

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING THROUGH  
THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM APPROACH FOR ELEMENTARY  
STUDENTS DURING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

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New York

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING THROUGH THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM APPROACH FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS DURING A TRAUMATIC EVENT**

Sheena Burke

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a significant concern for schools across the United States and abroad, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research suggests that school support is necessary for students to succeed academically and emotionally. In recognition of this need, the New York State Education Department mandated schools to implement a SEL program that focuses on developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and responsible decision-making skills. Many SEL programs have been researched to determine their effectiveness in affecting students' overall well-being. This phenomenological study used interviews with K–6 Responsive Classroom teachers in the Tri-State Area to determine the benefits of the Responsive Classroom approach for elementary students during a traumatic event. The findings showed a connection between the Responsive Classroom approach, a student-centered design of teaching and discipline, and the development of elementary students' self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. In addition, this study showed how the Responsive Classroom approach supports students during a traumatic event. Understanding the influence of the Responsive Classroom approach on students

during a traumatic experience may inform educational leaders' decisions when selecting an SEL program for their students.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents, Edgar and Jessie Burke. Words cannot fully convey the depth of gratitude I feel for your constant encouragement. This journey has been challenging, with moments where I contemplated giving up. However, it is your endless love and support that have provided me with the strength to persevere. I am fortunate to have such wonderful parents, and I count myself even more fortunate to have you both in my life.

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Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my dear family, whose support and understanding have been a constant source of strength throughout this endeavor. Your love and encouragement have sustained me during the challenges, enabling me to reach this milestone. Thank you, and I love all of you very much.

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I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.

—Philippians 4:13

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the face of American education encountered unforeseen challenges that will have educators debating and reevaluating their role in students' social-emotional development for years to come. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the awareness of the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) for all students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) reported that of 37 state leaders surveyed, 84% said the importance of SEL has increased due to the pandemic, and 78% reported district-wide requests for SEL (Bridgeland et. al, 2013). When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, students were thrust into a world of uncertainty, and meeting their social-emotional needs became as important as their academic achievement (Lyons et al., 2020). The widespread school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the U.S. education system. In 2020, at least 124,000 U.S. public and private schools and 55.1 million students nationwide were affected by the closures, disrupting their education (Education Week, 2020). With students suffering from broken relationships built prior to the pandemic, SEL was a means to restore positive connections and relationships and foster a sense of safety (Walker, 2020). More than ever, SEL is a priority and an integral part of the learning community.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted feelings of safety and protection for many children, leading to elevated stress responses and potentially compounding the impact of other stressors (Griffin, 2021). According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.), "A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens the

life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic” (para. 1). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many children’s and families’ sense of security, causing elevated stress levels that could exacerbate existing stressors (Griffin, 2021). The Southern Iowa Mental Health Center (2021) highlighted a study that of 39,000 children treated at nine pediatric trauma centers between March and September 2020, 2,064 were victims of suspected child abuse. In addition, among the children aged 5 and older, the number of child abuse victims tripled to 103. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) compared 2020 to 2019 data and found that between April and October 2020, mental health–related emergency room visits increased by 24% for children aged 5–11 and 31% for adolescents aged 12–17.

The trauma experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic has made educators more mindful of the importance of SEL. Children engaged in SEL develop skills to help manage their emotions. Students need to experience some sense of normalcy, where teachers and parents recognize their feelings and encourage free expression (Walker, 2020). Participation in SEL activities helps students develop skills that promote positive academic, social, and mental health outcomes (Jones et al., 2017). In a McGraw Hill (2018) report, 96% of the administrators surveyed believed SEL is as important as academic learning. In addition, 74% of teachers reported devoting more time to teaching SEL skills today than 5 years ago.

According to Randi Weingarten, former President of the American Federation of Teachers,

Teachers enter the profession to provide a well-rounded education and support the whole student, which includes social and emotional skills development. SEL is a

critical part of every child’s growth, both as students and as contributing members of society. Teachers have shared with us how important this is – now it’s up to all of us to support them in this essential work. (Bridgeland et al., 2013, p. 17)

School leaders develop SEL programs to implement a programmatic approach to teaching SEL skills. Administrators and teachers from schools with proven SEL programs have implemented programs that include teacher and administrator involvement, professional development, and school staff participation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an expectation for teachers to prepare their students to meet state standards and ensure students exhibited “appropriate school behaviors.” Although academics are important, learning is challenging without addressing students’ SEL well-being during a crisis (Walker, 2020). In a national survey, 14% of parents reported that their children’s behavior had worsened since the pandemic’s start (Patrick et al., 2020). According to Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) there must be a balance between academic learning and SEL. For students to be successful in the 21st century, students need to be engaged in more than just academics (Wallender et al., 2020).

Research has shown that the Responsive Classroom approach (RCA) supports the social-emotional development of students in grades K–8. A responsive classroom is a student-centered, SEL approach that addresses teaching and discipline by focusing on the following:

- (1) Creating optimal learning conditions for students to develop the academic, social, and emotional skills needed for success in and out of school, and (2)

building positive school and classroom communities where students learn, behave, hope, and set and achieve goals. (Responsive Classroom, 2018, para. 1)

### **Purpose of the Study**

This phenomenological study was a means to explore the lived experiences of elementary teachers who use the RCA. Understanding how teachers use and understand RCA will aid practitioners and researchers in understanding how the approach supports elementary students' social-emotional well-being, further promoting student self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Qualitative research on teachers' perspectives of the RCA is limited. This study's findings can provide school districts with background knowledge on the approach. Particularly, the findings show its effectiveness in supporting elementary students' social and emotional well-being during a traumatic experience such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The guiding framework for this study was CASEL. According to CASEL, SEL is the process through which children, youth and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

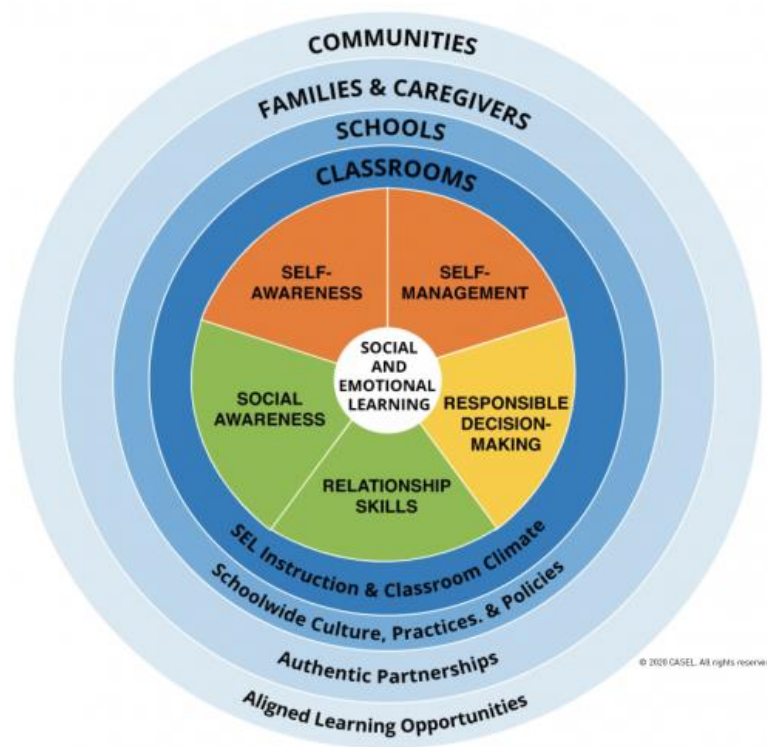
(New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2018, p. 6)

These skills comprise the five core competencies for success in life: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (NYSED, 2018). The CASEL model shows that these five competencies

affect short- and long-term outcomes, such as positive attitudes and social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, academic success, graduation rates, mental health, criminal behavior, substance abuse, and engaged citizenship (Ross & Tolan, 2018). According to CASEL (n.d.-b), SEL contributes to well-being, safer schools, and skills for future readiness. As the demand for SEL programs increases, CASEL’s goal is to provide invaluable resources to educators worldwide.

**Figure 1**

*The CASEL Wheel: The Five Core Competencies of Social-Emotional Learning*



*Note.* From *What Is the CASEL Framework?* by CASEL, n.d.-b (<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#communities>)

**Significance of the Study**

NYSED leaders recognize the importance of addressing students’ social-emotional needs, establishing SEL learning goals through the School Climate and Student



Engagement Workgroup of the New York State Safe Schools Task Force. The goals are as follows: (a) develop self-awareness and self-management skills essential to success in school and life; (b) use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; and (c) demonstrate ethical decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. NYSED leaders assert that creating student learning benchmarks will force district and school administrators to ensure that students receive SEL instruction, experience school connectedness, and become better learners.

Although research shows the benefits of SEL on academic achievement, most inquiries have been quantitative. There is a need for research to obtain qualitative data to show how SEL supports students during a traumatic event. Students face many challenges, which can be difficult to handle. Developing social-emotional skills will give students the support needed to succeed academically and socially. The COVID-19 pandemic should have caused educators to reflect on teacher preparedness when faced with the daunting task of educating students amid trauma. The current study's findings provide school districts with background knowledge of SEL and its relation to students' well-being during and after a traumatizing experience.

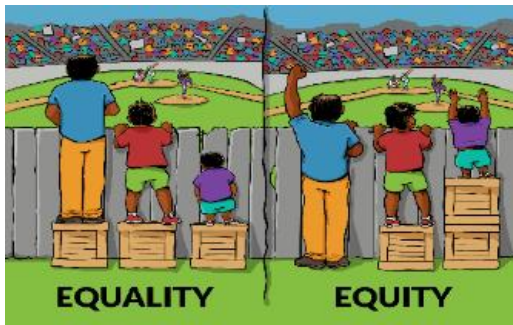
### **Connection to Equity and Social Justice**

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the urgency to examine SEL through the lens of equity for K-12 students. According to the Center for Public Education (2016), equality in education happens when all students receive the same treatment and have access to the same resources relevant to their specific needs, ensuring the full development of their academic and social potential. Figure 2 is an image widely used in

education to depict the meaning of equality versus equity. Although one can draw various conclusions from the image, for the purpose of this study, the image shows how everyone's needs are different. SEL is an avenue to address the tiered levels of social and emotional support students need.

**Figure 2**

*Illustrating Equality vs. Equity*



*Note.* From *Illustrating Equality vs. Equity*, by Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2016. (<https://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/>)

Implementing SEL could significantly contribute to the development of compassionate, fair, inclusive learning environment that gives each student the opportunity to achieve their highest potential. An effective systematic integration of SEL depends on establishing an equitable environment where every student and adult are honored, appreciated, and validated for their unique interests, abilities, social identities, cultural values, and backgrounds (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Although SEL alone is insufficient to correct the inequities in the education system, the approach could be a catalyst for school leaders to examine their efforts in being culturally responsive to the needs of their students. According to CASEL (n.d.-a), maximizing SEL to support equity is a necessary first step:

(1) SEL is relevant for all students in all schools and affirms diverse cultures and backgrounds; (2) SEL is a strategy for systemic improvement, not just an intervention for at-risk students; (3) SEL is a way to uplift student voice and promote agency and civic engagement; (4) SEL supports adults to strengthen practices that promote equity; and (5) Schools must engage students, families, and communities as authentic partners in social and emotional development. (p. 1)

The COVID-19 pandemic caused increased trauma among students. SEL was an aid to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for trauma-inflicted students. Equitable support requires an awareness of the diverse student experiences.

### **Research Questions**

This study answered the following questions:

1. What are Responsive Classroom teachers' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' social and emotional well-being?
2. How do teachers use the Responsive Classroom approach to support the social-emotional needs of students during a traumatic event?
3. What are the perceptions of Responsive Classroom teachers on how their practices foster the development of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in students?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions will help support the reader's understanding of the terms used in this study:

*COVID-19 pandemic:* A global outbreak of coronavirus, an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; World Health Organization, 2023).

*Relationship skills:* Communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed. Relationship skills provide individuals with the tools they need to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and act in accordance with social norms (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Responsive Classroom:* A student-centered, social, and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline. An RC includes a set of research- and evidence-based practices designed to create safe, joyful, and engaging classrooms and school communities for students and teachers (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-a).

*Responsive Classroom approach:* Focuses on (a) creating optimal learning conditions for students to develop the academic, social, and emotional skills needed for success in and out of school and (b) building positive school and classroom communities where students learn, behave, hope, and set and achieve goals (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-a).

*Responsible decision-making:* The ability to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, make accurate behavioral assessments to evaluate the consequences of various actions, and take the health and well-being of self and others into consideration.

Responsible decision-making requires the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Self-awareness:* Understanding of one's emotions, personal goals, and values. Self-awareness includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations, having a positive mindset, and possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Self-management:* Skills and attitudes that facilitate regulating emotions and behaviors. Self-management includes the skills necessary to achieve goals, such as delaying gratification, managing stress, controlling impulses, and persevering through challenges (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Social awareness:* The ability to take the perspective of and respect those with different backgrounds or cultures and to empathize and feel compassion. Social awareness involves understanding social norms for behavior and recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Social-emotional learning:* The process through which children, youth, and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.-b).

*Trauma:* An emotional response to an awful event, such as an accident, rape, or natural disaster (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

*Traumatic event:* An event that threatens injury, death, or the physical integrity of self or others and causes horror, terror, or helplessness at the time it occurs (American Psychological Association, 2008).

## **CHAPTER 2 INTRODUCTION**

The review of literature related to this study presents the impact of SEL on elementary students through the RCA. The review entailed analyzing research and literature summaries relevant to the research topic. The literature review has four sections. The first section is an examination of the CASEL framework. Next is a discussion of SEL and its benefits. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social and emotional well-being appear in the third section. Finally, the last section presents RCA practices

### **CASEL Framework**

SEL programs are a systematic means for providing opportunities for students to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the ideas of others, grow socially, and develop interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Payton et al., 2000). In 1994, a group of educators, practitioners, and child advocates collaborated on the “missing piece” in education and became known as CASEL (n.d.-b). The individuals believed schools needed to focus on students' social and emotional needs. The CASEL framework outlines the five core competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management) pertinent to SEL and the four settings (communities, families and caregivers, schools, and classrooms) for development. The framework provides a foundation for school communities when implementing a SEL program, acting as a guide for educational leaders when determining how to: “(1) foster knowledge, skills, and attributes across the five areas of social and emotional competence; and (2) establish equitable learning environments and coordinate

practices across four key settings that support students’ social, emotional, and academic development” (CASEL, n.d., para. 2).

Wikman et al. (2022) found a significant correlation between self-concept and prosocial behaviors. The findings were theoretically applicable to the CASEL model of social-emotional competence: self-awareness and social awareness. In addition, prosocial behaviors correlated with academic achievement. Wikman et al. showed children were successful academically when establishing positive relationships and social behavior norms. Lastly, self-concept (self-awareness) was highly related to well-being.

Demirci et al. (2022) used Totan’s Social Emotional Learning Scale and Kaner’s Peer Relationship Scale to examine the peer relationships and SEL levels of 364 students between the ages of 14 and 18. Demirci et al.’s findings validated that peer relationships are associated with SEL. Self-awareness and relationship-building affect peer relationships. In addition, self-knowledge (self-awareness) contributes to establishing healthy relationships with others.

### **Social-Emotional Learning Defined**

According to CASEL (n.d.-b), social and emotional learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (p. 1)

With SEL, students can think critically, analyze, communicate, and work collaboratively. Teachers must provide through explicit instruction and student-centered

learning activities for children to practice and apply to various situations (Durlak et al., 2011). A CASEL report showed the following: (a) teachers understand, value, and endorse SEL for all students; (b) teachers believe SEL helps students achieve in school and life; and (c) teachers identify key accelerators for SEL (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Ninety-three percent of teachers surveyed believed SEL was very important for a positive school experience, and 97% reported that SEL benefits all students from all backgrounds.

SEL comprises five core competencies important to the development of a student’s well-being: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Acquiring these skills (see Table 1) within the five domains is a process, a learned experience primarily in schools (NYSED, 2018).

**Table 1**

*Core SEL Competency Skills*

Self-awareness	Self-management	Social awareness	Relationship skills	Responsible decision-making
Identifying emotions	Impulse control	Perspective-taking	Communication	Identifying problems
Accurate self-perception	Stress management	Empathy	Social engagement	Analyzing situations
Recognizing strengths	Self-discipline	Appreciating diversity	Relationship-building	Solving problems
Self-confidence	Self-motivation	Respect for others	Teamwork	Evaluating
Self-efficacy	Goal setting			Reflecting
	Organizational skills			Ethical responsibility

**Benefits of Social-Emotional Learning**

According to Durlak et al. (2015), “SEL involves fostering social and emotional competencies through explicit instruction and through student-centered learning approaches that help students engage in the learning process and develop analytical,



communication, and collaborative skills” (p. 6). Social and emotional skills are essential for an individual’s mental and physical well-being in a society where it is necessary to interact with people from all walks of life, giving them the skills to cope with everyday challenges. Bierman et al. (2022) issued a brief on promoting SEL in preschool, stating that effective SEL programs have immediate and long-term positive results. Immediate results included following directions, increased attention, persistence at challenging tasks, greater enjoyment in attending school, and fewer problem behaviors. In the long-term, findings showed positive mental health, higher graduation rates, productive employment, reduced risky behavior, and more civic engagement.

Previously showing immediate improvements in mental health, social skills, and academic achievement, SEL programs continue to benefit students for months and even years, according to a 2017 meta-analysis from CASEL, the University of Illinois Chicago, Loyola University, and the University of British Columbia. Up to 18 years later, students exposed to SEL in school continue to perform better than their peers on several indicators, including positive social behaviors and attitudes, skills such as empathy and teamwork, and academics. Fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and lower drug use are additional noted benefits (CASEL, 2021).

In 2011, Durlak et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 213 SEL studies that involved 270,034 kindergartens through high school students across various settings. Universal school-based social-emotional development programs were the focus of the study. Students receiving SEL instruction demonstrated the following: (a) better academic performance (11 percentile points higher) than students who did not receive SEL; (b) improved attitudes and behaviors (greater motivation to learn and better classroom

behavior); (c) fewer negative behaviors (decreased class disruptions including noncompliance and disciplinary referrals); and (d) reduced emotional distress (fewer reports of depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal).

Green et al. (2021) investigated the effects of the SPARK Child Mentoring Program, a resilience-focused SEL program, on student resiliency, reduction of risk factors, natural emotional well-being, and school success. The 11-week program was an effort to help students recognize that when they change their thinking, their experiences, feelings, perceptions, and states of mind also change. Students learned strategies to quiet their minds for change to occur. The study included a randomized controlled group of 94 elementary school students (intervention:  $n = 47$ ; control:  $n = 47$ ) who participated in pre- and postintervention measurements. The tools used were the Three Principles Inventory for Youth (assessment of program content knowledge), Communication, Decision Making and Problem-Solving scale (CDP-Child Version), Impulse and Clarity subscales; and the Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents. The results showed that children in the intervention group increased their knowledge of how the mind functions, thus gaining insight into their own abilities. Through these insights, the students' social and emotional competencies grew stronger, resulting in positive development and adaptive functioning.

SEL outcomes can vary based on the curriculum used. Ashdown and Bernard (2012) investigated the effect of the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI). At a Catholic school in Melbourne, Australia, 99 preparatory and Grade 1 students of low socioeconomic status participated in a 10-week program. The home languages varied between English and Asian (other than Chinese). One first-grade and

one prep class received explicit instruction in the YCDI curriculum, and the other two classes did not. Results showed that although the YCDI teachers were well prepared, they did not follow the scripted lesson plans. The prep teacher covered the basics of the program with modifications, and the Grade 1 teacher presented activities from the curriculum and incorporated additional worksheets. The Grade 1 students demonstrated more improvements than the prep class. Students in the Grade 1 YCDI class showed positive improvements in reading achievement compared to those in the Grade 1 non-YCDI class. Comparatively, the students in the Prep YCDI class and non-YCDI class had similar gains in reading. The impact on reading achievement was not significant between the YCDI and non-YCDI students. The results showed a greater impact on the lower-performing students in Grade 1 YCDI. In addition, according to the teachers' ratings, the students in the YCDI were considerably more able to manage their emotions, get along with others, and engage in academic learning. The program was successful in reducing the problem behaviors of the Grade 1 students.

Hart et al. (2020) conducted a multiyear, multisite cluster-randomized trial to evaluate the efficacy of the Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP), a universal SEL program. The study's primary goal was to investigate the association between experience with the SSIC-CIP and students' performance on state exams in successive grades. The program targets positive social behavior through the implementation of 10 instructional units over 12 weeks that focus on developing skills such as cooperation, self-control, responsibility, assertion, and empathy. Teachers used various instructional strategies, including reinforcement, modeling, role-playing, and problem-solving. Three cohorts of second-grade students

participated in the study (treatment group:  $n = 249$ ; control group:  $n = 192$ ). The treatment group received the instruction, and the achievement on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment in math and reading for both groups was assessed in Grades 3 through 5. In addition, the interaction between SSIS-CIP and student academic skills prior to the program was evaluated using the STAR Reading and Math computerized adaptive tests as a baseline. The SSIS-CIP experience did not produce statistically significant differences in state performance assessments; however, interactions between SSIS-CIP exposure and baseline tests in math and reading showed higher probability rates that a student would achieve proficiency at different grade levels.

Schonfeld et al. (2015) studied the effects of the Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum on the academic achievement of urban high-risk students in Grades 3 through 6 in the U.S. Northeast. The participants were predominantly minorities from the same school district. Of the 24 elementary schools, 12 were randomly assigned to the PATHS intervention group ( $n = 692$  students;  $n = 12$  schools). The remaining schools were assigned to the control group ( $n = 702$  students;  $n = 12$  schools). Comparatively, both groups had similar sociodemographic and achievement levels on state exams in math, reading, and writing. Students in the control group continued to receive the preexisting SEL curriculum, which consisted of various commercially available resources, while the students in the intervention group received the PATHS curriculum, which focused on solving problems in a positive, nonviolent manner. The results were similar to Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis. According to state exam scores, students who participated in the PATHS program had a higher probability of attaining basic reading, writing, and math proficiency. The probability rate increased in

the sixth grade if the students received additional lessons. Reviewing the limited literature on how COVID-19 affected student SEL is essential.

### **The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Social-Emotional Learning**

In 2021, Styck et al. studied 2,738 Midwestern students in Grades 4 through 12 to determine stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The 20-item online survey indicated the five top stressors experienced by the elementary students ( $n = 516$ ): (a) not seeing friends in person, (b) missing events that were important to me (e.g., dances, graduation, field day, birthday parties); (c) family might get sick, (d) not seeing other family members in person, and (e) friends might get sick.

Panchal et al. (2023) examined literature from various databases on the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on children and adolescents ( $N = 54,999$ ). The study showed the most common mental health effects were anxiety and depression. Additional outcomes included loneliness, psychological distress, anger, irritability, boredom, fear, and stress.

Bhatnagar and Many (2022) studied teachers challenged to provide effective academic instruction and SEL support during COVID-19. In a case study of 23 novice teachers, Bhatnagar and Many explored teachers' perceptions about SEL in their teaching, strategies for impacting student learning and development, and challenges faced due to online or hybrid modalities. The findings showed that the teachers strongly believed they had to focus on building a stress-free, positive classroom community that fostered trust and acknowledged the trauma experienced by the students. Bhatnagar and Many determined that SEL is critically important during COVID-19 and must include trauma-informed practices, teacher self-care, and professional development in SEL.

Two weeks after the proclamation of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee et al. (2022) conducted a study of 283 parents of children ages 0 through 12 living in the United States. The study focused on the correlation of social isolation and loss of employment with child maltreatment. Lee et al. found an association between the parents' social isolation and increased physical and emotional neglect and verbal aggression toward their child.

Research has suggested that during times of crisis, there may be an elevated risk of child maltreatment due to various factors, including increased stress, limited social support, and economic burden. Children's well-being is closely tied to the well-being of their parent, guardian, or caregiver. Increased stress within households may correlate with negative outcomes for children.

### **Responsive Classroom Approach**

Responsive Classroom "is an evidence-based approach to teaching and discipline that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness" (Responsive Classroom, n.d., p. 1). The following six principles guide each of the four domains: (a) Social and emotional skills are just as important as content; (b) how and what we teach are equally important; (c) social interaction promotes cognitive growth; (d) working together as adults to ensure students are learning in a safe, fun, and inclusive environment is as important as our individual abilities; (e) what we know about our students influences our expectations and attitudes towards our students; and (f) families are partners (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-b).

In creating a positive community, RC teachers aim to provide a safe, predictable, joyful, and inclusive environment where students have a sense of belonging and

significance (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-a). Teachers achieve this classroom by implementing Morning Meeting (MM), using specific teacher language, and practicing positive discipline. According to McTigue and Rimm-Kaufman (2010), MM is a daily meeting held to create a sense of class community by including sharing, games, and engaging activities that promote critical thought. A person who can exhibit self-control, listen attentively, respectfully ask thought-provoking questions, and understand different perspectives will become a stronger learner (Kriete & Davis, 2016).

Teachers who use the RCA experienced the following positive outcomes: (a) improved student achievement, (b) improved teacher-student interactions, and (c) higher quality instruction in mathematics (Responsive Classroom, n.d.). Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) conducted an exploratory study of the RCA to address two questions: How does teachers' use of RC practices contribute to children's academic and social growth? and How is the relation between teachers' use of RC practices and children's academic and social growth? The researchers found that teachers who used more RC practices had children with higher academic results in reading, written language, and math. In addition, there was improvement in three social areas: teachers' perception of closeness, assertion, and prosocial behavior. Lastly, the study showed that teachers who used RC practices had students who showed less anxious-fearful behavior (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007).

The MM components of greeting, sharing, group activity, and morning message promote the integration of social and academic development in a safe space while creating a predictable, stable routine to start the school day (Kriete & Davis, 2016). Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) focused on the connection between teachers receiving RC training and their interaction with students. The results showed teachers who received RC

training reported feeling more connected to their students and experienced more positive feelings about their jobs. In a critical study of the RC program, Stearns (2016) examined empirical studies on RC's efficacy and outcomes, finding that MM allows teachers to incorporate reading and writing instruction. By incorporating print-rich material into MM, teachers can "give students a positive, emotionally healthy start to the day without sacrificing valuable time for literacy instruction" (p. 333). Stearns suggested that, if used consistently, the RC approach increased students' satisfaction in school, reduced negative behaviors, improved teacher morale, and improved academic performance. Research has shown that when students have a structured learning environment, feel welcome and valued, and have teachers instructing according to their individual and developmental needs, their interest and academic competency increase (Stearns, 2016).

In 2013, Abry et al. examined the direct and indirect effects of training in the RC approach, teachers' application of RC practices, and the quality of teacher-student interactions in a structured framework. This study was part of a 3-year longitudinal cluster. Twenty-four schools were randomly assigned to the experimental (teachers:  $n = 132$ ) or control (teachers:  $n = 107$ ) group, and the demographically diverse participants included third- and fourth-grade teachers. The results showed that teachers trained in the RCA implemented more RC practices, leading to improved interaction quality.

In a similar study, Abry et al. (2017) studied the relationship between specific RC components and the quality of teachers' emotional, organizational, and instructional interactions in third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms. Twenty-four schools in a mid-Atlantic district were selected based on their interest in RC (intervention:  $n = 13$ ; control:  $n = 11$ ). The foci were MM, rule creation, interactive modeling, and academic choice.



Participating teachers received 2-week training sessions on the practices of RC, onsite coaching, and RC books and materials. The baseline data consisted of teacher-reported use of the RC components and teacher–student classroom interaction quality observed prior to RC training. The study showed that teachers’ greater use of MM was associated with higher levels of emotional support, and academic choice was associated with higher levels of emotional and instructional support. The results suggest that when teachers provide academic choice, there is an increased enthusiasm for learning. Rule creation and interactive modeling did not produce high levels of interaction quality.

The language of the teacher is an important aspect of the RCA. RC teachers speak in ways that lead each student to envision success, think deeply, set goals, and work hard to achieve them (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-a). Effective teacher language in a responsive classroom incorporates several key attributes aimed at nurturing a positive and supportive learning environment, including the following:

- Positive and encouraging:
- Clear and specific
- Respectful and empathetic
- Responsive and flexible
- Promoting independence and responsibility
- Culturally relevant and inclusive
- Modeling positive communication skills
- Promoting critical thinking and inquiry

These characteristics of effective teacher language are integral to creating a responsive classroom environment that supports the social, emotional, and academic growth of all

students (Responsive Classroom, n.d.-a). It takes time to develop this practice of RC language, but the language proves invaluable when fully adopted by the teacher.

The RCA has shown positive effects on students. Brock et al. (2008) conducted a 3-year longitudinal analysis of the contribution of the RCA in relation to children's perceptions of the classroom environment and social and academic performance. Participants included 520 children (girls:  $n = 241$ ; boys:  $n = 270$ ; unknown:  $n = 9$ ), 213 of them identified as having one or more risk factors such as low family income, single-parent household, low maternal education, or limited English proficiency. The ethnic breakdowns were Caucasian Americans (68.2%), Hispanic Americans (13.3%), African Americans (10.2%), and Asian Americans (8.4%). Brock et al. collected data from three cohorts of third-grade students over 3 years, creating longitudinal and cross-sectional data sets. The teachers' RC practices were assessed using the Classroom Practice Measure, with teachers rating 34 items on a scale of 1–5. Classroom observations were conducted to validate teacher ratings. In addition, teachers completed a Social Skills Rating Scale (SRSS) and Mock Report Card for each student. Measurement tools completed by students included the School Attitude Questionnaire, which measured children's perceptions of their learning environment and achievement test scores. Although of small magnitude, there were three noteworthy findings from this study: (a) teachers who implemented more RC practices had students who scored higher on ratings of social skills, academic competence, and standardized achievement tests; (b) RC teacher practices contributed to children's positive perceptions of their learning environment; and (c) children's perceptions mediated the concurrent relation between RC practices and teachers' ratings of children's social skills but not achievement outcomes.

In 2014, Rimm-Kaufman et al. conducted the Responsive Classroom Efficacy Study. Three research questions guided the study, but only two pertained to the current study: What is the impact of the RC approach on students' reading and math achievement over 3 years? and To what extent does fidelity of implementation mediate the relation between treatment assignment and reading and math achievement over 3 years? After studying 2,904 students from the end of the second grade through the fifth grade, Rimm-Kaufman et al. noted five key results for the first question. First, the treatment group did not exhibit significant results on the fifth-grade math or reading achievement assessment. Second, girls had significantly higher achievement scores in both reading and math. Third, free and reduced-price lunch eligibility was associated negatively with math and reading achievement. Fourth, students of ELL status who took the plain English test format related negatively to math and reading. Lastly, the initial math achievement test related positively to fifth-grade math and reading. Results relevant to Question 2 showed that the direct effect of random assignment to the treatment group was negative for both reading and math. In comparison, the indirect effect of the treatment through fidelity on fifth-grade math and reading achievement was positive and significant, indicating that random assignment to the RC condition caused increased fidelity.

Educators have become more aware of the importance of SEL. The COVID-19 pandemic caused district and school leaders to examine the effectiveness of their SEL program. This chapter provided literature that gave insight into the meaning and benefits of SEL, the RCA, and the CASEL framework.

## CHAPTER 3 INTRODUCTION

For this qualitative research study, the researcher used a phenomenological method to analyze narrative data from participant interviews to further understand the phenomenon of the RCA in relation to the CASEL Framework. This chapter will discuss the methodology, research design and methods for the research. Included are the data collection procedures, trustworthiness of the design, research ethics, the role of the researcher, and data analysis approach.

### Research Questions

This study answered the following questions:

1. What are Responsive Classroom teachers' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' social and emotional well-being?
2. How do teachers use the Responsive Classroom approach to support the social-emotional needs of students during a traumatic event?
3. What are the perceptions of Responsive Classroom teachers on how their practices foster the development of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in students?

### Research Design

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75). *Phenomenon* derives from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, which means to flare up, to show itself, or to appear (Moustakas, 1994). German mathematician Edmund Husserl intellectualized the phenomenological approach as a means of making meaning of people's lived experiences (van Manen, 2014)). Phenomenology aligns with

the meanings that surface in one's experiences. It is a foundational premise for understanding the essence of a phenomenon in terms of what was experienced (textural) and how it was experienced (structural). Although interpretations can vary, it is important to comprehend the meaning people give to their experiences. For this study, the *lived experience* was how teachers supported the social-emotional well-being of elementary students during the COVID-19 pandemic through the RCA.

This study was an exploration of the "essences of pure experiences" without preconceived judgments (epoche) but with a fresh perception, allowing the true meaning of RCA to emerge. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), when one's belief is temporarily deferred, or bracketed, there is less interference with experiencing the phenomena objectively. The study was a means to explore the RCA through teachers' perspectives by capturing their lived experiences through a descriptive narrative inquiry.

### **Participants and Setting**

Individuals who shared the lived experience of implementing the RCA were recruited to accurately depict the phenomenon. Recruitment occurred via two advertisements (see Appendices A and B) posted on social media platforms detailing the criteria for participation. Potential participants clicked a Google Forms link to answer the background and demographics questions. After form submission, purposeful sampling was the selection method employed to intentionally include individuals who understood the research problems and the specific study phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were selected based on the researcher's judgment of how informative they would be.

The participants were eight (7 females, 1 male) diverse K–6 elementary teachers currently teaching in the Tri-State area of Long Island, Brooklyn, and New Jersey. Each participant had a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience in an RC setting. In addition, the participants varied in gender, grade level assignment, experience with the RCA, and the number of years teaching. It was assumed that the participants understood SEL based on the number of years implementing the RCA. The number of years teaching ranged from 5 to 27 years (average 14.75 years). All participants received some form of training in the RC practices and had been using the RCA for 3 to 25 years (average 8 years). The grade level of instruction of the participants at the time of the study was kindergarten ( $n = 2$ ), third grade ( $n = 4$ ), special education ( $n = 1$ ), and K–4 ( $n = 1$ ). All participants had at least a bachelor's degree.

**Table 2***Participants' Background and Experience*

Participant	# of years teaching	Current grade level	School location (county)	Educational experience	# of years using RCA	Trained in RCA?
P1	12 years	Kindergarten	Nassau County	Master's	7 years	Yes
P2	27 years	3rd grade	Ocean County, NJ	25 years teaching; K-5 & high school	25 years	Yes; Levels 1 & 2
P3	5 years	Kindergarten	Kings County	Early Childhood	3 years	Yes
P4	10 years	3rd grade	Kings County	BA in Psychology; currently completing a MS in Education Curriculum and Instruction	4 years	Yes
P5	13 years	3rd grade	Monmouth County	K-5 Special Education endorsement	7 years	Yes, Levels 1 & 2
P6	5 years	3rd grade special education	Monmouth County	Bachelor's in Communication, Masters K-6; additional certifications in Special Ed and Math Grades 5-8	5 years	Trainings that consisted of workshops (reviewed RC practices)
P7	27 years	K-4	Kings County	Bachelors	7 years	Yes; interactive modeling
P8	19 years	1st grade	Nassau County	Bachelor's, N-5 with a TESOL extension	5 years	Yes

## **Data Collection Methods**

The researcher used interviews to explore and gather data. After the background information was screened and participants were selected, a meeting time was scheduled, and each participant was emailed the questions and consent forms. In receiving the questions ahead of time, the participants had time to reflect, allowing more in-depth responses during the interview. For easy consent form return, the participants could scan or take a picture of the signed documents and send them back to me. Confidentiality was maintained by storing all documents and recordings in a password-protected file.

Data collection occurred through virtual interviews held during the most convenient time for each participant. The CISCO WebEx system was used to record and transcribe the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the responses. During the interviews, the researcher documented key words and thoughts for later use in the coding process.

### ***Interview Protocol***

A semistructured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was the instrument used to gain insight into the RCA, particularly its connection to supporting elementary students during a traumatic experience and developing self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. By applying a semistructured approach, the researcher had flexibility in the types of questions asked to acquire specific data relevant to the study. Seidman (2013) stated, “As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people’s ability to make meaning through language” (p. 13). To create opportunities for the participants to share their RC experiences, the researcher posed the following types of questions: background and demographics, experience and behavior, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, and sensory questions (see Appendix C).



Interviewing “is an art, a reflection of the personality of the interviewer, and cannot be taught” (Seidman, 2013, p. 81). The researcher applied the following listening skills as identified by Seidman (2013):

- Listen to what the participant is saying. Concentrate on the substance of the response.
- Listen to your “inner voice.” Take the participants’ language seriously without making them feel defensive about it. Avoid using words like challenge, adventure, fascinate.
- Listen while remaining aware of the process as well as the substance. Be aware of the time, how much you have covered, and how much is left to be covered.

(pp. 81–82)

Additionally, Seidman advocated for the use of listening skills alongside a proactive approach that involves asking clarifying questions, seeking further information on topics of uncertainty, exploring without being intrusive, refraining from suggestive questioning, employing open-ended inquiries, and not interrupting.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After receiving approval from St. John University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and based on the inclusion criteria, the researcher emailed teachers asked them to participate. Written consent (see Appendix D) was obtained, and qualitative data were collected through interviews.

The current study used Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach. The focus was on the description of the lived experience through the eyes of

the participants. To be open-minded, the researcher used the strategy of epoche, also known as bracketing. According to Moustakas, epoche is

a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilection, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. (p. 85)

At each interview's onset, the researcher held a social conversation with each participant to establish a comfortable and trusting climate, allowing the participant to be open and honest (see Moustakas, 1994). Questions asked during the interview provided insight into the phenomenon of the RCA.

### **Trustworthiness of the Design**

Establishing trustworthiness entailed applying Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model, an approach used to assess the quality and validity of qualitative research.

Trustworthiness in social science research refers to the study's credibility and the researcher's ethical conduct. A study has trustworthiness if performed in a reliable way and according to ethical standards. Assessing trustworthiness occurred through Lincoln and Guba's four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Strategies for validation included member checking, thick description, external audit, and reflexivity, all commonly employed to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research. By using Lincoln and Guba's criteria and these validation strategies, the researcher ensured the study was ethically conducted and produced reliable and valid results.

## *Credibility*

Credibility is the assurance that research findings accurately represent the phenomenon under investigation. In qualitative research, establishing credibility is crucial because it helps ensure that the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data are trustworthy. A methodological approach used to enhance the credibility of research, triangulation involves using multiple sources of data from different means of collection to cross-validate findings. The use of multiple data sources provides a richer and more holistic view of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The idea is that converging evidence from various sources will strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the interpretations. Once the sources are triangulated, common themes are identified. The researcher built a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by finding connections or similarities between the data collected through interviews and documents. In addition, incorporating triangulation and drawing from various data sources minimizes the risk of bias or misinterpretation. Triangulation adds depth and credibility to the study's findings, making them more robust and reliable.

Member checking, also referred to as respondent validation, is a valuable strategy in qualitative research for enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking involves seeking feedback from participants to validate the accuracy and completeness of the data analysis and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary purpose of member checking is to involve participants in the research process and ensure their perspectives and experiences are accurately represented. Member checking serves as a form of quality control, helping to confirm the researcher's

interpretations and conclusions. In this study, participants received a copy of the findings with a request to provide feedback.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability applies to the external validity or applicability of research findings to determine whether the insights gained from a specific study could be relevant and useful in other similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance transferability, the researcher provided detailed and context-rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, and phenomenon. This detailed account allows readers to assess whether the findings might be relevant to their situations. Rich detail provided a vivid portrayal of the research context and participants' experiences (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to note that although transferability is a valuable consideration in qualitative research, complete generalizability to all contexts might not be possible.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability focuses on the stability and consistency of the research process and outcomes. External audit and maintaining an audit trail are key components of ensuring dependability. An external audit is an approach where an independent evaluator not affiliated with the study assesses the research process and the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The auditor's role is to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of the research, including its interpretations and conclusions. The external audit helps ensure that the researcher's biases and subjectivity do not influence the research. The researcher's academic advisor and professional mentor were the external auditors for this study.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability requires research findings to be objective and not influenced by the researcher's subjectivity or personal agenda. The goal is to ensure the data analysis and interpretations are grounded in the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, the researcher used the reflexivity technique. Reflexivity involves the researcher's self-awareness and critical reflection throughout the study by acknowledging their perspectives and biases and seeking to minimize the impact on the research. A reflexive journal was maintained to document my thoughts, reflections, and decision-making processes during the study.

### **Research Ethics**

The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) is a seminal document in the field of research ethics. The report established three fundamental ethical principles for conducting research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Seidman, 2013).

#### ***Respect for Persons***

This principle emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting the autonomy and dignity of individuals. The researcher obtained St. John's University IRB approval to ensure the ethical treatment of human subjects. Because prospective participants were contacted outside of the school setting, neither building- nor district-level approval was necessary. Participants received a consent form (see Appendix D) informing them of the purpose of the study, description of the study procedures, risks/discomforts of participating, benefits of participating, confidentiality, fees, right to

refuse or withdraw, right to ask questions, and ways to report concerns. The participants could ask questions about the consent form to ensure full understanding.

### ***Beneficence***

The principle of beneficence requires researchers to maximize benefits to participants while minimizing potential risks and harm. Protecting the identity of participants was a key aspect of ensuring their welfare and complying with the principle of beneficence. The participants were assigned a pseudonym (Participant 1, 2, 3, etc.) to maintain confidentiality and privacy, and the researcher maintained a master list of participant names and numbers. The participants could approve or disapprove of the use of direct quotations in written publications, ensuring their voices were respected. Lastly, the participants had the opportunity to suggest interview times and the option to decline recording the interview.

### ***Justice***

Justice in research involves treating all participants fairly and equally (Orb et al., 2001). Participants had as much time as they needed to respond and could provide clarification of their answers. The incorporation of these ethical principles was a demonstration of commitment to the well-being and rights of the participants and helped to ensure that the study occurred ethically and responsibly.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

After the interviews, the researcher conducted a thorough and systematic analysis of the interview data by identifying significant statements or quotes, a process known as horizontalization, to determine thematic connections (see Moustakas, 1994). The next step was highlighting textural and structural descriptions. Textural description is a

description of the participants' experiences, whereas in a structural description, the "how" is the focus by identifying the conditions, situations, or context of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the researcher wrote a composite description that captured the essence or common experiences of the participants. Through this analysis approach, the researcher constructed meaning of how the RCA supports elementary students' social and emotional well-being when experiencing a traumatic event.

### **Researcher Role**

For this phenomenological study, my primary role as the researcher was to translate the lived experiences of the participants into words that captured the essence of the RCA. As an elementary principal serving a community of minority students and witnessing how the COVID-19 pandemic traumatized my students, I recognized that it could have been difficult to reserve my comments during the interviews. I strongly believe in the importance of SEL; thus, I remained cognizant of my biases and refrained from sharing my opinions. To maintain objectivity during the research process, I jotted down my thoughts and beliefs on a notepad, allowing me to revisit them in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to gain insight into a particular phenomenon through the lived experiences of individuals. By listening to and observing the participants, I collected and interpreted data, thus creating meaning of the RCA from the teachers' perspective. The study's findings provide insight into the RCA for educators as a tool for addressing the social-emotional needs of students. Chapter 4 presents the findings in a descriptive narrative format.

## CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings related to the following research questions:

1. What are Responsive Classroom teachers' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' social and emotional well-being?
2. How do teachers use the Responsive Classroom approach to support the social-emotional needs of students during a traumatic event?
3. What are the perceptions of Responsive Classroom teachers on how their practices foster the development of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in students?

To answer these questions, the researcher explored the lived experiences of elementary RC teachers by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach. Semistructured interviews were the means to gain teachers' perspectives and insight into the importance of the RCA in relation to SEL, student development, and support during a traumatic event. This chapter presents the emergent themes to grasp the "living sense" (van Manen, 2014, p. 39) of the RCA phenomenon.

### **Overview of Themes**

The coding process is central to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By assigning codes to the data collected, the researcher can aggregate the text into smaller categories of information, allowing themes to emerge. Themes emerge from the perceptions, experiences, feelings, values, and emotions of the participants. In this study, the researcher compared the participants' responses to identify similarities. Responses were initially categorized based on question type, as presented by Merriam and Tisdell



(2016). The questions focused on background and demographics, experience and behavior, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, and senses. At the start of each interview, the participants were asked to describe their initial perception of RC and how it had changed. This line of questioning set the foundation for their lived experiences to understand the growth mindset of the participants in terms of their perception of the RCA. The interview continued with prompts to describe, explain, and share their thoughts about RCA, allowing for deeper reflection. After the interviews, the researcher reviewed the participants' responses to identify commonalities. Subthemes relevant to the current study were relatedness, social bonds, community, language, health, and mental and social well-being. After the researcher aligned the responses to the subthemes, four major themes emerged: (a) initial skepticism and gradual embrace, (b) setting up students for success, (c) community and its connection to social bonds, and (d) the need for SEL during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Theme 1: Initial Skepticism and Gradual Embrace***

It is not uncommon for people to approach new methodologies with skepticism, especially regarding a new approach like the RCA. Individuals may meet change with resistance, questioning the effectiveness and relevance of new methods before experiencing them firsthand. The transformation from skepticism to conviction often occurs when individuals receive proper training and gain a deeper understanding of the approach. As participants become more open-minded, they could witness positive changes in their learning environment.

Some teachers did not believe the RCA was an effective approach to teaching and learning. Participant 3 was hesitant and only complied because it was part of her job.

After receiving training and engaging in the approach, she realized the benefits of using the RCA. The participant recognized that RCA was a way to get her students to think about what worked for them. According to Participant 3, they are “flipping it.” Participant 3 believed that “teachers should not be standing up there, just teaching”; students should also have input. Similarly, until she implemented the approach, Participant 8 thought it was another gimmick. She realized by focusing on the SEL of her students, her classroom began to “transform.” By directing her attention to the “whole child” before implementing academics, Participant 8 saw that her students were “able to meet the rigor of instruction.” Participant 4 felt she was “impelled” to use the RCA without having a real understanding of its purpose. Participant 4 did not know what was expected of her and how it was supposed to look in her classroom. As Participant 4 became more confident and had more practice, she saw the value of the approach.

Participant 5 wondered how she would make RC work in her classroom. Because administrators implemented the RCA school-wide, Participant 5 saw the benefits of everyone being on the same page when prioritizing students’ SEL. Participant 1 remembered anxiety, a lot of pushback, and feeling very overwhelmed and scared of the changes in the expectations of teaching in the classroom. With a changed perception, Participant 1 asserted, “I cannot imagine a world that I live in that did not have RC.” She explained,

I think it is really important work. It is helpful for the kids to understand expectations and responsibilities. It is important for the teacher to be able to manage a class successfully. I was a yeller and I have not raised my voice in

years. A great way to teach kids to be independent and coping skills. There is that social piece of laying the foundation for a community.

For Participant 1, RCA was no longer “another program” but a “change in thinking, how we speak to the children, how we set up the classroom, and the way we get to know our kids.”

Participant 2 was the anomaly. She was impressed with RC from the start.

Wanting to know more about what she was observing because it was different, she spent countless hours in professional development that she paid for herself. Participant 2 is a total “believer” in the RCA, admitting she does not know how a teacher does not use the approach. Participant 2 believed RC makes you “stronger” and a “better coworker.” After receiving professional development, Participant 6 realized the depth of RC. She stated, “It was about building community, and that was done throughout the whole day.” Lastly, Participant 7 felt RC was similar to the methods he experienced growing up. For Participant 7, the RCA was “refreshing.” He believed that RCA has a purpose and a value, and it “allows you to identify and support a culture that creates environments that are conducive for learning.”

Perceptions are subjective and can vary among individuals. However, this shift often occurs as individuals gain more experience, receive training, and observe the actual impact of the new approach in action.

### ***Theme 2: Setting Up Students for Success***

During the interviews, the participants were asked questions about MM, an essential component of RC. By incorporating MM, teachers can create a learning environment that sets up the students for success socially and academically (Responsive

Classroom, n.d.-b). Participant 3 believed MM was essential to the classroom, opening the mind and getting the students ready to learn. Participant 8 asserted, “[MM] cannot be skipped” because it is how she connects to the students and sets the tone for the day. If she tries to skip it, her students will remind her. Similarly, Participant 2 believed MM gets rid of a lot of anxiety and reduces behavior problems because her students know what is on the agenda for the day. Participant 4 loves MM. She shared that she is “filled with joy listening to and observing the students share their emotions and discover commonalities with their classmates.” As stated by Participant 6,

Morning Meeting follows the same format every morning providing the students with a predictable routine. Some students really thrive because of MM, and it’s fun. MM gives us a moment to get to know each other and really connect. I think that is awesome!

Participant 5 also expressed the excitement she experiences when conducting MM. She recalled a time she posted a picture of her son in his jersey that showed he made the All-Stars Team. Participant 5 remembered that when her male students entered the classroom and saw the picture, she said with great joy, “My son made the All-Stars, did you?” Participant 5 remembered the laughter that rang throughout the classroom. Similar feelings were expressed by Participant 1, who also believed MM was essential. For her, it is a “feel good, lovely time” that allows her to have an “emotional connection” with her students.

According to Participant 8, RC supports academic achievement in many ways. She contended that RC outlines age-appropriate ways to increase engagement, which promotes increased academic performance. Participant 6 stated that when students are not

socially and emotionally available, they are not ready to learn. Further, she stressed that students would struggle if SEL was not a priority. Participant 6 believed wholeheartedly that RC supports academic achievement. Participant 5 expressed that if a student feels uncomfortable or not accepted, she could not teach them. Additionally, Participant 5 stated,

SEL is how the students learn. If I am going to come here and dictate how you are going to learn without checking in with your mental self; it's not going to work. So, I am going to make those connections so they can be passionate about their education. The social, emotional, and the academics work together to ensure students are successful.

Participant 1 concurred with the other participants in believing RC supports academic achievement. During her interview, Participant 1 focused more on the structure of RC and how it supports teaching and learning. According to the participant,

The layout of the expectations helps me to reach more content and curriculum. The brain breaks and having interaction where they are talking to each other we are able to get so much more done because transitions are more successful when I am giving you reminding language. I am able to be more productive and cover more topics.

For Participant 3, the structure of RC pushes the students to think further. She believed learning is about exploring and pushing the students to think for themselves. The participant felt that letting the students do the “heavy lifting and learning” gives them the opportunity to “explore and dive deeper” into their own understanding. Participant 4 stressed the need to study students and be intentional about instruction. Participant 2 used

MM to teach lessons. When her students enter the classroom, they receive a question and time to work collaboratively, which builds self-esteem.

According to the participants, RC encourages students to share their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and values. Participant 2 shared that RC “speaks to each kid” and “every kid is different.” She also said that kids are more prone to taking risks. She explained that her students were selective mutes at the beginning of the year. They remained silent from September to November, and suddenly, in December, they began to talk a little. Around March, they shared and felt more comfortable, which Participant 2 found a “calming” experience.

Participant 6 described MM as the place where “we start connecting and supporting each other” as well as “learning and practicing different coping methods such as breathing techniques.” Throughout the day, Participant 6 revisited the rules as continuous support for her students’ personal growth. Participant 5 pointed out that RC helps build self-control and self-awareness, contributing to their overall success. The participant felt the approach fostered empathy for others, promoting well-rounded personal development.

Participant 7 highlighted RCA’s holistic nature, not only supporting academic growth but also helping teachers build stronger connections with students. Participant 7 said the proactive approach of noticing students’ moods, body language, and triggers indicated a commitment to holistic student development.

Overall, the participants valued the structure of MM and the RCA. Both offer numerous benefits in educational environments, including community- and relationship-building, communication skills development, and a platform for social and emotional

support. The RC setting has a positive impact on academic achievement by providing a structured, stress-free classroom environment that promotes engagement.

### ***Theme 3: Community and Its Connection to Social Bonds***

A third theme that emerged from the data was that the RCA encouraged strong relationship bonds by creating a learning environment that centers around community. According to the participants, social interactions within an RC allow the students to develop an understanding of their classmates and teacher, thus creating opportunities for discovering connections and developing social bonds. Participant 7 said RC is about “understanding other races and cultures. ... When you learn about different backgrounds, what characteristics are coined to that particular background, there is a greater appreciation.” The participant also believed that MM created a sense of belonging that fostered community. Participant 7 strongly affirmed,

It’s about teaching the scholars that everyone is not the same. We all have different skill sets and attributes. I model how others should be treated. Through interactive modeling, students learn the importance of understanding and respecting each other.

During the interview, it was evident Participant 3 believed each student was a valued member of the classroom community. She explained, “Everyone gets to share their feelings and what they do at home. We bring their home life into the classroom, finding similarities within each other [and] building on relationships.” Participant 3 reported that her students were listening to each other and learning about other cultures and diversity, which “helps students learn they have some similarities.” The participant affirmed, “Responsive classroom helps build relationships in the classroom, and those

relationships build community.” Participant 3 recalled making a connection with one of her students. During MM, she asked, “If you could be anywhere right now, where would it be?” Her student said she would want to be in heaven with her grandmother. Participant 3 affirmed that she would also like to be in heaven to see her mother. With a smile of satisfaction, the participant shared that her students had an instant connection with her. She ensured everyone got to share their feelings and what they do at home, allowing the discovery of similarities among each other, which builds relationships.

Participant 8 focused on how RC “teaches educators how to accurately understand the emotions of other people and to empathize with them,” which occur through “apology of action.” According to the participant, apology of action teaches the students how to let someone know they are sorry, and what to do when saying sorry is not enough.

Participant 5 emphasized the importance of inclusion and acceptance. Always referring to her students as “my friends,” she said that MM was basically “us hanging out on the couch at home, having a conversation.” Additionally, Participant 5 pointed out that MM aids in developing empathy for others. She stated,

By understanding themselves and others, it supports their personal development.

We are more inclusive these days. This builds understanding of others. During September and October, we are trying to build those relationships, and that allows for inclusivity. I model empathy indirectly during MM. Students are able to see how to act and react.

Participant 2 expressed a similar viewpoint. She also believed empathy was important “because kids need to feel they are not alone.” For Participant 2, there was a



sense of belonging, which created strong social bonds. She conveyed that MM allowed her students to understand their peers, which can result in acceptance.

Participant 6 reported doing a lot of group community-building activities during MM and throughout the day when they returned to in-person learning. The activities, such as the “Escape Room,” consisted of discussions about conflict resolution and empathy. For conflict resolution, the students discussed scenarios and came up with solutions. Participant 6 expressed that during the discussions, the students listened and spoke respectfully to each other. The participant “believes the RCA supports the importance of relationships with all students ... understanding that we all have differences. We are a community. We are a family.”

The participants believed that by creating opportunities for students to form strong social bonds, they laid the groundwork to help students develop lifelong social and emotional skills. Positive and inclusive social environments can have a lasting impact on a child’s well-being and future relationships.

***Theme 4: The Need for Social-Emotional Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

With strong emotion, Participant 2 shared that teaching during the pandemic was horrible. For her, “The worst part was not having direct interaction with my students and not being able to give them hugs.” Participant 2 saw first-hand how the pandemic affected the students socially and academically. She recalled spending an hour in MM daily while on remote instruction, remarking that the students just wanted to talk to and see each other. According to the participant, the students were missing the SEL piece and needed the interaction. When the students returned, they only wanted to be on the

computer. Participant 2 described having to force them to interact from the start of the day.

Participant 5 shared that remote learning during the pandemic was “very stressful” for the kids and her. She found it difficult to establish a relationship with her students. Participant 5 said she was basically on call from the start of the pandemic, making daily check-in phone calls with her students’ families to see if they needed anything. According to the participant, as many as 20 family members lived under one roof. Participant 5 disclosed that it was a scary time for them, and school was not a priority amid the loss of family members to COVID-19.

Participant 6 explained that she felt “guilty” not being with her students. She recalled trying to do fun things with her students remotely, like “Go Noodle” for brain breaks, but it was difficult to keep their attention due to household distractions. Participant 6 recalled that her students seemed anxious when the masks came off. To help them manage their anxiety, she used MM to focus on coping mechanisms, social problem-solving skills, and breathing techniques. Participant 6 believed “this gave them the tools needed to get through the day.”

Participant 3 said it was “challenging to teach” because she was not there with her students. If a child was struggling in an area, Participant 3 said she could not just pull them to the side to provide support. Participant 3 described not being able to see her students’ work. Trying to assist, she would tell her students to pull their laptop camera down so she could see their work. She felt a lot of time was wasted on technical situations, and a lot of parents were not tech-savvy.

Participant 4 shared that she faced many deaths during the pandemic. She said she “had a lot going on, and so did the families of my students.” The participant expressed that the energy she received from her students was that of confusion because they were experiencing things they never experienced before. Participant 4 recalled one of her students lost their brother to COVID-19 and was having difficulties processing due to parental leniencies or overcompensation. When asked what she would say to a person who says elementary students do not need SEL, she replied,

I would tell them to go into an elementary school. I feel that people have a lot of opinions about what should and should not happen in schools without stepping foot in the classroom. You can tell the difference in classrooms that address SEL and the ones that do not. In RC, students are able to express and handle themselves.

Participant 7 articulated that he found himself doing a lot of reassuring because his students needed support. If a child was not engaged, the participant intervened by sending messages to the student and making sure he checked in.

Overall, the participants believed SEL was a vital component in supporting the well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. SEL provided essential skills for managing emotions, coping with stress, building resilience, and helping students navigate the challenges they faced during this unprecedented time.

## **Conclusion**

Educators may initially approach new teaching methodologies with skepticism. The RCA, which emphasizes the importance of SEL, was met with uncertainty by some teachers. Questions concerning how RCA aligns with traditional practices or its

effectiveness may arise. As educators witness positive changes in student behavior, engagement, and overall classroom management, they may begin to embrace the RCA. A shift in perspective can occur with professional development, training sessions, and opportunities to share success stories.

A crucial aspect of the RCA is creating an environment that positions students for success. RC is a systematic approach to teaching, learning, and fostering a positive and inclusive environment. Through the RCA, teachers can create a supportive environment where students feel valued and respected. The RCA emphasized the importance of building a sense of community within the classroom. MM is one aspect that promotes community, strengthening social bonds among students. Students feel a sense of belonging and develop empathy for one another. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the importance of SEL, showing how the RCA supports students during traumatic times. Teachers using the RCA help students cope with stress, build resilience, and restore relationships broken due to the pandemic.

Each of the four emergent themes reflected a different aspect of the RCA. The findings showed the RCA provides a supportive, communitive setting to address students' social and emotional needs during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of eight elementary teachers to determine how the RCA supports students' social-emotional needs. Chapter 1 was an introduction to the purpose, framework, significance, and research questions that guided this study. Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature related to the content presented and the theoretical framework that directed this phenomenological study. Chapter 3 provided the study's purpose, methodological design, and procedures. Chapter 4 presented the findings with quotes from the participant interviews. In this final chapter, there are discussions of the findings and their relationship to prior research, limitations, and recommendations for future practice and research.

By engaging with the participants through interviews and analyzing the collected data, I categorized their shared experiences into four themes: (a) initial skepticism and gradual embrace, (b) setting up students for success, (c) community and its connection to social bonds, and (d) the need for SEL during COVID-19. This section presents how the themes intersect in relation to the guiding research questions:

1. What are Responsive Classroom teachers' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' social and emotional well-being?
2. How do teachers use the Responsive Classroom approach to support the social-emotional needs of students during a traumatic event?
3. What are the perceptions of Responsive Classroom teachers on how their practices foster the development of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in students?

### ***Implications of Findings***

The aim of the current study was to determine through teacher perspectives the impact of the RCA on the social and emotional stability of elementary students during a traumatic experience. Chapter 4 provided rich, detailed descriptions to illustrate how RCA supports students. To investigate the potential impact of RCA, the researcher conducted individual interviews with elementary teachers with varied levels of experience with RC. The following section presents the implications of this study and its connection to the CASEL framework.

#### ***Research Question 1***

What are Responsive Classroom teachers' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' social and emotional well-being?

The teachers provided valuable insights into the significant social and emotional challenges students faced during the pandemic and the additional responsibilities placed on teachers. The lack of in-person interaction with their classmates caused anxiety for some students; others expressed a strong desire to see their friends. This finding highlights the social aspect of education and the impact of isolation on students' emotional well-being. Additionally, the pandemic created a disconnect in relationships, resulting in an intense need for students to see each other, which was evident when they saw each other remotely. The students just wanted to talk, which indicates the significance of peer relationships for emotional support. Emotionally, students faced life-altering events during the pandemic, including living under one roof with multiple family members or families, attending school remotely or not at all, and dealing with the loss of

loved ones. These experiences left a lasting emotional impact on students, contributing to confusion and a need for coping mechanisms.

Teachers found themselves responsible for teaching academics and serving as support agents for their students' social and emotional health. The dual role highlighted the increased importance of addressing students' emotional needs during a challenging period. Some teachers reported focusing only on SEL because it was what their students needed. Teaching remotely presented challenges, including difficulty keeping students engaged and monitoring their work. Furthermore, teachers felt strained to meet their students' SEL demands while facing their own personal challenges. The adversities experienced by teachers and students highlight the need for a holistic approach to education that acknowledges and addresses the emotional needs of students alongside academic requirements.

The teachers' observations revealed students experienced anxiety, desired social interaction, experienced confusion, and needed coping mechanisms. These experiences manifested challenges related to self-awareness and self-management. Additionally, the teachers highlighted the importance of peer relationships for emotional support and the desire for social interaction among other students. This finding supports the importance of social awareness and relationship skills in students' experiences. The teachers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social and emotional well-being aligned with the core competencies of the CASEL framework, emphasizing the importance of addressing students' social and emotional needs within the educational context.

## ***Research Question 2***

How do teachers use the RCA to support the social and emotional needs of students during a traumatic event?

Evaluation of the data suggests several benefits of the RCA. The RCA is an approach that focuses on creating a positive and engaging classroom. According to the participants, MM plays a crucial role in establishing the tone for the day. This finding suggests the intentional and structured start of the day, as facilitated by MM, contributes positively to the overall learning environment. When teachers encourage students to share their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and values, anxiety levels and behavioral problems are significantly minimized. However, achieving these improvements requires establishing a safe and supportive environment. Participant 6 stated that students must be “socially and emotionally available before learning can take place.” Moreover, the data suggest that the RCA creates a culturally aware environment. By encouraging students to connect with each other, the approach fosters an inclusive and culturally sensitive classroom atmosphere. There is a sense of belonging and connectedness that promotes empathy for each other.

This study’s data indicate that MM is a key component of the RCA, playing a crucial role in establishing a positive and engaging classroom environment. Students can express their concerns and feelings in a structured, safe, and supportive learning environment. MM promotes self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. Lastly, the findings suggest the RCA fosters a culturally diverse environment that upholds the importance of inclusivity. The aspects of MM and the RCA align with the CASEL framework’s focus on social awareness.



### ***Research Question 3***

What are the perceptions of RC teachers on how their practices foster the development of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in students?

The findings from the implementation of MM suggest the practice plays a key role in fostering the development of students' competencies in various social and emotional domains. MM's structured nature allows students to develop competencies in areas such as self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. In addition, MM may aid in creating a community-centered learning environment. The participants identified MM as comprising four structured components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and message. MM provides a clear and organized framework for student interactions and contributes to a positive and predictable day. Additionally, students are actively engaged in sharing and relating to each other during MM. This sharing allows students to express themselves, contributing to the development of self-awareness and social skills. The participants also noted that students, through MM, discover similarities with each other, leading to a better understanding of self and others. Recognizing commonalities can promote empathy, understanding, and a sense of unity among the students. Lastly, MM is associated with the development of compassion for others, the establishment of connections, and the formation of social bonds. These outcomes reflect the social and emotional benefits of the practice, indicating that it contributes to a positive and supportive culture.

Overall, the perceptions of RC teachers indicated that MM effectively fosters the development of social awareness and relationship skills in students, aligning with the core competencies of the CASEL framework. By providing structured opportunities for

students to interact, share, and connect with each other, MM contributes to students' overall social and emotional development, promoting a positive and supportive classroom culture.

## **Relationship to Prior Research**

### ***The Need for Social-Emotional Learning During COVID-19***

The participant interviews provided valuable insights into the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on students' SEL, supported by the reviewed literature in Chapter 2. Styck et al. (2021) determined the No. 1 stressor for elementary students during the COVID-19 pandemic was "not seeing friends in person" (p. 536), which was a stressor noted by all participants. It was apparent students needed to interact with their friends and classmates. Second, school closures created feelings of isolation, which heightened feelings of anxiety and depression (Panchal et al., 2023). Other outcomes included loneliness, psychological distress, anger, irritability, boredom, and fear. Teachers recognized that learning could not take place unless their students felt safe. Bhatnagar and Many (2022) discussed the challenges faced by teachers during the pandemic. Teachers had to navigate the shift to online or hybrid modalities while providing effective academic instruction and social-emotional support. Novice teachers emphasized the importance of creating a stress-free, positive classroom community that acknowledged and addressed the trauma experienced by students. Not only were students dealing with their personal feelings, but some also faced parental neglect and verbal aggression (Lee et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic caused increased parental stress, contributing to negative interactions with their child. This finding underscores the broader societal impact of the pandemic on family dynamics and child well-being. Participants in the

current study recognized this issue and devoted time daily to addressing their students' social and emotional needs in MM.

### ***Community and Its Connection to Social Bonds***

CASEL (n.d.-a) reported that teachers believe SEL is important for a positive school experience, suggesting that educators acknowledge the role of social and emotional well-being in the educational environment. Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) found that teachers who received training in RC practices felt more connected to their students and experienced more positive feelings about their jobs. Thus, implementing RC practices could enhance the teacher–student relationship. This study's findings add to this body of knowledge because the participants reported a feeling of connectedness with their students during MM. They reported that their students displayed less anxiety and fearful behavior associated with the pandemic in MM. This finding aligns with Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu's (2007) conclusion that there is an improvement in teachers' perceptions of closeness, assertion, and prosocial behavior. The participants described MM as a time when students could share their feelings, fostering connections and creating strong social bonds. The participants observed that MM contributed to students displaying less anxiety and fearful behavior associated with the pandemic. Thus, intentional social-emotional practices may have a positive impact on students' emotional well-being, particularly during challenging times. The teachers highlighted MM as providing opportunities for students to make connections with each other. This finding echoes the idea that creating a supportive community allows students to share their feelings, discover commonalities, and build a sense of belonging. This theme aligned

with Ashdown and Bernard (2012), indicating that SEL contributes to students' ability to control their emotions and get along with others.

The community-building practices exhibited through the RCA play a crucial role in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. These practices not only enhance teacher–student relationships but contribute to students' emotional well-being, reducing anxiety and fostering social bonds. These findings aligned with the broader understanding that SEL is integral to a holistic and effective educational experience.

### *Setting Up Students for Success*

The literature indicates that social-emotional programs contribute to better student academic performance (Brock et al., 2008; Durlak et al., 2011; Schonfeld et al., 2015). The participants considered MM an essential practice they could not skip. The MM components played a critical role in preparing students for a successful day of learning. This finding aligned with the idea that a healthy start to the day, as facilitated by MM, contributes to positive outcomes.

Durlak et al. (2011) indicated that explicit instruction and student-centered SEL activities encourage critical thinking, analysis, communication, and collaboration. Schonfeld et al. (2015) achieved similar results, finding a higher probability of attaining reading, writing, and math proficiency. According to Stearns (2016), a healthy start to the day begins with MM, allowing teachers to include rich reading and writing material. With increased student satisfaction, improved teacher morale, and reduced negative behaviors (Stearns, 2016), students can focus on their learning by listening attentively and asking thought-provoking questions (Kriete & Davis, 2016).

The RCA aligns with CASEL's framework in the areas of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. Positive relationships and social behavior norms established through MM contribute to students' academic success, as noted by Wikman et al. (2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students relied on relationships with peers and teachers for emotional support. Demirci et al. (2022) found a direct correlation between peer relationships and SEL. Positive self-awareness contributes to healthy relationships. Practices like those in the RCA lead to improved interaction quality, fostering a better understanding of students' abilities and strengthening social and emotional competencies (Green et al., 2021).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study's qualitative nature and the relatively small sample size are possible limitations. Although the researcher collected rich details of the eight participants' lived experiences, the transferability of the findings is a limitation. Due to the small sample size of eight, the findings might not be generalizable to all RC teachers. The participants comprised seven females and one male, thus limiting the perspective to primarily women. For unknown reasons, it was difficult to secure more male participants. Additionally, the widespread locations of the participants make it difficult to generalize the findings to one specific area.

Using the CISCO WebEx platform posed an additional limitation to the study. Although the video recordings allowed the researcher to review the interview data multiple times for accuracy, the inability to witness participants in their natural environment restricted the data primarily to the interviews. Due to limited visitation to school premises following the return to in-person teaching, the researcher could not

observe the participant–student interactions during MM. Furthermore, virtual interviews constrained engagement with participants. In-person interviews would have facilitated observation of participants’ body language and interpersonal dynamics. Another limitation in data collection was solely relying on the responses provided by the participants during the interviews. A preferred approach would have been to include an option for teachers to initially write out their responses, which might have yielded more comprehensive responses from some participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

This study provides valuable insights into the RCA as an effective tool for supporting the social-emotional well-being of elementary students, especially in the face of traumatic events. The findings indicate that the RCA has a positive influence on students’ social and emotional well-being. This finding suggests that the approach goes beyond academic instruction and actively contributes to the emotional resilience and overall mental health of elementary students. In addition, the study highlights the relevance of RCA, or similar approaches, during challenging times, particularly in the context of traumatic events. RCA can be a valuable tool for educators and schools to provide essential support to students facing adversity or difficult circumstances. Moreover, by addressing students’ social and emotional needs, RCA contributes to a more comprehensive and balanced educational experience, recognizing the interconnectedness of academic and emotional well-being. Understanding how RCA positively influences students’ social and emotional well-being provides guidance on implementing similar strategies in other educational settings.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this study on the phenomenon of the RCA offers valuable insights, there are areas where further research could add depth and breadth to the understanding. First, expanding the sample size and participant diversity could enhance the external validity of the approach by exploring its effectiveness across various school settings and cultural contexts. Second, incorporating student focus groups of RC teachers could provide deeper insights into the benefits of RCA from the recipients' perspective. These firsthand data could validate the impact of the approach more effectively. Moreover, although the study highlights improvements in social-emotional well-being, the researcher did not fully explore the connection between RCA and long-term academic outcomes. Future researchers could explore how enhanced social and emotional skills through RCA contribute to academic success in subsequent years of education.

Addressing these limitations through future research endeavors could contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the RCA, its impact, and its potential for enhancing the educational experience for students.

## **Conclusion**

This study's findings validate the RCA as supporting the social and emotional well-being of elementary students, particularly during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This conclusion suggests that the evidence presented in the study supports the approach's efficacy in addressing students' unique needs in times of uncertainty and stress. In light of these findings, it becomes imperative to consider the allocation of resources and accountability mechanisms for implementing SEL programs.

First, investing in SEL programs should be viewed as a strategic allocation of resources rather than an expenditure. Research consistently shows the long-term benefits of supporting students' social and emotional development in terms of their well-being and academic success and prospects. Therefore, spending on SEL initiatives should be seen as an investment in students' overall health and success, which can yield significant returns in terms of improved school climate, reduced behavioral issues, and enhanced academic performance.

Second, accountability measures should be in place to ensure the effective implementation of SEL standards in schools. These measures might involve regularly assessing students' social and emotional skills, monitoring the fidelity of program implementation, and evaluating the impact of SEL interventions on student outcomes. Additionally, educators should receive adequate training and support to integrate SEL practices into their teaching effectively, and school leaders should provide ongoing guidance and resources to sustain SEL initiatives over time.

Supporting teachers is crucial in this process, as they play a central role in fostering students' social and emotional development. Teachers need access to professional development opportunities that deepen their understanding of SEL principles and equip them with practical strategies for incorporating SEL into their instructional practices. Furthermore, teachers need sufficient time, resources, and support to collaborate with colleagues, plan effective SEL instruction, and address the diverse needs of their students.

Although the RCA and similar SEL programs hold promise in supporting students' social and emotional well-being, their successful implementation requires a



comprehensive approach that addresses funding, accountability, and educator support. By prioritizing SEL initiatives and providing the necessary resources and support systems, school administrators can create nurturing environments where students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

These findings suggest the RCA could serve as a valuable tool for educators and schools navigating the complexities introduced by the pandemic. The emphasis on social and emotional support aligns with the broader recognition of the importance of holistic education that addresses students' well-being and academic needs. The pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for educators and administrators, prompting a need for effective strategies to support students' social and emotional well-being alongside academic achievement. School and district administrators need to implement a social-emotional program, RCA or otherwise, to support their students' various needs.

### **Final Thoughts**

Supporters of SEL argue that it is crucial for the holistic development of students. They emphasize that academic success is not solely determined by cognitive abilities but also by social and emotional competencies. SEL equips students with essential life skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which are vital for navigating various social and academic situations effectively. Moreover, proponents argue that SEL fosters positive school climates, reduces behavioral problems, and improves student engagement and motivation, leading to better academic outcomes and long-term success.

Advocates of SEL highlight its positive impact on students' overall well-being and mental health. They argue that SEL programs provide students with the tools to manage stress, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms, which are particularly crucial in today's fast-paced and often stressful world. By promoting emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, SEL contributes to healthier relationships, greater empathy, and increased empathy and understanding among peers. Furthermore, supporters assert that SEL fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion, creating supportive school communities where all students feel valued and respected.

Proponents of SEL assert that it is not merely an option but a necessity in education, especially considering the challenges facing today's youth. They argue that societal changes, including technological advancements, globalization, and socioeconomic disparities, have heightened the importance of SEL in preparing students for future success. SEL equips students with the critical skills to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world, including communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and empathy. Furthermore, advocates emphasize that SEL is essential for addressing issues such as bullying, substance abuse, and mental health disorders, which can significantly impact students' academic achievement and overall well-being. Therefore, proponents advocate for the integration of SEL into school curricula and policies to ensure that all students have access to the support and resources needed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Despite varying viewpoints on the importance, positivity, and necessity of SEL, there is a growing consensus among educators, researchers, and policymakers about its significant role in promoting student success and well-being. As such, efforts to prioritize

and integrate SEL into educational practices and policies are essential for creating supportive learning environments where all students can reach their full potential.

As I close my final thoughts, I share the responses from the participants when asked, “How would you respond to an individual who says elementary students do not need SEL?” In their responses, they emphasized the crucial role of SEL in developing good citizenship, a sense of belonging, inclusion, and safety. Additionally, some participants expressed disagreement with and incredulity toward individuals who question the necessity of SEL. Furthermore, the participants advocated for the early implementation of SEL, asserting that starting SEL practices in elementary school is essential for laying a strong foundation for students’ social and emotional development. Lastly, the participants argued that dictatorial methods are not conducive to creating a positive learning environment.

- “They are wrong! If you want to make good people, you have to start with making good kids. Good kids are civic social people who understand how to be a productive member of society. How do we do that? We treat them respectfully and show them how we use language to talk to each other. RC is a great way to start.” —Participant 1
- “We are no different than kids. We all want to be noticed. We all want a sense of belonging. We all want to be included, and we all want to feel safe.” — Participant 2
- “No need for SEL. Are you kidding me? What makes you think that? What are your findings? What research did you do for you to say that?” — Participant 3

- “I would tell them to go into an elementary school. I feel that people have a lot of opinions about what should and should not happen in schools without stepping foot in the classroom. You can tell the difference in classrooms that address SEL and the ones that do not. In a Responsive Classroom, students are able to express and handle themselves.” —Participant 4
- “That person may not be in education. I always love my students. If an educator is just here to be a dictator, then why are you educating? I mean, as much as I love to teach, it’s because I love to be around kids. You will not be successful if you are running a dictatorship.” —Participant 5
- “A person that says that probably has misconceptions about social-emotional learning.” —Participant 6
- “I disagree! Because of age, scholars are not mature enough to handle mature issues. I think SEL is important across the board. Scholars need to be supported through issues that they may be facing.” —Participant 7
- “I would ask them if they have ever stepped into an elementary classroom. Haha! The younger we start, the better we are!” —Participant 8

## APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT FLYER



Looking for certified elementary teachers (K–5) within the five boroughs of New York City and Long Island to participate in a research study that examines the Responsive Classroom Approach from the perspective of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you are eligible for the study, you will be asked to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, one-to-one interview via Zoom. In addition, the participant will be observed in-person during one session of Morning Meeting.

If you are interested in participating in this study, click the link below to answer a few questions. If you are selected to participate, you will be contacted by email.

<https://forms.gle/5JUakgo5Yf5FKS6x6>

## APPENDIX B RECRUITMENT FLYER FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

# ARE YOU A RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM TEACHER?



### PURPOSE OF STUDY:

*To examine the Responsive Classroom Approach from the perspective of teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

### PARTICIPANTS:

*Certified elementary K–5 teachers from the Tri-State area with a minimum of three years of experience in a Responsive Classroom setting. If eligible, you will be asked to participate in a 60- to 90-minute one-to-one interview via WebEx. In addition, the participant will be asked to share their SEL lesson plans and curriculum (if applicable).*

### BENEFITS:

*The findings of the current research will provide school districts background knowledge into SEL and its relation to students' well-being during and after a traumatizing experience.*

*If interested, please contact Sheena Burke at [sheena.burke21@gmail.com](mailto:sheena.burke21@gmail.com) or use the link <https://forms.gle/3d2BEYQxMTbPqWPJ9>*

**LOOKING FORWARD TO SHARING IN YOUR EXPERIENCE.**

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

Question type	Questions
<p><b>Background/demographics</b> Purpose: To obtain background information relevant to the study.</p>	<p>Initial survey (<i>included with recruitment flyer as a Google Forms link</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How long have you been teaching?</li> <li>2. What grade level are you currently teaching?</li> <li>3. What county is your school located?</li> <li>4. What is your educational background?</li> <li>5. How many years have you been using the Responsive Classroom approach?</li> <li>6. Were you trained in the Responsive Classroom? If so, what did your training consist of?</li> </ol> <p>Interview</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe your initial perception of the Responsive Classroom approach?</li> <li>2. Were you trained in the Responsive Classroom approach?</li> <li>3. How has your perception changed?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Experience and Behavior</b> Purpose: To gather information about the participants' behaviors, actions, and activities.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about a typical day in a Responsive Classroom.</li> <li>2. Describe your experience with social-emotional learning (SEL) during the COVID-19 pandemic.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Knowledge</b> Purpose: To learn about the participants' factual knowledge.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your understanding of SEL?</li> <li>2. In what way does Responsive Classroom support the personal development of students? (self-awareness)</li> <li>3. How does Responsive Classroom support students' ability to accurately understand the emotions of other people and empathize with them? (social-awareness)</li> <li>4. How does Responsive Classroom support students in their ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups? (relationship skills)</li> </ol>
<p><b>Opinion and Values</b> Purpose: To learn what each participant thinks about the subject.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your opinion of the Responsive Classroom Approach?</li> <li>2. What is your opinion of Morning Meeting?</li> <li>3. In your opinion, does Responsive Classroom support academic achievement? Explain.</li> </ol>

Question type	Questions
<p><b>Feeling</b> Purpose: To gain insight into the affective domain of each participant.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you feel about teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>2. What feelings do you experience when conducting Morning Meeting? Please share details of a specific time when you had one of the feelings.</li> <li>3. How would you respond to an individual who says elementary students do not need SEL?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Sensory</b> Purpose: To gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences through sensory details.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe the language heard from your students during Morning Meeting.</li> <li>2. Describe the most memorable reaction from a student during Morning Meeting.</li> <li>3. What behaviors have you observed in your students during Morning Meeting?</li> </ol>



**APPENDIX D ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION  
FORM**



**ST. JOHN'S  
UNIVERSITY**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
St. John's University**

*Title of Study: Teachers Perspective on Social-Emotional Learning Through the Responsive Classroom Approach for Elementary Students During a Traumatic Event*

Principal Investigator: Sheena Burke  
Department: School of Education, St. John's University  
Phone: 917-664-4721

**Introduction**

You have been invited to take part in a research study that examines the Responsive Classroom approach (RCA) for elementary students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will be conducted by Sheena Burke, Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education at St. John's University, as part of her doctoral program. Her faculty sponsor and dissertation chair is Dr. Randall Clemens, Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education at St. John's University.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary teacher who implements the RCA.

We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the RCA as a means of providing social and emotional support for students in the classroom.

In addition, this research may be part of a dissertation toward a Doctor of Education in Administration and Supervision and published.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions related to your experiences with RCA during a one-to-one interview via Zoom. In addition, you will be asked to allow the researcher to observe one session of Morning Meeting and share samples of your SEL lesson plans and curriculum.

Furthermore, the interviews will be audio and video-recorded for data accuracy. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the tapes be destroyed, that includes your participation.

Interviews will last for 60–90 minutes and will take place at the convenience of the participant. If necessary, the researcher will request a follow-up meeting to clarify information.

### **Risks**

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research. If, at any point, you experience any discomfort, you can refuse to answer or withdraw from the study.

### **Benefits**

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the RCA more in terms of supporting the SEL of students.

In addition, by participating in the study, you may find the experience to be enlightening as you reflect on your personal experiences with RCA.

### **Fees**

Participants will not be paid for this study.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained in a locked file cabinet. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file cabinet. The investigator will not include information in any report that can be linked to the participant.

Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: The researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. If you refuse or withdraw, your relationship with the investigator of this study or St. John's University will not be affected.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Sheena Burke via phone at 917-664-4721 or email at [sheena.burke17@my.stjohns.edu](mailto:sheena.burke17@my.stjohns.edu). You can also contact Dr. Randall Clemons, Faculty Advisor, at [clemensr@stjohns.edu](mailto:clemensr@stjohns.edu).

If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board, St. John's University, 718-990-1440.

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study and read and understood the content of this form. You will be provided a signed and dated copy of this form for your records along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigator.

Participant's Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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