

Elementary Students' Social Emotional Need Fulfillment Post Pandemic: An
Exploratory Study

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: Elementary Students' Social Emotional Need Fulfillment Post Pandemic: An Exploratory Study

This dissertation presents an exploratory study examining the social emotional development of elementary students who experienced long-term social distancing and disruptions in learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic. I employed student self-report surveys to discover: (a) how each of the CASEL environments are helping to develop the social emotional competencies of elementary students post pandemic, and (b) what social and emotional needs are not being addressed for elementary students. The participants in this study included 93 third through sixth grade students in two K-6 elementary schools in a frontier-rural Eastern Oregon school district. These data were triangulated with class discussions with 136 students in the larger of the two schools and Oregon SEED Survey data from the 2020-21 through the 2023-24 school years. Oregon SEED data from pilot years 2020-21 through 2022-23 included 8,462-9,802 third through sixth grade public school students in Oregon. The pilot years represented less than 10% of students enrolled in Oregon public schools. Oregon SEED data from the 2023-24 school year included 93,322 third through sixth grade students. This represents approximately 44% of enrolled students in grades 3-6. Key findings include elementary students self-reported a statistically significant decline in school enjoyment, emotional safety, and sense of belonging among peers, particularly among fifth and sixth graders. Addressing these gaps in classrooms, schools, families, and communities is essential to

shifting the trajectory of students' SEL competency development to support student growth.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in shelter-in-place policies and an abrupt end to in-class learning for students in more than 188 countries (Imran et al., 2020a). Social distancing mandates and lockdowns were initiated from January through April 2020 to curb the spread of the pandemic (Graber et al., 2020). Approximately 1.4 billion children were prohibited from attending schools and daycare, limiting their social opportunities (Merrill et al., 2020). As school districts pivoted from classroom instruction to distance learning and home learning models, the sudden shift to the education system may have adversely influenced the social emotional development of children.

A rapid review by Imran et al. (2020a) explored the effects of quarantine and isolation. The researchers reviewed three studies of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, Spain, and China. These studies suggest children are less likely than adults to contract COVID-19 and, if infected, are less likely to experience symptoms. However, evidence shows that children as young as two years old are more susceptible to psychological concerns resulting from the pandemic. Imran et al. concluded that social distancing, school closures, parental stressors, and loss of loved ones were a few of the worries with which children were struggling. Furthermore, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reported that mass school closures and social isolation have resulted in psychological harm (Imran et al., 2020a).

Background on Student Mental Health Challenges Before the Pandemic

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020), mentally healthy children are characterized by their ability to function well at home, in school, and in their communities. Prior to the pandemic, the CDC reported that up to 20% of US children experienced a mental health disorder such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, or behavior disorders, which resulted in serious challenges to learning, behavior, or emotional regulation. Furthermore, the prevalence of depression and anxiety in children increased from 5.4% in 2003 to 8.4% by 2012 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Post-pandemic CDC data (2025) from 2021-22 report that 10% of children were diagnosed with anxiety and 4% were diagnosed with depression.

Heath et al. (2017) outlined the growing mental health needs of US students. They reported that children's mental health needs were at an all-time high, and there are not enough mental health care professionals to provide services to all in need. A study by Taylor et al. (2017) revealed that although 20% of school-aged children had a psychiatric disorder, every state had a moderate to severe shortage of child psychiatrists. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, for example, reported that the state of Oregon has only 13 practicing child psychiatrists per 100,000 children (2020).

Mental health issues in students, including social emotional skill deficiency, has been a growing concern nationwide in both urban and rural areas. In a study of social emotional interventions, elementary teachers reported that students enter school with inadequate self and social awareness and insufficient self-management, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills (Grant et al., 2017). Moreover, they are given few opportunities to learn and practice these skills in a traditional classroom (Grant et al., 2017; Logue, 2007). Likewise,

Oregon teachers reported that students entered school with increasingly high social emotional deficits. According to the *Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Oregon* survey data, teachers’ perceptions of student conduct have declined in recent years. In the four-year period between 2014 and 2018, Oregon teachers’ ratings of how positive they felt about school discipline fell from 80% to 73% (TELL, 2018).

Table 1
TELL Survey Data (% of agree and strongly agree), 2018

Conduct Question	K-8 School (n=16)	K-12 District (n=239)	K-12 Oregon Public Schools (n=19,524)
Students understand expectations	74	86	81
Students follow rules	37	62	62
Policies are clear to faculty	74	81	72
Admin consistently enforce rules	56	75	66
Admin support teacher discipline	56	83	77
Teachers consistently enforce rules	88	80	72
Environment is safe	63	86	82
	64	79	73

Developing Social Emotional Skills

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning (SEL) as the developmental process for acquiring and applying self and social skills to establish and maintain healthy relationships (CASEL, 2020). Social emotional skill development is dependent upon social encounters. Szanto and Krueger (2019) reported that face-to-face social encounters provide opportunities to develop healthy interactions, cooperation, affective sharing, social identification, and empathy. These shared experiences contribute to the

development of relationships that cultivate empathy (Szanto & Krueger, 2019). Conversely, a lack of face-to-face interactions negatively affects children's psychological development (Ye, 2020).

In a paper written to inform practitioners, Logue (2007) suggests that increased academic rigor in kindergarten has decreased the amount of time children spend in play where they naturally develop social emotional skills. Consequently, students fail to develop the behavioral readiness necessary for academic learning. In addition, Logue (2007) reports that the discrepancy between student behaviors and teacher expectations results in high-risk students experiencing exclusionary discipline, providing even fewer opportunities to develop social emotional skills alongside their peers, thus perpetuating the problem.

Multiple studies have shown that SEL is necessary for behavior and academic growth, and that teaching SEL skills results in positive outcomes in these areas (Heath et al., 2017; Womack et al., 2011) as well as in developing protective factors for at-risk youth (Taylor et al., 2017). Likewise, a lack of SEL skills negatively influences growth (Womack et al., 2011). Students who lack SEL skills experience an increase in academic and behavior problems as well as higher dropout rates and are more likely to be referred for Special Education (Eklund et al., 2018). Therefore, the development of social emotional competence appears linked to academic success (Marchant & Womack, 2010). This relationship underscores the need to develop social emotional competence because such skills can affect students throughout their lives (Womack et al., 2011).

Schools are increasingly responsible for social emotional education and mental health support, as they offer a cost-effective way to reach large numbers of children. They are often the only mental health service option available to students (Imran et al., 2020a). In fact, over 75% of

children receiving mental health services do not receive any services outside of school (Taylor et al. 2017). Logue (2017) advocates that it is the school's responsibility to teach students the skills they lack so they can become successful academically. Heath et al. (2017) support the idea that teaching social emotional skills in the school setting is as important as teaching academics.

Social Distancing and Isolation

Humans are social beings, and prolonged social distancing measures have had a profound effect on children's psychosocial development (Witt et al., 2020). Healthy psychological development depends upon routines, social interactions, and relationships. Children require stable, supportive, and nurturing relationships to develop positive social emotional skills and to form positive relationships in the future (Imran et al., 2020b). However, for several months in the spring of 2020, U.S. students were isolated from their peers, their teachers, and their extended support networks. According to Witt et al. (2020), children suffer from long-term social distancing measures. Moreover, research by psychology researchers Cameron and Payne (2011) concludes that when individuals experience suffering, it adversely affects their prosocial affective responses and behaviors.

A review of 63 studies by Loades et al. (2020) examined the impact of social distancing and isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health. The study exposed many negative effects of long-term social distancing including fear, boredom, frustration, a lack of resources, and an increase in mental health problems in children. Many children also experienced increased loneliness, which, according to Loades et al. (2020), correlates strongly with mental health problems.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2013) declared that play is a fundamental right of all children. Play, they report, is critical to a child's physical and

psychological wellbeing, development, learning, and a semblance of normalcy and stability. Furthermore, in a study of the effects of quarantine and restricted environments on children, Graber and colleagues (2020) argue that play supports the development of coping skills to help children deal with stress, anxiety, and trauma. However, lockdown and social distancing mandates resulted in a lack of play opportunities with peers. Peer groups are instrumental in students' social development and in shaping social norms (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). In addition, peers provide prosocial ties and protective social relationships, which are essential to promoting resiliency against mental health problems (Taylor et al., 2017). Students depend on peer interactions to develop their identity and for social and emotional support. Therefore, isolation from peers may result in mental health impacts (Loades et al., 2020, Graber et al., 2020). It is reasonable to question whether this lack of opportunities to play with peers resulted in deficient coping skills, social skills, and self-expression in young children (Graber et al.).

Mental Health Concerns

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) defines mental health in children as reaching developmental and emotional milestones and learning healthy social skills. Social isolation often results in mental health problems, including feelings of alienation and depression (Merrill et al., 2020). Children are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues because of their limited understanding, communication skills, and coping strategies (Imran et al., 2020b).

Increasing infection and death rates, disruption to education and routines, isolation, and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic all contributed to increased anxiety in children (Imran et al., 2020b; Merrill et al., 2020). Likewise, quarantined children are more likely to develop depression and acute stress (Merrill et al., 2020; Ye, 2020). Ye (2020) reported that moderate stress can have short-term effects on physical, emotional, and cognitive functions.

Severe stress, on the other hand, can have serious, lifelong effects to children's psychological development and learning aptitude. Sprang and Silman's (2013) global study on the effects of the H1N1, SARS, and avian flu pandemics revealed that children who had been quarantined were five times more likely to develop mental health issues such as acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, grief, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One-third of quarantined children in their study required mental health services.

Similar data on the COVID-19 pandemic have been reported from around the globe. Loades et al. (2020) cite studies from China and the United Kingdom (UK). The data reveal that children in China experienced higher levels of anxiety, and young children in the UK worried about the virus significantly more than adolescents. Additionally, approximately 20% of Brazilian children suffered from anxiety during COVID-19 social distancing mandates (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020).

Additional studies of quarantined children in Italy, Spain, and China were cited by Imran et al. (2020a), Imran et al. (2020b), and Ye (2020). These studies suggest that boredom, social restrictions, isolation, and fear of the unknown may cause significant psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, anger, and PTSD. Parents in Italy reported that 43% of children seemed more listless toward activities they were doing before the pandemic (Imran et al., 2020a; Imran et al., 2020b; Ye, 2020). In over three quarters of all children studied, emotional problems such as perseverating on fear and worry over the virus, inattention and difficulty concentrating, regressive behaviors, clinging, irritability, anger, aggression, restlessness, nervousness, loneliness, listlessness, and withdrawal were documented (Imran et al., 2020a; Imran et al., 2020b; Ye, 2020).

Further studies from throughout the world reported elevated anxiety, anger, confusion, unusual sadness, fear, feelings of helplessness, loneliness, nervousness, and PTSD in children during the COVID-19 pandemic, and linked these findings to the result of quarantine and social distancing (Khan et al., 2020; Merrill et al., 2020). Students experiencing mental health problems would typically receive mental health services in school, but mass school closures prevented these students from receiving the services they required (Khan et al., 2020).

Domestic Risk Factors

In addition to their direct negative impact on students, quarantine and social isolation can have a negative impact on the well-being of families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many families experienced increased domestic stressors while, at the same time, being isolated from extended support networks (Imran et al., 2020b). Some parents lost their employment, others worked extended hours, and still others struggled to work from home, all while supporting their children's educational, social, and emotional needs at home (Witt et al., 2020).

A five-part polling series by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2020) found that, of 1,000 adults living with children in the US, 59% reported having serious problems caring for their children. In addition, more than 36% reported having serious problems supporting their children's education. By comparison, research by Imran et al. (2020a) revealed that only 12% of Italian and Spanish parents reported having family difficulties directly resulting from the pandemic.

Family issues and increased social distancing mandates contributed to increased rates of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation throughout the world (Imran et al., 2020b; Merrill et al., 2020; Witt et al., 2020) that were likely underreported due to social isolation measures (World Health Organization, 2020). Reports of domestic violence in China were three times higher than

average during the COVID-19 lockdown (Imran et al., 2020; Khan, 2020). In addition, reports of child endangerment amidst the COVID-19 pandemic show an increase in sexual assault, trafficking, child marriage, and child substance abuse (Merrill et al., 2020). It is worth noting that the US noted sharp decreases in reports during lockdown followed by increases in abuse and neglect reports as restrictions lifted (Simon, 2020). This surge in reporting resulted in child protective service agencies being overburdened, causing delays in interventions (Witt et al., 2020). Quarantine and lockdown measures made vulnerable children more prone to abuse, neglect, and exploitation (Imran et al., 2020).

Long-Term Effects of Isolation

Long-term isolation has adverse effects on children's mental health (Graber et al., 2020; Ye, 2020). Imran et al. (2020a) examined seven studies of the effects of isolation on children during outbreaks of H1N1, SARS, avian influenza, MRSA, and EBOLA; post-World War II; after a tsunami; and due to other health issues that required quarantine or isolation. The researchers report that negative psychological effects can develop months or years after social isolation. Children who had endured long-term social distancing measures were at four times higher risk for developing PTSD, depression, and social anxiety up to nine years later (Loades et al., 2020). Imran et al. (2020a) noted that much of the studies reviewed related PTSD to short-term, isolated outbreaks. They concluded that the COVID-19 quarantine of greater scope and longer duration would likely result in an increased prevalence of PTSD. Graber et al. (2020) cited Ramchandani's warning that there may also be hidden, yet profound impacts still to be realized. The long-term effects to children's mental health, asserted Witt et al. (2020), are expected to persist far beyond the span of the pandemic.

Post-Pandemic Studies

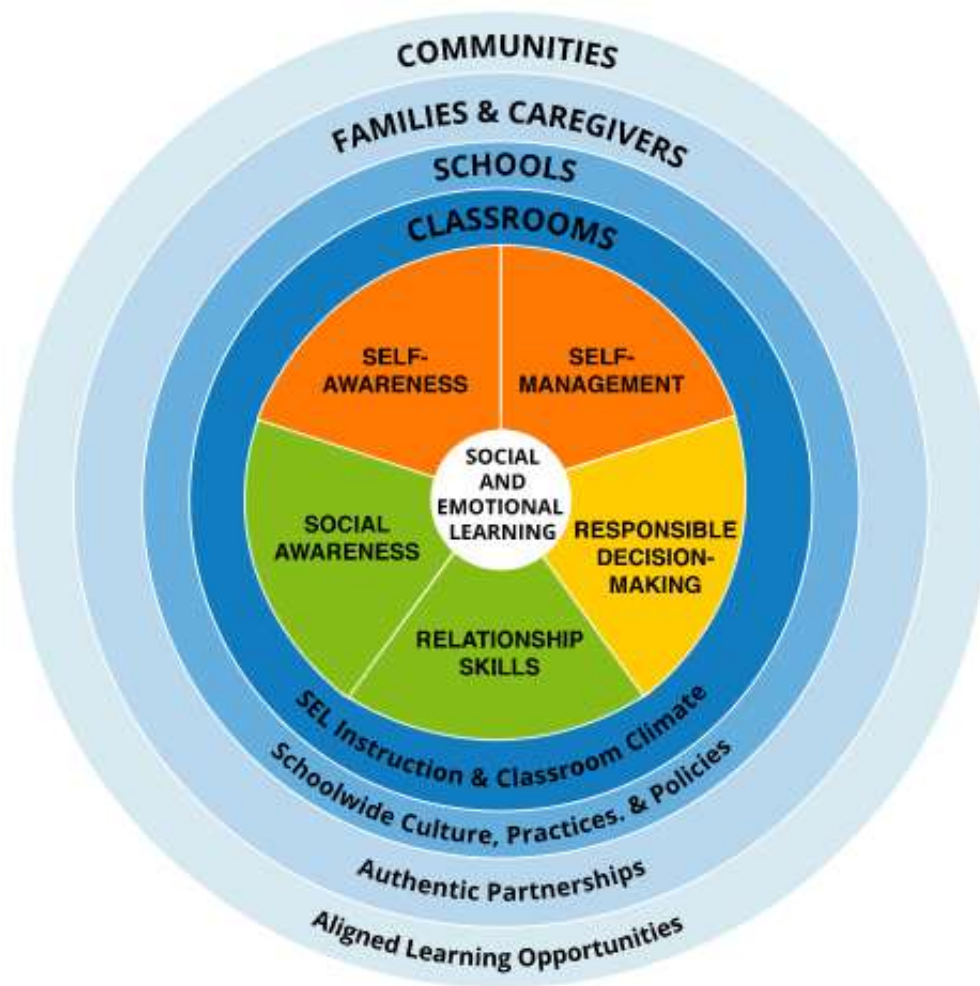
Research studies of school-aged children in Iran (Almasi et al., 2023), Minnesota, (Asambang, 2023) and throughout the world (Tambunan et al., 2021) concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic led to anxiety, depression, problems with attention, and aggressive behavior in students. Children experienced a decrease in social engagement, peer relationships, sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing, and students reported twice the pre-pandemic incidences of anxiety one-year post-pandemic (Theuring, 2023). A meta-analysis of 2856 publications including nearly 55,000 children confirmed these findings (Panchal et al., 2023) but noted differences between children with increased risk factors versus those with protective factors. Rothe et al. (2021) found that children without prior mental health concerns experienced an increase in both positive and negative emotions, and those with mental health concerns experienced a significant increase of extreme negative emotions. The extent of the increase, they reported, was linked to the size of the child's social network. Thorell et al.'s (2022) study of students in Western Europe compared the effects of distance learning on neurotypical children with those who have diagnoses of ADHD and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their research concluded, "having [Executive Functioning] EF deficits played a greater role than having an ADHD/ASD diagnosis" on whether a student experienced positive or negative mental health effects of distance learning (Thorell et al., p. 10).

Conceptual Framework

I used CASEL's SEL Framework (2020) to structure this research. CASEL's framework addresses students' SEL development within the interconnected contexts of four universal learning environments: Classrooms, Schools, Families and Caregivers, and Communities. Each of these environments plays a role in fostering the development of SEL competencies.

The CASEL Framework (Figure 1) contains five interrelated competencies. *Self-Awareness* is understanding one's thoughts and emotions and how they shape behavior. *Self-Management* is regulating one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. *Social Awareness* is understanding perspectives and showing empathy. *Relationship Skills* include establishing and maintaining positive relationships. *Responsible Decision-Making* demonstrates thoughtful, constructive choices that affect behavior and social interactions.

Figure 1. CASEL Social Emotional Learning Framework.



CASEL uses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979) of child development depicted by a series of nested environments. The core of the circle is the child's SEL skills and development. In this study, I will explore which SEL deficits are most critically affected in elementary students post-pandemic. The innermost circle around the core, the microsystem, represents the child's immediate environment. In traditional school models, this would be the classroom, where classroom climate is established and SEL instruction takes place. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students experienced a different modality of teaching and learning, and we do not yet understand its impact on students' ability to develop SEL skills.

The next layer of CASEL's Framework is Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, or the environments that have an indirect effect on the child, such as the schoolwide culture, practices, and policies. This layer focuses on schoolwide behavior expectations, equitable access to resources and opportunities, and health and safety protocols. The abrupt school closures and shift to the educational structure did not take equity into account. This is an area districts are still struggling to counteract.

CASEL adds another circle outside of schools for authentic partnerships with families and caregivers. During this global crisis and social isolation, teacher-parent partnerships were more significant than ever before. Parents who worked relied on daycare, churches, or community learning hubs to maintain connections with the school community.

The outermost layer of Bronfenbrenner's model is the macrosystem, the laws and culture within which the other circles are nested. CASEL frames this circle as aligning learning opportunities within the broader community. This layer encompasses the cultural and political landscape that affect policies at the district, state, and national levels to determine available resources in education.

All these environments were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic through disrupted in-person learning opportunities. Historically, educators have examined social emotional development exclusively within the context of the school and classroom environments. Because I was interested in examining students' social emotional development within the context of their environment, I examined the ways in which each of the environments played a role in the development of students' SEL competencies, as illustrated in CASEL's SEL Framework. This study aimed to reveal which of these most influenced students' developing SEL competencies from their own perspectives.

Research Questions

1. How are each of the CASEL environments helping to develop the social emotional competencies of elementary students, post-pandemic?
2. What social and emotional needs are not being addressed for elementary students, post-pandemic?

CHAPTER II

METHOD

I conducted a mixed methods exploratory study to document the social emotional needs of elementary students post pandemic and how schools are helping to meet those needs. Data sources included student self-report surveys and class discussions.

Setting and Participants

This study was set in a rural frontier public school district in Eastern Oregon. The county contains a population of slightly more than 7000 people and serves a 4,500 square-mile area. The district office sits on the boundary of the county's largest city, Town A, and Town B. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), Town A has a population of 1,664 within its 2.2 square mile boundary, and Town B has a population of 660 in an adjacent 1.4 square miles. The school district includes two smaller towns 11 miles west of Town A, and 25 miles to the south. These towns have populations of 548 and 165 and cover 0.7 and 0.8 square miles, respectively. The outlying areas include small farms and large, private and corporate ranches as well as BLM, Forest Service, and wilderness areas. The district serves a predominantly White student population with a higher-than-state-average percentage students with disabilities, including students with behavior and conduct disorders. Poverty rates are underreported based on Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) applications due to the district qualifying for the Community Eligibility Provision for free breakfast and lunch for all students (Table 2).

Table 2
State and District Demographic Data

Metric	District Count/%	Oregon Count/ %
Total Enrollment	462	542,271
Students with Disabilities	20%	16%
Mobile Students	15%	NA
Students Experiencing Poverty	30%	33%
Number of Languages Spoken	4	368
Ethnicity		
White	89%	58%
Hispanic/Latinx	6%	26%
American Indian/Alaska Native	<5%	<5%
Black/African American	<5%	<5%
Multiracial	<5%	7%
Regular Attenders	73%	66%
On-Time Graduation Rate	81%	90%

I used a non-probability convenience sample of third through sixth grade elementary students enrolled in Elementary School A. ($n=85$) and Elementary School B. ($n=8$) during the 2024-25 school year who took the fall Studer Education Student Experience Survey. I conducted follow-up discussions with all third through sixth graders at School A. ($n=136$). These students

experienced distance learning or homeschooling during their preschool through second grade school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

School A. supports two classes in each grade. The student enrollment of 237 includes 121 (51%) females and 116 (49%) males. During the 2024-25 school year, enrollment was down by 22% from pre-pandemic on-site student enrollment. The school was predominately White (90%) with fewer than 5% of students identifying as Hispanic, Native American, Black or African American, and Asian. Socio-economic status was determined using the 2022-23 Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) data of 54% (ODE, 2023).

School B is a two-room schoolhouse with one K-2nd grade classroom and one Third-Sixth grade classroom. The student enrollment of 13 includes six (46%) females and seven (54%) males. During the 2024-25 school year, enrollment was down by 48% from pre-pandemic on-site student enrollment. Ten of the school's students were White (77%), two were Hispanic (23%), and one was Native American (8%). Socio-economic status was determined using the 2021-22 Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) data of 100% (ODE, 2022).

Data Collection

I collected data for this dissertation study using the *Oregon SEED Surveys 2020-21* through 2023-24, the 2024 *Studer Education Student Experience Survey*, and follow-up post-survey student discussions.

Survey Instruments

Oregon Student Educational Equity Development (SEED) Survey. As part of the Oregon Statewide Assessments, students in grades 3-11 are asked to complete the Oregon *SEED Survey* each year as they complete their academic state assessments. The survey measures student perceptions of educational experiences using a four-point self-report Likert scale with an

option to skip each question. The survey asks to what extent students agree or disagree with 18 (third grade), 22 (fourth grade), or 26 (fifth and sixth grades) statements. Response options include: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) agree, (4) strongly agree, or (5) skip question (Figure 2). The first three years of data were optional for students as part of the pilot survey rollout. The Oregon SEED Survey became a mandatory part of the state assessments in the 2023-24 school year.

Elementary constructs include Access to Learning Resources, Sense of Belonging, Opportunity to Learn, Self-Efficacy Beliefs, and Well-Rounded Education. Constructs for older students also include Extracurricular Engagement and Career and Technical Education. This study focused on the Sense of Belonging construct and compared seven of the nine questions on Comfortable at School. This construct was chosen based on its alignment with the lowest scores reported on the Studer survey.

Items included for analysis are (1) I have friends at school; (2) My classmates care about me; (4) I feel welcome at my school; (5) There are adults at my school who care about me; (6) I feel safe talking with adults at my school; (7) I feel safe talking with students at my school; (8) I like going to school. Omitted items are (3) There are adults at my school who are like me and my family; and (9) I have classmates who are like me and my family, since these items had less relevance to the local demographics in this study. I used a one-way analysis of variance (Welch's ANOVA) over four years to determine statistical significance in change over time.

Studer Education Student Experience Survey. During the 2023-24 school year, the district developed a new three-year Strategic Improvement Plan comprising three goals. To measure the effectiveness of Goal 3, "Provide positive perceptions, community ownership, and support for our district's facility improvements", Indicator 1, "Staff and students create and

Figure 2. Oregon SEED Survey: *Sense of Belonging, Comfortable at School*

8. Think about this school year and the people at your school. How much do you agree with each statement?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Skip question
I have friends at school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My classmates care about me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are adults at my school who are like me and my family.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel welcome at my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Think about this school year and the people at your school. How much do you agree with each statement?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Skip question
There are adults at my school who care about me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel safe talking with adults at my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel safe talking with students at my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like going to school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have classmates who are like me and my family.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

maintain welcoming environments and connections for families and the broader community to support positive relationships and student learning,” the district contracted with Studer Education to create student, parent, and employee self-report surveys to be given twice yearly.

The *Studer Education Student Experience Survey* measures student perceptions of school culture using a five-point self-report Likert scale. The survey asks to what extent students agree or disagree with 20 statements. Response options include: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral/mixed feelings, (4) agree, or (5) strongly agree. From these items, I identified themes related to students’ beliefs and attitudes about learning and goal-setting, relationships, health and safety, fairness, responsibility, decision-making, recognition, respect, and belonging. These themes identified in the Studer Survey closely align with CASEL’s five interrelated SEL competencies and all four key learning environments; however, these categories were defined by the qualitative data collected during class discussions.

Post-Assessment Discussion Questions. To better understand why students rated each question the way they did, and to understand those items that were rated negatively in particular, I conducted post-assessment discussions with students at School A. Due to the small sample size and inability to ensure anonymity, I did not engage School B students in these discussions.

I scheduled 30-minute meetings with each fourth through sixth grade teacher at School A over the course of two days. I scheduled both third grade classes together since there were only 21 students combined. I shared the survey data with each classroom teacher in a PowerPoint presentation and teachers projected the data in front of their class while I explained how the data was compiled from student survey responses. After explaining the mean and top box scoring, I told students the purpose of my visit was to understand why they felt the way they did so we can

create an action plan to improve. Focusing on the mean data slide, I asked each class the following questions:

1. What is going well?
2. What is not going well and why?
3. What do we need to do differently?
4. What ideas do you have for improvement?

All students participated in the discussion while I took notes on my laptop to capture students' responses. Every class engaged in the discussion for the entire 30 minutes. One fourth grade class asked for an additional 30-minute session to be scheduled for the following day to allow everyone time to share their ideas.

Validity. The Oregon SEED Survey is administered online annually to all students in grades 3-11 during their Oregon State Assessment window. The Student Experience Survey was administered to district students for the first time during the fall of 2024. Self-report measures with young students can introduce maturation and social desirability bias. However, the consistency of trend data across four years strengthened the validity of the SEED surveys. The structure of the survey items in both surveys reflect CASEL's framework and the SEL competencies that are used for instruction throughout the district. The confidential, self-report nature of the surveys reduced distractions and influence from peers.

Discussion data gathered by the principal in the presence of the classroom teacher introduced a greater risk of social desirability bias. By questioning students about the rationale behind answers they or their peers had already provided reduced the assumption a particular response belonged to the student offering a rationale. Triangulating these data with survey data strengthened the validity of the findings.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data in two phases. I first analyzed state and local survey results, computing descriptive statistics and using Welch's one-way, between-subjects ANOVA analyses to test for differences by student grade level, with the item being the dependent variable and the grade level being the independent variable. After completing my analysis of quantitative data, I visited each third through sixth grade classroom at School A to gain a better understanding of students' rationale for answering the way they did. These individual classroom discussions provided additional insights into students' perceptions of their social emotional need fulfillment, post-pandemic. To analyze the interview data, I followed Creswell's (2009) suggestions for qualitative data analysis within the context of the CASEL Framework. First, I organized the data by Positives, Negatives (with reasons), Needs for Change, and Students' Ideas. I sorted and arranged the data to find commonalities across grade levels. Then, I read through all the data and reflected on its overall meaning.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

In this chapter, I provide the results of my study, first presenting the results of the Oregon SEED survey, then the results of the Studer Education Experience Survey, and finally the results of the interviews conducted during the classroom discussions.

Oregon Student Educational Equity Development (SEED) Survey Data

Oregon SEED Survey data from 2020-21 through 2022-23 were reported in percentages, while 2023-24 data were reported in raw numbers. To compare these data, I calculated 2023-24 data into percentages (Figure 3), and then calculated approximate raw data based on the reported percentages of the number of students who responded “agree” or “strongly agree” for each item response excluding the number of skipped responses.

Levene’s test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated for most survey items: four items were violated over all four years, one item was violated over three years, and two items were violated only in the 2023-24 school year. Because there were unequal variances across data sets, Welch’s one-way, between-subjects ANOVA analyses were performed for each question across four years with the item being the dependent variable and the grade level being the independent variable. Post-hoc pairwise tests were performed with a Games-Howell correction to account for unequal variances identified by Levene’s Test.

Item 1 results indicated that the effect on having friends at school was statistically significant, $F(3,90048) = 71.48, p < .001$. The mean associated with sixth grade ($M = 3.60$) was statistically significantly larger than the means associated with fifth grade ($M = 3.57$), fourth grade ($M = 3.56$), and third grade ($M = 3.51$), fifth grade was statistically significantly larger than fourth grade, and fourth grade was statistically significantly larger than third grade. This

Figure 3. Oregon SEED Survey: Percent Agree or Strongly Agree.

Question	2020-2021 (n=8,946)			
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
I have friends at school.	89.9%	91.0%	91.4%	90.3%
My classmates care about me.	74.6%	70.8%	69.7%	65.7%
I feel welcome at my school.	85.3%	84.7%	83.5%	80.5%
There are adults at my school who care about me.	86.8%	88.7%	89.0%	84.9%
I feel safe talking with adults at my school.	82.8%	82.2%	79.7%	73.2%
I feel safe talking with students at my school.	83.9%	83.1%	83.6%	76.0%
I like going to school.	77.3%	74.4%	70.9%	79.4%
Question	2021-2022 (n=9,408)			
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
I have friends at school.	88.4%	90.1%	90.3%	90.9%
My classmates care about me.	72.5%	67.5%	64.9%	62.3%
I feel welcome at my school.	82.8%	78.0%	76.3%	73.2%
There are adults at my school who care about me.	85.9%	87.0%	88.6%	85.3%
I feel safe talking with adults at my school.	81.4%	78.4%	75.4%	69.2%
I feel safe talking with students at my school.	79.9%	78.7%	75.7%	74.7%
I like going to school.	75.2%	70.8%	64.6%	58.9%
Question	2022-2023 (n=8,109)			
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
I have friends at school.	88.7%	91.6%	92.9%	92.0%
My classmates care about me.	73.8%	72.6%	67.6%	61.0%
I feel welcome at my school.	81.6%	78.9%	77.3%	67.6%
There are adults at my school who care about me.	86.7%	88.6%	86.6%	81.6%
I feel safe talking with adults at my school.	82.4%	79.6%	74.7%	65.5%
I feel safe talking with students at my school.	81.3%	79.8%	79.3%	73.7%
I like going to school.	71.9%	68.8%	62.4%	55.2%
Question	2023-2024 (n=90,048)			
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
I have friends at school.	89.8%	94.8%	92.7%	93.4%
My classmates care about me.	74.0%	72.3%	67.9%	64.6%
I feel welcome at my school.	81.6%	78.9%	76.1%	71.4%
There are adults at my school who care about me.	87.1%	88.5%	87.1%	83.0%
I feel safe talking with adults at my school.	81.4%	79.4%	74.6%	69.1%
I feel safe talking with students at my school.	81.2%	80.5%	78.3%	75.4%
I like going to school.	72.1%	65.5%	60.4%	52.1%

suggests that students' sense of having friends at school starts strong and increases significantly as students advance through the elementary grades. This is the only area where students report increases as they mature.

Item 2 results indicated that the effect on perceived peer care was statistically significant, $F(3, 89631) = 45.12, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.12$) was statistically significantly larger than the means associated with fourth grade ($M = 3.06$), fifth grade ($M = 2.98$) and sixth grade ($M = 2.93$). In addition, fourth grade was statistically significantly larger than fifth grade and sixth grade. There was no statistically significant difference between fifth and sixth grades. This finding suggests that students' perceptions of peer care steadily decline from third through fifth grade. This suggests that while students develop more friendships as they move up in grade, the feeling of peer care erodes significantly as they advance in grade.

Item 4 results indicated that the effect on feeling welcome was statistically significant, $F(3, 89074) = 38.24, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.37$) was statistically larger than the means associated with fourth grade ($M = 3.28$), fifth grade ($M = 3.20$), and sixth grade ($M = 3.11$). In addition, fourth grade was statistically significantly larger than fifth grade, and fifth grade was statistically significantly larger than sixth grade. This finding suggests that students' feeling welcome steadily and statistically significantly declines across grades from third through sixth grade.

Item 5 results indicated that the effect on feeling that adults care about them was statistically significant, $F(3, 89328) = 28.91, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.38$) was statistically significantly larger than the mean associated with fourth grade ($M = 3.35$), fifth grade ($M = 3.30$) and sixth grade ($M = 3.26$). There were also statistically significant differences between fourth and sixth grade but not between fourth and fifth grades nor between

fifth and sixth grades. This finding suggests that students' perceptions of adult care decreased from third through sixth grades. Although students in third grade generally feel cared for by adults, that steadily drops throughout their elementary school experience.

Item 6 results indicated that the effect on feeling safe talking with adults at school was statistically significant, $F(3, 88826) = 34.17, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.27$) was statistically significantly larger than the mean associated with fourth grade ($M = 3.21$), fifth grade ($M = 3.13$), and sixth grade ($M = 3.05$). In addition, fourth grade was statistically significantly larger than fifth grade, and fifth grade was statistically significantly larger than sixth grade. This finding suggests that while younger students feel more comfortable talking with adults, that comfort decreases statistically significantly as they move to higher grades.

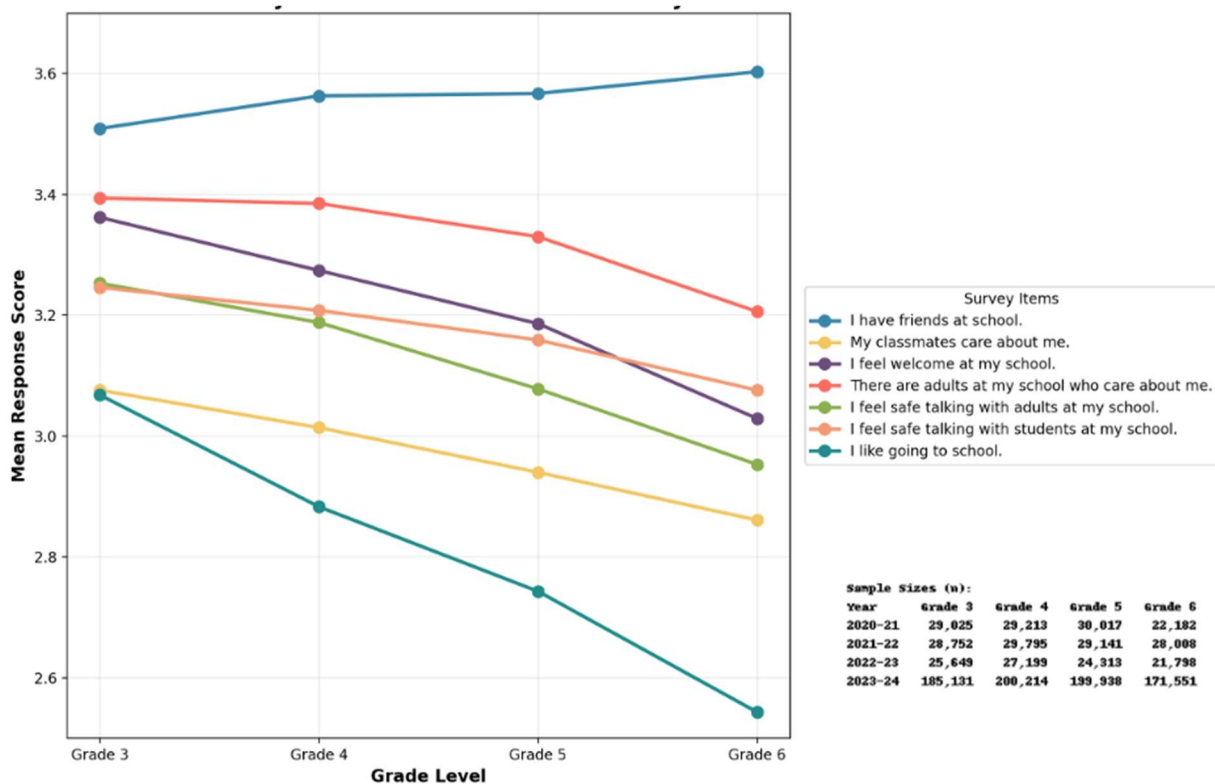
Item 7 results indicated that the effect on feeling safe talking with students was statistically significant, $F(3, 88522) = 30.88, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.27$) was statistically significantly larger than the mean associated with fourth grade ($M = 3.22$), fifth grade ($M = 3.14$), and sixth grade ($M = 3.09$). In addition, the means for fourth and fifth grades were statistically significantly larger than sixth grade. There was no statistically significant difference between fourth and fifth grades. This finding suggests that students' sense of safety and trust talking with peers decreases as they get older.

Item 8 results indicated that the effect on liking going to school was statistically significant, $F(3, 85325) = 1012.49, p < .001$. The mean associated with third grade ($M = 3.15$) was statistically significantly larger than the means associated with fourth grade ($M = 2.94$), fifth grade ($M = 2.66$), and sixth grade ($M = 2.46$). In addition, the mean response of fourth grade was statistically significantly larger than fifth grade. This represents the steepest decline of all items.

Enjoyment of school is highest in third grades and plummets sharply through sixth grade. This item represents the lowest reported means and the steepest decline across all grade levels.

These data suggest a significant pattern of declining sense of belonging and comfort in school as students move up in grade, except for friendship (Item 1), which improves by grade. These data are visually displayed in Figure 4. The most significant drop is in how much students like going to school (Item 8), dropping from 3.15 in third grade to 2.46 in sixth grade.

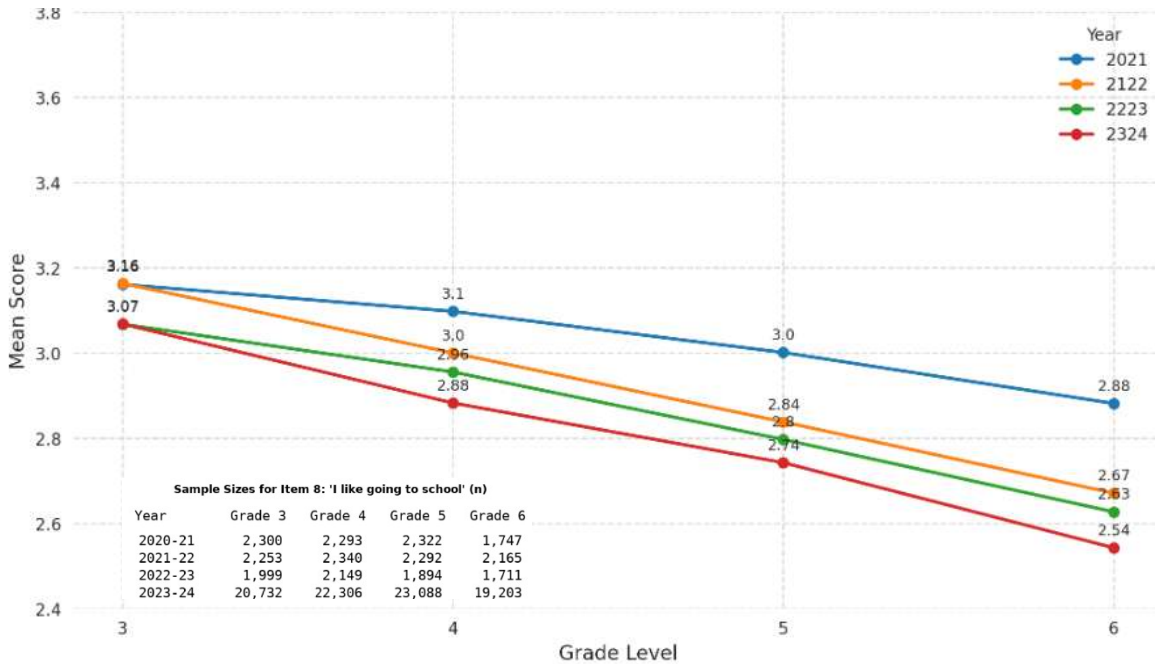
Figure 4. Oregon SEED Survey: Mean Scores by Grade Level.



I conducted a deeper analysis of three SEED survey items demonstrating the most concerning statewide trends across all grades. The item exhibiting the most significant decline across all years and grades was Item 8: “I like going to school” (Figure 5). Students in third

grade reported this lowest compared to all other items, and scores showed a consistent negative trend each year from fourth through sixth grades.

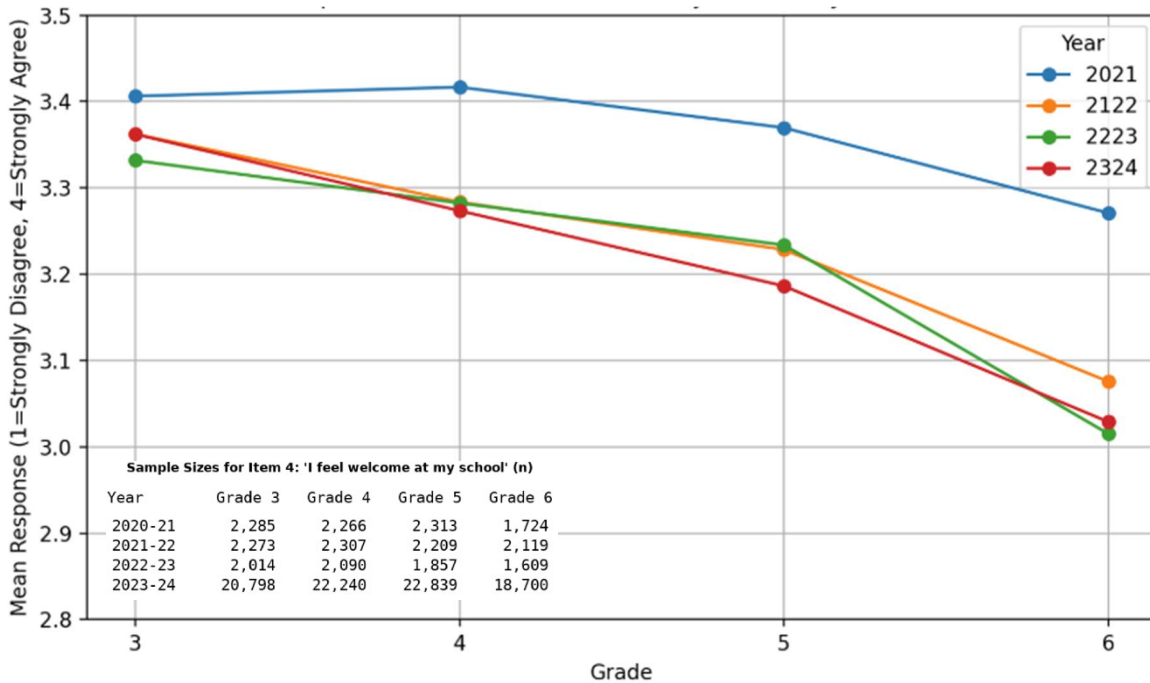
Figure 5. Oregon SEED Survey: Item 8 “I like going to school” by Year



Although Item 5 (“There are adults in my school who care about me”) showed a similar declining trend, this item was not further analyzed since concern was not reflected in the local survey. Therefore, the implications of this statewide decline were less relevant to this study.

Item 4: “I feel welcome at my school” indicates the next most significant decline across grade levels (Figure 6). Scores for this item were relatively positive in third grade but declined steeply and consistently across all years with each subsequent year. The 2023-24 school year showed the most pronounced downward trend with the gap in perceptions between third and sixth grade students widening over time.

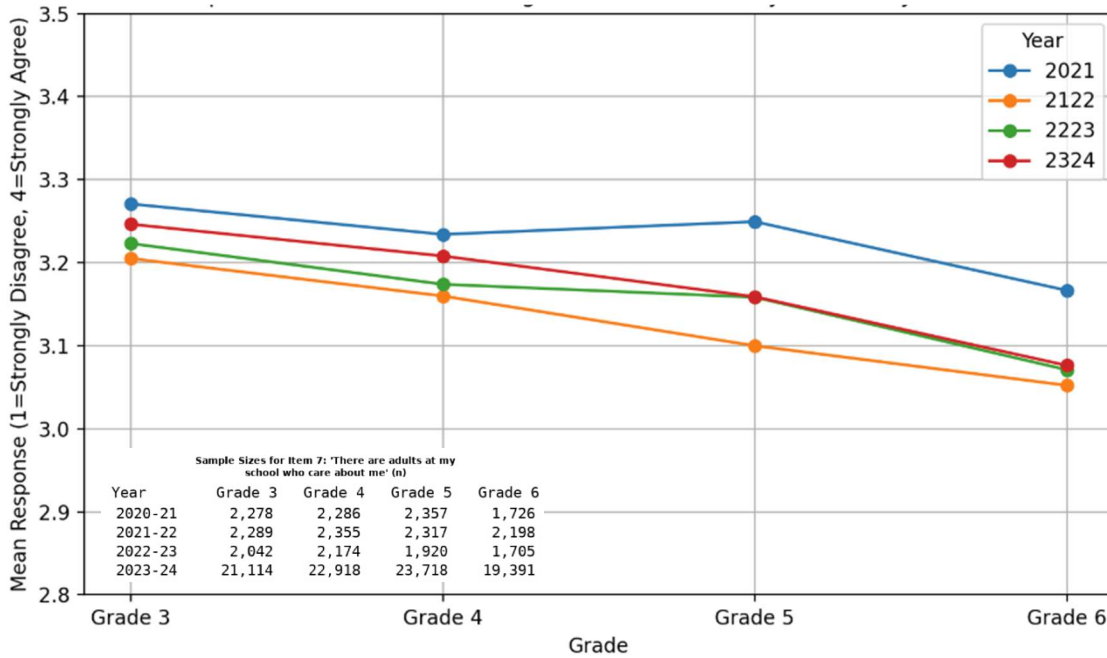
Figure 6. Oregon SEED Survey: Item 4 “I feel welcome at my school” by Year



Item 7: “I feel safe talking with students at my school” (Figure 7) indicated the next most significant decline across grade levels. Students in third grade reported low scores in this area, and a steady decline continued across grade levels each year.

These analyses reflect a consistent downward trend each year in perceived enjoyment, belonging, and care across all grades over the four-year period. The most recent year (2023-24) consistently shows lower scores than previous years. Fourth to fifth grade appears to be a critical transition point where many scores drop significantly, and these declines are becoming more pronounced over time. The patterns are consistent across nearly all aspects of the upper elementary school experience.

Figure 7. Oregon SEED Survey: Item 7 “I feel safe talking with students at my school” by Year



Studer Education Student Experience Survey Data

The Studer Education Student Experience Survey measured student perceptions of school culture using a five-point self-report Likert scale. The survey asked to what extent students agreed or disagreed with 20 statements (1) *strongly disagree*, (2) *disagree*, (3) *neutral/mixed feelings*, (4) *agree*, or (5) *strongly agree*. Studer Education provided tables for each school to compare site-level data with district data. School A fall mean scores showed areas of strength and weakness and scored consistently higher than the district average on most items (Figure 8). An additional table was provided to show top-box scores. These show the percentage of students who chose the top box, or five on the Likert scale. School A top-box scores were consistent with the mean score data, indicating areas of strength with every item scoring higher than the district top-box percentage (Figure 9).

Figure 8. *Studer Education Student Experience Survey Fall Mean Scores: Elementary School A.*

	Fall 2024	District Results
Participants	85	267
Mean	3.86	3.67

	Fall 2024	District Results
1 I believe my learning is important at my school.	4.42	4.11
2 I enjoy specials or electives.	4.00	4.07
3 I believe my teachers care about me.	4.26	3.92
4 I feel safe at my school.	3.95	3.88
5 I believe school rules are consistently enforced.	3.52	3.44
6 I think my school is clean.	3.19	3.28
7 I believe my principal is a good leader.	4.54	4.16
8 I feel safe on the bus (only answer if you ride the bus).	3.64	3.62
9 I feel there are healthy food choices for me to eat at lunch.	3.93	3.70
10 I know how to get help when I have a problem.	4.28	4.04
11 I set learning goals and track my progress.	3.56	3.40
12 I believe my teachers challenge me to think.	4.31	4.04
13 I believe my teachers ask me how I learn best.	3.65	3.35
14 I believe my teachers recognize me for good work.	3.84	3.64
15 I feel students are nice or show respect to each other at my school.	2.92	3.01
16 I like going to my school each day.	3.20	3.01
17 I feel like I belong at school.	3.64	3.34
18 I feel my family is treated nicely or with respect at my school.	4.13	3.85
19 I regularly receive feedback from my teachers about my academic progress.	3.82	3.52
20 I have opportunities to be successful at my school.	4.29	3.98

Figure 9. *Studer Education Student Experience Survey Fall Top Box Scores: School A.*

	Fall 2024	District Results
Participants	85	267
Top Box Percentage	42.46%	26.60%
Top 2 Box Percentage	64.97%	60.05%

	Fall 2024	District Results
1 I believe my learning is important at my school.	60.00%	38.58%
2 I enjoy specials or electives.	42.86%	38.64%
3 I believe my teachers care about me.	56.47%	32.71%
4 I feel safe at my school.	44.05%	32.20%
5 I believe school rules are consistently enforced.	23.81%	17.49%
6 I think my school is clean.	16.67%	13.53%
7 I believe my principal is a good leader.	69.41%	43.94%
8 I feel safe on the bus (only answer if you ride the bus).	34.85%	27.78%
9 I feel there are healthy food choices for me to eat at lunch.	48.19%	25.87%
10 I know how to get help when I have a problem.	55.29%	35.34%
11 I set learning goals and track my progress.	30.95%	18.49%
12 I believe my teachers challenge me to think.	57.65%	33.08%
13 I believe my teachers ask me how I learn best.	36.47%	19.62%
14 I believe my teachers recognize me for good work.	37.65%	23.40%
15 I feel students are nice or show respect to each other at my school.	12.94%	9.36%
16 I like going to my school each day.	29.76%	17.05%
17 I feel like I belong at school.	41.18%	20.22%
18 I feel my family is treated nicely or with respect at my school.	53.01%	31.68%
19 I regularly receive feedback from my teachers about my academic progress.	41.18%	21.35%
20 I have opportunities to be successful at my school.	54.76%	32.33%

School B’s fall mean scores also showed areas of strength and weakness and, as with School A, scored consistently higher than the district average on nearly all items (Figure 10). School B’s top-box scores were also consistent with their mean score data. School B’s very small sample size made it very clear to assess areas of strengths and weakness in the top-box table showing very high or very low top-box percentages (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Studer Education Student Experience Survey Fall Mean Scores: School B.

	Fall 2024	District Results
Participants	8	267
Mean	4.23	3.67

	Fall 2024	District Results
1 I believe my learning is important at my school.	4.25	4.11
2 I enjoy specials or electives.	3.00	4.07
3 I believe my teachers care about me.	4.75	3.92
4 I feel safe at my school.	4.63	3.88
5 I believe school rules are consistently enforced.	4.29	3.44
6 I think my school is clean.	4.00	3.28
7 I believe my principal is a good leader.	4.75	4.16
8 I feel safe on the bus (only answer if you ride the bus).	4.75	3.62
9 I feel there are healthy food choices for me to eat at lunch.	4.25	3.70
10 I know how to get help when I have a problem.	4.25	4.04
11 I set learning goals and track my progress.	3.63	3.40
12 I believe my teachers challenge me to think.	4.00	4.04
13 I believe my teachers ask me how I learn best.	4.25	3.35
14 I believe my teachers recognize me for good work.	4.25	3.64
15 I feel students are nice or show respect to each other at my school.	4.38	3.01
16 I like going to my school each day.	3.88	3.01
17 I feel like I belong at school.	4.38	3.34
18 I feel my family is treated nicely or with respect at my school.	4.71	3.85
19 I regularly receive feedback from my teachers about my academic progress.	4.13	3.52
20 I have opportunities to be successful at my school.	4.38	3.98

Figure 11. Studer Education Student Experience Survey Fall Top Box Scores: School B.

	Fall 2024	District Results
Participants	8	267
Top Box Percentage	40.91%	26.60%
Top 2 Box Percentage	84.42%	60.05%

	Fall 2024	District Results
1 I believe my learning is important at my school.	50.00%	38.58%
2 I enjoy specials or electives.	0.00%	38.64%
3 I believe my teachers care about me.	75.00%	32.71%
4 I feel safe at my school.	75.00%	32.20%
5 I believe school rules are consistently enforced.	42.86%	17.49%
6 I think my school is clean.	25.00%	13.53%
7 I believe my principal is a good leader.	75.00%	43.94%
8 I feel safe on the bus (only answer if you ride the bus).	75.00%	27.78%
9 I feel there are healthy food choices for me to eat at lunch.	25.00%	25.87%
10 I know how to get help when I have a problem.	37.50%	35.34%
11 I set learning goals and track my progress.	12.50%	18.49%
12 I believe my teachers challenge me to think.	12.50%	33.08%
13 I believe my teachers ask me how I learn best.	37.50%	19.62%
14 I believe my teachers recognize me for good work.	37.50%	23.40%
15 I feel students are nice or show respect to each other at my school.	37.50%	9.36%
16 I like going to my school each day.	37.50%	17.05%
17 I feel like I belong at school.	50.00%	20.22%
18 I feel my family is treated nicely or with respect at my school.	71.43%	31.68%
19 I regularly receive feedback from my teachers about my academic progress.	25.00%	21.35%
20 I have opportunities to be successful at my school.	37.50%	32.33%

To better understand how the two elementary school compared in their perceptions of the school experience, a table was created to analyze mean scores and top-box scores for each item. This helped to uncover trends, inequities, and emerging themes between the two schools (Table 3). Although there were some consistencies between the two elementary schools, the side-by-side comparison revealed some of the benefits to social and emotional development a small school may have over larger schools. It also shed light on opportunities students at School B feel they are not being offered.

Table 3. *Studer Education Fall Student Survey, 2024*

Question	School A Mean	School A Top Box	School B Mean	School B Top Box
1. I believe my learning is important at my school.	4.42	60%	4.25	50%
2. I enjoy specials or electives.	4.00	43%	3.00	0%
3. I believe my teachers care about me.	4.26	5%	4.75	75%
4. I feel safe at my school.	3.95	44%	4.63	75%
5. I believe rules are consistently enforced.	3.52	24%	4.29	43%
6. I think my school is clean.	3.19	17%	4.00	25%
7. I believe my principal is a good leader.	4.54	69%	4.75	75%
8. I feel safe on the bus.	3.64	35%	4.75	75%
9. I feel there are healthy food choices for me to eat at lunch.	3.93	48%	4.25	25%
10. I know how to get help when I have a problem	4.28	55%	4.25	38%
11. I set learning goals and track my progress.	3.56	31%	3.63	13%
12. I believe my teachers challenge me to think.	4.31	58%	4.00	13%
13. I believe my teachers ask me how I learn best.	3.65	36%	4.25	38%
14. I believe my teachers recognize me for good work.	3.84	38%	4.25	38%
15. I feel students are nice and show respect to each other at my school.	2.92	13%	4.38	38%
16. I like going to my school each day.	3.20	30%	3.88	38%
17. I feel like I belong at school.	3.64	41%	4.38	50%
18. I feel like my family is treated nicely or with respect at my school.	4.13	53%	4.71	71%
19. I regularly receive feedback from my teachers about my academic progress.	3.82	41%	4.13	25%
20. I have opportunities to be successful at my school.	4.29	55%	4.38	38%

Emerging Themes

Adult Relationships. Questions 3, 7, 10, 14, and 19 addressed adult relationships with students and their families. Items included student perceptions of teacher care, principal leadership, knowing how to get help, being recognized for good work, and receiving feedback from teachers. Students in both schools reported positive relationships with adults. School A students scored an average of 4.15 in this area, and School B students scored an average of 4.43. This was School A's highest category and School B's second highest. Responses align with Relationship Skills and Social Awareness competencies within Classroom and School environments.

Safety and Discipline. Questions 4, 8 and 9 address students' perceptions of safety and discipline. Items included feeling safe in school and on the bus and having healthy choices for lunch. This was an area of concern for School A students, yet students at School B reported positive perceptions of safety and discipline. School A students scored an average of 3.70 in this area, while School B students scored 4.56. This was School B's highest category and School A's second lowest category. These responses reflect challenges in Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making within Classroom and School environments.

Belonging, and Peer Relationships. Questions 15, 16, and 17 address perceptions of respect and belonging. Items included students showing respect to each other, liking school, and feeling they belong at school. School A students scored an average of 3.47 in this area, while School B students scored an average of 4.34. School A students scored lowest in this category, yet School B students reported positive feelings in this category. This theme is connected to Social Awareness and Relationship Skills within Classroom, School, and Family & Caregiver environments.

Learning and Engagement. Questions 1, 11, 12, and 13 address learning and engagement. Items included perceptions that learning is important, goal-setting and progress monitoring, feeling challenged, and being asked how they learn best. Students at School A scored an average of 3.99, and students at School B scored an average of 4.03. This was the second highest category for School A and the second lowest for School B. This theme relates to Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making in Classroom environments.

Resources and Opportunities. Questions 2, 6, 9, and 20 addressed school resources and opportunities. Items included specials and electives, cleanliness, and opportunities for success. School A students scored an average of 3.85, and School B students scored an average of 3.91. This was the lowest category for School B. This theme relates to Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making in Classroom and School environments. While both schools provide identical meals and require moderate to extensive facilities updates and repairs, students at School A reported greater dissatisfaction in these areas.

Interview Data

Follow-up classroom discussions provided additional insights into students' perceptions to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges students face post-pandemic. As previously explained, I followed Creswell's (2009) suggestions for qualitative data analysis within the context of the CASEL Framework to analyze the interview data. First, I organized the data by Positives, Negatives (with reasons), Needs for Change, and Students' Ideas. I sorted and arranged the data to find commonalities across grade levels. Then, I read through all the data and reflected on its overall meaning. Emerging thoughts about the data are: (1) students affirmed positive data; (2) students feel unsafe physically and emotionally, especially on the bus; (3)

students believe rules are inconsistently enforced; (4) students have a desire for additional support, structure, and respectful interactions with peers.

I organized discussion data into chunks to identify and label categories. Categories used in coding were self-created, guided by student responses and aligned with CASEL's Framework to accurately reflect lagging SEL competencies. These included Health and Safety, Belonging and Peer Relationships, Classroom Engagement and Learning, Consistency and Discipline, and Need for Support. I then looked for interconnected themes to accurately represent students' rationale for their answers.

Health and Safety. Students expressed concerns about physical and emotional safety. Students stated they did not feel emotionally safe because "students are mean" and "I might get in trouble for tattling." Several reported they have seen kids physically or emotionally hurting others, and they feel threatened by observing these incidents. Furthermore, they said they feel threatened by being near others who have harmed them or others in the past, and they feel threatened when observing incidences. Some brought up students making fun of other kids and using derogatory slang from social media. Others discussed being perceived as rude or bullying when they are just joking around. Students acknowledged they don't all agree on what is normal behavior. Another issue of concern was observing that other "kids with problems outside of school bring issues into school."

Students also addressed cleanliness, particularly in the bathrooms and cafeteria, as a lack of respect and lack of responsibility by students who do not pick up after themselves. Several mentioned students leave their mess for the janitor to clean. Students expressed frustration with peers' irresponsible behavior and reliance on others to pick up after them. One student said, "If you see a mess, clean it up." Other students addressed vandalism to the newly remodeled

bathroom. These perceptions are related to Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, and Responsible Decision-Making within the School environment.

Belonging and Peer Relationships. Students shared their struggle with feelings of belonging post-COVID. One student stated, “After coming back from homeschooling, it was hard to get back in.” Another said other students had maintained friendships when they were home, and “I didn’t know if I still fit in.” Students expressed their challenges of reintegrating into peer groups and rebuilding peer relationships post-pandemic. They pointed out that some students came back after a few months while others were out a year or more. The break from their peer group made them uncertain about where they fit in when they returned. These concerns within the Classroom and School environments are related to Social Awareness and Relationship Skills.

Classroom Engagement and Learning. Students reported they felt mostly positive about the teaching and learning in their classroom. They stated they scored “I like going to school each day” low because they were tired in the morning and don’t get enough sleep, they don’t want to be around people, and they would rather stay home and play games. Some students felt other students disrupted the learning environment, and they did not like having to sit in class for so long. In addition, students expressed concerns about balancing school, home life, and extra-curricular activities. Some students discussed feeling overwhelmed when schoolwork is hard. These concerns in the Classroom environment are related to Self-Management, and Responsible Decision-Making.

Consistency and Discipline. Students expressed concerns about inconsistently enforced rules, yet they seemed more concerned with what might happen than with what has happened or is happening. Students shared a concern on the bus that other kids have cell phones could take

videos on TikTok. They fear students might use videos against them. Other students were concerned about the bus crashing when they don't have seatbelts or that one of our monthly safety drills (such as a recent lockdown drill) would actually be the real thing. These fears correlate with research on increased anxiety in children post-pandemic and indicate deficiencies in Self-Awareness, Self-Management, and Responsible Decision-Making within all CASEL environments.

Discrepancies. The Studer Education Student Survey and the Oregon SEED Survey data revealed notable discrepancies, particularly in student perceptions of adult relationships. The statewide SEED data showed a significant downward trend regarding perceptions of adult support and safety in communication, particularly from third through sixth grades. Conversely, the Studer survey revealed students across both elementary schools rated their relationships with adults positively, with high mean scores indicating strong trust, support, and emotional care from teachers and the principal. While the SEED survey data revealed decreasing confidence in adult care and safety in adult-student interactions as students progressed through the grades, Studer survey indicated that students felt generally supported by adults. This discrepancy may suggest differences between personal or local contexts and the broader perceptions of students statewide. These contrasting findings highlight the importance of context-specific relationships in students' daily experiences and emphasize the need for local, relationship-building strategies to counteract broader negative trends.

Other notable discrepancies in the Studer survey data emerged between School A and School B. School B consistently reported higher mean scores and top-box scores, especially in feeling safe at school and on the bus, belief that rules are consistently enforced and feeling respected by peers. School A students scored these items substantially lower, expressing

concerns over inconsistent discipline, emotional safety, and peer interactions. This discrepancy may reflect differences in the school's size and structure. School B's smaller, multi-grade classroom may foster closer adult and peer relationships and stronger sense of community. These differences suggest a need to create similar supportive conditions in a larger school setting.

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CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Oregon statewide SEED Survey and local district Student Education Student Survey data, along with follow-up discussions show significant evidence that elementary students are declining in SEL competencies post-pandemic. These results are consistent with a growing body of literature of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s mental health and SEL skills (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Heath, et al., 2017; Sprang & Silman, 2013; Taylor, et al., 2017; TELL, 2018). As Almasi et al. (2023), Asambang (2023), Panchal et al. (2023), Tambunan et al. (2021), and Theuring (2023) have more recently reported, the pandemic has had a profound impact on young children’s social-emotional development. This study adds evidence that elementary students in Oregon have experienced a significant downward trend post-COVID, particularly in the fifth and sixth grades. These students consistently show significant declines in sense of belonging, emotional safety, and peer relationships.

Teaching and learning was disrupted during the pandemic, and that has had a lasting effect on Social Awareness and Relationship Skills among peers. Students who experienced long-term social distancing continue to experience challenges re-engaging with their peers and understanding how they fit into their peer groups. This is consistent with early research on the impact of COVID-19 by Loades et. al. (2020), Graber et al. (2020), and Ye (2020). However, these competencies are a strength when interacting with adults, including staff, family, and community partners. This may be explained by the school-family partnerships that were born out of distance learning. These relationships within all CASEL environments can serve as a foundation to build SEL skills among peers.

Students' fears around safety and discipline indicate a deficit in students' Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making skills at School A. School A students scored similarly to the longitudinal statewide SEED data in regard to safety and discipline, but this was School B's highest scoring category. The reason for this discrepancy may be the contrast between School B diminutive size and multi-grade structure and School A's traditional school settings with larger peer groups. School B students benefit from more individualized attention from staff and a more closely-knit school community. This is supported by the research of Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) and by Taylor et al. (2017) that argue the benefits of small peer groups to support prosocial ties and protective social relationships. Conversely, School A's larger student population perpetuates the challenges of developing lagging SEL skills in a state of heightened anxiety and fear.

The significant decline in fifth and sixth grade students' sense of belonging and positive peer relationships closely aligns with Loades et al.'s (2020) finding, indicating a critical need for schools to implement targeted interventions to rebuild prosocial ties. Students throughout the state of Oregon report feeling isolated from their peers despite receiving SEL instruction. This is consistent with research that illustrates how isolation from peers has increased anxiety, depression, and aggression in children (Almasi et al., 2023; Asambang, 2023; Tambunan et al., 2021; Theuring, 2023). To address these deficits, schools should focus on cooperative learning and team-building approaches to encourage positive peer interactions, especially in the fifth and sixth grades. In addition, discipline should focus on restorative practices to rebuild relationships and promote empathy.

District and State Policies may need to adjust to meet students' decreased SEL skills and resulting increase in anxiety and disengagement. A focus on clear and consistent expectations

and trauma-informed practices will support students' sense of safety. In addition, given the SEED survey's declining trends in elementary students as they advance in grade level and the Studer survey showing higher elementary scores than secondary, intentional efforts should be made to extend SEL development into the secondary school setting. Building upon positive elementary practices such as peer collaboration, high school and intergenerational mentoring, and restorative practices, may provide critical continuity and support students as they transition from the elementary setting.

Conclusion.

In this dissertation, I evaluated student mental health and wellbeing over time, and I analyzed how one rural school district in Eastern Oregon is coping with post-pandemic concerns to answer two research questions

1. How are each of the CASEL environments helping to develop the social emotional competencies of students post-pandemic?

The CASEL Framework provided a structure to organize each of the SEL competency deficits reported in the data. By framing the deficits within the CASEL environments, we can begin to understand the context of skill deficits and create action plans to provide specific supports to better address student needs. The data indicate that all four CASEL environments play a role in developing SEL competencies post-pandemic. Teachers provide academic and emotional support in the Classroom environment and foster peer relationship-building to support all SEL competencies. Classroom and School environments need to shift their focus to provide targeted interventions, especially to fifth and sixth graders, to adapt to students' specific needs. Families & Caregivers and Communities are environments of strength, thus providing a rationale for developing outside and intergenerational partnerships.

2. What social and emotional needs are not being addressed for elementary students post-pandemic?

The analysis, supported by the literature, revealed several unmet SEL needs elementary students are facing post-pandemic, particularly as students transition from fourth to fifth grades and beyond. Students in fifth and sixth grades reported statistically significant declines in sense of belonging, engagement, emotional safety, and peer relationships despite an increase in SEL instruction and support. These declines may be linked to the unique challenges they faced in early childhood during the pandemic. Prioritized areas of focus should include consistent discipline and safety protocols, trauma-informed practices, intergenerational opportunities, and small group collaborative peer learning. In addition, students should be given increased opportunities to exercise Self-Management and Responsible Decision-Making to help them manage school and home life balance.

Limitations and Controlling for Threats to Validity

One threat to internal validity is maturation. Many students who took this survey in the fall were engaging in this form of reporting for the first time. Students' attention spans, comprehension, and dedication to produce accurate information can change dramatically from one assessment to the next. One third grader shared during class discussion, "Lots of people just circled random numbers." Teachers will read the survey aloud to students in the future and share with them how the information will be used.

Another threat is instrumentation, which is related to the wording of the items. Because the survey measures used were designed for use with third through eleventh graders, some of the wording was confusing for young students. For example, many students interpreted "I like going to school each day" as enjoying the process of transitioning from home to school. Several

students noted they did not like the process but enjoyed school. Teachers will be encouraged to explain each survey item for their students to reduce this threat in the future.

A third threat to internal validity is social desirability bias. Since the school principal conducted follow-up class discussions and classroom teachers were present, this may have influenced students' openness to fully express their true feelings. Students in this age group may be more concerned with choosing the correct answer out of concern for principal and teacher approval or fear of repercussions rather than sharing their true perspectives. This did not seem to be a concern with the students in the district. The survey was anonymous, and students shared the rationale for their answers openly during discussion as these types of discussions are typical for the culture of the district.

Threats to external validity include the small convenience sample size and lack of predictive or concurrent validity. These threats limit the generalizability of the study beyond similar rural school district. Although one of the elementary schools is comparable to many other rural schools across the state, School B is unique in their resiliency to state and global SEL downward trends. Students in this study are predominately White, and a growing number of students are experiencing poverty. The Oregon SEED Surveys and current global research from the literature review serves to counter the threat to generalizability.

Additionally, history is an external validity threat. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a loss of an entire trimester of the 2019-20 school year. In-person school attendance during the following five years have varied by district and by family. Some students came back to school full time for the 2020-21 school year while others experienced multiple quarantines, engaged in distance learning, homeschooled with family, or some combination of these. Teaching and

learning during the pandemic were not equitably accessible to all students, thus many impacted students continue to experience inadequate support necessary for them to succeed with school.

Future research should include a larger sample size and greater student and environmental diversity for generalizability.

Implications:

This study aimed to help educators understand the wide range of needs elementary students and their families are experiencing post-pandemic. Key areas for focus include specific educational practices to support fifth and sixth grade students develop a sense of belonging and positive peer relationships. To address declining feelings of emotional safety, belonging, and peer engagement, specific programs and interventions.

Districts. Given that elementary students reported more positive perceptions than district averages on the Studer survey, creating a strong districtwide SEL model is essential. Districts should leverage elementary SEL programs and practices to extend support in lagging SEL skills to all grade levels. Programs such as Lunch Buddies, mentoring partnerships, and other cooperative activities pairing elementary and high school students, senior citizen, or other community mentors may help strengthen students' feelings of belonging and peer connection at every level.

Schools. Incorporating programs such as Restorative Justice can significantly enhance the feeling of emotional safety by helping students learn to communicate, resolve conflicts, and rebuild relationships constructively. Maintaining schoolwide structures to promote consistent behavior expectations, discipline, and responsibilities can build community and promote a positive school culture.

Classrooms. Implementing peer collaboration, research-based SEL curriculum, and trauma-informed practices across all grade levels can explicitly teach students strategies to support lagging SEL competencies that may have been impacted by COVID protocols. Evaluating these programs through pre- and post-assessments can determine their effectiveness.

Future Research. Future longitudinal studies examining students' SEL competency development across educational transitions—particularly from elementary to secondary levels—could provide deeper insight into the grade-level declines documented here. In addition, research into whether targeted professional development for teachers improves SEL development could help inform the design and implementation of effective sustainable interventions across all grade levels. Finally, studies exploring the impact of strategies such as peer collaboration, high school and intergenerational learning partners, and strong teacher-student relationships on SEL development could direct schools and districts to build supportive environments for students to learn and grow throughout their school careers.

Schools play a pivotal role in supporting students' emotional wellbeing, particularly in the face of unprecedented challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provided a lens through which we observed elementary students struggling with significant declines in SEL competencies, highlighting the need for responsive, targeted SEL interventions in all environments. As we continue to support students to navigate an uncertain educational landscape, implementing approaches such as restorative practices, peer mentoring, and trauma-informed instruction can profoundly impact students' perceptions and wellbeing. The strategies and insights drawn from this research may support students' immediate SEL needs as well as empower them to create a more resilient future.

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