at a personal level with the teacher as well as peers and helped in promoting a strong classroom community.

I put out music all the time in my classroom. Our school is 90% plus black students. It was either kind of classic Motown kind of stuff or, you know I put on some pop thing to kind of get them engaged, then we start talking about it...to get their engagement was key ... music was the big hook (Geometry, high school teacher)

The teachers' practices exemplified approaches used by teachers to personally connect with their students, share aspects of students' lives and cultures in their classrooms, which built mutual trust and respect. Teachers also focused on creating a low-stress and positive learning environment, which was necessary for students to feel safe to make mistakes and learn. Like one teacher mentioned,

I guess a positive environment, one that doesn't cause any sort of distress. You know, one that encourages, learning from failures, a low stakes environment. And I make sure that they're, comfortable in the classroom, and that they're comfortable speaking with me, and I tried to make it so that there's, there's not too much stress, I'm not freaking them out. So that's what I try to do. (Elementary math teacher)

Building a strong home-school connection was also a part of building trust with students as well as their parents. Teachers communicated frequently with parents, sought their involvement, and kept them informed about all the activities in the class. Like this teacher mentioned, through use of multiple messaging systems like Class Dojo, remind, text messages, and emails, parents were kept informed about class and school activities, as well as student work and grades.

I would, keeping the parents updated constantly...with their child. I had quite a few forms of communication, I use *Class Dojo*. To communicate everything that was happening in the classroom or in the building. I had, send *remind*. So, parents will get reminders via text message of major things that was happening in the classroom. Parents also have access to any graded assignment. I think that's really important. So, any assignments that was done in my classroom, parents can always access. (Elementary, all subjects teacher)

Teachers maintained an ongoing communication with parents to provide them complete access to classroom materials, assignments, and graded work so that they could become more effective partners in their children's education.

Affirming Cultures and Identities

Teachers in our study gained insight about students' backgrounds, cultures, and positively affirmed their identities in the classrooms. Like this art teacher encouraged students to take pride in their culture and utilize their background as an asset in developing art projects.

[I encourage] kids that they really use their own background, their own personal history, to create engaging and incredibly interesting pieces of work. I try to make sure that the students are bringing in their own opinions are understanding that their personal history, and also their own aesthetics, valuable in their ability to create art that is very cool! (Art, high school teacher)

Participants in our study shared how encouragement to incorporate culture in their work increased students' motivation to engage in research, ask parents for help, and seek out other resources. This incorporation of identity and culture in teaching helped evoke an emotional response to the content, and made students care more deeply about their learning and perform well. Additionally, teachers' understanding of children's interests and cultural backgrounds helped them become cognizant about specific student needs. For instance, in cases where students came from non-English speaking families and had specific English language needs, teachers ensured that students' learning was not put on hold while picking up English skills.

I work with ESOL students, who don't speak English at home. And I always have to take into account that piece about them, give them that grace of them having to learn English, in the academic setting. So, I've always been very cognizant of the way they learn in order for them to understand the material. (Elementary, ESOL teacher).

Teachers mentioned that affirming cultures in a positive way in the classroom and encouraging students to take pride in their identity helped them become more engaged in the academic content and enhanced their overall learning experiences.

Student Motivation

Teachers acknowledged that the pandemic had been an especially traumatic period for a lot of students, which had caused many students to become disengaged and lose motivation because of online learning and social isolation. This disengagement from instruction, in addition to zoom fatigue, impacted students' confidence and self-esteem, and teachers utilized various approaches to make students regain their confidence. Teachers in our study mentioned constantly motivating students to aim high and achieve their goals. For instance this teacher mentioned, there was a heightened need for him to believe in his students and provide them constant support and motivation.

If I teach you that I believe in you, why can't you believe it too. There's nobody that can tell me that I can't do anything. No matter what I say, mom or dad says, or anybody, nobody can tell me that I can't do anything because they think that they are not, you know they can basically tell you how to do it and they probably don't even think they can tell you they can't, so I try to put so much faith and belief in them. If they believe, 90% of the battle is already won because I believe I can do this. (Math, high school teacher).

Through building personal trust and close relationships with their students, teachers were able to perform the role of "motivational coaches" for their students. Isolation, stress, and trauma had caused a lot of students to lose faith in their abilities, and teachers mentioned that students desperately needed role models in their lives who could redirect them, affirm faith and confidence in them, and provide them the necessary hand holding to "put in their

all” in the classroom.

Overall, teachers worked to build trust and close relationships with students and their families, constantly brought in positive references to students’ culture, language, identities, and interests in their classroom, and motivated students to set high goals for themselves while expressing confidence in them. All these aspects of a positive learning environment set the stage for a greater social, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement for students who may be dealing with personal stresses in their lives.

Instruction for Social Emotional Learning

Next, we detail what instruction looked like when teachers focused on SEL in their classrooms. In order to increase classroom engagement, teachers focused on instructional activities and assignments that included social interactions and collaboration among students. For emotional and cognitive engagement in classroom, teachers made activities that were hands-on, enjoyable, and interactive through extensive use of technology. Using their knowledge of students’ individual needs, teachers modeled expectations for students and provided them detailed feedback to ensure that students met learning objectives.

Social Skills and Student Interactions

Teachers mentioned that about two years of isolation had made students lose contact with peers and friends in the school. Once the students transitioned back to in-person instruction, teachers had to work on encouraging peer interactions, building social skills, and encouraging collaborative work. They used strategies like pairing students or assigning work in small groups, to promote collaborative learning experiences. Since teachers were mostly teaching in a hybrid modality, one part of their class was in-person and the remainder online, they came up with strategies to enable collaboration across learning modalities. Like this teacher mentioned, she paired online and in-person students to build a support system so that students felt included in the classroom discourse regardless of their learning modality.

When I had kids that were virtual and in class, I paired them up so that a student that is virtual had a buddy who was in class, so therefore they can have accountability, and they are able to be abreast with their classmates, just in case they forget. So that's my main thing this year if I got 12 kids inside this classroom, all of them are going to have a daily buddy who is virtual so every day, they need to see if their classmates is there and you know just being helped me just pair them up, that's something that was really powerful. (ELA, middle school teacher)

Thus, assigning buddies to students not only helped with social skills and interaction, but also generated an atmosphere of supporting one another in the learning process.

Using Technology for Interactive Learning

Teachers also mentioned putting in extensive work to create lesson plans and assignments that were fun, hands-

on and engaging. They primarily relied on various technology portals for instruction to cater to the needs of students who were in-person as well as online. For example, this teacher mentioned using EdPuzzle, which helped students work on their comprehension skills, providing students texts to read, along with videos and an accompanying quiz to check for understanding.

So EdPuzzle was another platform that I really, really enjoyed. And the kids liked it too because sometimes when you're watching a video with them, and you start to ask a question, the kids are kind of like, try to think about what they just heard. however long it takes you to figure out the answer, which the questions that relate to the video are there, they go hand in hand (ELA, elementary teacher)

This teacher also mentioned that online platforms allowed all students to participate together during class time and work on assignments irrespective of their participation mode, in-person or online. Watching videos together, brainstorming responses to the questions posed, and a low-stress assessment of understanding served as a hook for getting students to the next level of reading comprehension. Other teachers also mentioned platforms like Nearpod which enabled interaction among students, were user friendly, and students could participate in classroom discussions whether they were online or in-person, "I used an online platform, and that way students could engage with it in class but also the students online could take part and they can at least read out their answers so I use a platform called Nearpod." Thus, student participation, regular communication with peers, building social and collaborative skills through use of interactive activities became a priority for teachers in order to help students feel supported, not just by the teacher but also be the peer group.

Modeling Expectations and Providing Detailed Feedback

Teachers mentioned spending a great deal of time trying to get students engaged and excited about learning. They mentioned going "above and beyond" to meeting with students one-on-one and in small groups to model expectations for them, or to get them caught up if they were not feeling confident in the content. They also continued to provide scaffolds once students had turned in their work by providing extensive feedback to ensure that all students achieved learning objectives. For example, this teacher mentioned designating Friday as the tutoring day, where students who were online or in-person could have a personal session with the teacher to clarify doubts and ask questions.

We had designated like tutoring days on Fridays for them, I just left my schedule open for the kids and the main kids who wanted to hop on the tutoring hours were those digital learners so that they could get more, because it's harder for them to stay engaged at home. So, when it was just a smaller group online, or even just individually online during the tutoring, and I can just really sit down with them even through a screen and just reach them a little bit more and learn more about them individually and how they learn (Math, elementary teacher).

To work on students' confidence and content readiness, these small group and individual meetings were invaluable. This helped remove inhibition among students to approach the teacher to ask or help or seek clarification and also provided teachers insight into specific needs of students. Another teacher mentioned that detailed feedback to students also played a big role to help them understand expectations as well as provide

positive reinforcement, “I found myself giving comments for every single student. It's funny, these kids are not motivated by grades. They're motivated by constructive comments.” Thus, teachers’ use of extensive modeling and writing detailed feedback helped address varying instructional needs of the students, built confidence, and provided encouragement and support to get caught up with grade level expectations.

Addressing Unfinished Learning

Teachers acknowledged that the pandemic had created new learning needs, especially for the students who were online or could not access either online or in-person instruction. Teachers shared a need for more intensive inputs to address these needs, which researchers have called *unfinished learning* (Dorn, et al., 2021; Vestall, 2021). Like this teacher mentioned that students who haven’t mastered the skills necessary to move on to the next level, will need supports from the teacher to help them get caught up, “I think that there will be some setbacks like there's gonna be a lot of kids who come in with a lot of gaps, so having to adapt for that will be a change.” Acknowledging that their students would be coming in with vastly different competencies helped them prepare for social-emotional engagement as well as academic instruction to help students experience success rather than frustration.

Focusing on Soft Skills

Instructional needs were not the only concern for the teachers. They also mentioned that students had gone through a challenging period, especially since this group of students belonged to communities that were low-income, racial minorities, who were more severely impacted by the pandemic than the general US population. To ease students’ transition back into school, teachers tended to focus a lot on soft skills like class participation, volunteering in class, and learning to apply content learned in class in real life situations, like this teacher mentioned,

I always look for the more soft skills of learning and my students like their test scores and things aren't of as much importance to me but things like that they like to read and they volunteer to read out loud in class, they volunteer to participate more that they start to tell me stories about how they read over the weekend, or, you know, they bought a book with their mom or something like that. I am focused on how they make those text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. (ELA, elementary teachers)

Thus, helping students transition back to the expectations of the classroom, encouraging students to volunteer in class and participate in discussions were critical skills to help students understand the content and apply it in real world contexts. Such interactions conveyed a message to students that their teachers cared about them and were genuinely interested in learning more about students’ lives and connecting with them at an emotional level. The importance of these soft skills could not be underscored enough according to the teachers in our study.

Empathy and Compassion

Teachers mentioned that the trauma from the pandemic was so apparent in their classrooms that it could no longer be ignored. In fact, they mentioned the criticality of addressing social and emotional issues prior to even delivering the academic content, for example, one teacher said,

I engaged my students' emotions, before I'm trying to deliver this content. I think that with the learning loss, there's going to be a lot of emotional issues as well, because some students have been at home for almost two years now. You know and so we have to think about that and sometimes the homes are not in the best situation for learning. Some students probably felt very lonely. (Math, middle grades)

Teachers mentioned that acknowledging the social-emotional needs made teaching more effective and increased student engagement in classrooms. Teachers provided students opportunities to express themselves, share personal stories, and have personal connections not just with the teacher but also with peers. Like this teacher mentioned, classroom learning is much more than academic inputs, it also includes teachers showing care, empathy and compassion for students as well as students exhibiting it for one another.

This year, especially in the pandemic relationships have always been important, but more so now, like making sure that my students know that I see them as students and as people and not just, like, not just what they learned in my classroom. So, it wasn't always just about academics, you know, just letting them talk or letting them ask me questions and share what's going on in their lives that was important, too. Also, to know one another, support one another and be a closed knit group. (Social studies, High school teacher)

Teachers also emphasized that the learning needs and emotional trauma caused by the pandemic was not fair for the students and instead of penalizing them for being behind, teachers needed to act with more compassion and flexibility, and acknowledge the growth they have made despite the unusual learning circumstances. As one teacher said,

But just taking a step back and just like, almost like having more empathy for these kids and what they've gone through and, and how they have adapted and developed and grown as students because it's not fair to the kids how, how they've had to learn and how they've had to adapt and, be away from their peers and all of that. So, I would say, be more empathetic and show flexibility. (Special education, elementary teacher)

Teachers thus, emphasized the need for trauma informed pedagogies, seeing students as human beings with emotional needs, and disrupting the "business as usual" approach in teaching students.

Formative Assessments

Teachers relied much more on using formative assessments to support students' learning objectives and creating a low-stress environment to learn. They also mentioned that school districts and states needed to show flexibility in mandates around standardized testing, which would further add to the stress and trauma of students already coping with unfinished learning needs. Like this teacher mentioned, the student growth metrics communicated to them from the school district were unreasonable for the 2020-2021 year.

Expectation is that you increase your at least 60% of your students, one grade level, but I had to adjust my expectations. I had to say that this is not realistic to say that this is going to happen. I found that first

semester I think there was they improved by a month, but the average was that they had, they gained a month of knowledge from where they started. (Science/math, elementary teacher)

As this teacher indicated, upon reconnecting with the class, all students showed growth; however, teachers and administrators needed to be considerate in how they measured growth. The “usual” metrics schools have employed in the past would not work because they do not account for students’ personal life situations or even the unique challenges posed by the hybrid learning environment, loss of engagement, motivation, and absence. Some teachers mentioned that their school districts suspended standardized testing in the period, which was appreciated by the teachers and students alike.

We didn't have the gateway tests, that County typically has. I still use the [county] standards, but I was able to be a little bit more relaxed in the sense of being able to teach what I wanted to teach, and that made sense. Sure. And so it was easier to still interweave that cultural responsive pedagogy, into the classroom. Typically, [name] county is very notorious for every teacher having to have the same quiz, every teacher has to have the same lesson plan every teacher has to have the same test, and this year it wasn't like that. And so, it was a year of firsts. (ELA, elementary teacher).

Thus, when teachers had more flexibility and were not forced to comply with a standardized curriculum and assessment mandates, they were able to provide students trauma informed pedagogies, a low stress learning environment and the necessary mental and emotional health support. In this context therefore, formative assessments were much more helpful in providing students helpful feedback and scaffolds to keep them progressing in the learning, without adding undue stress and pressures of a standardized testing environment. Teachers found a focus on empathy and flexibility essential to engage students and help them transition to in-person learning.

Advocating for Students and Self

Teachers faced immense challenges during the 2020-2021 academic year, which ranged from getting ahold of students who they had lost contact with, grappling with the technology divide in high-needs districts, reaching out to parents to follow up about attendance and performance concerns, trouble-shooting technology issues, and creating lesson plans and assessments utilizing SEL frameworks. All of this took a toll on teachers’ own mental and emotional health and they mentioned feeling burnt out and exhausted from all the additional tasks they had taken on upon themselves to be effective educators in this time of trauma. Teachers’ own balance in such a context was closely tied to the issues of the community, students’ social-emotional health, and systemic or equity related resource challenges. Thus, teachers mentioned the need for advocating for students’ well-being as well as their own, since the two were closely linked. As the literature mentions, teachers who are socio-emotionally competent themselves can be teachers who promote these skills in students and teach for SEL (Yang, 2021). Given this close connection between teachers’ own social-emotional health and students’ learning, teachers mentioned advocating for compassion and fair policies at the building level and county level to teach students effectively and meet their social, emotional, and academic needs. Teachers also mentioned the importance of self-care and collaboration with colleagues in order to reduce stress and fatigue and create a support system.

Reaching out to School/County Administrators

Given the impact of systemic inequities on students attending the high-needs schools where our teachers were employed, teachers often had to push school principals as well as county administrators for a fair access to devices and hot-spots so that students could join online instruction. Like one teacher mentioned,

I think a lot of teachers should advocate for themselves and advocate for their students more, we just we just take what we're given and you know it's kind of like make do, but I think too, like, sometimes it just needs to be said. I have a classroom of 20 kids and give me five laptops, he wanted to take tests on the computers, "how's that going to work principal?" Letting a principal or letting whoever know like I hear your expectation, but in my classroom. ... this year has taught me to just kind of put things back on my leaders and, ask them what we should do, letting people who are in charge, make decisions that are appropriate. (ESOL, elementary teacher).

This teacher showcased her frustration and inability to teach her entire group of students because the classroom did not have enough laptops for all students. She mentioned how teachers should no longer accept directives provided to them from the leadership but push back and ask for more equitable resources for their students. This not only brings equity in learning, but also reduces stress on the teachers in trying to figure out how to come up with "creative solutions for resource shortage". Similarly, another teacher mentioned reaching out to county leadership to express their frustration and advocate for better technology access for students to reduce the technology divide.

We wrote an open letter to our superintendent and his staff was we wanted it to be a one-to-one district, but [name] County, said that being a one-to-one district technology wise, was not feasible. And so, I teach at a title one school now. And so, realizing that, most of my students were working off their cell phones. They didn't have a viable Chromebook, and if they're given a Chromebook, the Chromebooks were sometimes broken. It created like a big barrier. So, it was like a firsthand experience with what the digital divide is, and how damaging it can be to students learning. (Elementary teacher)

This teacher also mentioned how she witnessed the technology divide and its repercussions on student learning play out in real time. This lack of access to resources and other systemic inequities that impacted students' lives further added stress and fatigue for teachers and complicated their job of meeting student needs and helping students stay engaged. Thus, advocacy became a central part of teachers' lives during the 2020-2021 year, in an attempt to find solutions to problems that negatively impacted teachers' and students' mental and emotional health.

Support Structures and Self-care

The unique challenges associated with online/hybrid learning and traumas arising out of the pandemic caused the teachers to feel overwhelmed and burnt out. They often had to perform a lot of duties on top of teaching, such as learning new technology that would be suitable for SEL, helping out colleagues with technology issues, and following up with parents, often stepping in for the school social worker, school psychologist or counselor. All of

these activities took up a lot of teachers' personal time and they mentioned working long hours every day and even on the weekends. Like this teacher mentioned,

Life is kind of crazy as a teacher, you have all of these duties outside of simply teaching. I was the technology guru, the resident expert at my school, helping colleagues figure out technology portals, organize teaching materials online, help them become the most efficient instructor online. You have to create your own resources and materials and a lot of times it saved effort when we worked collaboratively. (Science, middle grades)

Teachers mentioned the need for collaboration among colleagues and support structures within schools to reduce their stress and burn-out. The supports were not just limited to the school building, but also in the teaching community writ-large, and teachers mentioned needing the support of teacher networks and working out solutions to teaching problems. When these collaborative opportunities were not available, teachers felt that they had to "reinvent the wheel," come up with solutions themselves, which further increased stress and negatively impacted their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Teachers also mentioned struggling to balance between personal life and professional life because of the increased amount of time they were having to devote in school. Like one teacher said, "I have a 3-year-old at home who also needs my time and attention but balancing between school-work and home life has been extremely challenging this year." Thus, added stress was a real factor in these novice teachers' lives in the year 2020-2021 and caused mental and emotional health concerns for them.

While some schools had explicit support and resources available for mental health needs, there is an immense need for such structures to be available more widely. Like this teacher mentioned, "we did mental health Mondays, in which we focused on effect. Well, we did nurturance one day, we did focus, awareness, all these different things." Thus, there is a need for the acknowledgement of stresses and traumas created by the pandemic which not only impacted the students, but also teachers' mental and emotional well-being, causing them to feel burnt out and overwhelmed.

Discussion

The findings of our study supported the value of social-emotional learning in a time when P-12 education all over the world was in the midst of an unusual period, with the ongoing pandemic, teaching in hybrid modalities, and social-emotional trauma inflicted upon communities and students (Brown, Correll & Stormer, 2021; Dolighan & Owen, 2021). Insight into teachers' practices revealed that competencies of SEL focused instruction, care and compassion in teaching, trauma informed pedagogies, and content instruction woven together helped support holistic student development (Yang, 2021). Teachers found it necessary to bring social and emotional wellbeing of students front and center in their instruction and focused heavily on building classroom communities, social interactions, collaborative learning environments, parental engagement, and positive references to student identity and culture (Feng Teng & Wu, 2021). Through a focus on SEL, teachers established a mutual trust with the students, and affirmed faith in students' abilities through extensive motivation, reinforcement, and modeling.

These supports helped build student self-esteem and confidence to set high goals for themselves and work towards achieving them (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Mecham, et al., 2021).

Emerging from a period of social isolation, emotional trauma, or loss, such supports from the teachers helped students transition into classroom learning more easily and make up for the unfinished learning (Vestall, 2021). The pandemic created a wide range of learning needs among students in classrooms and further complicated the task of teaching. Through the use of personalized, small-group and individual meetings, tutoring sessions, and written feedback, teachers continued an individualized focus on students' needs (Zieher, et al., 2021).

The beginning years in the profession are challenging for all teachers; the unique circumstances of the year 2020-2021 increased the challenge manifold. Since all teachers in our study were novice teachers, it is understandable that they experienced more burnout and fatigue while teaching in an unusual environment (Mecham, et al., 2021). Being considerate to student traumas, engaging students online as well as in-person in ways that would nurture and support their social, emotional, and academic needs added to the number of hours teachers were putting in each week for our novice teachers and led them to feeling burnt out by the end of the year (Michalec & Wilson, 2021; Yang, 2021).

Since teachers in this study were employed in high-needs schools, where students were more vulnerable to the negative impact of the pandemic, teachers often mentioned feeling frustration about inequity in resource distribution which added another layer of challenge to the teachers' job. This period also led teachers to engage a lot more in advocacy for a fair distribution of learning resources, flexibility in mandates to reduce stress on students, and more autonomy to teachers to determine approaches most suitable for their students' learning needs. There is a real need to address teachers' burn out and fatigue coming out of the pandemic as it might lead to greater teacher turnover (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

SEL and trauma informed pedagogies are the need of the hour since P-12 students are feeling the lingering impacts of the pandemic, catching up with unfinished learning, and at the same time coping with social and emotional issues (Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Vestall, 2021). Although our study included 23 teachers from one southeastern state, the challenges they faced were similar to the experience of teachers nation-wide or even internationally. SEL was essential to promote engaging ways of learning and transitioning into school instruction as showcased by the teachers in our study. Although their context was that of high-needs schools and vulnerable student populations, the findings offer helpful insight into effective approaches to instruction for all students. The results imply that SEL can be practiced by teachers in all content areas, irrespective of the grade-level, all over the world (Meecham, et al., 2021; Michalec & Wilson, 2021).

Even though in 2021-2022 academic year, majority of students have returned back to in-person instruction, it is important to consider the implications of challenges teachers faced during the pandemic. Research from the two years of COVID instruction highlights the salience of SEL, and a need to provide teachers in all schools the

necessary skills, resources, and support structures to incorporate SEL in their classrooms (Brown, et al., 2021; Katz, et al., 2020). Results from our study are consistent with recent research and indicate that subject and grade-level resources, interactive tools, and SEL focused materials should be widely available to teachers, so that they do not have to spend personal time developing these materials for themselves (Cristol & Gimbert, 2021; Sahlberg, 2021). Another aspect is technological competence, as studies have found that teachers who were more equipped to teach utilizing online technologies for SEL, felt less stress and burnout (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). Both of these aspects have implications for teacher education as well as professional development to not just support SEL competencies in teachers, but also create resource pools for materials that are easily available, in addition to technology support and training, which should be ongoing (Brown, et al., 2021; CASEL, 2021). The other implication is the need for more support personnel, such as social workers, counsellors and school psychologists who may play an important role in addressing traumas and emotional concerns in students, and provide professional intervention, which the teacher may not be equipped to offer (Yang, 2021).

Teacher burnout and self-care is another important implication from our study, as there is a tremendous need to equip teachers with self-care strategies, resilience, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Support structures from schools and districts, teacher networks, and access to professional help from school psychologists are critical for teacher self-care (Yang, 2021). Since teacher turnover and teacher shortages are becoming increasingly prevalent in the United States, finding ways to reduce teacher burnout, offering systems of collaboration and support at the school level or at the professional level are may offer important implications for reducing turnover (Brown, et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

There is also a need for compassionate and trauma informed policies in education at the school district and state level like the teachers in our study mentioned (Katz, et al., 2020). As a field, we need to recognize the need to address the social-emotional needs of students and create low-stress and high-engagement environments in our classrooms concern, especially in high-needs school districts (CASEL, 2021). It is also becoming an urgent need to focus on teacher care and social-emotional competencies of teachers to reduce burn out and stress in teachers and retain high-quality dedicated teachers in the profession (Yang, 2021).

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