NAVIGATING THE VOYAGE WITHIN: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON EMBEDDED SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

August 2023

By

Matthew Tom

Dissertation Committee:

Nathan Murata, Chairperson
Gari-Vic Baxa
Jocelyn Romero Demirbag

Keywords: social emotional learning, middle school, English language arts

Dedication

To my parents whose unconditional love, guidance, patience, and exceptional parenting have helped me become everything I am.

To my family and ancestors who have given me life, strength, and wisdom.

To my friends who have given me endless encouragement, laughter, and camaraderie.

To all those in my life who taught me to love others, to love learning, and to never settle for the status quo.

To my students–past, present, and future–who keep me motivated, inspired, grounded, and introspective as I progress through my own voyage within.

Abstract

The middle school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom is a place where adolescents can articulate their experiences, empathize with characters, and process the world around them. Social emotional learning (SEL) is fundamentally woven in the fabric of English Language Arts, as an underpinning of ELA is to qualify the world and analyze it.

This qualitative case study describes eight ELA teachers' present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating SEL as an organically embedded component of ELA instruction at a middle school in urban Honolulu, Hawai‘i. Semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a post-interview survey were used to garner teacher perceptions of SEL in the ELA classroom. Results indicated that ELA teachers feel SEL is a natural component of ELA instruction, strong relationships between students and teachers are important, SEL integration contributes to academic and emotional engagement, and SEL instruction has become more intentional. In addition, ELA teachers expressed interest in exploring peer mentoring systems of support and professional development on navigating contemporary issues.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

Adolescent growth during their middle school years is a time of flux during which students are in the process of figuring out who they are, how they fit in, and what kind of power their voices and lived experiences have (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Students experience an increase in academic rigor, requirements, and responsibilities, and undergo changes socially, emotionally, and biologically, too. Situated at the base of Lēʻahi (Diamond Head), Lēʻahi Middle School (pseudonym) has changed alongside society and its students. Under the name of Lēʻahi Intermediate School, the campus opened in 1939 as the first intermediate school in Hawaiʻi (Lēʻahi Middle School [pseudonym], 2019, p. 17). In 1997, Lēʻahi Intermediate officially transitioned to Lēʻahi Middle, focusing on a more developmentally appropriate transition for students between their elementary and high school years. Rather than focusing on college and career readiness as its main objective of these middle school years, Lēʻahi Middle emphasizes being "a place with heart, that challenges and strengthens the mind, body, and spirit" with a mission "to provide students with a positive learning environment that meets the unique needs of adolescents and their supporters" (Lēʻahi Middle School [pseudonym], 2019, p.18). This school, with its unique focus on strengthening the whole child in a nurturing environment serves as a valuable intersection of priorities that deserves to be explored.

Lēʻahi Middle School's "4Rs" further demonstrate how the school culture as a whole is structured to naturally foster students' academic, social, and emotional growth:

Responsibility- Being accountable for one's actions

Resiliency- Overcoming or coping with challenges in your life

Respect- Caring for self, other, and surroundings

Relationships- Building positive connections with others (Lē‘ahi Middle School [pseudonym], 2019, p. 19).

These core beliefs of Lē‘ahi Middle School align with the beliefs of the Association for Middle Level Education which asserts the following are essential attributes for a successful middle school:

- Responsive: Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made.
- Challenging: Cultivating high expectations and advancing learning for every member of the school community.
- Empowering: Facilitating environments in which students take responsibility for their own learning and contribute positively to the world around them.
- Equitable: Providing socially just learning opportunities and environments for every student.
- Engaging: Fostering a learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory, and motivating for all learners. (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 8)

Social-emotional competence is one facet of the Association for Middle Level Education’s core beliefs, and in middle school, social emotional learning (SEL) curriculums are often implemented in Advisory or Homeroom classes. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “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” (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021).

Although it is important for students to be challenged academically, it is imperative for students to be able to understand and articulate their mental health needs:

> Social-emotional competence can protect students from the adverse effects of mental health difficulties and a lack of such competence is regularly linked to an increased chance of poor health, unemployment, and imprisonment. A responsive middle grades school, therefore, offers students regular, integrated, and culturally sensitive opportunities to develop skills and adopt mindsets that will help them succeed in school and life. Students explore how to identify and manage their feelings, understand and empathize with others' points of view, communicate and connect with a range of people in a healthy way, and make positive choices. (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, pp. 34-35)

Subsequently, during this time of change, as adolescents engage in self-discovery, their feelings of superiority and inferiority tend to fluctuate, and they begin to identify in different ways depending on the social context and environment (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). This time of discovery can also be a tumultuous time of self-doubt and uncertainty as adolescents experiment, attempt to navigate and make sense of everything that is happening to and around them. In middle school, adolescents have a strong desire to belong to a peer group which inherently increases their exposure to both positive and negative peer pressure. Adolescents are influenced by social media, popular culture, and family values, and because they are beginning to grow in their sense of self, they may tend to feel that their problems are unique to them and may not see themselves as a part of a larger landscape (World Health Organization, 2021).

Jones and Bouffard (2012) observe that "SEL programs are rarely integrated into classrooms and schools in ways that are meaningful, sustained, and embedded in the day-to-day interactions of students, educators, and school staff." It is important to "incorporate social-

emotional learning into the curriculum to support the development of empathy and healthy peer relationships," to "support students' abilities to relieve emotional stress in healthy ways," and to "provide opportunities for students from historically marginalized backgrounds to tell their own stories about their experiences as a way of helping youth to develop their voices and critically examine their experiences in supportive, affirming, and safe spaces" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 62). In addition, in terms of adolescents' psychological development, it is important for students to be supported in feeling that their experiences are validated and affirmed, even if their concerns may seem trivial to adults.

Because middle schools have the Association for Middle Level Education's policies and guidelines to serve as the foundation and skeleton upon which they can build their campus culture, it is important for schools to constantly revisit and refine their organizational and teaching practices to ensure that they align both with the tenets of AMLE and the core beliefs of their campus community. With a strong philosophical foundation of the 4Rs, coupled with the middle school teaming structure where "interdisciplinary team[s] of two or more teachers [work] with a common group of students for a shared block of time" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 51), I am interested in studying how comfortable individual teachers are with helping students grow socially and emotionally at Lē'ahi Middle School.

Problem Statement

Teachers understand that it is important for students to both be supported in their academics as well as in their social and emotional learning (Dawson et al., 2020; de Leon, 2017; Guzzo, 2018; Hoffman, 2017; McTigue & Liew, 2011; Rivers & Brackett, 2010; Storey, 2019). Because teachers already have a multitude of responsibilities to do during the day each day, it is important to help teachers integrate SEL into their content instruction so that it is not an

additional burden, but instead an organic component of teaching. Many teachers have implemented programs and strategies to help teach students "self- and social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision making" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 35) to help them navigate their emotions and interpersonal relationships. It is common for middle schools to implement third-party SEL programs, but these programs are not enough. Some of these programs teach students more about behavior management, conflict management, and coping skills rather than allowing students to express themselves in a meaningful way. In addition, these SEL intervention programs "often pick and choose aspects of the curriculum they find helpful, leave out core elements, and modify the contents of the course" which may not necessarily be applicable nor appropriate for each student's situation (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 10).

In classrooms, a foundation of care and mutual trust is important for students to feel comfortable and safe enough to share and express their feelings and ideas, ultimately leading toward creating a space of community, care, and healing (Medley, 2012). Due to the nature of English Language Arts (ELA), the foundation of which is understanding and using language to convey meaning (Rivers & Brackett, 2010), ELA teachers have the unique opportunity to access students' lived experiences and help them articulate and process these stories. Bibliotherapy and counter-storytelling are a few powerful channels (Rombough, 2017) through which students can discuss difficult topics without needing to directly discuss their own experiences (de Leon, 2017). Although it may be common for teachers of a variety of disciplines to build strong, lasting relationships with their students, due to the nature of their content area, they may not have as many naturally embedded opportunities to help students unpack, analyze, and articulate their emotions and experiences.

As students become more comfortable with their teachers and peers, they may begin to share personal stories about their lives, some of which may be of prior traumatic experiences, as there is power and healing in sharing one's story (Dawson et al., 2020; de Leon, 2017; Godbold, 2019; Medley, 2012). However, studies have shown that although teachers understand that teaching SEL is important and beneficial, teachers do not feel prepared enough to implement SEL practices in ELA (Bateman, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2020; Rothi et al., 2008; Storey, 2019).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this single-site multiple case study is to describe Lē'ahi Middle School's English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating social emotional learning (SEL) as an organically embedded component of ELA instruction.

Research Questions

This study aims to describe the current SEL practices ELA teachers are already implementing in their curriculum and how they can extend those organically embedded SEL opportunities further by answering the following research questions:

1. How do ELA teachers at Lē'ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?
2. What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?

Definition of Terms

The terms defined in this section are germane to this specific study and educational setting. To maintain consistency, this dissertation will use the following definitions throughout.

Curriculum

In this study, *curriculum* refers to the kinds of lessons, skills, activities, and learning experiences students are exposed to and engage with during the course of a school year. Curricula can be driven by initiatives at the state-level, school-level, and by the individual teacher depending on the environment. A curriculum's flexibility and how it is executed depends on the aforementioned levels of implementation.

Empathy

According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary, *empathy* is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another."

English Language Arts (ELA)

According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary, *language arts* is defined as "the subjects (such as reading, spelling, literature, and composition) that aim at developing the student's comprehension and capacity for use of written and oral language." In this study, English Language Arts refers to the single year-long course Lē'ahi Middle School students take each year in grades six, seven, and eight.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines *social emotional learning* as "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" (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Importance of Social Emotional Learning

Because the United States has compulsory education for students eligible for grades Kindergarten through 12th grade, schools serve as a constant and consistent touchpoint in students' lives. Teachers are able to see students each day and guide their academic knowledge, social growth, and interpersonal communication skills as they interact with the curriculum and their peers. Although academic growth is important, "the value of incorporating social emotional learning is high as it educates children on their emotions and teaches them productive ways to deal with the challenges in their life" (Bateman, 2012, p. 14).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning (SEL) as "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" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021). CASEL's SEL framework identifies five Core Competence areas that help promote educational and emotional development in adolescents: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). These five competencies–also known as the CASEL 5–are broad, interrelated aspects of social emotional learning that are impacted by relationships and partnerships fostered between the classroom, school, families and caregivers, and the broader community (Figure 1). Teachers can have a direct impact on the way social emotional learning is fostered through the kinds of

instructional activities and learning opportunities they provide, as well as the classroom climate they cultivate in both academic and social ways.

Figure 1

CASEL's SEL Framework

Note. From Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2021). *Fundamentals of SEL.* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

Students are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge "in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" where the "scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits" of information (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Instead, students are complex, sentient beings with individual experiences and ways of

interacting with the world around them in individually unique ways. According to the Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire (2000), a liberatory education is inherently intertwined with an individual's experiences, as the

> dialoguers engage in critical thinking–thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them–thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity–thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (p. 92)

In addition to academic knowledge, students need to learn processes by which they can be introspective, realize their positionality, and understand their own emotions in relation to the contexts around them. When one has a dialogue with another, it is not only words colliding and intermingling with each other in a vacuum devoid of emotion. Rather, when one dialogues with another, their experiences, worldviews, emotions, and ideas interact with and rub against each other. Behind these ideas that one has–whether someone else agrees with them or not–has emotions behind them; ultimately, the person who spoke the ideas into existence is just that–a person. Freire (2020) states that "if I do not love the world–if I do not love life–if I do not love people–I cannot enter into dialogue" because "dialogue cannot exist without humility" and a level of awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions (p. 90).

Considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, before a student can begin to effectively and efficiently understand and interact with academic material, not only do their basic physiological and safety needs need to be met, but their psychological needs–love and belonging and esteem–need to be met, or at least addressed, too. However, the "American educational system has neglected the importance of students' mental and emotional growth for so many years that the

topics of social, emotional, and ethical education often seem disjointed from our professional duties and academic curricula" (Herrera, 2020, p. 4) and leaves students socially and emotionally underdeveloped.

As the pace and rigor of our society has accelerated and increased respectively over time, the "inconsistenc[ies] of daily family life has created instability in the lives of children" requiring them to have "coping skills that they are not emotionally equipped to handle, such as when both parents work long hours and they are left alone or left with an inept caregiver" (Bateman, 2012, p. 13). In part, because of the lack of a solid support system at home, "teachers are increasingly confronted with these deficiencies in ways such as students' inability to resolve conflict, bullying, and children's general lack of understanding of the causes and consequences of emotions," while at the same time needing to focus their attention on academic instruction in order to meet the Common Core State Standards (Bateman, 2012, p. 2).

Herrera (2020) succinctly outlines the importance of teaching social emotional learning alongside or intertwined with academic content:

> The primary goal of SEL is to educate our students while acknowledging that mental and emotional health are a vital component of their wellbeing and success. Thus, SEL and academic learning experiences can and do work in synergy; they do not have to be mutually independent of one another. Where SEL instructs, educates, and heals the learners' minds and soul, academics strengthen students' content knowledge and achievement. An allegory I use to describe the synergy between SEL and academics is that SEL represents the water and academics represents the soil, both of which are necessary for seedlings to develop and thrive. Without water and soil, seedlings' growth is comprised [*sic*] and cannot fully flourish. The same happens when academic

instruction neglects SEL; students can only develop to a certain point and their growth, as individuals, will be compromised. (p. 11)

Studies have shown that "students who are hopeful and optimistic achieve greater academic success than those who are not" (Bateman, 2012, p. 9), as "hopefulness and optimism bring motivation to keep going in the face of obstacles" (p. 10). Thankfully, both hopefulness and optimism are temperaments that can be learned and practiced. Storytelling and studying literature in the English Language Arts classroom is a unique space in which SEL can be explored, because as students begin to learn about how to express the challenges and triumphs the protagonists and antagonists face, they begin to gain access to the vocabulary needed to express their own emotions and lived experiences.

Storytelling and Literature as a Space for Empathy and Healing

Each person sees the world through their individual worldview which is informed by their individual interactions with the environment that surrounds them. Reading stories and analyzing literature is "significant to humans because narrative structures help us make sense of our everyday experiences" which can lead to a greater understanding of our own positionality (de Leon, 2017, p. ii). Sometimes it is difficult to talk about one's own experiences because they are so personal and may be uncomfortable to explain to others. However, a study that used bibliotherapy as a means to cope with bullying revealed that literature can "give children a channel through which they can more easily access and discuss bullying rather than directly addressing their own experiences" (de Leon, 2017, p. 38). Although students could identify with the characters on a cognitive and emotional level, they were not required to talk about their own experiences directly.

Literature can help students explore complex ideas which provides the opportunity to "understand and, at times, virtually see through the eyes of another person, hear their thoughts, analyze their motivations, analyze their behaviour and share their experiences" which can help students realize that their experiences are not lived in isolation (Storey, 2019, p. 125). de Leon (2017) indicates that "we are theorized to develop a "personal fable" in our adolescence when we begin to question our identities, how we are situated in our environments, and the direction of our lives" which can feel isolating, as adolescents may begin to formulate "the belief that our experiences are completely unique and impossible to be understood by others" (p. 101).

Because of the inextricable link between SEL and ELA, "SEL positions ELA teachers to better facilitate these transitions through thoughtful text selection and innovative approaches, while paying attention to the real reasons why we do what we do" (Marlatt, 2020, p. 48). For example, through reading and analyzing counter-stories–the stories of marginalized groups that are not typically heard in society–children of color may feel a sense of empowerment, as these stories can challenge social and cultural stereotypes (de Leon, 2017, p. 39). de Leon (2017) emphasizes that multicultural young adult literature "provides opportunities for adolescents of colour to discuss racial/social issues without directly addressing their own experiences" which can aid in helping students feeling isolated in their struggles (p. 40).

Just as Freire (2000) discusses in his critique of the "banking" concept of education where students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with information (p. 72), Medley (2012) argues:

> Young learners are not disembodied cognitive devices for processing language input, but persons with histories. They are the products of what they have seen, heard, smelled, touched, acted on, and been subjected to–as well as the products of their ancestors'

> experiences. Through stories passed down over generations, they have absorbed and processed interpretations of who they are, how they have become what they are, and what they have the potential to become. Their personal histories have profoundly affected their psychological states and their stakes in the classroom. (p. 112)

Through creative, exploratory, and reflective writing, analyzing novels and texts of study, and engaging in the myriad of strategies implemented in the ELA classroom (Dawson et al., 2020; McTigue & Liew, 2011; Storey, 2019), students are provided with natural opportunities to engage with "self-kindness, common humanity (seeing your experiences as part of a larger, human experience), and mindfulness (having a balanced perspective on our pain and not over-identifying with it)" (de Leon, 2017, p. 80) which can help promote mental wellness and empathy and create a space for healing.

Students come to our classrooms with a vast variety of experiences, some of which have been violent and traumatic, and it is important for students to be able to express hidden memories or suppressed emotions in a productive and non-self-destructive way. Yoder (2005) asserts that "when all of the story is acknowledged and mourned–the valor, heroism, sacrifice, pain, fear, resilience, betrayals, humiliations, shortcomings, atrocities, and guilt–then shame and humiliation can be shed, forgiveness sought, courage celebrated, and reenactment ended" (p. 54). When students are given the opportunity to acknowledge their trauma, sit with their emotions, process and analyze how and why they feel the way they do, and are assisted in articulating these ideas, they can begin to heal from these experiences.

Language instruction can be implemented and guided symbiotically with social emotional learning. For example, Guzzo (2018) suggests that through a structured and systematic process of expressive writing, students can walk themselves through "the experience of rebuilding their

negative story into a more positive one" and as they write "about their event, students realize that their story is not as bad as it first seemed, and that there are ways to cope with the issues constructively" (p. 34). According to Guzzo's 2018 study, "students were able to organize their memory of the episodes that led to the negative event, moving forward with a more positive outlook" and allowing them to "step away from the event to take a more objective stance" (Guzzo, 2018, p. 37). Students can feel a sense of empowerment, as they are able to regain some control over their experiences as they process them. When students are able to write freely, Godbold (2019) notes that previous studies have shown that "free writing has potential to both liberate the writer while also validating her authorial voice" as they are able to reflect on their own experiences and practice a form of "reflective self-care while also negating oppressive pedagogical norms" (p. 3).

Although academic writing is a valuable skill, "neglecting opportunities for students to creatively explore language limits self-expression and denies students the cathartic benefit of finding expression through the "Art" aspect of English Language Arts" (Godbold, 2019, p. 3). The ELA context is naturally situated to explore "topics such as emotion, relationships, conflict, motivation, decision-making, point of view, and worldview" (Storey, 2019, p. 125) which makes it imperative for teachers to be prepared in facilitating conversations around identity, mental health, and social emotional learning.

ELA as an Organic Venue for SEL

Inherent within the English Language Arts classroom is the opportunity to learn about the world and other people through the exploration of both fiction and nonfiction texts, and within these texts, there is room for the exploration of one's self. Reading and analyzing literature pairs well with social emotional learning because "it reflects the human condition and connects us

regardless of time or place" and "can help students better understand the value of literature while helping them relate to it and learn from it" (Bateman, 2012, p. 19).

Social emotional learning is fundamentally woven in the fabric of English Language Arts, as an underpinning of ELA is to qualify the world and analyze it. Through literary exploration, students are able to experiment with and actively shape their own individual identities as they empathize with the protagonists, antagonists, and minor characters. Through literature studies and narrative writing, students can "reflect on who they are and where they are going, not just in terms of progressing as students but also in their journey toward adulthood" (Marlatt, 2020, p. 48). As students examine and evaluate the motivations, challenges, and triumphs of the characters in literature, it makes discussing difficult and sometimes highly personal situations a little easier, as students are discussing this material in terms of the character's experiences, rather than their own.

In her analysis of how ELA and SEL have a symbiotic relationship, Storey (2019) describes how ELA is naturally centered around the human experience:

> Literature encompasses an infinite variety of human emotion and experience that readers can access and experience vicariously. ELA provides ample opportunity for meaningful personal engagement and connection, meaning making, and reflection. The pith and substance of ELA involves matters that are intricately interwoven with social and affective experiences. Exploring and deconstructing topics such as emotion, relationships, conflict, motivation, decision-making, point of view, and worldview are an important part of conventional ELA curriculum when studying various literary genres. (p. 125)

ELA has the ability to connect the larger human experience to students' individual experiences, interests, and anxieties, while giving them the opportunity to voice their own

thoughts (Storey, 2019, p. 127). This, in turn, makes the ELA curriculum a natural medium through which SEL can be woven. For example, the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Grade 6 ELA curriculum seems to intertwine both ELA academic learning standards and SEL together in the formation of five human-centered and inherently SEL-focused Big Ideas:

- Language and text can be a source of creativity and joy.
- Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world.
- Exploring and sharing multiple perspectives extends our thinking.
- Developing our understanding of how language works allows us to use it purposefully.
- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016)

English Language Arts is "replete with opportunities to consider the emotional aspects of life and practice skills that are critical in interpersonal relationships" as students analyze the construction of meaning from written and oral communication (McTigue & Liew, 2011, p. 116). Godbold (2019) notes that although students may be able to connect with the characters in the canonical fiction texts in high school curricula and that academic writing does carry important educational value, "students are rarely given opportunities to produce their own creative, open-ended pieces of writing" and instead, "are expected to practice their writing skills by analyzing other authors' creative expressions" which deprives them of the opportunity to explore language more creatively in service of self-expression (p. 3).

One method of instruction that has attempted to systematically weave ELA and SEL together throughout the preschool through high school levels is the RULER approach developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. RULER is an acronym for five skills required for

emotional intelligence: recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, regulating (Brakett et al., 2019). Brackett et al. (2019) emphasizes that they "characterize RULER as an *approach* (i.e., a set of guidelines, principles, and practices to guide SEL implementation and behavior) rather than just a *program* (i.e., planned activities) although sequenced and structured programming is one key component" (p. 145). Embedded within the RULER approach is the Feeling Words Curriculum which helps students strengthen both their ELA skills and the five emotional intelligence skills in the RULER model (Rivers & Brackett, 2010, p. 95). A core function of ELA is to "help students learn to interpret texts–that is, to reflect on textual meaning from their own perspectives–and to evaluate texts–that is, to use critical thinking to identify particular text elements, such as logic, emotional appeal, and purpose" (Rivers & Brackett, 2010, p. 95). As students begin to analyze literature and informative texts, they may begin to examine their own values, ideologies, emotions, and beliefs in response to what they read. The Feeling Words curriculum attempts to help students use specific language and vocabulary in specific ways to practice communicating their ideas and emotions through a scaffolded series of structured reading and writing opportunities. When students are able to read a selection of texts, empathize with the characters and contexts, and have the vocabulary to articulate their feelings and responses, reading and writing can be a powerful tool in helping students grapple with and begin to understand their own internal struggles.

Studies show that young readers not only enjoy reading for its entertainment value and cathartic experience that it can provide, but many expressed "being drawn to reading because it offered reassurance about their feelings and experiences" (Story, 2019, p. 131). Literature can provide opportunities for students to empathize with characters' feelings of triumph, defeat, pride, sadness, and an entire range of other emotions. According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.)

dictionary, empathy is defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner” (Merriam-Webster). It is difficult for a young person to articulate precisely on their own the complex emotions they may experience as they encounter a variety of social contexts. Godbold (2019) suggests that many adolescents find it difficult to intuitively empathize with their peers, but “at the same time, many of them are self-conscious about the struggles they face in their individual lives, and do not trust their peers with their most vulnerable selves" (p. 82). Young adult fiction “attempts to convey exactly an adolescent's inability to understand the world and other people; the confusion and anxiety of being young; the discomfort about the profound changes in mind and body” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 89). By reading and analyzing literature with the explicit purpose of servicing both ELA and SEL development, students not only engage in academic advancement, but they also have the opportunity to grow in the ways the CASEL 5 describe. Empathy takes experience and intentionality to develop, and SEL instruction through literature in the ELA classroom can help students practice this skill in a natural, organic way.

Student-Teacher Relationships Are Foundational

Noddings (2012) asserts that establishing a climate of care in the classroom is not on top of all the other demands, but rather is “underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better” (p. 777). Through her research in care ethics, Noddings discusses how caring relations between people–specifically students and teachers–help both parties mutually grow and learn. Although student-teacher relationships are inherently unequal in power, “both parties contribute to the establishment and maintenance of

caring" as the dialogue between the carer and the cared-for articulates how care is expressed and received (Noddings, 2012, p. 772).

Teachers are responsible for teaching the content area, and this responsibility cannot be neglected. However, as Noddings (2012) explains, when a student exhibits a need that is not related to the content area, a caring teacher must temporarily put aside the academic demands to respond to the student's expressed need:

> Good teachers must be allowed to use their professional and moral judgment in responding to the needs of their students. They will not ignore assumed needs–the curriculum cannot be ignored–but they will attempt to address the more basic expressed needs. When a relation of care and trust has been established, the teacher may elicit the student's cooperation in tackling the assumed needs or, together, they may agree that the student might reasonably reject these needs and pursue another path in life. In either case, both teacher and student have accomplished something worthwhile. Time spent on building a relation of care and trust is not time wasted. (p. 774)

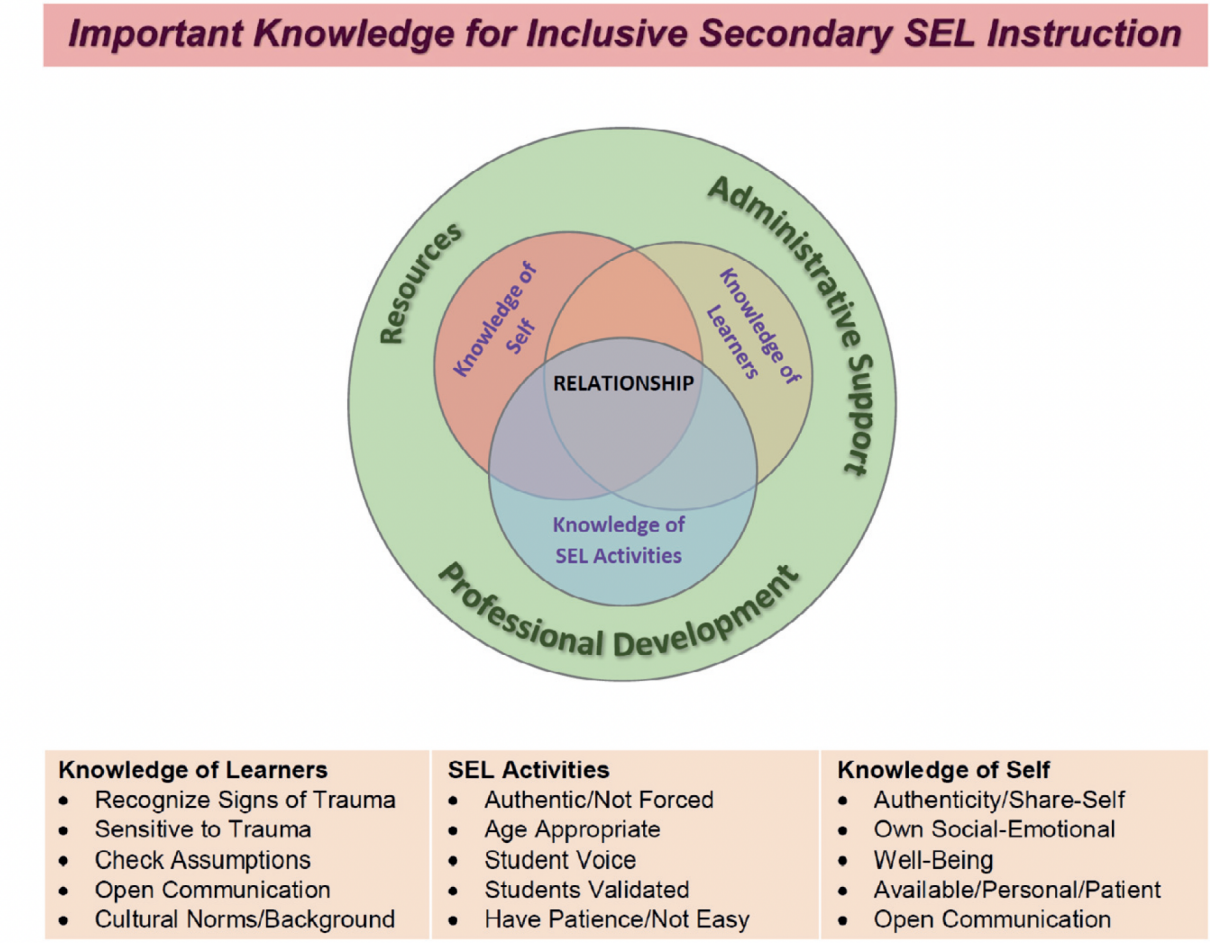
In addition, Noddings (2012) notes how "caring cannot be reduced to empathy" and that it is important to not simply just say that you know how the other person feels without engaging in dialogue with them (p. 775). Sometimes the expressed need is obvious and easily addressed. However, in some situations, further dialogue and subsequent reflection on the person's responses is necessary to achieve "empathetic accuracy" (Noddings, 2012). Much like Freire's (2020) perspective on dialogue as an intermingling of experiences and perspectives, Noddings (2012) expresses how "dialogue is fundamental in building relations of care and trust. Within a well-established relation, we are more likely to achieve empathic accuracy" (p. 775).

In Santos' (2022) study, she developed the Theory of Inclusive Secondary SEL Instruction by conducting interviews and focus group discussions centered around the following research question: "What are secondary school educators' perceptions of implementing SEL so that it meets the needs of diverse learners and students affected by trauma?" Santos found that among the responses from 21 participants of the study, the central linking factor in implementing inclusive SEL practices was forming positive relationships with students.

Figure 2 from Santos (2022) shows how a variety of factors all contribute to sound implementation of inclusive SEL practices, and it is the relationship between students and teachers that provide the link between all facets. According to this model, to build relationships with students, it is important for teachers to have knowledge of themselves (reflecting on their pedagogy, interpersonal interactions, and wellbeing), knowledge of the learners (students' backgrounds and cultural norms), and knowledge of SEL activities (activities that are age-appropriate, authentic, and validating).

Figure 2

Santos' (2020) Theory of Inclusive Secondary Social-Emotional Content Instruction



Inconsistencies in SEL Implementation

The implementation of third-party SEL curriculums in the ELA classrooms has been inconsistent due to an already overburdened learning environment (Fitzpatrick, 2020; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Martínez, 2016; McTigue & Liew, 2011; Storey, 2019). Although some pre-packaged third-party SEL curriculums can be related to ELA, some models "are not focused on ELA curriculum but are in fact adjunct programs targeting SEL skills in isolation requiring dedicated time commitments and reducing regular curricular time" (Storey, 2019, p. 128). Philibert (2016) explains that "many SEL, character education, or mindfulness programs focus on singular character traits taken out of context, such as "This week is empathy week!" which

further disconnects social emotional learning from an authentic, naturally occurring context (p. 29). These external programs to be implemented in the classroom context would take additional preparation time for the teachers and may not feel relevant or authentic depending on the teacher's particular pedagogy. Although the texts of study and focus of each lesson of these third-party curriculum may be focused on analyzing and discussing emotions, these lessons may feel as though they are being implemented in a vacuum rather than organically woven into the fabric of "everyday classroom reading, writing, and dialogic learning primarily focused on ELA subject matter and skills" (Storey, 2019, p. 128). Rather than implementing surface-level, one-off activities, when SEL is interlaced naturally in ELA, deeper and richer conversations can be fostered over time, naturally leading toward a culture-shift that lays safety, vulnerability, and the expression of one's experiences as the foundation for the class. This shift can occur naturally with the teacher and students at the helm, rather than the prescribed third-party SEL curriculum.

Although some of these curriculums and frameworks have lessons that can be carried out in ELA classrooms, the buy-in and follow-through with fidelity has been inconsistent (Bateman, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2020; Rivers & Brackett, 2010). Because "changes from the outside are often viewed with more suspicion from internal stakeholders" (Kezar, 2018, p. 75), it is for this reason that external SEL programs may have variable rates of implementation. When change comes from within–first starting off with observations of what is working and moving onto how those positive attributes can be explored, refined, and enhanced–the change may feel more organic and less intrusive (Bryk et al., 2017; Kezar, 2018). When external third-party entities are hired or sweeping top-down initiatives are implemented by an administration, there might be resistance, as the buy-in and motivation has not necessarily been intrinsic (Bryk et al., 2017). When the change comes from within, the implementation of that change is less adversarial. In order for a

change to last beyond the trial or pilot phase, the change must be intrinsically motivated, rather than externally enforced.

Fitzpatrick (2020) also notes, however, that the creators of third-party SEL intervention programs "often pick and choose aspects of the curriculum they find helpful, leave out core elements, and modify the contents of the course" which affect both the fidelity in which teachers are able to use these lessons and the way students are ultimately affected and influenced by them (p. 10). Although the SEL programs may receive scrutiny from teachers due to it being an additional responsibility to assume from an external entity, the lack of fidelity may not necessarily be intentional, as teachers "are working within the limitations of their competence and training" in social emotional learning and mental health education (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 10). Teachers are not mental health professionals, and they may not have enough training or experience to feel comfortable discussing topics carrying emotional weight.

Philibert (2016) provides a comparison that both illustrates the issue of teachers lacking preparation to teach SEL and the problem generated if an institution implements practices without proper training:

> If we adopted violin standards at the state level requiring each and every classroom teacher to deliver proficient violin instruction, there would be, rightfully, an outrage among educators. Administrators across the country would decry that we have not trained our teachers to deliver violin instruction appropriately. They would fear that lack of teacher knowledge would lead to unsatisfactory teaching and the spreading of misinformation about the content. There would be concern that suggesting that anyone can teach violin without proper training would devalue the content and its delivery. And all these concerns would undoubtedly be valid.

> This begs the question: if we would never think to adopt violin standards in this way, why did we do it with SEL and are we sacrificing the fidelity of the practice in the process? We must move schools beyond simply adopting the state SEL standards or a mindfulness program. We agree that we would never just hand a teacher a violin and expect him to be able to teach it proficiently. SEL must be viewed the same way if we expect to impact the climate and culture of the classrooms in which the learning is taking place. (p. 16)

When studying the implementation of a particular SEL intervention curriculum, some themes that emerged from Fitzpatrick's (2020) investigation were: 1) Teachers felt that there was not enough time to implement the full curriculum with fidelity and the preparation needed to do so was overwhelming. 2) Teachers felt that they did not have enough training in mental health. One-hundred percent of the teachers surveyed in Fitzpatrick's study agreed that "having mental health competencies is one of the most important skills all teachers should have" (p. 20).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter highlights the methods used to organize, collect data, and data analysis for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight purposefully selected participants from the English Language Arts (ELA) department at Lē‘ahi Middle School (pseudonym) in urban Honolulu, Hawai‘i. The purpose of this study was to describe Lē‘ahi Middle School’s English Language Arts teachers’ present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating social emotional learning as a naturally embedded component of ELA instruction. Because the implementation of curriculum and SEL practices can be influenced by the overall school culture and climate, I decided to limit this case study to a single site, Lē‘ahi Middle School, as opposed to studying a larger population of middle school English Language Arts teachers.

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?
2. What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?

The Research Paradigm

This study utilized qualitative research methodology through a constructivist epistemology which “assumes that there are multiple realities that can be studied and that the researcher derives his or her understanding of these realities by working with and through the participants’ perspectives of a given phenomenon or problem of practice” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 13). Because knowledge is a human construction, and each person experiences reality differently, it is important to gain multiple perspectives to see the same topic through a variety of

lenses. Each person's perception of society is based on a variety of lived experiences influenced by social politics, positionality, and interpersonal relationships, which causes each individual to make meaning of the world in different ways. By conducting a basic qualitative study, I am interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their words, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25).

According to Merriam (2009), interpretive research "assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (p. 9). Constructivism and interpretivism are terms often used interchangeably, and Cresswell (2007) explains:

> In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences…. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views…. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (pp. 20-21)

This study was not seeking a single correct answer, but rather, was pursuing an understanding of individual preparedness, successes, and support needed. This study utilized an inductive process in which data was collected "to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research. Bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents are combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general" (Merriam, 2009, pp. 15-16). It is important to note, however, that because the researcher is the fundamental instrument for both collecting

and analyzing data, bias is inherently present, as the researcher has their own worldviews, values, and opinions. However, "rather than trying to eliminate these biases or "subjectivities," it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). My positionality and biases are identified in the Ethical Considerations, Validity, and Reliability section of this chapter.

The Research Design

"A *case study* is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37), where each case is delineated by finite, identifiable boundaries. Stake (2006) explains that "a case is a noun, a thing, an entity; it is seldom a verb, a participle, a functioning. With these cases we find opportunities to examine functioning, but the functioning is not the case" (p. 1). In the context of this single-site multiple case study, each case is an individual teacher in the Lē‘ahi Middle School English Language Arts Department.

This was a descriptive case study where the end product is a "rich, "thick" description" of the various perceptions of ELA and SEL as described by the interviewees (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). According to Merriam (2009), the term "*thick description* is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" which is, in this study, the experiences of each individual teacher (p. 43). In a single site multiple case study, "the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together" (Stake, 2006, pp. 5-6). In this study, the cases are bound together by all participants being English Language Arts teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School, and it is for this reason that these participants were purposefully selected.

To begin to understand the perspectives of the English Language Arts teachers on embedded social emotional learning in the classroom at Lē‘ahi Middle School, in-depth interviews with each of the participants were conducted. The in-depth interviews were private in nature which allowed the interviewee to speak freely and candidly rather than in a group setting. Hennink (2014) explains that “the increased confidentiality of an in-depth interview allows for more personal information to be described than can be included in a group discussion” (p. 29). Each interview was semi-structured which relied on a flexible list of questions that provided some structure, but also allowed for opportunities to shift directions or probe deeper in particular areas depending on the flow of the interview. Appendix C provides the list of potential semi-structured interview questions that were asked during the interview. Some of the scripted questions were asked, and some were skipped, depending on the responses of the interviewee. The structured but not rigid format of a semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the merging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) summarize the general components of a semi-structured interview:

- Interview guide includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions
- All questions used flexibly
- Usually specific data required from all respondents
- Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored
- No predetermined wording or order. (p. 110)

Once all of the individual interviews were conducted, a focus group was facilitated with seven of the eight participants due to availability. A focus group is an interview with a group of people who have knowledge about a specific topic. Hennink (2014) explains:

> Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive discussion through which data are generated which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard. (pp. 2-3)

This focus group was held after the in-depth interviews to "identify a range of perspectives on a research topic, and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspective of the participants themselves" (Hennink, 2014, p. 2). This focus group exposed participants to an "effective forum for exploring new topics, generating community-level information, and identifying social and community norms" (Hennink, 2014, p. 29). The participants of this focus group all knew each other and have worked with each other for extended periods of time. Because the focus group setting was inherently less confidential, it helped identify what the norms and generalized consensus of the English Language Arts department at Lē‘ahi Middle School were.

The focus group was conducted using a semi-structured discussion guide which provided a set of discussion starting and probing follow-up questions, while still allowing the group's conversation to organically develop and shift directions (see Appendix D). The main purposes of a discussion guide are "to remind the moderator of the topics and questions that need to be covered to meet the research objectives" and to help "manage the group discussion by providing effective "warm-up" questions to build rapport and "closing" questions to signal the discussion is coming to an end" (Hennink, 2014, p. 48). As participants discuss ideas, raise questions, or engage in dialogue about a particular topic, the discussion may shift spontaneously, which is the nature of a focus group.

After all interviews and the focus group concluded, six of the eight participants electronically completed a survey that helped concisely summarize participants' attitude toward embedded SEL (see Appendix E). This reflection and debrief helped provide additional context around the participants' perspective and their respective responses.

The Research Context and Participants

This study took place as a single-site multiple case study at Lē'ahi Middle School in Honolulu, Hawai'i. This school was selected as the location of study because it emphasizes being "a place with heart, that challenges and strengthens the mind, body, and spirit" with a mission "to provide students with a positive learning environment that meets the unique needs of adolescents and their supporters" (Lē'ahi Middle School [pseudonym], 2019, p.18). This unique focus on strengthening the whole child in a nurturing environment made it a valuable location to study.

The single site is Lē'ahi Middle School's English Language Arts Department, and each participant was taken as an individual case. Each of the eight interviewees was purposefully selected due to their roles as 6th, 7th, or 8th grade English Language Arts teachers at Lē'ahi Middle School. The literature shows that the English Language Arts classroom and curriculum can be utilized to help students explore and articulate their own experiences as well as analyze and empathize with the experiences of others. Because of the school's focus on whole-child development and the possibility for the organic integration of SEL in the ELA curriculum, the ELA teachers at Lē'ahi Middle School were able to provide a unique and valuable perspective. Their years of experience, previous locations of employment, and credentials vary, though all of the participants have taught at Lē'ahi Middle School for greater than one year.

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining approval from the University of Hawai‘i Institutional Review Board and the Hawai‘i Department of Education Data Governance & Assessments Branch, informed consent forms were distributed to participants and collected with signature.

Interviews

Each of the 45-minute semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and automatically transcribed verbatim via the Otter.ai (https://otter.ai) app for audit trail and transcription purposes. Participants were not video recorded. All synchronous interviews were conducted via the online conference platform, Webex (https://www.webex.com/), in order to adhere to the research regulations set forth by the Data Governance Branch of the Hawai‘i State Department of Education at the time of interview. Participants were given a description of the general purpose of the study and interview as a part of the consent form. Participants' responses and research findings were anonymized using pseudonyms to protect the interviewees' identities. Participation was voluntary and participants had the agency to continue or exit the study at any time. If participants became stressed or uncomfortable, they were allowed to skip the question, take a break, stop the interview, or withdraw from the process altogether.

The goal of this study was to describe the individual experiences of English Language Arts teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School with regard to their implementation of embedded social emotional learning in their classroom and curriculum. The questions in Appendix C were asked in each semi-structured interview, and follow-up questions were asked as necessary (see Appendix C).

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted via the online conference platform, Webex. The semi-structured focus group was approximately 40 minutes in length and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim via the Otter.ai app. As the moderator of the focus group, I used a semi-structured discussion guide to start the discussion, and I asked follow-up questions as needed (see Appendix D). To allow the discussion to develop and move freely between the participants, no set order was used for participants to respond. However, if participants needed additional clarification to start or follow-up questions to help the discussion continue, I intervened as needed. If participants became stressed or uncomfortable, they were allowed to take a break and return to the discussion, or they could have withdrawn from the focus group altogether.

Electronically Administered Survey

To help triangulate the data and provide the opportunity for debrief and reflection, a survey with multiple choice and open-ended questions was administered electronically and completed asynchronously after all interviews and the focus group have concluded (see Appendix E). Similar to the interview and focus group procedures, participants were allowed to skip questions as necessary or withdraw their participation in the survey. The data collected from the surveys was anonymized.

Data Analysis Procedures

Audio files from the interviews and focus group session were taken from the Otter.ai app and imported into Trint (https://trint.com/), a transcription and transcript editing software. Within Trint, I played back each audio recording alongside the automatically transcribed transcript and made corrections to any mistranscribed words. The final transcription of each interview and focus group was a condensed transcript in which non-verbal communication was not recorded,

and verbal fillers (words like “um” and “uh”) were removed (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 171). Each transcript was sent to the respective interviewees for member checking–a process that allowed individual participants to review the recorded data to ensure its accuracy and make corrections or clarifications as necessary. Participants were given the opportunity to revise any language or provide additional commentary on the transcript before I began the coding process.

According to Saldaña (2016), a code is “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). To assist with coding, I imported the transcripts from the interviews and focus group into Delve (https://delvetool.com/), a qualitative analysis software. Initial coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to construct initial categories as I read through the interview transcripts. After initial coding, a combination of in vivo coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016) were used to further define the initial codes into smaller, more specific units of analysis. As interviews progressed, the initial categories were inductively constructed, and then became the basis for the themes in this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that categories must answer the research questions and

1. Be *exhaustive* (enough categories to encompass all relevant data)
2. Be *mutually exclusive* (a relevant unit of data can be placed in only one category
3. Be as *sensitive* to the data as possible
4. Be *conceptually congruent* (all categories are at the same level of abstraction). (p. 213)

In addition to the categories, subthemes were generated, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that

> data often seem to beg for continued analysis past the formation of categories. A key circumstance here is when the researcher knows that the category scheme does not tell

the whole story–that there is more to be understood about the phenomenon. This often leads to trying to link the conceptual elements–the categories–together in some meaningful way. (p. 216)

In the Findings section of this paper, I provide a cross-case analysis to extract commonalities and consistencies between the various cases and also draw attention to notable outliers as well.

Ethical Considerations, Validity, and Reliability

In this multiple case study, data was triangulated through collecting data from multiple sources: interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Rather than only selecting a few participants from the department, this study sought maximum variation of participants by inviting all faculty members of the English Language Department to participate. Member checking was an embedded component of this study to ensure their words were captured as intended. Thick descriptions of each participant as well as the physical context of the study were provided to help readers determine if the findings match the context, and to "enable readers to compare the "fit" with their situations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256).

Positionality Statement

Although I have been teaching ELA for six years, I am a new ELA teacher at Lē'ahi Middle School which simultaneously places me at both an insider and outsider status. The commencement of this study begins during my first year as an ELA teacher at Lē'ahi Middle School, and the data collection of this study will conclude approximately one and a half years into my tenure at Lē'ahi Middle. I am new to the school, so I have not yet experienced the full effect of school culture or the various dynamics of the English Language Arts department and the school, which positions me as an outsider. However, I simultaneously occupy an insider

status since I, like the other teachers in the ELA department, am an experienced teacher who has taught using the Hawai‘i State Department of Education Common Core State Standards, and I have my own opinions on what kinds of activities are effective and important to integrate in ELA classes in service of SEL.

The goal for this study was not to project my own assumptions or ideas onto the participants, but rather, it was to understand the level of comfort and variety of skills used to organically weave SEL into English Language Arts at Lē‘ahi Middle School. My role as a researcher in this study was to understand and not to persuade or evaluate, although I do recognize the interpersonal dynamic this may cause. Lumsden et al. (2019) assert that

> reflexivity is valuable in that it draws attention to the researcher as a part of the world being studied while reminding us that those individuals involved in our research are subjects, not objects. By being reflexive we acknowledge that social researchers cannot be separated from their autobiographies and will bring their own values to the research.
>
> Reflexivity highlights the messy nature of the social word and therefore social research, including the complex and myriad power contests and relations which must be negotiated, and the implications that must be attended to in the course of our research. (p. 1)

Through intentional personal reflexivity throughout the course of this study, I needed to consistently check my own biases and not turn my research study at Lē‘ahi Middle School into a comparative analysis between the ELA curriculum/departments at my previous school of employment and Lē‘ahi Middle. Although I would have loved to work with students in this study, this research is most effective if it affects the facilitators of the learning experience–the teachers–who will hopefully, in turn, use the research to inform their own teaching. Finally,

when analyzing the findings of my research, I needed to slow down and use functional reflexivity to make sure that I accurately represented the voices of the teachers themselves and did not skew or influence the data based on my own biases, interpretations, or personal preferences.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the findings of eight semi-structured interviews, one focus group, and one electronically administered survey conducted with eight English Language Arts teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School. This case study sought to describe how the participants view their role and comfort in integrating social emotional learning as an embedded component of English Language Arts instruction. Previous research indicates teachers are challenged to provide both academic and social emotional learning instruction to students.

This case study sought to investigate ELA teachers' present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating social emotional learning as an organically embedded component of ELA instruction at Lē‘ahi Middle School by answering the following research questions:

1. How do ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?
2. What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?

For the purpose of understanding the kinds of data collected in this study in response to each research question, a data overview and analysis approach can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Data Table Overview

Research Question	Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data
How do ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?	- 8 individual interviews (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) - 1 focus group interview (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) - 1 open-ended survey question (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)	5 Likert scale survey questions
What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?	- 8 individual interviews (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) - 1 focus group interview (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) - 1 open-ended survey question (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)	5 Likert scale survey questions

Chapter 4 is presented in the following sections. The first section provides a summary on the participants' demographics and teaching background. The next section will provide the quantitative findings gathered from the electronically administered survey. The last section will present the data to answer the two research questions of the study.

Participants

Participants involved in this study included eight teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School located in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. All eight teachers in the English Language Arts department at Lē‘ahi Middle School were interviewed. Because of the school's focus on whole-child development and the possibility for the organic integration of SEL in the ELA curriculum, the ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School were able to provide a unique and valuable perspective. Their years of experience, previous place of employment, and credentials vary, though all of the participants have taught at Lē‘ahi Middle School for more than one year. Two of the eight

teachers have held positions in other careers prior to becoming a teacher in the Hawai‘i State Department of Education.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant via the online video conference platform, Webex, to elicit their individual perspectives on embedded social emotional learning in the English Language Arts classroom. Eight of the teachers participated in the individual semi-structured interviews, seven of the teachers participated in the focus group, and six of the teachers participated in the electronically administered survey. Participants have a combined total of 122 years of full-time teaching experience across 12 different schools in the United States. Participant demographics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	6	75%
Male	2	25%
Teaching Credentials		
Elementary	2	25%
Secondary	6	75%
Teaching as second career	2	37.5%
Full-time teaching		
Taught at 1 school in teaching career	0	0%
Taught at 2 schools in teaching career	4	50%
Taught at 3 schools in teaching career	4	50%

Quantitative Findings

Six of the eight participants participated in the electronically administered survey, and all responses ranged from neutral to strongly agree. Participant responses to the survey indicate that the teachers surveyed generally have a favorable disposition toward social emotional learning in the English Language Arts classroom. Table 3 outlines the responses to each Likert scale question:

Table 3

Electronically Administered Survey Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that social emotional learning pairs naturally with the English Language Arts content area.	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	-	-
I feel comfortable and confident in embedding social emotional learning opportunities in my English Language Arts curriculum.	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	-	-	-
When planning my ELA lessons, I intentionally build in learning opportunities that focus on or relate to social emotional learning.	2 (33.3%)	3 (50%)	1 (16.7%)	-	-
I feel comfortable and confident in helping students process their emotions.	1 (16.7%)	4 (66.7%)	1 (16.7%)	-	-
I feel supported by the administration and counselors at my school when I have concerns about students' wellbeing.	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	-	-	-

Qualitative Findings and Themes

The interview, focus group, and survey data were triangulated by identifying themes and sub-themes that emerged between the three data collection methods and the interviews via the first and second cycle coding process described in Chapter 3. An inductive coding approach was used by utilizing initial coding to generate initial categories as each interview occurred. This was followed by a combination of in vivo coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016) which were used to define the initial codes into smaller, more specific units of analysis. Table 4 below briefly illustrates this process:

Table 4

Example of First Cycle Coding Process Used

Initial Coding	In-Vivo Coding	Descriptive Coding
Empathy	- "All of that feeling and connection" - "Living through the character" - "Really connecting with them" - "Communicate with others" - "Learning doesn't have to be serious all the time" - "Really sinking in" - "All the emotions are all good" - "There's a lot happening to kids that they might not necessarily be sharing" - "A lot for one person to carry as an eighth grader"	- understanding - empowerment - process - communication - emotion - weight
Vulnerability	- "I didn't know you felt this way" - "Had no idea" - "Way deeper conversations" - "More willingly shared" - "I'm the adult she's telling" - "Comfortable enough to tell me that"	- trust - divulge - sharing - conversation - talk
Relationships	- "Get to know them a lot better" - "We just make connections"	- support - connection

	- "Thank you for teaching me about life" - "Allowing me to be me" - "They can see it; they can read you" - "It's the whole gamut"	- authentic - honesty

Lastly, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to condense similarly coded passages together. Through the inductive coding process that occurred as each subsequent interview was conducted, the initial codes then became the basis for the five themes found in this study:

- **Theme 1:** SEL is a naturally woven component of ELA instruction.
    - **Subtheme 1:** The basis of SEL is connection, and connection leads to academic and emotional engagement.
- **Theme 2:** Compassion, trust, and empathy within the ELA classroom are foundational.
- **Theme 3:** A strong counseling team supports teachers.
- **Theme 4:** SEL instruction has become more intentional.
- **Theme 5:** ELA teachers expressed interest in more training on contemporary issues and topics (e.g., LGBTQIA+) for students and families.

As part of these findings, each participant was asked to reflect on their own definition of SEL, and what it meant to them within the context of this study.

Definition of Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning as

> 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. (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021)

In each of the interviews, each participant was asked for their definition of social emotional learning. The data showed that the definitions from each participant centered around a central objective of providing opportunities for students to express and process their emotions in a productive way. Each participant had a different expression of their definition of SEL, and their definitions provide a general glimpse into their pedagogical and philosophical approach. Table 5 outlines each participant's definition of social emotional learning with quotations from their respective individual interviews.

Table 5

Participants' Definitions of Social Emotional Learning

Participant	Definition of Social Emotional Learning
Participant A	"I like to learn about my kids. And how we learn about them is through what their interests are, how they're feeling, and so on and so forth. So for me, the easiest aspect of sneaking in SEL into ELA is through poetry, right? And narrative writing because they're all fiction, you know, made up. And when they learn to write their own poetry and express themselves through writing, it's basically a perfect kind of like segue to social emotional learning and self-awareness, and that. So to me, like, poetry is a way to encourage and teach students about their, about maybe like articulating their own feelings, like what is it that they feel?"
Participant D	"So I would say social emotional learning is pretty much everything that's not tested on the standardized tests. It's learning to be the best version of yourself, right? Learning how to interact with others. Learning how to–you know, like, know yourself. Learning how to deal with emotions, learning how to deal with failure, success. Learning how to work with others. It's like all those things."
Participant E	"You know, it's the package. It's the whole package. And I think that teaching [SEL] is long after I have taught… you know, who's going to remember *Tangerine*? Who's going to remember all the parts of an essay like... Will you ever really go on after college to write argumentative essays or whatever? But it's about, you know… It's about life skills and learning to cope with finding joy. And in the things you can learn to develop the skills to

	find emotional wellness, and how to approach the things in life that hurt and that are difficult."
Participant H	"I think my kind of textbook definition is just being able to apply different things within my curriculum to address it. It is basically students' mental health or wellbeing to feel so that they feel social and emotional support in that area. But I think for me personally, what I like to see from students in the classroom is just being able to find some type of connection to the curriculum and then put that effort or drive into their work. So I do different things throughout the year to kind of get them into that habit of being personally aware of their work. And I think different assignments let me get a different gauge of where they're at because if they do write, for example, like really dark stuff–sometimes it does have to do with whatever they're watching on Netflix or things like that–but it just kind of sets you up to give a hint to the counselor, "Hey, so-and-so's writing about this." So I think having that collaboration helps with social emotional too, because it does show kind of that back and forth. But I think for students and a lot of us is just being able to recognize when you do need help, and I guess that extra support."
Participant K	"And so SEL is my life. If I can just save one person. But I feel I end up saving a lot. COVID is their only. Oh, my God. Because their world has not been challenged or shaken up until then. I had maybe four girls and a couple of guys at different times ending up at the psych ward and Queen's Hospital. It's because they've never they don't know how to deal with these restrictions, and there's no resiliency and there's no grit and there's no stick-with-it. There really isn't–you crumble if somebody looks at you wrong. You get a grade that you wish was something different, they just fell apart. So I try to embed, always. SEL is a huge part of my curriculum. It's needed now more than ever, for different reasons. That's what we practice in my classroom. We do life. And if I can teach Common Core through it, I do my best. Good for me. But I tell the students it's more important to me that they become better people for having sat in my classroom. And I write them a letter at the end of the year. And they write–a lot of them would write me notes and letters and they'll say that I learned so much more than I ever thought I ever could, not just from English. And I learned so much more from you than any other English teacher. But about life. Thank you for teaching me about life. And thank you for helping me examine

	myself and who I am and allowing me to be me."
Participant T	"It's really an opportunity to have students support their emotional needs and social emotional growth. It gives time for them to express their thoughts and feelings and be able to make connections not only with the content we're teaching in the classroom, but to make connections with each other and myself. It gives them an opportunity to kind of learn real world skills and collaborative learning opportunities. Being able to defend in an argument. Being able to handle and control their emotions when they might disagree with somebody. Or if they've got to find patience for things."
Participant S	"It's basically just helping the students to deal with those everyday life and social problems that they're facing, whether it's family, community, friends, whatever it is. It's just helping the students to identify what that issue is and then learning how to work their way through it, rather than just focusing on the negative part of the problem and that the problem's never going to go away, when it actually is something that they could work out. And just teaching the students that, you know, problems may feel like it's the end of the world. Because I think, especially with our middle schoolers, they feel like they have a problem and that's it. That's all that's going to happen for the rest of their lives. But just kind of teaching them how to work through it so that they can get past it and get through the rest of their day is oftentimes my goal because I think they get so focused in on that one problem, they just shut down."
Participant Y	"I like to allow the kids to express themselves freely. In a sense that's appropriate obviously because we are only seventh grade, but allow them to express themselves freely in a sense where they feel safe in my classroom. They feel safe among their peers and they feel safe just being around me as well. I think that's kind of like the basic foundation in my eyes that when you come to my class, you're comfortable enough that you can say what you want and you will respect other people as they respect you."

Although distinct in their own way due to differences in teaching styles and personalities, the participants' definitions of SEL share similar characteristics of helping students express themselves, process their emotions productively, and helping them to connect and engage with the literature of study. As each participant described their definition of social emotional learning, they frequently described specific activities or assignments in which social emotional learning was a large component. Often, these assignments that involved social emotional learning were

not one-off activities in isolation, but instead were larger units or themes that spanned the course of weeks, months, or full quarters and semesters. The symbiotic relationship between social emotional learning and the English Language Arts classroom is further described in Theme 1.

Theme 1: SEL is a naturally woven component of ELA instruction.

During the interviews, all eight teachers repeatedly mentioned how the reading and writing in ELA provides numerous opportunities for students to explore who they are, what they're interested in, and how other characters or classmates have grappled with relatable challenges. Participant T describes how she feels SEL fits well in the ELA classroom:

> *[O]ut of all the content areas, I think English Language Arts really lends to the SEL movement. I really think it provides so many opportunities during our classroom time with the students to be able to insert it. It just seems it flows naturally into our area of teaching. I mean, there's so many opportunities and teachable moments with like real-life examples in our reading, whether it be literature or informational type reading that lend itself to be able to focus on that social emotional learning that the kids really need. There's so many teachable moments, like I said, that we can go beyond the standards and benchmarks and we can even take that opportunity to even branch off if we can and go deeper with students to talk about topics that they feel are important. So it's kind of natural, and I'm happy to do that, and we're very lucky.*

> *We have built in advisory time to address the social emotional. It just seems that the ELA content area provides so much opportunity to build relationships and have conversations and talk deeper than any other of the content areas. I mean, at least in my opinion anyway, not that it can't be in other content areas. ELA just seems to go hand in hand with SEL teachable moments a lot easier.*

The word “opportunities” was used 31 times throughout the interviews and focus group, and “teachable moments” was used four times, including in the example above. The repetition of these words reveal how the teacher looks for these moments in which she can delve a bit deeper into topics that can be relevant to students’ social emotional learning.

Participant E adds that “there’s a lot of opportunities for students to explore their own SEL and to convey that through English.” She adds that especially in their personal narrative unit, “it’s them exploring all those things about themselves . . . and by the end of the school year, they are so much more in tune to who they are and possibly what their values and their principles are.” These “teachable moments” are also very important to Participant E, as “students start to identify what’s of value” especially “when it comes to relationships and people . . ..”

Participant A asserts that “ELA is a great way to incorporate SEL” because “adolescence is a tender age. They’re going through a lot. And sometimes, you know, maybe they’re too scared to ask their parents or talk to their parents about it, so we’re here.” Participant A’s willingness and comfort level in helping students navigate their struggles is evident here, as she suggests that students can talk with teachers about a certain topic if they are not completely comfortable talking with their parents or family members. Participant A continues to add that “poetry’s perfect for focusing on the present moment . . . and it is a “way to encourage and teach students about . . . articulating their own feelings.”

In discussing how SEL is woven into his own classroom, Participant Y mentions how ELA naturally helps students learn more about themselves by giving them the vocabulary to do so in a more articulate manner. Participant Y describes how “it’s really nice that we can always find an avenue back to just them as a person.” Especially when students read stories and essays and write their own, Participant Y shares that he tells his students that “you need to know how to

identify these terminologies because you see it every day, you see every day in your lives, and you can express yourselves more freely in that sense with informative writing and argumentative writing." Participant A adds that "especially in middle school, [students] are more willing to talk about things through their writing, [rather] than speaking about it" which further strengthens the tie between processing one's experiences and articulating it in a precise and productive way.

When students have the vocabulary to articulate their experiences and the experiences of others, it is important that students use only the language that is directly applicable to the specific context. Participant Y asserts that

> *it's so important for them as they grow up to find the right evidence and to really make sure that what they're learning is accurate and credible to better themselves as a person, you know? So I think those are just some of the basic foundations. But to add the creativity to it, to allow them to express themselves, that's just like the icing on the cake for us, you know? So I feel like English is such a good subject to teach when it comes to SEL.*

There are numerous entry points to weave SEL into the ELA curriculum, and Participant H tries to focus on "building that connection or developing those social skills that they need to be successful in the future." She mentions a specific example about how she weaves both ELA curriculum and SEL concepts together:

> *So I think for me it's just looking at what can I offer them or give them that would benefit them the most in the future. And so it's not always going to be, oh, let's read this super hard text, analyze Shakespeare. It might be kind of like looking at, I guess more like word choice. So how did the word choice over here affect the overall outcome, or how did it*

impact us as an audience? And then just keeping that in mind as we're, you know, like going into communication with others, too, that sometimes the words we are choosing can have different impacts on people.

I do talk to them a lot about word choice like that, too, because we do want the audience or even, you know, people we talk to have certain emotions as we're going through things. So some words that we're choosing might not necessarily be the best. Upgrade basic words to be a little bit more clear on what we're trying to express. So I just try to think of it in terms that way. So like they might forget about what we learned in third quarter, but at the same time carrying on the overall lifelong skills I think would be most beneficial for them.

Four of the eight participants specifically mentioned how they challenged the students to use more precise language other than basic adjectives like "good" or "sad" or "happy." Participant H describes this as "upgrading basic words" to truly pinpoint exactly what one means. As teachers discussed the organic relationship between ELA and SEL, they also contrasted how it might be more difficult for other subject areas to integrate SEL as a natural component of instruction as seamlessly as one can in ELA. Participant E discussed how although there's "definitely a symbiotic connection between SEL and ELA" and possibly history, too, "I think you probably have to work a little harder for math and science to work the SEL into the curriculum . . ." because "there's not as much opportunity for self-reflection and for sharing back out . . . those things that are meaningful."

Four of the eight participants mentioned that their students journal regularly in class, and as students express their experiences and emotions through their journaling exercises and

conversations, Participant K describes how helps students articulate their feelings in productive and appropriate ways:

> *And I tell them–if I scold you, it's because I care about you. I love you too much to allow you to talk to me in that tone. Let's find a better way. Let's beef up your vocabulary so you don't have to throw around those F-bombs. We find some other words that are fun to use. That'll impress people; they'll have to look it up. And so I, I just do life with them. So it's really hard for me to put a finger on SEL because it is how I live my life, I think. We all are in need of SEL to different degrees, different types for different reasons and I feel today's classroom, especially with COVID and online learning and kids, Generation Z-ers, they need it. They're on social media more than they are face-to-face conversing, you know. And this is what's raising our kids.*

Participants in this study assert that SEL and ELA are naturally intertwined. Participant K encourages her students to discuss the narratives, histories, and topics elevated in ELA class with their parents, as "many don't know things because they haven't experienced it, or they only know it at a cerebral level." Participant K succinctly summarizes a general sentiment echoed by all of the other teachers in this study: "When you know somebody's stories, it makes it more personal. I cannot separate the SEL." Through this interweaving of SEL and ELA, students are able to connect not only at an academic level, but at an emotional level, too, which can lead to increased engagement.

Subtheme 1: The basis of SEL is connection, and connection leads to academic and emotional engagement. Although each of the eight participants had various methods by which they embed social emotional learning into the fabric of their pedagogy and instruction, 100% of the participants talked about how they try to make the topics of study relatable and relevant to

students' lives. Teachers mentioned that especially with students who may be labeled or label themselves as "reluctant readers" or students who struggle with reading comprehension, it was important to make sure that students could connect and relate to the literature and topics of study. According to the participants, when students can relate to the literature and topics of study, they are able to utilize their background knowledge and their own lived experiences to assist with comprehension, visualization, and empathetic connections.

Participant S comments that, "in the beginning it totally wasn't intentional to have this many SEL tie-ins to all of the lessons." She says she focused on helping students make real-life connections to the book "more to engage the students and just help them with overall comprehension of what was happening in those books, because it was oftentimes above the reading levels that they were at." Especially for students who struggle to read and comprehend literature, "to get them engaged was our main goal because if not, they would have just been hating whatever book we were reading." Participant T agrees, and adds her insight on how she intentionally selects novels with male protagonists, as she has a harder time connecting with the male students in her class:

> *I think those are my students that don't really engage in reading as much, so a strong character that's looking for an identity, that works through a big conflict, that succeeds and learned lessons along the way–I think students can really relate and see themselves in certain characters of our books.*

Throughout Participant E's novel study of Edward Bloor's *Tangerine*, she asks students to reflect on the various themes, character development, and challenges brought forth in the novel. Out of that, she asks students to write an original poem about a theme or life lesson they connected to as they read. Participant E reflects on this:

I just think that's all kind of SEL, right? It's all about where we fit socially and what our own values and principles are and what and I think that's so important. Kids should get put behind the wheel of the car. They should understand the ramifications of what their words mean, and also how to combat the stuff that comes about from it.

When students can relate on a personal and emotional level to the reading and writing assignments and feel safe to do so, they are more likely to remain academically engaged (Corso et al., 2013). In this section, I will highlight in-depth anecdotes from several participants that show how their students' SEL connection led to their academic engagement. According to the Glossary of Education Reform, student engagement "refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" and is the description of "engagement" that I will be using in this study ("Student engagement," 2016).

Participant S. Earlier in her teaching career at a different middle school, Participant S led her students through a novel study of Christopher Paul Curtis' *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963* with her sixth grade class. Although students were not as familiar with the historical content, Participant S reflects on how her students were able to identify with the characters' experiences and make connections to situations in their own lives:

But just kind of tying it into that demographic of dealing with gangs and racial groups, not getting along with one another, because that was an issue within the school where certain racial groups just weren't having it with other groups. And so we kind of told them, you know, this is what that family was dealing with. You're dealing with two groups of people that just because of the color of their skin, they weren't getting along.

> *And look at what you're having to deal with now in your community, you know, how does that feel? Can you empathize with them? Can you sympathize? And so it's just that kind of tie-in that they have more of a buy-in, an engagement in this story, because if not, I think it would have been really over their head, kind of bland. So that helped a lot.*

Students tend to become emotionally invested in literature when they can empathize with the characters. As stated in Chapter 1, the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines *empathy* as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another." In the context of the ELA classroom, students can exercise empathy by making emotional connections between their own experiences and the experiences of another person or character. Although Participant S commented that the first several chapters of their novel study was "always kind of rough" because it's mostly exposition, and the students are "kind of feeling it out," she described how students were living life right alongside the characters:

> *But as we kind of talked more about, how does this relate to you? You see that emotion come out. So when we're reading, you see like hand motions like this coming from them, facial expressions, which is awesome because that's all of that feeling and connection that they have to what's going on in the story. It was awesome because that's how [my teaching partner] and I knew, you know, this is really sinking in for them. It's not just we're reading it to read. They're actually kind of living through the character and really connecting with them.*

When students began to draw these connections between the character's experiences and their own lives, some students started to voluntarily share these connections with the class.

I think some of the students just really took things to heart . . . and really opened up . . . . And those were all things that I had never imagined that my kids were having to face. And so it was really eye-opening on my end because they would have never openly, I think, shared those things with me. It was more, I think, seeing what another character's experiencing, processing that, and then saying, "Hey, I'm kind of dealing with this, too. I can totally relate to this."

And so it was really neat. Like some days–and I felt so bad because we wouldn't always have time to share. But there's so many hands up because they want to be able to tell their story, too. But I think the double entry journals helped to kind of buffer a lot of that where if they couldn't share out loud, they were at least getting it on paper where somebody would see it. And so that's kind of what we did.

Depending on the novel, students are able to draw connections to their lives in a variety of different ways. Participant S has her students write about these connections to the literature in double-entry journals, which allow students to articulate their thoughts on paper. She recounts a distinct memory of a student making vivid and visceral connections to situations some of the characters experience. When reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963*, Participant S recounts this memory:

And he was kind of telling me, "When I go home, I get all these weird looks from people along the way. People look at me like I'm nothing. People look at me like I'm this criminal, like I'm going to do something bad." And this kid, when I see him, I don't see any of those things. And he was kind of just writing about, you know, "People always give us this bad rap because we're from this area. We grow up here, our family's from here, and they just assume that we're going to do all of these negative things in the

community when that's not our intention. I'm just trying to get from school to home and home to school. You know, I'm just trying to survive and be a good student. But everybody has these just nasty opinions of me, and it really hurts me. I hate it. I wish I could change it, but I don't know how."

In addition, when reading Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, Participant S notes that students could relate with another adolescent character's point of view of a situation that adult characters try to rationalize:

A lot of them could relate with family members being stuck in another country and not being able to come over with them, only having one parent come here and while the other one is still working. And so a lot of that came out and I had no idea that that was going on. Most times we just assume, you know, the parents might be separated, divorced. And so it was nice to kind of get to know them a lot better on that level. That that's something that they're struggling with. Their family isn't full, even though their parents are telling them they're in a new place, they're in a better place, and they're doing it for them, on the students' end, they're struggling because they want their whole family here. They don't want to just be living here with like an aunt and uncle or a relative.

Participant M. Like Participant S, Participant M uses literature as a springboard from which she can teach and reinforce the importance of honesty, especially when it comes to asking for help when times are difficult. In her conversations with students, she reminds students that there are many adults who can help them process whatever they are going through, but the first step is being honest with themselves and with others:

Secrets are not good. They're bad. We talk about that in ELA class. We do a book where somebody is keeping a dark secret. And one of the themes that we learn at the end is

secrets are not good. Honesty is best. So even in our themes, in our reading, we're able to connect with our SEL, too. So that's kind of cool. And being able to read a book and learn some lessons and connect it to our own lives.

Participant Y. As Participant Y teaches informative writing in his class, rather than having them research topics at random or of his choosing, he has students focus their research on careers and future goals which he asserts is "very like SEL-based because we have to give the kids this time to really, like, think about it and express themselves" no matter what industry or career path they choose. He gives students the opportunity to research careers, colleges, and post-high school opportunities that they are interested in and "because the kids are constantly collaborating and they're sharing, we have to create this environment of like, it's okay, you know, like if you don't want to go to college, that's, that's okay."

Participant Y has students investigate their strengths and skills and has them probe deeper into what kinds of jobs capitalize on the assets they currently have. Out of his students' research have come interesting discussions about their future, ranging from students pursuing ascension in the fast-food industry, to pursuing careers in the medical field. Importantly, however, is Participant Y's focus on students' own investigation, rather than him critiquing his students' ideas or choices:

He's very smart and he's really like a go-getter, but he's like, "No, college isn't for me. I don't want to further my education after high school." And legitimately he said, like, "I just want to run my own little fast-food chain. I just want to work at McDonalds for a little while. I know I can progress my way up."

And I'm like, "Okay, like that sounds good, you know, at least you have a plan and you thought about this." So that was one really interesting job that I thought was really like, "Wow, like, okay, I didn't expect that from you."

Then of course, you have all these other kids who are very like focused and they have like these, these clear visions of, like, they if they're gonna be a doctor, not just a general practice. They want to be . . . cardiologists or they want to be like all specific, like optometrists . . . they are so well-aware of these things, you know? And it shocks me that these seventh graders, 13-year-olds, they're so focused on future already.

Participant Y used students' own interests as topics of study to teach informational writing, rather than requiring all students to write about the same topic. When students are given the agency to choose their own topics of study, engagement increases due to students' intrinsic interest (Flowerday et al., 2004). Notably, Participant Y does not judge or critique students' ideas, but he asks them to think deeply and investigate the various courses of action. Thinking about one's future is a highly personal matter, and when students can relate to and are invested in the topic of study, this intellectual and emotional connection leads to academic engagement.

Participant E. Similar to Participant Y, Participant E likes to make students "think about their own lives and how they fit and what their goals about life were. Not necessarily academic goals, but just like. What made them tick? What made them who they were?" She asks students to write these ideas down in a journal and describes some of her process:

I've always done that kind of journaling. And some are read and some are not. So the ones I tell them that at any time at all, if they feel uncomfortable, they can fold that page over, and I know that's not journal page for me to read. But then there are some I require and I grade because I kind of want to see where they're going to go with their essay or

what the background of their personal narrative connections might be. So we always start most of our essays . . . with some sort of journal journaling about the topic or about threads of connection.

This journaling serves as a way for students to focus their thoughts and to get their preliminary thoughts onto the page. As they reflect on their initial thoughts and see these thoughts on the page, students can begin to formulate connections between ideas to see which parts resonate with them the most. These "threads of connection" can help students become more emotionally invested in the topic of their writing and clarify their writing's trajectory.

Participant H. Participant H's perspective on SEL in the ELA classroom is having students "find some type of connection to the curriculum and then put that effort or drive into their work." In her year-end assignment for her students, she recounts a moment where a student's emotional connection to a writing assignment, coupled with her own pedagogical approach, helped bring out a side of her student that she had not seen before:

And then I think the prompt was to expand upon the most difficult moment in your life . . . I did skim through my homeroom's. Everybody was kind of like divorce or like losing a loved one. His was the fact that he had to watch his dad go to prison. And that was just– he used vocabulary that I wouldn't have pictured him using. You know, he's seen as somebody who's ready to fight, but it was just very heartbreaking and vulnerable because he wrote about how his heart was breaking because he was watching the news and found out that Dad had to go to prison, things like that. So, for me, it was just eye opening because we can see students and I mean, they see us too, but we don't necessarily know what's going on in their personal lives.

Participant H adds that “some kids are defensive because they don't have those skills to learn and it's just frustrating for them,” but when they have the emotional engagement and are personally invested in the work, the academic engagement follows.

> *So for me, I think I just saw something a little bit beyond the fact that he's ready to fight all the time. So it just took a little bit more work, and he was receptive. I think for him, if I did come down totally hard, he would have just deflected me and just, oh, I hate so-and-so. But for him, I think he just needed that support because he was a kid or he is like academically capable. It's just and getting to know him later on, I can see why I think that parental role wasn't there.*

In reflecting on her interaction with this student, Participant H remembers that her own daughter was in preschool at the time, and that having children of her own has impacted the way she teaches:

> *Having to have a kid and think about what kind of teacher would I want for her, and kind of taking that on into my philosophy as well. So the things that I ask the kids to do or how I have to correct behaviors, if parents did have a problem with that, I mean, I can honestly say it's something I would do for my own child and, yeah. That's just been integrated in there.*

Summary. All participants felt that social emotional learning is an organic part of the English Language Arts curriculum. Novel studies, exploration into character development, narrative writing, and vocabulary development were a few of the many ways participants naturally wove SEL into their ELA instruction. Participants noted that when compared to other subject areas, the ELA class is the most natural fit for SEL instruction, as there are numerous entry points to weave in SEL. To engage students, the participants discussed how they try to

make the topics of study relevant to students' lives so students can use their background knowledge and lived experiences to make connections with the curriculum. To have students open up, dig deeply into, and articulate events in their lives that can be highly sensitive and personal, not only do students need to be engaged academically and emotionally, but a foundation of trust, safety, and bravery needs to be established first between the teacher and students, and between students as well.

Theme 2: Compassion, trust, and empathy within the ELA classroom are foundational.

In Theme 1, I discussed how SEL is a naturally woven component of ELA instruction, and how personal connection to content and curriculum lead to academic and emotional engagement. Participants also shared that to encourage students to garner the courage to be vulnerable and share stories about their own life and experiences, having a compassionate, trusting, and empathetic relationship with students was a prerequisite. Teachers emphasized how important it is to build relationships between the teacher and student, between students, and as a collective classroom community. Participants discussed a variety of ways by which they build trust with students, how they respond to students empathetically and genuinely, and how they share their own lived experiences, too.

Participant T underscores the importance of building a foundation of compassion and trust to gain access to the deeper stories that students hold within them:

> *I love to celebrate, but those moments where students have trusted me with some of the most incredible stories that you wouldn't believe. And it just kind of is testament how important building those relationships with your students are. Once you build that relationship, there's trust, there's a bond, and they feel comfortable sharing the most, you*

know, disagreeable, scary things. But it's important that you have built that relationship, that you can help them in the areas wherever they need.

I've seen some pretty sad things. Everything from, you know, abuse to just being in a bad mental depression state. And even though our students are really young, they're still going through some very adult heavy problems. I would have never known. I've had students that have obvious–it's obvious that there's problems at home, but I would have never thought. And because of that relationship building, I was so lucky that they trusted me so I could get them the help that they needed.

To get to the point where students feel safe enough to be willing to share these kinds of stories with their teacher requires intentional relationship building over an extended course of time because "you have to build that connection and that trust for them to open up and accept help from you" (Participant H). Relationships of this magnitude are not built in a single lesson, month, or even possibly a semester. Teachers do need to be patient, intentional, and authentic in how they approach relationship building, and Participant T adds how important the first quarter is in setting a strong foundation of familiarity and connection before beginning to teach curriculum:

It doesn't matter how long it takes. Focus on relationships, no matter what. Don't dive into books. Don't dive into curriculum. Whether it's team building, getting-to-know-you activities, celebrating things that they like. Just making them laugh. I mean, I think laughter really connects all students. So showing funny YouTube videos, just making sure you make that connection, first off, in your classroom. I think that is probably the biggest and most successful way to kind of integrate a SEL in any classroom. Doesn't even have to be, you know, ELA lessons or benchmarks. Just relationship building.

Teachers discussed a variety of written and interpersonal strategies to build relationships with students and how these strategies need to be authentic. Participant K has a sign on her classroom door that gives students the option of a fist bump, a handshake, a high five, or a hug. Participant K stands at the door and each student greets her with one of the four options on the sign. Although this is one of many strategies she uses throughout her class, this greeting at the door ensures that she has interacted with each student at least once that day. Participant K explains her observations and how she explains to students the importance of this practice:

> *I wish you could see how many kids need a hug. How many! And I teach them this. I go, "Did you know that the science says humans need 12 nonsexual, healthy touches every day to be emotionally healthy? So I'm generous with my hugs with you because I don't know if you got one today. And you might not get one until the next class with me." And a lot of them are–a lot of boys. I'm not talking just girls, mostly boys.*

Building relationships with students also comes in the form of teachers being firm, but compassionate "warm demanders" (Hammond, 2014). Hammond (2014) defines a warm demander as:

> A teacher who communicates personal warmth toward students while at the same time demands they work toward high standards. Provides concrete guidance and support for meeting the standards, particularly corrective feedback, opportunities for information processing, and culturally relevant meaning making.

Participant H discussed how she was firm in her expectation of the student completing the work, and at the same time worked with the student to get the assignment completed, even if it meant adjusting the deadline:

A lot of times we can be focused on the end goal, whether it's been projects or essays and test scores. But still, keeping in mind that there's a lot that are happening to kids that they might not necessarily be sharing. So I guess in my teaching, it's more like I am teaching curriculum and content, but also, I'm trying to get to know the students a little bit better and have that open door.

So I do tell them that sometimes, you know, things come up, although dates are supposed to be strict. So we learn to be responsible if you communicate the fact that you know something is going on. The due dates are also flexible and there's a difference between abusing that. And I think that policy has helped students be a little bit more open because they know that they have to communicate their needs. And when it gets to the real world, I mean, that's what we have to do, too.

If a classroom has a foundation of trust and care, there is a mutual understanding and learning that can take place: students are able to express themselves in more open ways, and teachers learn about the world through the experiences of their students. Participant E used the word "mutual" to describe the kind of learning that takes place, rather than the word "reciprocal." The Merriam-Webster (n.d) dictionary defines "reciprocal" as "consisting of or functioning as a return in kind" and "mutual" as "shared in common." The use of "reciprocal" connotes a transactional relationship, and the use of "mutual" connotes a simultaneous relationship.

Participant E expresses how she does not shy away from acknowledging that she, too, is learning and does not have all the answers. She lets her students know that she is open to feedback and learning from them as well:

And I tell my students all the time. You guys, if there's something that I need to learn and you guys teach me, I'm super thrilled. And there's a lot for me to learn when it comes to technology and how to do something faster and how to use some fast key or whatever. So it's always mutual learning.

The simultaneity in the learning connoted by the use of "mutual" helps elevate and accelerate the class as a whole. Similar to the sentiment Participant E describes, Participant A conveys her perspective on the mutual and simultaneous relationship between students and teachers:

When you get to know your students better, then you can learn from them as well. Like, you know, we as teachers are not the end all know all, you know, we are learning from each other as well as they're teaching us as well. And I think that's my favorite part about this job–is really learning about who these creatures are that walk into our classes and what they think and how they feel. It's nice. We're lucky.

Participant D emphasizes how learning is a team effort, and that he tries to build a community where everyone works together to practice, improve, and succeed:

The goal is for them to acquire English. That's the main goal. And that's what I want. But you can't have that unless they try. Right? So for me, the base goal for me is to have them try–like their effort has to be there. I want them to put their effort into it. And I can tell when they're trying and when they're not. So, you know, like language learning is about practice, whether it's practicing speaking, practicing reading. But you have to put the effort into it to get better. And I stress that we're doing this together. You know, it's a journey that we're going on together and we need to work together to get better. You know, it's a built-in support system.

This mutual relationship both strengthens the trust between teacher and student, and it also helps the student learn when there is a shared level of empathetic understanding. Participant H recounted a time during which a student tried to pass off his friend's work for his own. Participant H asked him a series of probing, non-threatening questions, and eventually he came around to tell the whole truth:

> *He told me that his brother ripped up certain worksheets, and that his whole thing throughout the year has been that he wants to get an A. I talked to him after that about being honest. Like personally, he's not that academic, but for me it's like he's also trying to put in that effort. For me, effort counts more than whether you're just great at writing because some kids are great, but they're not necessarily pushing themselves. But for me, it's more like your effort and what you're putting into it.*
>
> *So for him to come back, he did tell me about his brother. I also know that he was on four baseball teams at the same time. So he told me that he's staying up until–he has practice, I think, until 8:00 at night, he comes home, eats dinner, so it's now 9:00, and then he has to stay up 'til maybe 2:00 to do his work. And we've had that discussion like a couple of weeks prior about it. Because like I told him, I don't want you to go home and feel like you have to stay up 'til 2 to do this because you do need sleep; you're growing. All that's just statistics. You need a certain amount of sleep. So just please use class time wisely. But I told him as far as his notebook goes, I gave him another opportunity.*
>
> *And he thanked me a lot and he understood. But I also told him, "And don't lie because you're really not a good liar. Like you're fidgeting, and I can tell because I already know. So just please be truthful and honest in your work." And he kind of got it. But I think being able to own it that way, and like come back. Yeah. Was something that*

made him not feel good because he was worried about his grade, but at the same time, like being honest, I told him, is something that's really important.

In this situation, Participant H could have severely reprimanded and punished the student for cheating and contacted administrators and parents. The student was academically dishonest, and in doing so, broke a school rule. However, rather than navigating the situation by way of reprimanding and assigning punishment, Participant H empathetically handled this situation using restorative justice practices such that the student learned from his mistake, and the situation strengthened the relationship between them. Zehr et al. (2022) describe misconduct through a restorative justice lens: a "wrongdoing is a violation of people and of interpersonal relationships. Violations create obligations. The central obligation is to put right the wrongs, i.e., to repair the harms caused by wrongdoing" (pp. 30-31). Although the wrongdoing does receive some attention, "the focus is on helping the parties reach inner resolution . . . empowerment of the parties and a process of mutual recognition of the other's humanity" (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007, p. 10). Had Participant H reprimanded the student and given him school-sanctioned punishment for his transgression, the relationship between student and teacher may be seen as an adversarial one. However, Participant H led her discussion with the student with empathy and allowed the student to preserve his dignity, while simultaneously holding him accountable for his actions. She articulated to the student how she understood his busy schedule, and at the same time how cheating is not an honest way to navigate life. Handling the situation with mutual understanding at the forefront, Participant H was able to hold the student accountable, while at the same time preserving the relationship between them.

Participants referenced how, from a young student's or adolescent's point of view, teachers are often automatically seen as the infallible authority figure in the classroom. This

power dynamic between student and teacher inherent in schools may make students hesitant to take risks or be vulnerable in their writing or work. Teachers noted that they needed to be vulnerable in discussing their own life experiences to help humanize them, as well as a model for students on how to approach and discuss their experiences. Participant E felt that "you really can't teach somebody that you don't know. Letting them know who you are, what matters to you, and getting to know them and what matters to them is important."

Participant H notes how she brings her own life experiences into the classroom, and how she uses things she has written as examples for the class to investigate and critique. In addition to modeling the process of analyzing and critiquing work, by using things that she has created herself, she is modeling how one can be vulnerable, accept critique, and the resiliency of not taking constructive criticism personally:

> *I create [a piece of writing] on my own, and then we kind of talk about different things that I've added in there, what they feel that they could improve or change. If I give them a prompt that they have to personally address, I create a piece on my own so that they have something to reference and kind of see how these pieces fall together.*
>
> *I think it does let them open up a little bit more if I do have that example from myself, because then that way they're able to see, "Oh yeah, we can critique my work" and it's not always me being like, "Oh, this is how it needs to be" and give them comments and feedback. But I tell them like any feedback from them, that definitely doesn't hurt my feelings. It's just so that they're able to recognize here, what could we do differently on this?*

By bringing her own examples, life experiences, and written work into the lesson and having students analyze and critique the way she wrote about or reacted to these experiences this

"collaboration helps with social emotional, too, because it does show that kind of back and forth" (Participant H). In addition, it is helpful when teachers explain the rationale behind certain facets of their pedagogy. When teachers intentionally explain why they make certain pedagogical moves, students are more apt to empathize with the teacher and see that the practice comes from a place of authenticity and is not merely a gimmick. Participant K discusses how she is upfront about how her own life experiences influence her teaching practices:

> *But I tell them, "I tell you I love you because that reminds me to love you. And I grew up where I wasn't–I was never told other than my dad. He told me daily, multiple times. But once that divorce happened, that part of my life went away until I was in my thirties. And I don't know if that's you. So I tell you, I love you in case you need it."*

Throughout the interviews, four participants mentioned the importance of authenticity, and that students can tell when a teacher is not being authentic with their words or actions. Trust between students and teachers is built when both parties know that the other is being genuine, and conversely, distrust is created when there is a lack of authenticity. When Participant E is unsure of a particular course of action or how to best advise a student, she is honest with them, and she tells them, "this is a situation that I'm really not sure what you should do. I just know that something needs to be done." She is also upfront about what she thinks the best next steps would be in a given situation:

> *I tell them, counselors are professionals. This is what they have been trained in. So that's the first line. And if Admin needs to get involved, it would come to that. So I always use the counselors as my first bounce-off. So I just try to be honest with kids. I think that, you know how we raise mine, I think kids know when you're not being honest. And I think that's what's detrimental in a relationship if you try to either just whitewash their*

feelings, give them these rote answers like, you know. Oh, you'll be fine. You know, brighter days are coming, etc.. Kids know. I often cried with the kids. I'm just kind of like that. So when they're telling me stuff that's happening, I usually end up just crying along with them.

As Participant E "usually end[s] up just crying along with" the students, sometimes the students do not need someone to fix anything, but they just want someone to empathize with their experience and sit with them in their emotions. Participant D also believes that a foundation of trust is required between a student and teacher before that student will feel comfortable to ask for help. Intertwined with this is the importance of helping a student understand that when they have challenges, they do not need to face these challenges alone. Participant D recounts a time when a student told him that she was self-harming and how he navigated this situation:

This is like if the student is telling me, they trust me, right? So I always tell the students . . . resilience is great, like overcoming challenges. However, there are challenges that you can't overcome by yourself, and you're going to need help. And it's okay to ask for help. It's totally okay. Like it's very difficult at times for everyone to ask for help. And, you know, it's okay to ask for help and it's okay to go to an adult you trust on campus, whether it be your teacher, your counselor, you know, someone, vice principal, whatever. It's okay to do that.

And I think we should be okay, you know, to listen. And if we don't know what to do, that's fine, right? Because we have other people that can help us on campus. So yeah, I mean, I do want to lean into it. I do not want to not shirk it off, you know? At times it does make me feel uncomfortable. Like the cutting thing, like, I freaked out. Like, that

wasn't the best reaction. I think they knew that I cared about them. I don't want to turn a student away. If they need help, I'm not going to deny them help.

Students ask for help in a variety of ways, but "number one, they're not going to reach out until they're comfortable and feel safe" (Participant K). Participant K further discusses how a mutual foundation of trust, respect, and empathy is required for both the teacher and student to be vulnerable in sharing their own stories:

I tell them the same thing, though. They love my stories and I tell them, "When I feel safe with you, when I feel you're not gonna laugh at me, when I feel you're not going to judge me for what you don't know or haven't experienced yet, I will. It allows me the freedom to tell you more so that maybe you can learn through some of my experiences, and maybe learn about others."

In discussing her thoughts regarding the relationship between students and teachers, and the relationship between ELA and SEL, Participant A comments that

ELA is a great way to incorporate SEL. Don't be afraid to get to know your students. They are amazing beings, and we're so lucky. You know, adolescence is a tender age. They're going through a lot. A lot. And sometimes, maybe they're too scared to ask their parents or talk to their parents about it. So, we're here.

Summary. ELA provides fertile ground for students to explore and learn how to articulate their lived experiences, their emotions, and the kinds of situations they grapple with daily. However, before students feel comfortable expressing their true selves, a foundation of trust, compassion, and empathy must first be fostered. Participants discussed various ways to build this trust through empathetic listening, restorative justice practices, listening and responding to students with warmth and authenticity, and being vulnerable themselves. When

teachers are in a position where responding to students' situations is beyond their level of expertise, it is important to be upfront with the students regarding the best steps for further action in order to get students the assistance they need.

Theme 3: A strong counseling team supports teachers.

Theme 1 focused on how SEL is a naturally woven component of ELA instruction, and that students are more likely to engage with the academic content when they can connect with it on an emotional level. Theme 2 identified how powerful trusting and empathetic relationships between teachers and students are, and how this serves as the foundation for any kind of SEL instruction to occur. When students feel comfortable with their teachers and feel connected to the academic content, students may divulge ideas or personal experiences that may raise concern to the teacher. It is in these moments where teachers need to decide if it is best to inform the counselor of the situation so the student can get the assistance they need.

In their individual interviews, all eight participants mentioned that they know their responsibilities as mandatory reporters, and that they feel supported by the counseling team at Lē'ahi Middle School. If a student writes about a concerning topic or brings up something in conversation that either raises concern or is a topic that the ELA teacher is not comfortable discussing, all eight ELA teachers feel that they can always refer students to the counseling team for further assistance.

In accordance with the Hawai'i Multi-Tiered System of Support (HMTSS) guidelines set forth by the Hawai'i State Department of Education's Office of Student Support Services, Lē'ahi Middle School has a variety of school-wide screening processes that check-in weekly and quarterly on the social and emotional wellbeing of students. Participant M outlines how these school-wide processes and protocols work alongside teachers' observations:

There are some students that I'm really connected with that I know feel comfortable enough to be able to share certain things about themselves, some personal, deep things. But I always, no matter what, I always bring it to the attention of the counselor. So not only am I checking in, but the counselor–their counselor is well aware–so they can do a check in. I think a lot helps with our weekly check ins with our counselors.

[It's] better to be safe. Put it through the right channels. Follow protocol. I always try and ask my students if they're comfortable enough to share. But I also let my students know that I have to pass on certain things to another adult.

Participant M feels comfortable with the channels of communication because the school has

different steps to navigate. Easy, clear expectations. If a student comes to you, our counseling team is there, and our admin team. Counselors are constantly on campus giving students this kind of help to begin with. Health and welfare has always been a priority here. So I feel very, very comfortable and not so overwhelmed with cases and incidents. And that's a big help. We have such an incredible staff that is so–they take their responsibility serious and know what to do and how to approach things. And yeah, I feel very comfortable going to our counseling staff and admin to be able to help students that need it the most.

Teachers are upfront with students regarding their due diligence as teachers. Participant E tells her students that their "journals are private so long as it's not something that's breaking the law or endangering someone's life . . . if that is the situation, I will need to talk to the counselor, or you will need to." When students' situations are out of her area of expertise or when they need more intensive help and advice, she does not hesitate to refer them to the counselor.

Participant D reflected on when a student came to him and told him that she had been self-harming, he initially reacted out of shock and surprise, but then was able to reassess the situation and alert the counselor. Upon reflection of this incident, Participant D realized that the student was doing exactly what teachers have encouraged students to do: when they are in need, seek help from an adult. He mentioned to the counselor that the student told

> *me she's cutting and it's probably why she's wearing long, long sleeve shirts all the time. And I guess she wanted to let someone know, and so she told me. So can you please check in with her? I think at the time we were going through a time period where a lot of girls were cutting; they were wearing long sleeved shirts, or they would cut by their ankles.*

Participant D's response also establishes trust with the student because he does what he said he would do and follows up with the appropriate entities. Due to the natural interweaving of academic ELA content and social emotional learning coupled with the trust a student may have with the teacher, sometimes students may write about topics, ideas, or experiences that may raise concern about their safety and wellbeing. Participant A discussed how she feels that it is best to alert the counselors to check-in on students if they mention anything of concern:

> *You know, at times I'll have to call the counselor and say, "someone wrote this and this and that and you might need to talk to them" because it does open them. Poetry's perfect for focusing on the present moment, right? And when they learn to write their own poetry and express themselves through writing, it's basically a perfect kind of segue to social emotional learning and self-awareness. So to me, poetry is a way to encourage and teach students about articulating their own feelings. Like what is it that they feel? And sometimes when that comes up, things come out in the poetry that I have to inform the counselors about.*

Participant Y discussed that he is always open to being a listening ear to students but is transparent with students about his responsibilities to follow-up and follow through if they raise anything of major concern. This tells students that they can trust him, but he still does need to do his due diligence as an educator and notify counselors, especially since they are trained in this area. Participant Y notes that he does not want to lie to the students or give them the wrong advice, so whenever students broach topics he does not feel comfortable navigating, he knows he can always look to the counseling team for support.

Similar to Participant Y, when Participant S encountered situations with students that brought forth conversations in which she did not feel comfortable advising the student, she told the student that she would notify the counselor to help build the student's support group. She notes how receptive and proactive the counselors are at checking in with the students and helping to provide them with support:

> *When I kind of feel myself kind of stuttering through the conversation of how to navigate it with them, I usually just let the student know, "I'm going to relay this information to the counselor. I hope that's okay with you, because we're just trying to build your support group here, because the more that they know, if you're feeling a certain way, they already have that information and they have a starting point to kind of talk to you."*
>
> *And for the most part, the students have been really open to that. I think they just want to know that there's people in their corner. And the counselors have been really great about providing follow-up and just check-ins. Not even like anything serious. They come to my office, they kind of just tend to watch out for them at recess and lunch before school, after school. And they just do these kind of nonchalant check-ins with them just to see if they can start a conversation. So that's been really helpful.*

Summary. The ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School feel confident in and supported by the school’s counseling team and refer students to the counselors when they bring up topics of concern and when teachers feel uncomfortable or not informed enough to give advice to a student about a particular situation. As evidenced in Theme 2, the foundation required for students to feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts, emotions, and experiences is the trusting relationship they have with their teachers.

Theme 4: SEL instruction has become more intentional.

Participants mentioned in both their individual interviews and the focus group that although Lē‘ahi Middle School as a whole was moving toward making SEL an intentional part of the school culture before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic and discussions about how to best serve and help students accelerated this process of operationalizing intentional SEL practices in class. Participant D observed that

> *the school in general has always tried to foster that feeling of connectedness–connection to peers, connection to teachers, connection to adults on campus, connection to community. The pandemic may have made it more to the forefront, but I don't think we would have been in a vastly different place if there were no pandemic.*

Participant M acknowledges Participant D’s observation and adds that students have become more comfortable with discussing mental health topics. She comments that they are

> *getting used to having that as a topic of discussion and making sure that it's kind of like common articulation and common words that we use–even down to emojis–using those to kind of express our feelings. I think they are becoming more comfortable with the frequency, the amount of times that we talk about it, the weekly or biweekly check ins. I think it's just becoming part of their everyday school life, too. And I think, while some*

students are still shy and reserved or maybe private about certain things, I think as a whole, I think even as adults we're used to talking and getting used to sharing more about how we're feeling, too. And I think that in turn helps them feel a little bit more comfortable sharing out as well.

Participant E adds that in a conversation with her son, she realized that on a larger scale–beyond the walls of just the school–a slow culture shift is happening with regards to the perception of mental health and how it is now becoming the norm. She mentions that "therapy is no longer this taboo word" and that it's "understanding we all need–what people in the past call therapy–is something we all need in relationships." She discusses how people are beginning to understand mental health more, and in post-pandemic times, she doesn't feel "the world will ever be the same in many, many zones, but especially in the SEL zone. I think we're all learning. I'm learning."

During the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were required to learn from home, brought back to in-person school in small cohorts, and required to physically distance themselves six feet apart, Participant S comments on how much students missed their community of supporters–both peers and adults. Much like Participant M's observations, Participant S has witnessed that students are more

open and receptive to having those types of conversations as well as being more willing to share what's going on on their end rather than just saying, "Oh, nothing, I'm fine." And so I think, like what [Participant M] was saying with that consistency that our school has, I think that's also helping to get the kids back into the mode of "let's talk about this" rather than be passive about it.

Participant H noticed more of a significant shift in the school's focus on SEL and remarks how this shift has not only impacted students, but teachers as well:

> *I think for me, the pandemic has definitely influenced social emotional learning in the classroom, and I think what we are seeing is maybe the beginning of a culture shift, whereas before we were focused on solely work, whereas now it's more like the whole individual. So being able to recognize and really check in with yourself and where you're at and how you're doing. And I think that mental health, even for us as teachers, isn't maybe something we've thought about much before the pandemic. And I mean, even now, it just feels like there's a lot going on, too. But looking at students and their perception of SEL, I think it will just become more commonplace for them to be able to have those self-check-ins and then be able to maybe advocate for themselves and what they would need and support.*

In reflecting on her own teaching practice, Participant K highlights how students struggled to cope with the myriad of challenges the pandemic caused and exacerbated. She discussed her own life challenges on an individual and global scale, and how these experiences inform her intentional approach to SEL both pre- and post-pandemic:

> *SEL is my life. If I can just save one person. But I feel I end up saving a lot. And since COVID and Generation Z where COVID is their war. I mean, I lived through the Civil Rights [Movement]. I lived through Vietnam. I lived through Stormin' Norman, you know, Desert Storm. I lived through many different things. And then the memories of my parents in World War Two, Korea. I lived through so many things in depressions, recessions, and stock market crashes. I lived through it all.*

COVID is their only . . . because their world has not been challenged or shaken up until then. I had maybe four girls and a couple of guys at different times ending up at the psych ward and Queen's Hospital. It's because they've never they don't know how to deal with these restrictions, and there's no resiliency and there's no grit and there's no stick-with-it. There really isn't–you crumble if somebody looks at you wrong. You get a grade that you wish was something different; they just fell apart. So I try to embed, always. SEL is a huge part of my curriculum. It's needed now more than ever–for different reasons.

SEL is a learned and practiced skill that was truly tested by the COVID-19 pandemic, and after observing one of Participant K's lessons as a part of Lē'ahi Middle School's peer walk-through protocol, Participant E realized how she wanted to be more intentional with embedding SEL opportunities in her ELA class:

I'm more intentional about it than I was. I used to just be like, get the work done, get the work done. But so it's definitely made me think a little bit more about kindness and inclusivity and opening the space for it. Not that I wasn't, but I need to open a space for it and provide kids opportunity to talk to the ones they may never talk to. Or ones that may never feel comfortable in the space, maybe to find a space in the homeroom or class where they would feel comfortable.

In thinking about her own journey toward weaving SEL into her ELA instruction prior to teaching at Lē'ahi Middle School, Participant S recognized a shift in the focus of her lessons when SEL became more of a topic of discussion at the faculty level. Her administration wanted to start promoting SEL so that students would feel safe and welcome at school, rather than wandering around the community. They wanted students to know that adults cared about them at

school, and there was a conscious, intentional effort to do so. She adds that "when we made that transition, it wasn't anything that was strenuous or anything that felt really taxing because we realized we already had a lot of the pieces there." In moving forward with SEL implementation, they took their existing curriculum, novel studies, and assignments and made a deliberate effort to make SEL connections when possible. She outlines her journey:

> *And curriculum wise, I would say in the beginning it totally wasn't intentional to have this many SEL tie-ins to all of the lessons. Where I was teaching, it was more to engage the students and just help them with overall comprehension of what was happening in those books . . . And I think over time, with more discussions about SEL and the importance of teaching the students SEL, I think that's when the lessons changed a little bit. Focus was a little different and I think a SEL became a little more prominent in some of those lessons. Not always an easy thing to do as some of the books, you know, it's just you can't. But, yeah, I think my teaching partner and I had more of a focus into making that effort to do so compared to when we had first started.*

Participant S also discusses how their starting point is "trying to build that foundation of a safe place. This is people that you can talk to, not just about school, but about other things that are bothering you or that you're dealing with."

On multiple occasions, Participant E mentions being "thoroughly motivated and challenged to include more as a regular routine of just offering spaces" to help students process both emotional and academic topics. She recognized how fast-paced a student's day can be and that

> *the day goes by, so full and so busy. They don't have time to just check in with each other. And sometimes more so than checking with the teacher, it's us giving them a space, a safe*

space, whether it's through their journal or the small group discussions or whatever, where they feel that they have a space to kind of say, "I'm not doing so great."

In addition to being more mindful of the kinds of opportunities she was building into her lessons and the kind of classroom culture she was fostering, she recalls a time when a student was transitioning between genders. She remembers how she needed to be very intentional with her word choice, the way she approached certain topics, and the kind of classroom climate that would be most inclusive of this student:

I had a student this year who is trans, transgender-ing. Like in the middle. Started the process in 6th grade and like officially we're transitioning [this year]. They were in my homeroom as well as in my ELA class. A lot of constant awareness: Words I spoke, atmosphere in the class, how to approach certain subject matters that we were teaching or arguing about or debating about or discussing. Sensors are always on, right? Just caring about people. A young person. Any child of any age is capable of having the same emotions. You understand, like, that mutual respect. I oftentimes come across teachers who don't respect that in the youngster, and they just think they should be told that they should fit into the box that you've created. And I don't think that.

Summary. Although participants observed that Lē‘ahi Middle School has tried to lead with SEL in mind for many years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic accelerated the discussions among faculty to make SEL more intentional in the classroom environment. Six out of the eight participants mentioned that they have not only become more intentional in weaving in SEL opportunities in the classroom, but they have been having more SEL-focused discussions with students on an individual basis, too. Teachers have observed that generally, students are more comfortable discussing mental health and have the vocabulary to do so. When

teachers have created a classroom climate in which students feel safe, some students may share or discuss contemporary topics that teachers are unsure how to navigate. Teachers want to be able to help students and continue these conversations in sensitive and empathetic ways, and they feel that more training would help them do so.

Theme 5: ELA teachers expressed interest in more training on contemporary issues and topics (e.g., LGBTQIA+) for students and families.

According to the interviews, focus group, and survey, 100% of the participants felt comfortable in embedding social emotional learning in their English language arts classroom and they feel supported by the counseling team when students need more in-depth assistance. They feel that protocols are in place to assess and address students' wellbeing and to follow up with them as needed. When students raise ideas or issues of concern, participants feel confident in working with students to investigate further, and when the topics are beyond the participant's area of expertise or comfort level, they are confident in the systems of support currently available at Lē'ahi Middle School.

When asked about potential resources they would want to help support students' social emotional learning, Participant S in particular, discussed how she wanted more resources on how to help students navigate more contemporary issues like gender identity, pronoun usage, and relationship choices. Participant S describes her uneasiness in discussing these topics with students:

> *I think that's where things get a little more uncomfortable for me because especially with . . . the parents. And I mean, I completely understand they're not as open, I think, to finding out when students make certain choices and, I know on their end, it's tough to process those things, I think. Because even for our parents . . . there's tons of information,*

but it's all in how much you're going to go dig into it and research it. It's not like they have classes for parents everywhere and people have time to go to these seminars and things.

So I would say that's the area that I'm more uncomfortable with because I don't want to say something to the student and then it goes back home to their parent, "Well, [Participant S] said that this, this, and this." But, I think even just talking to the student, too, I have a harder time when they share those things, because on our end there hasn't been that much training. We've had very little. But I think that's our state where we tend to be behind in those types of topics compared to the Mainland where say, the pronoun topic has been at the forefront when we haven't really spoken about it at all here.

Because when I do summers at [private school], they were on us about those things as a private school. But yet when I come back to the public school setting, we're not talking about that at all, just very minimally. So I would say just the more recent issues, that's where my uneasiness is. But all of the previous things like dealing with friends or bullies; I'm comfortable with handling those things.

When asked more about her perception on what conversations were happening at the private school at which she taught summer school that were not necessarily happening at the public schools, she said that the teachers and administrators at the private school

were really pushing for students to just know who they are and be proud of who they are. And so they wanted the students to be able to openly tell people, "These are my pronouns." But with most of their staff coming from [other] private schools or from [current private school], they didn't really provide training. They kind of had a

conversation with us, but it was more assumed that you understood those things, knew how to talk about it.

And so they brought in a couple of trainers. We did a couple of seminars in those opening days. But my [public school] coworker and I . . . had to do a lot of research on our end as far as how to teach that to students who are coming in from the public schools because they're going there on scholarship for the summer for the [private school subsidized summer school] program. And for us, we talked about it. We're like, this is so out of our comfort zone because we've never been officially trained or had training for long enough to feel confident in teaching this to students.

But just hearing the conversations between the faculty and just the expectations from the administrators at the private sector, you can tell that, you know, these are things they've talked about. These are things they've had multiple trainings on throughout the year. And they have a vision and mission for where they want to go with that topic, but very different from here [in the public schools]. Not to say that there's anything wrong with that, but I don't think that's at our forefront right now. We know it's a topic that we need to talk about, but it doesn't really feel like that same, I guess immediate agenda item. It doesn't have the same feeling in the public sector.

When asked what the priority of public schools is within SEL, Participant S felt that public schools are "trying to build that foundation of . . . a safe place. This is people that you can talk to, not just about school but about other things that are bothering you or that you're dealing with" and that this is an important first step because "we can't really get anywhere if the students aren't willing to open up." She observes that the kind of support students are given from teachers is "more ground level support, rather than diving into a specific topic with them yet."

As students begin to open up to teachers and each other, Participant H would like more student-to-student support to help students feel they're not alone in their struggle, and they can lean on and empathize with another student going through a similar situation. The impact of another student's advice can carry a different kind of weight and meaning. She explains:

> *I think if students had more student-to-student support that way it might be beneficial where it's like, "Hey, I'm not the only one going through this. There's, you know, other people who have been there or who are currently going through the same thing," so that they can discuss. Because I think for us as teachers, our best ideas sometimes come from other teachers, and then we tweak and we figure out what works for us.*
>
> *But I think for them, even though we have group work, it's more academic versus social. So like if they had, I think more student groupings that . . . were more . . . homogeneous, where we have like these students kind of going through a divorce in the family or whatever it is, then they might have . . .*
>
> *I guess they know that I feel a certain way and so do like these other people. And the feelings that I have aren't necessarily wrong. They're just what I'm feeling in the moment, and here's some things that people, other kids have done to work through it.*
>
> *Because I think it's hard for us to tell them, "Oh, you should be–you could be doing these things, you know, like writing in a journal all like reading, doing all this other stuff." I think at the grade level we're at, it's more like what their peers are doing. So kind of understanding, okay, so and so–especially if they respect them–has done this. So maybe that's something that could work for me, too.*
>
> *So I think if we had those kind of groups, I don't know if it would help or not. But for me personally, I think it does help to hear other people's stories and then kind of, you*

know, understand that it's not just me; there's others, too. And to get that kind of more personal advice.

Participant H also juxtaposes her idea of small-group peer-to-peer support against the currently purchased and implemented SEL program, Second Step. Second Step is "a first-of-its-kind social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that's modern, web-based, and responsive to the needs of today's students and educators. It's underpinned by the latest research in adolescent brain development and social psychology" (Second Step, 2023). Homeroom teachers use this online program with embedded videos and prompts to guide students through a series of social-emotional learning topics each week. In addition to the Second Step program, counselors and other Lē'ahi Middle School support staff create "advisory videos" to supplement the Second Step program's lessons. The Second Step lessons are usually facilitated through whole-class, group, or pair discussion in homeroom, and "to address, you know, like 24 different students with 24 different backgrounds, it's a little bit hard with those Second Step things" (Participant H).

Participant H mentions how the culture of homeroom can feel different than the culture of an academic class, which can feel different than a smaller peer mentoring group.

I think with the programs we have, it's hard because a lot of times students fight it and they might not necessarily be in a safe space to be like, "Oh, hey, this is going on in my life." Some of them share one-on-one with us. But, you know, to have to share in front of 24 other people who–some you barely know or you've just seen–is kind of . . . I can understand it's uncomfortable because I wouldn't want to be sharing my whole life in front of the faculty. So I think if our school had SEL like a little bit more like [small group

student-to-student support], it might help the students a little more than all the advisory stuff.

To see how other teachers incorporate a variety of strategies around ELA, SEL, classroom management, student interactions, etc. into their pedagogy and classroom environment, Participant D wants to have more "time to have professional conversations." He recognizes that "we all have different teaching styles, different perspectives, and we all have different things that we teach, but I'm always looking for things that I can do" to help students further.

Summary. All participants felt comfortable embedding SEL in their ELA classrooms, and they feel supported by the school's counseling team when extra support is needed. The participants highlighted that they would appreciate more resources and training on how to navigate contemporary discussions like gender identity, pronoun usage, and LGBTQIA+ relationships. Additional training is desired regarding how to have these discussions with both students and their families. Participant H noted how she thinks student-to-student mentorship would help students going through similar life challenges, and Participant D would like to have more time to have professional conversations with his colleagues to share resources, ideas, and troubleshoot challenges.

Challenges and Pedagogical Adjustments

In the quantitative data gathered from the electronic survey, across all six questions, four of the six participants had a favorable disposition toward SEL and its interconnectedness within the ELA curriculum. Two of the participants had neutral dispositions which will be explained further in this section. All participants felt comfortable and supported in embedding SEL learning opportunities into their ELA curriculum. However, in the open-ended question of the

survey, Participants S and H mentioned the pressure of being a highly tested subject area. Participant S mentioned that although she feels SEL is important,

> *being a core subject area, my goal is to focus on the content standards. I try to find a balance between content and social emotional learning but the topics of social emotional learning don't always tie into the content, and I want to make sure that I provide my students with enough instruction on the course content for them to be successful.*

In addition, Participant H emphasized a similar kind of pressure due to ELA being a state-tested content area. However, Participant H also mentioned that

> *there are a lot of opportunities that can be included to compliment student learning. Being intentional with the way SEL is implemented is important since learning should be a purposeful journey and that's something that I'll continue to focus on. As a teacher I'm always changing things so learning more about SEL strategies that fit well with my curriculum is something that I'll continue to do. I've been teaching for 11 years and I still haven't reached a point where I can say that I'll just teach the exact same things next year. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable to know that what I created this year might not be used next year, however it speaks to the role of the teacher and the need to be adaptable to both students and the time.*

When comparing the results of the Likert scale survey and the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and focus group, Participants S and H answered "neither agree nor disagree," despite providing very positive and powerful anecdotes during the interviews and focus group. Both Participants S and H answered "neither agree nor disagree" to the statement "I feel that social emotional learning pairs naturally with the English Language Arts content area." Participant H answered "neither agree nor disagree" to the statement, "I feel comfortable and

confident in helping students process their emotions," and Participant S answered "neither agree nor disagree" to the statement, "When planning my ELA lessons, I intentionally build in learning opportunities that focus on or relate to social emotional learning."

Alongside these responses in the electronic survey, the same two participants noted the pressure they feel as teachers of a state tested subject area, as they feel a sense of urgency to cover all of the Common Core State Standards for their respective grade levels. They note that although there are many ways in which SEL can be woven into the ELA curriculum, sometimes certain state standards do not have natural SEL tie-ins. In the interviews and focus group, many of the moments the participants discussed regarding SEL in their ELA class were situated in Quarter 2–the ten-week period during which teachers facilitate a whole-class novel study, or in Quarter 1–the ten-week period during which students write a personal or fictional narrative. At Lē'ahi Middle School, Quarter 3 focuses on argumentative writing, and Quarter 4 focuses on Shakespeare or poetry.

Upon following up with Participant S regarding her response of "neither agree nor disagree," she further explains:

> *SEL is something that can be paired with the ELA curriculum, but it is not something that I go out of my way to include in my daily instruction. For example, in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2, we cover personal narratives and read the book, "Restart." Both of those activities involve talking about some of the SEL topics, but my intent with instruction is not to cover those topics; it is to make sure that I'm providing instruction that supports the students' understanding and ability to meet the CCSS.*
>
> *I do agree that there can be connections between SEL and ELA activities. However, the lessons that do have SEL components are not designed to specifically work*

on SEL. The lessons are based on supporting the students' understanding of the CCSS and may have components that touch upon SEL topics. These pairings between SEL and ELA do not happen on a daily or a consistent basis, so that is why I had chosen neutral as my answer. I do build in SEL topics when I can, but I wasn't sure about the time frame that the question was referring to.

Similar to Participant S, upon follow-up clarification with Participant H regarding her response of "neither agree nor disagree," she explains:

SEL can be used within the ELA curriculum, however it's not something that I'm actively looking to include. It's one of those "if it works, it works" kind of thing. For example, with informational text quarters, it would be more difficult to include than a quarter with literature. I think in the group session I also mentioned that I have used it to explore positive character traits to make connections to characters/themes, but ultimately my focus would be on building students' proficiency in meeting the CCSS that I would use to assess their final project. I feel that although it can pair, the times I would use SEL would be selective and it wouldn't be something I can honestly say I use every quarter so that's why I chose neutral. It's still relatively new to me, so as I'm learning, it might change to being easier to implement with informative texts.

With regard to the Likert Scale statement, "I feel comfortable and confident in helping students process their emotions," Participant H says she would have agreed if the statement were rephrased as "I feel comfortable encouraging students to connect their experiences to the curriculum." Regarding the statement as it was originally worded, she felt that it

applied more to counselors in the "ability to process emotions" part. I know that ELA can be an outlet for emotions since it engages writing and sometimes personal experiences,

but any time I have read something that hints at trauma, I have asked the student about what they wrote/created and alerted the counselor for guidance on any steps that should be taken. I guess it would be the difference between guiding someone who is having a bad day versus dealing with heavier issues. A bad day I can do, but if a student were dealing with parental problems or self-harm (for example), I would encourage them to see the counselor, hence my neutral stance.

Participants S and H noted that although SEL can be woven into the ELA curriculum, because their main objective is to support students' understanding of the ELA Common Core State Standards, sometimes they are unable to weave SEL into each lesson throughout the year. In a conversation with Participant S, she mentioned how she does try to choose topics for informational and argumentative writing based on students' interests such as the length of a school day or school start times, school e-sports teams, homework requirements, mandatory school uniforms, etc. (Participant S, personal communication, January 10, 2023). This connects with Subtheme 1 of this study, that the basis of SEL is connection, and connection leads to engagement. This study focused solely on the implementation of the interweaving of SEL into the ELA curriculum, and Participant K comments on how students might benefit if SEL was embedded into curriculums across a variety of disciplines, and not just in ELA:

I feel that all students would benefit greatly if their teachers (not just ELA) embedded SEL into their curriculum; and, if teachers were intrinsically motivated to do so on their own as part of their professional practice–not just mandated by the administration to implement an SEL program.

Lastly, Participant Y finds it challenging to adapt and adjust his pedagogy to suit the different needs of his students each year. He mentions that

I want students to be able to be more comfortable with expressing themselves in a safer environment. I'm still trying to figure out a better way to exhibit amongst my students because every year the students' personalities change so I need to be able to adjust accordingly.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the eight semi-structured interviews, one focus group, and one electronically administered survey conducted with eight English Language Arts teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School. The first section presented a summary of the participants’ professional background, their definitions of social emotional learning, and a summary of my coding process. The next section presented the data organized by theme to answer the research questions outlined in this study. Based on the interviews and focus group, 100% of teachers see the value in weaving in SEL in the ELA classroom, though two participants specifically mentioned that some units and forms of writing lend themselves more naturally to SEL than others. Although methods varied by teacher, all eight teachers discussed how they try to make the topics of study relatable and relevant to students’ lives, and starting with students’ identity, interests, and experiences was a natural way to do so. 50% of participants have their students journal throughout the year on a regular basis, and 75% of participants have become more intentional in their approach toward embedding SEL in the ELA classroom when possible. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of the study and will present implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Implications

This study explored teachers' perceptions on social emotional learning in the English Language Arts classroom. Chapter 5 restates the research questions, reviews the methods used, and summarizes and discusses the findings associated with this study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The data gathered show that the ELA teachers at Lē'ahi Middle School believe that SEL is a naturally woven component of the ELA class curriculum, as integrated SEL helps to engage students academically and emotionally by helping them make connections to their own lives. In addition, to cultivate a space for students to feel comfortable and brave enough to articulate their own experiences and share their thoughts, a classroom climate of compassion, trust, and empathy is foundational. When students feel safe enough to share their thoughts, students may mention topics that may raise concern from teachers. Teachers feel comfortable listening to students and helping them navigate the majority of topics students discuss. However, when topics of concern arise or when teachers do not know how to appropriately respond to students, the participants described how the counseling team at Lē'ahi Middle School is supportive and proactive in providing students with assistance. The data also showed that although Lē'ahi Middle School has "always tried to foster that feeling of connectedness," participants commented that they as individual teachers are becoming more intentional in SEL instruction post-COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, ELA teachers expressed interest in more training on contemporary issues and topics (e.g., LGBTQIA+) so they can feel more comfortable and confident in discussing these subjects with students and families.

Discussion

How do ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?

The participants of this study acknowledge the importance of SEL and each have a personalized understanding of what SEL is and how it can be woven within ELA instruction. Despite research asserting that the American education system has neglected to emphasize the importance of students' mental and emotional health education (Herrera, 2020, p. 4), the results of this study show that ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School do place an emphasis on weaving SEL into their curriculum. Teachers understand how SEL is multifaceted (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021) and requires a multitude of stakeholders to help students be successful in and out of the ELA classroom.

The findings complement existing research that show how reading and analyzing literature naturally pairs with social emotional learning (Bateman, 2012), as teachers also note that students tend to engage with academic content when they can relate to it on an emotional or experiential level. Many of the teachers discussed how SEL can also be used to help students understand more complex texts, by helping them utilize their own background knowledge to make connections to their lives. The findings are consistent with that of Storey (2019) who asserts that embedding SEL into the ELA curriculum "would cover the same technical elements [of ELA] but use a SEL perspective to consider the material" and that "ELA is predisposed to the integration of SEL because curriculum content and assessment methods align with SEL outcomes" (p. 124).

Teachers also used literature as catalysts or experiences of analysis to teach larger life lessons or to help students feel that their experiences are not as isolated as they might feel

(Storey, 2019). Participants mentioned specific novels like *Walk Two Moons*, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963*, and *Tangerine*, that contained characters who experienced life events that students could relate to. Participant R mentions that in *Walk Two Moons*, students could relate to family members being stuck in another country and not being able to live with them, or the feeling of their family not being whole. Although *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963* is a novel set in a historical context that students are not too familiar with, students could relate to the rivalries between racial groups and gangs, and the kinds of racial profiling they feel when they walk through their own communities in Hawai‘i. Participants discussed how these novels sparked lively and rich discussion from students as they shared how their own experiences align with the experiences of some of the characters.

In agreement with previous research, the participants believe that the ELA curriculum can be a place for healing (Medley, 2012), can help students empathize with a character's experiences while processing their own (de Leon, 2017; Hébert & Kent, 2000), and help process previous trauma (Yoder, 2005). Similar to the thoughts of the participants, Hébert and Kent's (2000) study found that bibliotherapy, "an attempt to help young people understand themselves and cope with problems by providing literature relevant to their personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times," was an effective way for students to understand their own experiences through the analysis of a character's situation.

Hébert and Kent (2000) also mention that "teenage readers may feel relief that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem. The reader learns vicariously how to solve some of the problems upon reflecting how the characters in the book solved their problem" which can help students navigate through the challenges in their own lives. When participants talked about their experiences discussing novels like *Walk Two Moons*, *Tangerine*, and *The Watsons Go to*

Birmingham–1963 with students in class, they noted how students were able to see how characters understood, unpacked, and navigated the various challenges that were presented in the novel. Students connected with issues of loss, racial profiling, and bullying, among many others, and in addition to empathizing, they were able to see how the character worked through the issue.

It was not a surprise to see how previous literature (Hanobeck, 2022; Noddings, 2012; Santos, 2022) and this study showed that having healthy, honest, trusting, and compassionate relationships between student and teacher is important in successfully integrating SEL into the classroom learning environment. Teachers understand how having a reflective understanding of themselves, an understanding of their learners, and knowledge of SEL activities (Hanobeck, 2022; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Santos, 2022) are important in creating student-teacher relationships of care (Noddings, 2012). Across the eight interviews and one focus group, the word "relationships" was used 37 times in reference to student-teacher connection and interaction which indicate its importance to the participants and suggest how fundamental this kind of student-teacher interconnection is.

It is evident that all participants truly care about their students and seek to address both the expressed and assumed needs of the students (Noddings, 2012). All teachers mentioned at least one story about how a student began to open up to them through their work or in ELA discussions and how the teacher worked with that student to address and assist the student in their individual situation.

The literature previously cited in this paper regarding supplementary third-party SEL programs supported the opinions of three participants of this study, articulating that although the SEL program can be well-intentioned, the SEL skills of focus can feel as though they are being

taught in a vacuum, rather situated in a larger context (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Storey, 2019). These participants discussed how the third-party SEL program implemented at Lē‘ahi Middle School is facilitated through homerooms, which does not necessarily provide the same kind of space for students to be vulnerable. Although homerooms do meet each day and participate in activities together, it seems that students are less likely to be vulnerable and candid in discussing their emotions and honest feelings in this setting. Fitzpatrick (2020) suggested that a particular SEL intervention curriculum had mixed success of implementation fidelity due to teachers' time constraints and lack of mental health training. While the participants in my study did not address the fidelity of the implementation of the Second Step program, multiple participants mentioned the difficulties they face due to the different classroom climate in homeroom as opposed to the ELA classroom where a climate of vulnerability and trust is already built through SEL embedded within the ELA context.

All eight ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School seem to have adequate knowledge and comfort in incorporating SEL into their classroom and addressing any of the issues that may arise out of it. Although always learning and adjusting as their students change, the participants seem to be comfortable with their pedagogy and have a clear understanding of the protocols and supports in place to assist students in need.

Participants felt supported by the counseling team at Lē‘ahi Middle School which may help alleviate some of the pressure to have all the correct answers or know how to navigate each situation. Participants articulated how they listen to and work with students, and in the instances where the participants do not know how to respond to students' concerns, they gently refer students to the counselors who have specific training and expertise. All six of the participants

who took the survey indicated that they feel supported or strongly feel supported by administration and counselors when they have concerns about students' wellbeing.

What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?

As evidenced by the interviews, focus group, and survey, teachers feel supported by their administration and counselors when they have concerns about students' wellbeing, and they can see that the school as a whole is moving toward making SEL an intentional part of the school culture. Participants did not particularly discuss a need for more support in integrating SEL in their ELA classroom, but they did share specific additional school-wide support they feel would benefit students' SEL.

Participant S shared that more resources on how to help students and their families navigate contemporary topics like gender identity (LGBTQIA+), pronoun usage, and relationship choices would be helpful, as she does not currently feel well-versed in these topics in particular. Research validates Participant S' experiences, as many educators do not feel equipped to discuss LGBTQIA+ topics, especially in relation to bullying (Meyer, 2008; Zack et al., 2010). Schools whose personnel have had training in sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) experience a more positive school climate, and personnel feel more empowered to discuss SOGI topics and intervene in gender/sexuality-based harassment situations (Greytak et al., 2013; Ioverno et al., 2022). School administrative support for SOGI training may reduce victimization of LGBTQIA+ students and can shift the discussion from one's personal beliefs, to a discussion of overall student well-being (Ioverno et al., 2022). Not only can SOGI training help teachers understand LGBTQIA+ issues and its associated vocabulary, but it can also help promote a more positive school climate for all students (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010).

Participant H would like to see the school build more student-to-student support systems to help students who share similar struggles connect with each other over a shared experience to mutually grow and empathize with each other. The American School Counselor Association (2021) defines peer support programs as "peer-to-peer interaction in which individuals who are of approximately the same age take on a helping role, assisting students who may share related values, experiences and lifestyles." The importance of school-based peer support has been shown (Douglas et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2009) and advocated for (Waite, 2021a) in schools as it "brings individuals with similar experiences, particularly in mental health, together to provide mutual acceptance, understanding and validation along with typically a peer leader or peer support specialist providing help navigating resources and systems" (McKinney et al., 2022). A variety of peer-to-peer mentoring programs exist globally that are built around specific areas of focus like mental health, fostering a college-going mentality, academic tutoring, etc. (Waite, 2021). However, the majority of research has focused on older students mentoring younger students, as opposed to students within the same grade level or immediate age range working through similar and shared challenges together as a support group. The way student-to-student mentorship and support systems can take shape depends on the school culture and the intended purpose of these partnerships.

Finally, Participant D feels that more time for professional conversations with colleagues from a variety of subject areas (Math, Science, Social Studies, Hawaiiana, Performing Arts, Graphic Arts, Physical Education, Career and Technical Education, Digital Media, etc.) would be beneficial to help students further. He is interested in learning from his colleagues about how they have navigated certain situations or how they approach teaching SEL from varied perspectives and modalities. Hanobeck (2022) suggests that additional training and professional

development may help teachers "progress through a demanding curriculum yet provide opportunities to teach and reinforce SEL skills" to assist in embedding SEL throughout the year-long curriculum. Faculty-wide conversations with colleagues from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and expertise alongside professional development may help provide nuanced perspectives on how to incorporate SEL in a multiplicity of ways across contexts.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Although the entire population of eight ELA teachers at Lē'ahi Middle School were interviewed, students, counselors, school-based behavioral health specialists, administrators, community members, students' family members, and other non-ELA teachers did not participate in this study. Teachers were able to tell their perspective of SEL integration in the ELA classroom, but students' perspectives were not solicited. No physical artifacts or direct observational data were collected; therefore, this study's results were based on the participants' own recollection of events.

An additional limitation to be considered is my professional relationship to the participants, as mentioned in my positionality statement in Chapter 3. The interviews and focus groups were conducted between my first and second years of teaching at Lē'ahi Middle School. Although we spent a year at the same school and in the same department together, I did not yet have very strong interpersonal relationships with the participants, which may have influenced the openness and willingness of the participants to discuss certain topics or provide specific examples of SEL in their classroom.

Implications for ELA Teachers

Although students have always needed to navigate a variety of social, emotional, psychological, scholastic, and familial challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these

challenges and highlighted the urgency for social emotional learning in schools (Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020; Branje & Morris, 2021). Results from this study indicate that ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School find that the ELA classroom is an effective environment in which embedding SEL can be organic. Although SEL can work as an engagement technique for students to relate to the academic ELA content, it soon becomes more than purely an engagement tool if teachers create a classroom environment in which compassion, trust, and empathy are foundational. Trusting and genuine student-teacher relationships are paramount and are a prerequisite for students to be vulnerable in their writing and in sharing their emotions and experiences. Teachers should consider exploring how they might approach teaching the majority of ELA curriculum through a SEL-focused lens. Teachers should continue to create and foster brave spaces for students to explore and articulate their experiences and connections to the ELA curriculum.

I have not found studies that disprove or discourage the use of an integrated approach to SEL in the ELA classroom, but research has shown that the time demands of SEL frequently conflict with the ability to address all curriculum, especially the curriculum that is tied to standardized testing (Hanobeck, 2022). Teachers readily acknowledge the importance and relevance of SEL while simultaneously feeling the pressure to cover all Common Core State Standards and prepare students for the state assessments.

Especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL instruction has become more intentional at the school and ELA classroom levels. SEL continues to be a topic of focus as students, teachers, school leaders, and society as a whole begin to better understand how to discuss mental health topics.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that the ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School continue to embed SEL as much as possible in their curriculum. It would be beneficial if all teachers across a variety of disciplines explored how they might organically embed SEL into their curriculum in meaningful and streamlined ways.

Lē‘ahi Middle School may consider addressing the articulated need for resources on how to help teachers, students, and families navigate more contemporary topics of LGBTQIA+, mental health, and modern adolescent relationship dynamics. Among a multitude of other avenues, resources can come in the form of school-wide training, leveraging community and state resources, and encouraging public-private school partnerships. Ongoing conversations with colleagues at the individual school level and complex area level may be helpful to offer nuanced perspectives and practices that teachers can incorporate in their own pedagogy, classrooms, and curriculum.

In addition, Lē‘ahi Middle School may consider building student-to-student support groups in conjunction with teachers and counselors to help students who share similar struggles connect with one another. Especially in adolescence, a time when peers generally have great influence, these student-to-student support groups–possibly facilitated by the counseling team–could help provide a place of safety, understanding, and connection for students who may feel isolated in their experiences. These student-to-student groups could bring together students to identify as LGBTQIA+ or are questioning their sexuality, students whose families are going through divorce, students who are grieving, students who are adjusting to changes in family dynamics, among many other challenging situations adolescents face (McKinney et al., 2022).

Implications for Future Research

The student perspective was not a part of this study, but an investigation into students' perceptions of social emotional learning embedded within the English Language Arts content area would be worthy of study. Additional insight into what kind of SEL support students would like to see at the sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade levels would be valuable, especially since participants indicated that this generation of students are growing up with the vocabulary to discuss mental health and other contemporary topics. Replicating this study in other middle school ELA departments across the State of Hawai‘i would also be important for further study to see how the school culture, ELA department composition, and student demographics may influence the results. In addition, investigating the consistency in perspectives ranging from the feeder elementary schools all the way through to the high school level may be of interest to see how schools within the same complex area can possibly work together to create interscholastic continuity of SEL practice.

Further research may be directed toward perceptions of embedded SEL in other subject areas and the benefits and barriers in doing so. How do teachers of other disciplines perceive their role in embedding SEL in their discipline's curriculum? What further support do those teachers need to more effectively and comfortably embed SEL in their subject area? In addition, it would be worthwhile to explore how an interdisciplinary approach to SEL may affect overall student wellbeing.

Appendix A: Human Studies Program Approval

UNIVERSITY of HAWAI'I® SYSTEM

Office of Research Compliance
Human Studies Program

DATE:	April 04, 2022
TO:	Murata, Nathan, University of Hawaii at Manoa, College of Education Dean's Office Tom, Matthew, University of Hawaii at Manoa, College of Education
FROM:	Rivera, Victoria, Dir, Ofc of Rsch Compliance, Social&Behav Exempt
PROTOCOL TITLE:	Teacher Perceptions on Embedded Social Emotional Learning in the English Language Arts Classroom
FUNDING SOURCE:	None
PROTOCOL NUMBER:	2022-00070
APPROVAL DATE:	April 04, 2022

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

This letter is your record of the Human Studies Program approval of this study as exempt.

On April 04, 2022, the University of Hawaii (UH) Human Studies Program approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the protection of human research participants. The authority for the exemption applicable to your study is documented in the Code of Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46.104(d) 2.

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at the OHRP Website www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html.

Exempt studies do not require regular continuing review by the Human Studies Program. However, if you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from the Human Studies Program prior to implementing any changes. You can submit your proposed changes via the UH eProtocol application. The Human Studies Program may review the exempt status at that time and request an application for approval as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so. Signed consent forms, as applicable to your study, should be maintained for at least the duration of your project.

This approval does not expire. However, please notify the Human Studies Program when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

2425 Campus Road, Sinclair 10
Honolulu, HI 96822
Telephone: (808) 956-5007 • Fax: (808) 956-9150
An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution

Appendix B: Consent Form to Participate in a Research Project

University of Hawai'i
Consent to Participate in a Research Project
Matthew Tom, Student Investigator
Project title: Teacher Perceptions on Embedded Social Emotional Learning in the English Language Arts Classroom

Aloha!
My name is Matthew Tom, and I am a graduate student in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's College of Education EdD Professional Practice program. I am inviting you to take part in a research study. As part of the requirements for earning a doctoral degree, I am conducting a case study on the English Language Arts Department at Lē'ahi Middle School (pseudonym).

What am I being asked to do?
If you participate in this project, I will meet with you for an individual interview and a focus group discussion via WebEx on a date and time convenient for you. A short online survey will also be given to summarize your perspective.

Taking part in this study is your choice.
Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop participation in the study, there will be no penalty or loss to you. Your choice to participate or not participate will not affect your employment in the Hawai'i Department of Education.

In the final write-up of this project, I will use pseudonyms for the school and each participant.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this single-site multiple case study is to describe Lē'ahi Middle School's English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating social emotional learning (SEL) as an organically embedded component of ELA instruction, and to identify any additional supports needed.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?
There are three parts to this research study:

1. The semi-structured interview will be scheduled on a date and time convenient for you and will consist of approximately ten open-ended questions. It will take 45 minutes to an hour. Only you and I will be present in the WebEx room during the interview.

   With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe it and analyze your responses. You will be provided with a transcript of your interview to verify its accuracy and make any necessary adjustments. You will be one of about seven people we will interview for this study.

2. A focus group will be conducted via WebEx on a separate day agreed upon by the participants. With your permission, I will audio-record the focus group so that I can later transcribe it and analyze your responses. You will be provided with a transcript of your interview to verify its accuracy and make any necessary adjustments.

3. An electronic survey (7 multiple choice, 2 open ended questions) will be administered to summarize your perspective.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?
I believe there is little risk to you for participating in this research project. I do not anticipate any stressors or emotional reactions to the questions. However, if you become stressed or uncomfortable, you will be allowed to skip the question, take a break, stop the interview/focus group/survey, or withdraw from the process altogether by notifying me of your request verbally or in writing.

Participants will be able to reflect on their current teaching practices, their successes, areas of improvement, and supports needed. This study will help identify what strategies, activities, lessons, and pedagogical skills currently work well in the ELA classroom. In addition, supports for growth and implementation sustainability may also be identified in the process.

Privacy and Confidentiality:
I will keep all study data secure on a password-protected computer. Only my University of Hawai'i dissertation committee chair and two advisors will have access to the information. Other agencies that have legal permission have the right to review research records. The University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study. While I will maintain strict confidentiality, the nature of a focus group may not ensure complete confidentiality, as multiple participants will be present..

After I transcribe the interviews and focus group, I will destroy the audio-recordings, and any identifiers will be erased. When I report the results of our research project, I will not use your name or any other personal identifying information that can directly identify you. I will use pseudonyms and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

My Role as a Researcher:
The goal for this study is to understand the level of comfort and variety of skills used to organically weave SEL into English Language Arts at Lē‘ahi Middle School. My role as a researcher in this study is to understand, and not to persuade or evaluate. Although I am currently a Hawai'i Department of Education employee, while conducting this study, I am operating as a University of Hawai'i at Mānoa graduate student researcher. Findings will be compiled and reported as a part of my dissertation.

Compensation:
After you complete the individual interview, focus group, and electronic survey, you will be compensated with a $20 gift card for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Future Research Studies:
Even after removing identifiers, the data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

University of Hawai'i
Consent to Participate in a Research Project
Matthew Tom, Student Investigator
Project title: Teacher Perceptions on Embedded Social Emotional Learning in the English Language Arts Classroom

Questions:
If you have any questions about this study, please email me at mttom@hawaii.edu. You may also contact my Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Nathan Murata, at nmurata@hawaii.edu.

You may contact the UH Human Studies Program at 808-956-5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu to discuss problems, concerns and questions; obtain information; or offer input with an informed individual who is unaffiliated with the specific research protocol. Please visit http://go.hawaii.edu/jRd for more information on your rights as a research participant.

If you agree to participate in this project, please return this signature page using one of the two return options listed below. Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Return options:
- Electronically sign, date, and email the signature page back to: mttom@hawaii.edu
- Print, sign, scan, and email the signature page back to: mttom@hawaii.edu

Signature(s) for Consent:
I give permission to join the research project entitled, "*Teacher Perceptions on Embedded Social Emotional Learning in the ELA Classroom.*"

Please **initial** next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

_____ Yes _____ No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview and focus group portion of this research.

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Mahalo!
Matthew Tom
Doctoral Candidate, EdD in Professional Educational Practice
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
mttom@hawaii.edu

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Script and Questions

Thank you very much for being willing to participate in this interview. My name is Matthew Tom, and I am a current student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the Doctorate in Education in Professional Educational Practice (EdD) program.

Today's interview is the first part of a three-part study, with a focus group scheduled for a later date with all available participants, and a short electronic survey to be completed at a later date.

The purpose of this study is to describe the present levels of preparedness and currently implemented strategies in integrating social emotional learning as an organically embedded component of ELA instruction. When I complete the write up of this study, I will use pseudonyms for all participants and the name of the school.

The two research questions I intend to focus on are:

1. How do ELA teachers at Lē‘ahi Middle School perceive their role and comfort level in teaching social emotional learning through their class?
2. What specific supports do ELA teachers need to more effectively and comfortably integrate SEL in their daily classroom practices and ELA curriculum?

Just a reminder, this interview will be audio recorded only and should take about 45 minutes. Also, if you need a break or feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about your teaching experience?
    a. For how many years have you been teaching, and at what schools?
    b. What subjects and grade levels have you taught?
    c. Are you credentialed in any other subject areas?

2. What drew you to teaching, and what drew you to teaching English in particular?
3. How do you define social emotional learning and what do you already know about SEL?
4. Do you feel that ELA (language learning) and SEL naturally go together? Why or why not?
5. Especially as a language teacher where language meets culture, how do you connect with students and build relationships with them?
6. Can you tell me about some learning activities (like writing opportunities, lessons, etc) you do in class that naturally foster SEL?
    a. Is this something that you feel is *in addition to* your curriculum, or do you feel it's woven into your curriculum?
7. Can you tell me about a time when a student began to really open up to you through their writing?
    a. When working with this student, what was most challenging about it?
    b. When working with this student, what did this experience teach you about your own reactions?
8. When was a time when a student shared information about themselves or their situation and you didn't know how to respond?
9. Do you feel like you are trained enough to respond to the various emotional needs of students?
10. What kind of resources would you need or want to help support students' social emotional learning?
11. How do you think being an ELA teacher helps or hinders your ability to help support students' social emotional learning?

12. If you had to give a brand new ELA teacher advice on how to start organically weaving in SEL into their classes, as opposed to something extra or external that they add on top, what advice would you give them?

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your perspectives and experiences with me; this concludes the interview. After I finish transcribing this interview, I will email you the transcript to check for accuracy. If there are any inaccurate parts or any corrections or additions you would like to make for the record, you can add them at that time. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Appendix D: Focus Group Discussion Guide

Introduction

Thank you all for coming today and for previously participating in the individual interview sessions.

As a doctoral student in the EdD program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I would like to find out more about your experiences and perspectives on integrating social emotional learning in the English Language Arts class setting.

In our discussion today, think of it like a talk story and brainstorming session where everyone shares their ideas and can build on the ideas of others–hopefully walking away today with new ideas or different perspectives on how to weave SEL more organically into the ELA curriculum.

There are no right or wrong answers, and I simply want to hear your honest thoughts and ideas. I have a general list of questions for the group, but also feel free to add other things you feel are important as we go along.

Just like in the interviews, I will be audio recording the discussion for transcription purposes only. In my write-ups, I will use pseudonyms for all participants. I will also use the pseudonym, “Lē‘ahi Middle School” for this school. The recording will not be accessible by people other than me and the three members of my dissertation committee. Is it okay with everyone to record the discussion?

During our discussion, please let everyone share their views, but only one person should speak at a time so that the recording will be clear. Just join in when you have something to say. I won’t be going around the group for every question.

Everything shared today should be kept confidential and not shared with people who are

outside of this study. You are free to use the real name of this school in the conversation, as I will assign the Lē‘ahi Middle School pseudonym upon the transcription of this focus group. This discussion will last about 45 minutes. Are there any questions before we start?

1. How has the pandemic influenced social emotional learning?
    a. Post-pandemic, do you feel students want to talk about social emotional learning and mental health more often than pre-pandemic?
    b. Is SEL more important or desired by students post-pandemic?
    c. Have you seen a change in students discussing mental health topics?
2. In the interviews, many of you talked about how the counseling team helps considerably, especially when students express instances of social or emotional need.
3. In the absence of a strong counseling team, would this affect the topics you have students write about or read?
4. With the news that several states are banning the instruction of SEL and SEL-related books, has there been any pushback or political friction you've experienced?

Thank you so much for your time today and for sharing your thoughts and ideas. Are there any other things anyone would like to mention before we wrap up?

Thank you again for your time and sharing your ideas with us today.

Note. Adapted from Hennink, M. M. (2014). *Focus group discussions.* Oxford University Press.

Appendix E: Electronically Administered Survey Questions

1. I feel that social emotional learning pairs naturally with the English Language Arts content area.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
2. I feel comfortable and confident in embedding social emotional learning opportunities in my English Language Arts curriculum.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
3. When planning my ELA lessons, I intentionally build in frequent learning opportunities that focus on or relate to social emotional learning.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
4. I feel comfortable and confident in helping students process their emotions.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. I feel supported by the administration and counselors at my school when I have concerns about students' wellbeing.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree nor disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
6. **Open Ended:** Are there any strategies, lessons, or pedagogical adjustments that you have wanted to implement in service of social emotional learning? (optional)
7. **Open Ended:** Additional Comments (optional)

References

American School Counselor Association. (2021). *The School Counselor and Peer Support Programs*. https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-Peer-Support-Programs

Bateman, C. E. (2012). *Integrating social emotional learning with English language arts: Creating relevancy to reading and writing* [Master's thesis, State University of New York College at Brockport]. SUNY Open Access Repository.

Bishop, P., & Harrison, L. M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe.* Association for Middle Level Education.

Brackett, M. A., Bailey, C. S., Hoffmann, J. D., & Simmons, D. N. (2019). RULER: A theory-driven, systemic approach to social, emotional, and academic learning. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(3), 144–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1614447

Branje, S. and Morris, A.S. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent emotional, social, and academic adjustment. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 31*(3), 486–499. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12668

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2016). English Language Arts 6. Retrieved November 27, 2021, from https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/english-language-arts/6/core

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2017). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better* (5th ed.). Harvard Education Press.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). *CASEL's SEL Framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted?*. https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL-SEL-Framework-11.2020.pdf

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2021). *Fundamentals of SEL.* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

Corso, M. J., Bundick, M. J., Quaglia, R. J., & Haywood, D. E. (2013). Where student, teacher, and content meet: Student engagement in the secondary school classroom. *American Secondary Education*, *41*(3), 50–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43694167

Cresswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Dawson, C. M., Fenton, S., & Ruby, R. (2020). From bystander to community: A schoolwide journey in literacy and social-emotional learning. *Voices from the Middle, 27*(3), 33–38.

de Leon, C. M. (2017). *"A calm arises": An anxious adolescent's experience of building self-compassion through aesthetic reading* (Publication No. 10754830) [Master's thesis, Queen's University (Canada)]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Douglas, L. J., Jackson, D., Woods, C., & Usher, K. (2019). Rewriting stories of trauma through peer-to-peer mentoring for and by at-risk young people. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 28*(3), 744–756. https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12579

Ellis, L. A., Marsh, H. W., & Craven, R. G. (2009). Addressing the challenges faced by early adolescents: A mixed-method evaluation of the benefits of peer support. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 44*(1-2), 54–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-009-9251-y

Fitzpatrick, M. (2020). T*eacher perceptions of imbedded mental health curricula* (Publication No. 27741250) [Doctoral thesis, University of Colorado at Denver]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Flowerday, T., Schraw, G., & Stevens, J. (2004). The role of choice and interest in reader engagement. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 72*(2), 93–114. https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.72.2.93-114

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Godbold, H. (2019). *Free writing and student mental health: An investigation into the merits of expressive writing* (Publication No. 22622381) [Master's thesis, Saint Mary's College of California]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Greytak, E. A., & Kosciw, J. G. (2010). *Year one evaluation of the New York City Department of Education "Respect for all" training program* (ED512335). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512335.pdf

Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., & Boesen, M. J. (2013). Educating the educator: Creating supportive school personnel through professional development. *Journal of School Violence*, *12*(1), 80–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.731586

Guzzo, M. F. (2018). *Expressing writing with adolescents: Revealing secrets what's really going on?* (Publication No. 28248562) [Master's thesis, McGill University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students.* Corwin Press.

Hanobeck, D. L. (2022). *Social and emotional learning: A qualitative study on supporting student mental health in middle school* (Publication No. 29061241). [Doctoral dissertation, Cabrini University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Hébert, T. P., & Kent, R. (2000). Nurturing social and emotional development in gifted teenagers through young adult literature. *Roeper Review, 22*(3), 167–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190009554027

Hennink, M. M. (2014). *Focus group discussions.* Oxford University Press.

Herrera, L. J. P. (2020). Social-emotional learning in TESOL: What, why, and how. *Journal of English Learner Education, 10*(1), 1-17.

Hoffman, C. R. C. (2017). *Social and emotional learning: A case study of the practices and systems within a caring middle school community* (Publication No. 10246236) [Doctoral dissertation, University of the Pacific]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Ioverno, S., Bishop, M.D. & Russell, S.T. (2022). Does a decade of school administrator support for educator training on students' sexual and gender identity make a difference for students' victimization and perceptions of school climate?. *Prevention Science*, 23, 108–118. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-021-01276-x

Jennings, P., & Greenberg, M. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. R*eview of Educational Research, 79*(1), 491–525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Johnstone, G., & Van Ness, D. W. (2007). *Handbook of restorative justice*. Taylor & Francis.

Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and emotional learning in schools from programs to strategies. *Social Policy Report, 26*(4), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2012.tb00073.x

Lē‘ahi Middle School [pseudonym]. (2019, March 14). *Self-Study Report* [ACS WASC Accreditation].

Kezar, A. (2018). *How colleges change* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Lochmiller, C.R., & Lester, J. N. (2017). *An introduction to educational research: Connecting methods to practice.* SAGE.

Lumsden, K., Bradford, J., & Goode, J. (2019). *Reflexivity: Theory, method, and practice*. Routledge.

Marlatt, R. (2020). Revitalizing English language arts through social and emotional learning. *The English Journal*, *109*(3), 44–49.

Martínez, L. (2016). Teachers' voices on social emotional learning: Identifying the conditions that make implementation possible. *International Journal of Emotional Education, 8*(2), 6-24.

McKinney, S., Ruiz, D., M. Vázquez, A., & E. Alvarez, M. (2022). *Youth-centered strategies for hope, healing, and health*. The Hope, Healing and Health Collective. https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Youth-Centered-Strategies-for-Hope-Healing-and-Health_NBWJI-and-TCP.pdf

McTigue, E., & Liew, J. (2011). Principles and practices for building academic self-efficacy in middle grades language arts classrooms. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *84*(3), 114–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2010.543191

Medley, M. (2012). A role for English language teachers in trauma healing. *TESOL Journal*, *3*(1), 110–125. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.6

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Empathy. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.* Retrieved November 26, 2021, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Language arts. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.* Retrieved November 26, 2021, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/language%20arts

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Reciprocal. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.* Retrieved February 19, 2023, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reciprocal

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed). Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, E. J. (2008). Gendered harassment in secondary schools: understanding teachers' (non) interventions. *Gender and Education, 20*(6), 555–570. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802213115

Nikolajeva, M. (2014). Memory of the present: Empathy and identity in young adult fiction. *Narrative Works, 4*(2). https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/NW/article/view/22784

Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education, 38*(6), 771–781. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047

Philibert, C.T. (2016). Everyday SEL in elementary school: Integrating social-emotional learning and mindfulness into your classroom (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315697079

Rothi, D. M., Leavey, G., & Best, R. (2008). On the front-line: Teachers as active observers of pupils' mental health. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(5), 1217-1231. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.09.011

Rivers, S. E., & Brackett, M. A. (2010). Achieving standards in the English language arts (and more) Using the RULER approach to social and emotional learning. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *27*(1–2), 75–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2011.532715

Rombough, K. (2017). *The "write" way: Creative writing as a school-based approach to treat childhood and adolescent anxiety* (Publication No. 10643593) [Master's thesis, Queen's University (Canada)]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3E. ed.). SAGE Publications.

Santos, J. A. (2022). *Transformative and trauma-informed social-emotional learning at the secondary level* (Publication No. 29167119). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Second Step. (2023). *Second step: Middle school curriculum*. Committee for Children. Retrieved November 6, 2022 from https://www.secondstep.org/middle-school-curriculum

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis.* The Guilford Press.

Storey, M. (2019). Engaging minds and hearts: Social and emotional learning in English Language Arts. *Language and Literacy*, *21*(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29355

Student engagement. (2016, February 18). In *The glossary of education reform*. http://edglossary.org/student-engagement/

Yoder, C. (2005). *The little book of trauma healing: When violence strikes and community security is threatened*. Good Books.

Waite, C. (2021). *How schools can harness the power of peer networks to help students rebound during and after COVID-19*. The 74. https://www.the74million.org/article/waite-how-schools-can-harness-the-power-of-peer-networks-to-help-students-rebound-during-and-after-covid-19/

Waite, C. (2021a). *Peer connections reimagined: Innovations nurturing student networks to unlock opportunity*. Christensen Institute. https://whoyouknow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Peer-Connections.pdf

Weisbrot, D. M., & Ryst, E. (2020). Debate: Student mental health matters–the heightened need for school-based mental health in the era of COVID-19. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 25*(4), 258–259. https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12427

World Health Organization. (2021). *Mental health of adolescents*. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health

Zack, J., Mannheim, A., & Alfano, M. (2010). "I didn't know what to say...": four archetypal responses to homophobic rhetoric in the classroom. *The High School Journal, 93*(3), 98–110. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.0.0047

Zehr, H., MacRae, A., Pranis, K., & Amstutz, L. S. (2022). *The big book of restorative justice*. Good Books.