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PROACTIVE PROSOCIAL STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY FIRST-GRADE TEACHERS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the

Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and
Learning Program of
Kutztown University of
Pennsylvania

In Partial
Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Education
Doctorate

By Lisa M. Skiadas

May, 2020

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The Dissertation for the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching
and Learning Degree

By Lisa M. Skiadas

has been approved on behalf of the College of Education

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Helen S. Hamlet, Committee Chair

Dr. Amber Jean-Marie Pabon, Committee Member

Dr. Susan Ursprung, Committee Member

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Abstract

Primary students begin their school careers with widely varied skill sets in the areas of social and emotional competence, executive function, and self-regulation. However, many schools, like the one in this study, do not include social and emotional learning (SEL) in their curricula or tiered intervention frameworks. Students who struggle with basic classroom functions and behaviors do not receive the maximum benefit from academic instruction. Conversely, high levels of social and emotional competence have been linked to future academic success, financial and job security and better physical and mental health.

This investigation sought to identify proactive strategies used by three first-grade teachers in a rural primary (K-2) school in Pennsylvania and to identify trends participants have observed among first-grade students. The three teachers were selected by their peers and administrators as possessing particular skill in improving students' social and emotional competence. Additional participants included four special area teachers: art, guidance, and two physical education teachers. All seven participants participated in semi-structured interviews intended to collect their observations about trends they see among their first-grade students. Additionally, each of the three first-grade participants was observed eight times at various times during the school day.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A Concern in Practice

Due to a back injury in the fall of 2014 and eventual spinal fusion surgery, I was unable to teach for 18 months. When I finally returned to my job teaching music to primary school children, it was as if someone had flipped a switch. I noticed that my young students seemed restless and impatient. A number of the children struggled to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, take turns, make friends, or regulate their emotions. Many of my students, all kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders, seemed to lack the basic social skills needed to function in a group setting. They interrupted conversations with no regard for the person who had been speaking, demanded almost constant attention, argued about being first in line or first to be chosen for activities, and had difficulty sharing and remaining patient. While it is entirely possible that this change had occurred gradually and that my distance from my context only made it seem sudden, it was clear to me that the situation required serious investigation. As a teacher and as a leader, I have never been one to avoid or minimize challenges, particularly when those problems could have a serious academic and emotional impact upon my students. Although I had considered pursuing a doctorate when I was young and energetic, I had since decided that I was content with my master's degree. I loved my job and felt that with each year, I was improving my practice. However, after returning to teaching, I found myself thinking and talking about this problem often, and the sense of urgency I felt was exactly the push I needed to locate a doctoral program that would enable me to investigate and propose solutions to this troubling phenomenon.

Call to Action

In an educational climate that is strongly focused upon data and standardized test performance, we need to thoughtfully consider whether we as educators are producing commodities or educating children (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). A single-minded focus on high test scores disregards students' humanness and individual social and emotional selves. Prioritizing test scores can result in the standardization of education, which often problematically results in schools neglecting to attend to the different talents and achievements of students "...especially those from minorities and those with disabilities and special education needs" (Peters & Oliver, 2009, p. 273). In fact, research indicates that improving students' social and emotional competency can improve the proverbial bottom line by increasing test scores by 11 to 17 percent (Durlak et al., 2011). By attending to only the academic facet of students' lives, we fail to equip them with the necessary coping and interpersonal skills they will need to exist and succeed in the global economy (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). Recent estimates suggest that 40 to 60 percent of U.S. high school students are chronically disengaged (Greenberg et al., 2017). Conversely, educational integration of academic, psychological, and social aspects of self promotes student well-being (McGilchrist, 2012; Siegel, 2010). Students are more receptive to instruction when they see their teachers as human beings and interact with them on a personal level (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). In addition, students with positive peer relationships typically achieve more emotional and material support from peers and experience a greater sense of engagement and belonging at school, thereby contributing to academic achievement (Boulton, Don, & Boulton, 2011; Gallardo, Barrasa, & Guevara-Viejo, 2016; Raposa, Laws, & Ansell, 2016). However, the unfortunate reality in education is that what is assessed gets emphasized and even well-meaning teachers are forced into a position to prioritize academic instruction over providing opportunities

for children to build character and to develop empathy and social responsibility (Diamond, 2010).

As a music teacher, I occupy a unique space in which I regularly interact with more than 20 classes of young children. I am able to see the whole picture, to observe trends that occur school-wide and are not simply a product of one self-contained set of students. My observations, coupled with a body of research detailing the troubling future implications of a systemic failure to address the whole child, motivated me to understand the phenomena I have experienced and to find a way forward. In investigating the prosocial strategies used by three first-grade teacher subjects, I hope to paint an accurate picture of what is and to detail a starting point from which we can collectively make decisions about how to proceed. I opted to work with first-grade teachers because they represent the median of the three grades housed in my setting.

Justification for the Study

Students who have mastered social and emotional skills are better equipped to form relationships with others, experience higher academic achievement, and exhibit better mental and physical health (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). In the long term, socially and emotionally competent children are also more likely to be ready for college, experience career success, and become engaged citizens (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). When children struggle to establish basic school behaviors like cooperation, rule-following, and getting along with peers, they do not receive the maximum benefit from academic instruction (Gresham & Elliott, 2014). Despite research indicating that social and emotional learning is vital to promoting academic and life success, educators continue to hold inconsistent opinions around whether social instruction should be explicitly taught in the educational environment (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). While stakeholders may worry that interventions focused on social behavior

may result in a loss of academic instructional time and may shortchange academic outcomes, research indicates that failing to address social issues in the classroom may have potentially life-altering effects for students. Guo, Zhou, and Feng (2018) contend that time spent on cultivating prosocial behavior is far from wasted, as an increase in prosocial competence promotes students' social and academic functioning. Furthermore, both longitudinal and experimental studies suggest that the positive relationship between prosocial functioning and academic success may be causal (Capara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015). In a like manner, social and emotional competency in childhood has been linked to important life outcomes like financial and job security and physical and mental health 20 and 30 years later (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). Additionally, eliminating the need to interrupt instruction to solve or mediate social issues among individual students or groups of students will net an overall gain in quality instructional time. The intent of this study is to closely examine how selected first-grade teachers in a rural primary school promote prosocial behaviors in the absence of an explicit social skills curriculum and to correlate classroom strategies with observed behavioral trends based upon observation and in-depth interviews with classroom teachers and other stakeholders.

Well-developed, age-appropriate social skills have been linked to high academic achievement (Gresham, 2015). Recent research has proposed several conceptual and theoretical frameworks aimed at detailing how effective social interactions with adults and peers contribute to academic success (Denham & Brown, 2010; Eisenberg, Valiente & Eggum, 2010). These theories indicate that students who are able to form social relationships and regulate emotions receive greater benefits from academic resources like positive teacher attention, assistance from peers and classmates, and peer and adult modeling of academic skills (Cooper, Moore, Powers,

Cleveland, & Greenberg, 2014). Even among students who display risk factors for future academic difficulties such as externalizing behaviors, social competence appears to predict long-term academic achievement (Kwon, Kim, & Sheridan, 2012; Luo, Hughes, Liew, & Kwok, 2009). Additionally, preliminary evidence indicates that social and emotional learning may serve as a key component in understanding and reducing long-standing achievement gaps defined by racial and socioeconomic differences among learners (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). While previous research with samples considered high-risk suggested that social competence was associated with improved academic functioning in first grade, a 2010 study indicated that these positive effects extend through fifth grade (McWayne, Cheung, Wright, & Hahs-Vaughn, 2010). Moreover, a recent benefit-cost analysis conducted at Columbia University indicates a sizeable economic return for schools that invest in SEL programs, with a projected ratio of 11 dollars in return per dollar spent (Belfield et al., 2015). However, many schools make little or no provision for social skills in the curriculum. As the number of primary students entering school with social needs increases, the classroom environment is compromised in a way that can inhibit academic achievement. The purpose of this study is to conduct a series of observations and in-depth interviews and to document the ways in which selected first-grade teachers in a rural primary school address social skills instruction, if at all, and the correlation between each approach and observed trends in student behavior. Using case study methodology, this study intends to answer the following questions: 1. How do first-grade teacher participants proactively promote prosocial skills in the classroom? 2. What behavioral trends have classroom teachers and specialists observed among first-grade students?

Historical Background

School climate has been deemed an essential factor in students' success, both academically and behaviorally (Smith & Shoupe, 2018). While there exist many definitions of school climate, it can be generally described as the quality and character of the school environment (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009) that is created through the "values, goals, norms, expectations, teaching practices, leadership styles, and bureaucratic structure of a school" (National School Climate Council, 2007). A social climate of acceptance results in increased student engagement, higher academic achievement, and positive peer interactions (Albrecht, Mathur, Jones, & Alazemi, 2015). Conversely, research has documented that punitive discipline models in school negatively affect school culture and individual growth (Haymovitz, Houseal-Allport, Lee, & Svistova, 2018). As early as 1978, Vygotsky recognized that social functioning with peers is necessary for the development of new ideas and skills. School is one of our culture's primary sources of socialization (Albrecht, et al, 2015), and it is crucial to establish supportive classroom environments that encourage social communication and social problem-solving strategies to optimize student success (Hebert et al., 2014). Students acquire socially acceptable behaviors in climates where positive social networks support opportunities for learning (Albrecht et al., 2015). Many years' worth of research has shown that children with better developed social and emotional learning skills consistently experience higher achievement both in school and in life (McKown, 2017).

Researchers have documented a predictive relationship between positive social behaviors and high academic achievement (Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). In a 2016 longitudinal study, Rabiner, Godwin, and Dodge found that school grades in young adulthood were significantly lower for students who had not experienced peer acceptance in early childhood. Many school districts across the United States are beginning to include social-

emotional learning in state learning standards due to the positive links between prosocial behavior and positive psychosocial and academic outcomes (Gresham & Elliott, 2014). Research suggests that social and emotional skills are malleable and can be both taught and learned (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). To support this effort, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is assisting 55 school districts through its Collaborating Districts Initiative as the schools incorporate various Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. CASEL has also formed a Collaborating States Initiative to help states to develop policies and guidelines for SEL in schools. All 50 states have SEL standards for preschool students, and four states, including Pennsylvania, have K-12 SEL standards in place (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). CASEL organizes SEL outcomes around five competence clusters: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Even as early as 1997, Bandura's theory of social cognition suggested a causal path between social behavior and academic achievement. Social Learning Theory suggests that social behaviors are learned through observing others and that children internalize and encode these observations to store and retrieve as a basis for later action (Bandura, 1977). Bandura further posits that social competence and social intelligence are two separate constructs; social intelligence results from socially competent behavior (1977). Thus, social intelligence cannot exist without social competence because experience influences knowledge acquisition (Bandura, 1977). The tenets of Social Learning Theory are fundamental in designing effective social skills interventions in schools, particularly Bandura's suggestion that children learn appropriate social behaviors through modeling, rehearsal, and feedback (Michelson, Sugai, Wood, & Kazdin, 1983).

In the following section, I will review research around holistic education and the problematic implications of a singular focus upon academic outcomes. Additionally, I will review the literature around existing social skills interventions and curricula and their effectiveness in the school setting.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this research, the following definitions will be operationalized:

- Cognitive recognition will be defined as the basic cognitive skills needed to direct behavior toward goal attainment.
- Emotional processes will be those skills that allow children to recognize, express, and regulate their feelings as well as understand the emotional perspectives of others (Jones et al., 2017).
- Executive function will comprise attention, inhibition, and working memory and will include the skills that help children to sequence behavior, inhibit impulsivity, switch perspectives, and use information to make decisions.
- Prosocial will be defined as “intentional social behavior to benefit others, such as sharing with, helping, and comforting others” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, p. 114). The term prosocial was coined by Wispe (1972) as an antonym to antisocial behavior and was intended to refer to any action that “benefits or at the very least promotes harmonious relations with others” (Hay, 1994, p. 33).
- Relationship skills will include those tools needed to establish and maintain relationships and to act within socially-accepted norms.

- Responsible decision-making will refer to the knowledge and skills required to make decisions around social interactions and behavior regardless of the setting or context (Greenberg et al., 2017).
- Based upon the five competence clusters of SEL set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), self-awareness will be defined as the ability to understand one's own emotions and values, the capacity to assess one's own strengths and limitations, and willingness to adopt a growth mindset. Social competence will be defined as a skill set that helps to facilitate effective social interactions (Denham & Brown, 2010). Social skills will be defined as "a specific class of behaviors that an individual exhibits in order to complete a social task.
- Self-management will be defined as the skills and attitudes used to regulate emotions and behaviors. Examples of self-management include the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through challenges.
- Social and emotional learning (SEL) will be used synonymously with character education, 21st-century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). SEL will refer to "children's ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship" (Jones & Doolittle, p. 4). Social tasks might include such things as peer-group entry, having a conversation, making friends, or playing a game with peers" (Gresham, 2016, p. 320).
- Social awareness will be defined as the ability to engage in perspective-taking and to empathize and act with compassion.

- Social intelligence will be defined as “the ability to successfully perceive, remember, understand, and interpret social contexts, cues, and information” (Dowswell & Chessor, 2014).

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

While it has traditionally been considered the role of the family and home to equip students with social skills and abilities that will allow them to succeed in a group academic setting, students are starting their school careers with varying degrees of social and emotional competence. These discrepancies may result from increased exposure to media, limited adult supervision, socioeconomic factors, or societal changes in traditional family structures (Hall, Jones, & Claxton, 2008). Such variances can be problematic in the classroom and can lead to negative academic outcomes for some students as they progress through school. Children who exhibit low levels of empathy and high levels of externalizing behaviors are much more likely to engage in bullying behaviors (Elliott, Hwang, & Wang, 2019). Additionally, evidence exists that high levels of relational aggression may predict substance use behaviors in adolescents (Quigley & Maggi, 2014). Rabiner, Godwin, and Dodge (2016) found that children with less developed social skills are more likely to be rejected by peers and have difficulty establishing or reestablishing supportive relations with teachers. Furthermore, research has shown that over time, students who have experienced rejection may gravitate toward deviant peers (Lansford, Dodge, Fontaine, Bates, & Pettit, 2014) which may serve to further hinder academic engagement and undermine future success (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011). In a like manner, research has shown that children's social acceptance by peers at a young age contributes to academic success, while a lack of peer acceptance may lead to lower academic achievement (Rabiner, Godwin, & Dodge, 2016). A four-week longitudinal study found that children who performed three acts of

kindness showed significantly higher peer acceptance than those who visited three places (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schornert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), which aligns with the suggestion that peer acceptance may serve as a mediating variable between prosocial behavior and peer acceptance (Guo, Zhou, & Feng, 2018). Research further indicates that the development of social and emotional competency is as powerful as the development of academic skills in driving students' educational outcomes and helping individuals to maintain physical and mental health (Miyamoto, 2016). Sotardi (2016) conducted a longitudinal study that examined daily school stress among 65 elementary school children and found critical relations between exposure to daily stress at school, student's self-appraisals of stress and future expectations, and usage of coping strategies. Results indicated that students felt underprepared to cope with stress in socially appropriate, effective ways (Sotardi, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

History and overview of holistic education.

The holistic paradigm in education aims to address and develop all significant aspects of the experience of being human. It contends that education should cultivate students' intellect, physicality, spirituality, emotions, and social competence. Additionally, proponents of a holistic approach believe that the educational experience should strengthen relationships between individuals, relationships with the environment, and different ways of knowing (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, & Liaghtadar, 2012). There is no one way to apply the holistic paradigm—rather, it encompasses a set of principles meant to be utilized in diverse ways (Miller, 1992). These principles challenge the consumerist culture and its singular focus upon standards and testing. The roots of holistic thought can be traced back to aboriginal and indigenous cultures, and the original concept is derived from the Greek *holon*, which views the universe as an

interrelated whole that cannot meaningfully be reduced to its component parts (Lee, 1997). The two most significant holistic educators in the past century have been Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner (Grimes, 2007). Montessori (1965), who founded the Montessori School movement, believed in nurturing the spiritual development of children and allowing their personalities to unfold so that they would grow into independent adults. Steiner (1976), who founded the Waldorf School movement, referred to children's "soul-life" and how it could grow within the educational setting.

Benefits of a holistic paradigm.

In 2014, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), in conjunction with the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), developed a model of education intended to align education with public and school health. The website they developed exists in the public domain and offers a list of indicators for a holistic approach to teaching and learning. The site additionally includes a free assessment tool for schools and provides state-specific "report cards" around how well schools are meeting students' needs. Finally, the organization offers state-specific recommendations for improvement in five categories: health, safety, engagement, support, and challenges (ASCD, 2015). Pennsylvania's "Whole-Child Snapshot" urges schools to consider the importance of not only academic skills but also personalized support, safe environments, good health, and challenging learning opportunities in preparing children for lifelong learning and well-paying jobs.

Maria Montessori held that the secret to transforming society was to transform the child (Haskins, 2011). She believed it to be the task of both educators and society to "permit the inner development of human personality and to develop a more conscious vision of the mission of mankind and the present conditions of social life" (Montessori, 1949, p. 25). Her vision of

educating young students focused upon the cultivation of both mind and spirit (Haskins, 2011). Increased concerns around performativity in education are causing a shift away from a holistic approach to teaching and learning (Adams, Monahan, & Wills, 2015). However, it is important to remember that our nation's founders established the public school system not only to teach academic skills but also to "create a competent citizenry made up of independent and critical thinkers who could work effectively with others and contribute to democratic society" (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 16). Despite its long international history, holistic education is getting lost in the shuffle, giving rise to concerns about children's overall well-being (Poelsel, Dulfer, & Turnball, 2012). This shift is especially problematic given the number of stressors affecting children. Family conflicts, economic needs, health issues, and media messages "combine to create emotional pressures on our students that they cannot put in the locker with their coats as they proceed through the school day" (Elias, DeFini, & Bergmann, 2010, p. 30). If children are to flourish and thrive as human beings, attention to their personal, social, and emotional well-being is imperative (Adams et al., 2015). The classroom serves as an optimal setting for the acquisition of prosocial behaviors given the fact that young children spend the majority of their awake time at school (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012).

Failure to address the whole child negatively impacts pupils' lived experiences in classrooms. Results of a 2019 study indicated that kindergarten students who struggle with executive functioning skills have difficulty organizing and self-regulating their learning (Geary et al, 2009; Geary, Hoard, Nugent, & Bailey, 2012). Further, preschools in the United States are expelling children for unmanageable behavior at a rate over three times that reported in elementary and secondary grades (Sherwin, 2013). In addition, since the 1990s, the instances of psychotropic medications prescribed to children under the age of five for intolerable behavior is

on the rise (Harrison, Cluxton-Keller, & Gross, 2012; Knight, Knight, & Bain, 2011). A 2010 study conducted at Brown University revealed that the prescription of psychiatric medications to preschoolers had doubled between 2001 and 2007 in a privately-insured cohort. Of further concern is the fact that in 2013, elementary students were reported to be experiencing five to eight times as many clinically significant anxiety disorders and instances of major depression than just 50 years ago (Gray, 2013). The World Health Organization (2010, p. 1) defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” Half of all lifetime diagnoses of mental illness begin by age 14, and 75% are diagnosed by age 24 (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005). Societal changes in the last century, including the shift from a manufacturing to an information economy, indicate the need to reevaluate educational goals. Social and economic pressures in conjunction with exposure to an increasingly complex world through media and technology call for schools to take action and to equip students with the tools they need to manage stress and to work collaboratively (Greenberg et al., 2017).

When students experience repeated difficulty in regulating behavior in social interactions, they begin to develop self-representations as children who cannot control themselves, thereby negatively impacting their self-efficacy as students. Conversely, students situated in a context that supports and encourages attempts at self-regulation are more likely to form a self-concept that promotes effective negotiation of future regulatory challenges (Blair & Diamond, 2008). This positive or negative feedback loop results in a self-fulfilling prophecy over time, and the trajectories of students with above- or below-average executive functioning skills diverge, exaggerating what were once small discrepancies and producing an ever-widening achievement

gap (Fitzpatrick, McKinnon, Blair, & Willoughby, 2014). Inadequate development of social skills at an early age initiates a cycle in which resulting social issues can prevent children from future social growth and development (Dowswell & Chessor, 2014). Therefore, the school environment needs to create learning environments that are sensitive to students' individual backgrounds and lived experiences in order to support both academic and social success (Tirri, 2011). A fundamental goal for preschool and early elementary education should be the development of a curriculum that supports self-regulation by providing instructional and emotional support and that uses appropriate measures to assess its effects upon students' cognitive, social-emotional, and academic abilities (Blair & Diamond, 2008).

Equity.

In considering or proposing any systemic change, it is imperative that we first critically examine both the motivation and implications of such a change for all stakeholders. In looking at executive functioning, and more specifically, self-regulation in primary school students, we need to consider students' lived experiences and how they may influence school readiness. For the purposes of this dissertation, self-regulation will be operationalized as the ability to maintain focused attention, regulate responses to stress and strong emotions, and engage in positive social interactions (Blair & Raver, 2015). An ever-growing body of research links the ability to self-regulate with positive short and long-term behavioral and academic school success (Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009). In addition, recent scholarship suggests that both positive and negative environmental conditions and social interactions become biologically embedded and can shape brain and behavioral development (Blair & Raver, 2012; McEwen & Gianaros, 2011). Because experience shapes children's psychological and physiological development, there exists the possibility for a disparity in expectations between the

in-school and out-of-school environments. Cognitive and social-emotional skills necessary to develop self-regulation may be less developed in children growing up in poverty or other adverse conditions (Blair & Raver, 2015). Data from a longitudinal study called the Family Life Project (FLP) indicate that higher levels of poverty and material hardship predict children's ability to self-regulate based upon observed executive function skills and salivary cortisol levels (Blair, et al., 2011). Salivary cortisol measured at ages 7, 15, and 24 months of age was significantly higher for children living in poverty and was shown to partially mediate the effect of both parenting and poverty on children's cognitive abilities. Additionally, the researchers discovered that "the typical level or set point for cortisol is higher in African American children than in White children in infancy and early childhood and that higher cortisol partially mediates an association between African American ethnicity and lower executive function ability at age 3 years" (Blair et al., 2011, p. 1980). Based on biological sensitivity theory, both highly supportive and highly unsupportive environments lead to elevated stress physiology (Ellis, Essex & Boyce, 2005). However, the increase would not be as regulated in an unsupportive environment, which could lead to reactive and rigid forms of cognition and behavior. Conversely, in a supportive environment, stress hormones would be more regulated and would, therefore, facilitate flexible forms of cognition and behavior such as executive function (Blair, 2010).

In addition to considering socioeconomic status and the role it plays in school readiness, we must also acknowledge systemic educational inequities around race and ethnicity. In the United States, gaps in academic achievement across ethnic lines are documented as early as kindergarten (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Over time, these early gaps widen and reduce the likelihood that students will be able to catch up with their peers (Reardon, 2011). Further problematic is the fact that quality preschool programs are often unavailable to students of color

and those living in poverty (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Literature about Montessori education suggests that students enrolled in Montessori preschool and kindergarten programs and even middle and secondary-level programs demonstrate greater academic, social, emotional, and behavioral gains than those enrolled in more traditional programs (Kayili & Ari, 2011; Lillard, 2012). Some studies have even suggested that the benefits of Montessori preschool extend through high school, particularly for Black males (Dohrmann, Nishida, Gartner, Lipsky, & Grimm, 2007). While children from all racial and ethnic groups benefit from preschool education, evidence suggests that benefits may vary among groups (Raikes, Vogel, & Love, 2013). Therefore, further investigation of the effects of preschool for children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds is an important next step, especially in the context of Montessori programs. Because Montessori schools have traditionally attracted children from families of higher socioeconomic status, research around these programs has been limited (Lillard, 2012).

In the interest of broadening the scope of Montessori research, the Miami School Readiness Project (MSRP) study investigated both school readiness as a function of Montessori vs. traditional curricula and whether ethnicity (Black or Latino/a) moderated the relationship between readiness and curriculum (Ansari & Winsler, 2014). The sample included roughly 7,000 Latino/a and 6,700 Black four-year-old students enrolled in high-poverty, Title I public pre-kindergarten programs in Miami. This study is especially important because it is one of the first to examine subgroup differences among inner-city children. Results indicated that Latino/a students who had scored below national averages on pre-assessments excelled in both pre-academic and behavioral skills when taught using the Montessori curriculum. While all students in the study made gains in cognitive, language, and motor skills, Black children in this particular study fared better in conventional pre-K programs. However, differences in outcomes ranged

from negligible to small (Ansari & Winsler, 2014). The authors hypothesize several potential explanations for these differences. The Montessori curriculum is highly phonetic, as is the Spanish language, which may have helped Latino/a students to connect to their native tongue. Additionally, in accordance with the results of previous studies, Latino/a children who receive phonetic instruction demonstrate positive language and literacy gains (Cheung & Slavin, 2012). Furthermore, the Latino/a participants may have come from Spanish-speaking homes, which means that they may have been first- or second-generation immigrants. According to DeFeyer and Winsler (2009), children of immigrants exhibit stronger social-emotional and academic skills than native-born students.

Numerous large, urban public school districts in cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, Dallas, Cincinnati, Hartford, and Denver have implemented the Montessori curriculum in some of their magnet, charter, and neighborhood schools. Report card data shows that the proportion of students in Montessori programs scoring proficient or higher on states' math and English is greater than those of students in other schools within the same districts. In addition, results demonstrated that students in schools with strong Montessori programs made greater gains in executive function, reading, vocabulary, and social problem-solving (Lillard, 2012). A separate study conducted in a large, urban district in North Carolina compared reading and math achievement scores for African American third graders in public Montessori programs with the scores of students in other magnet schools within the same district. In comparing scores from end-of-grade exams in reading and math, the researchers found no significant difference in math scores; however, the students in the Montessori programs scored significantly higher in reading (Brown & Lewis, 2017).

Montessori education has acquired a stigma as an early childhood approach for the elite due to its prevalence in private school spaces in the United States (Murray, 2012). However, according to the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NSMPS), there are currently nearly 500 public schools offering public early childhood, elementary, and middle school programs (2014). More than a quarter of students enrolled in these programs are African American, and nearly one-fifth of students are Hispanic or Latino/a (Debs, 2015). Proponents of the Montessori curriculum argue that this method has the potential to mitigate and address the failure of American schools to adequately serve students of color (Hall & Murray, 2011). Hall and Murray (2011) identified intersections between the Montessori approach and research-documented culturally responsive teaching practices for African American students. Many high-poverty urban schools implement a behaviorist approach, while Montessori programs emphasize flexibility, individualized instruction, promoting student autonomy and choice, and building strong relationships. Racial disciplinary discrepancy was found to be less disproportionate in public Montessori schools when compared to more conventional school settings in a 2015 study by Brown and Steele. It is important to note, however, that other studies have failed to corroborate an advantage for African American students in Montessori programs (Mallett & Schroeder, 2015); additional research is needed in this area.

Reform and transformation.

Regardless of the method of implementation, a holistic approach to education has the potential to effect radical reform. Our current reductionist system views children as separate entities in competition for limited resources. Conversely, holistic education embraces a global, spiritual, ecological epistemology centered on people and relationships. (Miller, 2000). Rather than aiming to perpetuate social and cultural inequities, a whole-child approach aims to serve

and develop human potential to the fullest extent, which is “a radical alternative to prevailing social and cultural constraints on human development” (Miller, 2000, p. 387). In shifting toward a more holistic paradigm, we must acknowledge the danger of haphazard or substandard implementation of individual methods. Failure to recognize the underlying worldview of any method reduces that method to one more instance of reductionism (Miller, 2000).

Implementation of holistic principles in the classroom may help to equalize outcomes for students of low SES and those who struggle with executive functioning (Lillard et al., 2017). In a longitudinal study that compared two public Montessori schools with conventional schools in a high-poverty American city, Montessori children outperformed their non-Montessori peers on measures of academic achievement, social understanding, and mastery orientation and reported greater liking of academic tasks (Lillard et al., 2017). In the same study, discrepancies in academic achievement between low SES Montessori students and higher SES traditionally-schooled children were smaller at each data collection point, and there existed no statistically significant difference in academic achievement by the conclusion of the study. Equally striking and encouraging was the fact that children identified with lower executive functioning scored equally well on academic measures as students with higher executive functioning skills (Lillard et al., 2017).

According to Pennsylvania’s “Whole Child Snapshot”, there are a number of recommended steps Pennsylvania schools can take toward meeting established indicators of a holistic focus and ensuring that students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2015). In terms of health, ASCD recommends that schools adopt the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model and that schools connect families in need with low or no-cost physical and mental health services. Safety recommendations include regular

school climate assessments that incorporate input from staff, families, and students and focused support of social and emotional learning and character development. To improve student engagement, ASCD suggests that schools offer a variety of extracurricular and extended-day learning opportunities as well as providing credit for experiential learning outside of school. In the category of support, schools are tasked with creating individualized learning plans that connect to students' academic and career goals as well as supporting parent education, family literacy programs, and ongoing professional development for school personnel. Finally, ASCD recommends that schools challenge students by providing coursework via multiple pathways and using accountability systems that measure student performance and growth and that schools intentionally strive to improve student engagement by attending to their social and emotional needs (ASCD, 2015).

Social Skills Interventions and Curricula

Research documents numerous interventions to potentially increase students' social competence. First, schools that develop school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) geared toward reducing inappropriate behaviors and teaching prosocial skills report fewer behavior problems (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012). Comparatively, Gresham (2015) defines academic enablers as the behaviors and attitudes that allow students to participate and receive maximum benefit from classroom academic instruction. Using the Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES), Gresham (2015) identified social skills as one such academic enabler that can positively impact academic achievement. Albrecht et al. (2015) employed Social Skills Training and Aggression Reduction Techniques plus Time-Away (START^{plus}) in three Midwestern U.S. elementary schools over a three-year period. Based on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, the program includes social skills training at the universal

primary level, small group instruction at the targeted level, and individualized, intensive intervention in conflict resolution and problem-solving at the tertiary level. Results indicated significant increases in attendance, reductions in time away and disciplinary referrals, and mixed results in academic achievement scores. Informal survey and anecdotal data indicated changes in the climate of the school (Albrecht et al., 2015). A study conducted by Harpin, Rossi, Kim, and Swanson (2016) tested a 10-week Mindfulness program, an amalgam of MindUp (The Hawn Foundation, 2011) and Mindful Schools (Cowan, 2011) curricula, with a fourth-grade class and compared results to those from a matched comparison classroom. The instruction was delivered by a certified Mindfulness Instructor.

At the end of the study, teachers reported significant positive gains in prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and academic performance. Qualitative student feedback indicated high satisfaction with the curriculum and examples of students' ability to transfer Mindfulness skills to unique settings (Harpin et al., 2016). Merritt, Wanless, Rimm-Kaufman, and Peugh (2012) investigated children's relations between emotionally supportive teacher-student interaction and children's social behaviors and self-regulatory skills in first-grade classrooms. Results indicated that higher emotional support in teacher-student interactions correlated with lower child aggression and improved behavioral self-control (Merritt et al., 2012). A 2014 study examined the effects of the Coping Power Program on reducing behavioral problems and improving prosocial skills in nine first and second grade classes. Findings showed a significant reduction in problematic behaviors and an increase in prosocial behaviors (Muratori et al., 2014).

In addition to a number of interventions, complete curricula exist for teaching social skills to children. The Second Step program is a skills-focused social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that focuses on direct instruction around skills that promote learning, empathy,

compassion, emotional regulation, and interpersonal problem-solving (Cook et al., 2018). The curriculum, grounded in social learning theory, centers around three main areas of social-emotional competence: empathy, social problem solving, and anger management. It draws from other conceptual frameworks as well, including social information-processing (Dodge, Petit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986), cognitive-behavioral therapy (Kendall & Braswell, 1985), and self-regulation through verbal mediation (Luria, 1961). In order to adopt and execute this program with fidelity, classroom teachers or school counselors are primarily responsible for teaching the curriculum to students. Additionally, training is to be provided for all school staff, parents, and on-site trainers in order to create a school climate that addresses children's social well-being and supports the use of positive social behaviors (Cook et al., 2018).

Effectiveness of Social Skills Interventions in Schools

For students who exhibit underdeveloped coping skills, low self-esteem, inability to resolve conflict appropriately, a propensity for anger or aggression, or a lack of empathy, one may question the potential effectiveness of school-based social skills interventions. Students spend much of their time outside of the school environment and are subject to all manner of external influences over which the school has no control. However, there is a significant body of research to document the effectiveness of particular interventions and to suggest that social skills can be both taught and improved in the educational setting. Research additionally suggests that SEL programs that focus on character development, relationship-building, and enhancing school climate increase students' life potential and lead to academic success (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Unfortunately, most schools currently emphasize treatment over prevention (Greenberg et al., 2017). Further, many schools that do include SEL curricula present

them in the same ways across multiple years without considering age or grade-appropriate scope and sequence (Jones et al., 2017).

A 2015 study by Gresham indicates that social skills interventions are particularly beneficial to students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). A meta-analytic review of the literature shows that 65% of students with EBD improve when provided with social skills interventions. Merritt et al. (2012) discovered that emotional support from a teacher was critical in lowering aggression and increasing self-control among first-grade students, regardless of the number of socioeconomic risk factors present for each child. The results of this study further suggest the importance of classroom interactions in the acquisition of social and emotional competence (Merritt et al., 2012). Muratori et al. conducted a randomized trial of the Coping Power Program with nine first and second grade classes randomly assigned to intervention or control conditions. The program is aimed at preventing aggressive behaviors. Results indicated that those students who received the intervention showed more prosocial behaviors post-intervention (Muratori et al., 2014). Ross and Sabey (2015) investigated the effect of blending Check-In Check-Out and social skills instruction as a Tier Two intervention within the RTI framework.

The Check-In Check-Out program is designed to reduce problem behavior and increase prosocial behavior. Results indicated gains in positive social engagement and a decrease in negative social engagement for four of the five participants. Additionally, school staff rated the program as both effective and efficient (Ross & Sabey, 2015). In a meta-analysis of school-based SEL programs, results indicate that policymakers and teachers can contribute to healthy child development by incorporating research-based SEL programs school-wide. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated that SEL programs were successfully implemented by classroom teachers

and school staff and did not require outside personnel for effective delivery (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Greenberg et al. (2017) advocate for a public health approach to SEL in which interventions would treat not only those students affected by targeted problems but would also include prevention strategies aimed at the entire student population. They further suggest that a well-designed SEL program is most effective when it is SAFE, that is, sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (2017). In recent years there has been growing emphasis upon universal approaches to promote well-being for all individuals, not only those experiencing mental illness (Weare, 2010). SEL has been recognized as one effective means of fostering mental health in schools (Sklad, Diekstra, DeRitter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012). Too often, the perceived failure of SEL is due to insufficient dosage or duration. When SEL is viewed as secondary or extracurricular, SEL lessons are often abridged or skipped in favor of academic instruction. Effective whole-child education should not be limited to the classroom; it needs to occur in hallways, on the playground, in the cafeteria, and outside of school. Furthermore, staff needs thorough training in how to use a common language, promote SEL skills, and facilitate conflict resolution (Jones et al, 2017). Courses focusing upon SEL are not mandatory in most teacher education programs, and SEL workshops are generally not required in practicing educators' professional development. In order for widespread and sustained positive outcomes, SEL integration in preservice teacher training and staff development is crucial (Hymel, Low, Starosta, Gill, & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Furthermore, SEL programs are effective only when schools provide infrastructure and district-wide commitment and support (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Gaps in Existing Research

While a large body of research exists around social skills in children, there are a number of areas in need of exploration to further understanding of this phenomenon and to best serve students in schools. Ross and Sabey (2015) found that Check-In Check-Out in addition to social skills instruction was effective as a Tier Two intervention within an RTI framework and that it resulted in increased positive social engagement. However, they also note that further research is needed to identify and evaluate effective strategies to address social skills needs within a PBIS framework (Ross & Sabey, 2015). In a 2016 study, Rabiner et al. found that students who experience peer rejection at an early age are at risk for lower academic achievement due to their inability to form supportive relationships with teachers and their likelihood to gravitate toward deviant peers. The researchers suggest that further inquiry is needed around peer evaluations of social competence or comparing teacher versus peer ratings of early social competence (Rabiner et al., 2016). Findings further indicate that there exists a research gap in terms of knowledge about how early academic, attention, and social-emotional skills affect academic achievement and high school graduation (Rabiner et al., 2016).

A longitudinal study conducted by Sotardi (2016) found that students felt unprepared to use appropriate coping strategies to deal with daily stress appropriately and effectively. However, Sotardi (2016) states that little research exists in the areas of stress and coping in elementary school students and that the literature around stress and coping includes very little representation of ethnic or cultural diversity. In another study, Merritt et al. (2012) discovered that higher levels of teacher support correlated with lower child aggression and higher behavioral self-control among first-grade students. The researchers suggested that the unique contribution of emotional support beyond simply a teacher's management of student behavior warranted further

study and could offer insight into how teachers' interactions with young children aid in socialization and contribute to age-appropriate adjustment skills (Merritt et al., 2012).

Conclusion

While a significant body of literature exists around social skills and how best to teach or improve them in the educational setting, there remain a number of gaps in the research. Many studies include or refer to a prescribed curriculum or intervention, and most studies surround social skills, including coping skills, aggression, empathy, and stress, focus on older students, not those at the primary level. Very few studies address what teachers can do in their classrooms to promote prosocial behaviors in the absence of a prescribed curriculum or plan.

In my setting, our counselors use the Second Step curriculum for guidance lessons once per six-day cycle. However, the program was designed to be implemented school-wide, and all professional and support staff are meant to receive training so that consistent language and positive supports of skill steps exist throughout (Cook et al., 2018). Until I asked the right questions of my colleagues, I was unaware that this program existed or was being used in my building in any capacity, which means that aside from the two counselors, the remainder of the staff are not able to provide positive support, model skill steps, or use language consistent with the program.

In my 20 years of teaching in my context, I have observed patterns among my classes year after year. The same small group of classroom teachers consistently cultivate a culture of respect, community, and kindness each year, while others' classes are consistently unkind, disrespectful, and seemingly unconcerned with the feelings of others. Of course, there are exceptions for individuals in those groups, but I am referring to whole-group dynamics. Through a series of observations and in-depth interviews with classroom teachers and specialists who

work with the first and second graders in my school, I aim to determine what prosocial, proactive strategies selected teachers use in their classrooms. My goal is to group and code those strategies into categories. Additionally, through the use of interviews, I plan to collect teacher and specialist perceptions of social trends school-wide and within each class and to note any behavior patterns the teachers have noticed. It is my hope that once the interventions have been identified, they may be considered for inclusion as tiered interventions in our school-wide RTII framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine what proactive strategies selected first-grade teachers used to promote prosocial behaviors and to identify correlations between those strategies and observed behavioral trends within each class. Data collection for this study consisted of classroom observations and interviews with classroom teachers and specialists. Data were then coded to identify categories of interventions and behaviors.

Sample and Population

Sample.

The sample was comprised of teachers from a rural K-2 public primary school in Pennsylvania. This site was selected because this action research study aimed to understand and remedy a phenomenon or problem of practice in the school in which the researcher has been teaching for 19 years. The building included twelve half-day kindergarten classes, six morning classes and six afternoon classes. There were 11 first-grade classes and 10 second-grade classes as well. The participants included three first-grade teachers identified by colleagues and administrators as particularly skilled at proactively promoting prosocial skills and behaviors. Additionally, special area teachers, including the art teacher, two physical education teachers, librarian, and two guidance counselors were invited via e-mail to participate in the interview portion of the study. Four of the seven special area teachers agreed to participate.

Description of the site.

The district in which the research site is situated is a rural public school district located in Pennsylvania. The school district's mission is to develop each learner as a productive citizen who is able to navigate challenges. The district's vision statement centers around active community engagement, a well-articulated curriculum, quality resources, and positive morale.

The school district operates four school buildings: one high school, one junior high school, one intermediate school for grades three through six, and one primary school for students in kindergarten through second grade. The research was conducted at the primary building, where the total number of students enrolled was 674. The student population was .74% Asian, 11.87% Hispanic, 2.82% Black, and 80.71% White (School Performance Profile, 2017.). The percentage of students living in poverty at the time of the study was 38.3% based upon the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch (S. Nelson, personal communication, November 15, 2017).

The school district includes numerous stakeholders, all of whom play integral roles in the operation and success of the schools and students. The superintendent oversees the operation of all four buildings, facilitates systems-level decisions in conjunction with the school board, assists in the hiring of teachers, and performs classroom observations. The school board negotiates teacher contracts with teacher union representatives, makes district-wide budget decisions, approves the hiring of new staff, and represents the beliefs of the community. Building administrators directly supervise faculty and support staff, address student behavior concerns, and manage the day-to-day operation of each school building. Teachers plan and provide instruction, perform duties assigned by administrators, communicate with parents and families, assess student work, attend professional development sessions, and serve as mentors and leaders. Support staff includes secretaries, custodial staff, classroom assistants, and personal care

assistants. Parents and guardians support their children by assisting with homework, communicating with teachers and administrators, attending parent-teacher conferences and school events, serving on the PTO, and volunteering their time for clerical work and special activities. Community members support the school district financially through property taxes, attend school board meetings where they can voice questions and concerns, and attend concerts and sporting events. Students attend school daily, engage in class discussions, complete assignments, and participate in sports and extracurricular activities.

Typical school day.

Students arrive at 8:45 and have the option of eating breakfast in the cafeteria from 8:45-9:05. Those who do not eat breakfast at school report directly to homerooms for morning work, morning announcements, and the pledge to the flag. Breakfast is available for \$1.00 and is free to any student who qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Following the morning announcements, each classroom teacher holds a morning meeting. Students who eat breakfast typically return to classrooms within the first five minutes of morning meeting time and quietly join the others. Half-day kindergarten classes and the one section of full-day kindergarten have one 30-minute special per day, and first and second-grade classes have one 40-minute special per day. All students are given 30 minutes for lunch as well as a 10-minute walking break and a 20-minute recess period.

Role of the researcher.

The schools in the district operate on a six-day cycle. On cycle days one, two, and three, I spend the entire day at the primary building. I am assigned to breakfast duty each of those mornings from 8:40-9:10. For the remainder of each day, I teach 40-minute music classes to first and second-grade students. At the end of each day, I am assigned to escort one group of seven

kindergarten students to their bus at 3:30. On cycle days four, five, and six, I begin my day at the intermediate school with 30-minute beginning instrumental lessons in small groups. I travel to the primary school at lunch time, and spend the afternoon teaching 40-minute music classes to first and second grade.

In conducting an inquiry in my own setting, I acted in multiple roles: teacher, researcher, colleague, friend, and employee. As I teach all the first-grade students, they know me and would occasionally engage me or have questions when they saw me outside of the music room or observe me performing an unfamiliar role. I am aware that my presence in the classroom may influence student behaviors, and have described any such observations in detail. If students had questions, I answered as honestly as possible on a level that primary children could understand. As my focus was on social skills and behaviors, I neither encouraged nor discouraged dialogue between students and myself.

Participant Selection

Using the work of Milner (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2009) as a model, first-grade teacher participants were selected using a process of community nomination. Both researchers distributed surveys to a predetermined group of stakeholders and asked them to identify those in the group who were particularly skilled in a given area. I followed the same format and sent a one-question survey via Survey Monkey to all first-grade teachers, the building principal, and the assistant principal. As this study aimed to delineate proactive prosocial strategies used in first-grade classrooms, participants were those who were identified via a survey of their first-grade teacher colleagues and building administrators as being particularly skilled in promoting social and emotional competence. Teachers whose names appeared most frequently were invited via e-mail to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

Instruments used to collect data included two separate rounds of semi-structured interviews and eight 30 to 40-minute classroom observations. The purpose of the first set of interviews was twofold: first, it was intended to establish teachers' beliefs about the role of the school in helping students to develop both socially and behaviorally. Second, the interview was intended to determine what behavioral trends classroom teachers have observed among first-grade students. The second set of interview questions were asked of special area teachers and helped to determine patterns of behavior among those classes whose teachers were participating in the study. The observations served as a means of determining, through detailed field notes and coding, what proactive strategies first-grade teacher participants used to promote prosocial behaviors.

Case Study

Case study is an inductive technique that allows researchers to conduct in-depth study of complex issues in their authentic contexts (Rule & John, 2015; Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Case study is one of four qualitative designs commonly used in research in the social sciences; the others include ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenological study (Kolb, 2012). Researchers engaging in case study commonly use participant observation and interviews as data collection techniques. Through observation, the researcher can glean an understanding of the setting and its participants. This technique is often used in conjunction with interviewing in order to collect data in the participants' words (Yin, 2009). The process of analyzing collected data is known as coding and includes varying levels of analysis that allow the researcher to identify categories, properties, and dimensions within the data (Saldana, 2016). Trustworthiness of data can be improved through the process of triangulation, a technique in

which multiple methods of data collection converge to enhance validity (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018; Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

My research intended to illuminate what if any, proactive, prosocial instructional strategies were employed within selected first-grade classes in my setting. Case study methodology is particularly useful in developing theory, evaluating programs, and developing interventions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I employed a constructivist view of case study which encompasses flexible interactions between the researcher and participants (Bhatta, 2018). Multiple methods, as well as the inclusion of member checks in the form of specialist teacher interviews, were used to improve the accuracy and validity of my data. As an insider to the context, I was ever-conscious and transparent about potential bias (Bickman & Rog, 2008). According to Flyvbjerg (2011), “the main strength of case study is depth, detail, completeness, and within-case variance” (p. 314).

Data Collection

Specialist teacher participants were invited via email to participate in the study. Participants included as many special area teachers as were willing to participate, with the final number of specialists being four. The initial e-mail communication included information about the focus of the study. Potential first-grade teacher participants were selected by community nomination, and nominees were invited via e-mail to participate (Milner & Tenore, 2010; Milner, 2014). Approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) required informed consent from participants, and all seven participants completed the required consent forms before any data was collected. Special area teachers were invited via email to participate in the interview portion of the study. Interviews are one of the most important sources of case study data and served as a means of developing social bonds and building mutuality between the researcher and participants

(Yin, 2009). As a researcher, I was cognizant of the fact that interviews do not reproduce prior realities (Alvesson, 2011) but instead provide statements from distinct perspectives unique to participants. Data were collected from two groups of participants: 1. First-grade teachers and 2. Special-area teachers.

Prior to conducting observations, I interviewed each participating classroom teacher using questions designed to articulate each teacher's definition and understanding of appropriate social skills and prosocial behaviors and what social skills or behavioral trends they have noticed in their own classrooms (see Appendix A). Interview questions served as a guide but remained flexible, allowing for the conversation to flow freely, thereby inviting further discussion and maximizing the comfort level of the participants. Following the completion of the interviews, the researcher conducted eight detailed observations of each participating teacher during a four-week period. As the focus of this study was proactive interventions used to promote prosocial behaviors, observations primarily served as a means of collecting data regarding proactive rather than reactive strategies employed by classroom teachers. Finally, I interviewed special area teachers (see Appendix B) to glean their perceptions, observations, and personal experiences overall as well as with each of the classes included in the study. As the first-grade teacher participants were those identified by administrators as individuals who are especially skilled in prosocial instruction, I have compiled a list of strategies commonly employed in their classrooms for potential consideration in our tiered RTII framework.

Data Analysis

Research question 1.

Research Question 1: How do first-grade teacher participants proactively promote prosocial skills in the classroom? Initial interviews with the two participating classroom teachers

elicited data that contributed to a working definition of “prosocial” for the purposes of this line of inquiry. Jottings and memos from the eight observations of each teacher were converted into detailed field notes and coded to determine themes and categories of proactive strategies and interventions.

Research question 2.

Research Question 2: What behavioral trends have classroom teachers and specialists observed among first-grade students? Initial interviews provided data around behavioral trends and themes each classroom teacher had observed among his or her students. Interview data were transcribed and coded in order to find common themes among behavioral trends observed. In a like manner, data from interviews with special area teachers were transcribed and coded to elicit themes of observed behavioral trends both overall and within each participant’s class.

Coding refers to the process of eliciting meaning from collected data. Codes show how a researcher has selected, separated, and sorted data in preparation for analysis and provide an invaluable means of synthesizing large quantities of interview data and field notes. The coding process consisted of two phases: initial coding and focused coding. During initial coding, I studied fragments of data closely for their importance in analysis. The initial coding phase continued researcher/participant interaction and helped to bring me to a place of interactive analysis (Charmaz, 2017).

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter details the results of the case study intended to answer the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do first-grade teacher participants proactively promote prosocial skills in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What behavioral trends have classroom teachers and specialists observed among first-grade students?

In addition to reporting findings of this study, the results section will detail the process used to analyze the seven interview transcripts and field notes from 24 classroom observations. This results section will illustrate codes and themes through graphic displays and will provide quotes and other textual examples, where appropriate.

Sample

Seven participants, three first-grade teachers and four special area teachers were interviewed for this study. First-grade teacher participants were chosen by a process of community nomination in which their first-grade teacher peers and two building principals completed a survey and identified them as being particularly skilled at proactively promoting prosocial behaviors in their classrooms. The three teachers receiving the highest percentage of votes responded in the affirmative when invited to participate in the study. All of the seven special-area teachers in the school were invited to participate, and four of them elected to serve as subjects for this investigation. All three first-grade teachers were Caucasian women with

varying degrees of teaching experience. Teacher 1 had student taught for a full semester in the first-grade classroom in which she currently teaches. She replaced her cooperating teacher full-time the following school year when her cooperating teacher resigned to stay home with her young children. She has taught only first grade during her five years as an educator. She is married with one three-year-old daughter. Teacher 2 student taught in two half-semester placements, one in second grade and one in fourth grade. She has been teaching first grade by choice in the same school district for the entirety of her 31-year career. She has never been married and has no children. Teacher 3 has been teaching for a total of ten years, all in the same district. She has spent nine of those years in first-grade, and taught kindergarten one year at the request of the administration. She requested to be moved back to first grade the following year, and her request was granted. She is married and has a three-year-old son.

Special area participants consisted of one art teacher, one guidance counselor, and two physical education teachers. All four were Caucasian, and the only male participant was one of the physical education teachers. The specialists represented varying degrees of experience at multiple levels and in different settings. Specialist 1 had previous experience in a high school setting, both as a student teacher and as a long-term substitute. She has been teaching for a total of five years and is married and expecting her first child. Specialist 2 had spent the beginning of her career as a support person who handled crisis situations in an urban school district in Maryland before accepting her current position. She had also spent years coaching basketball. She has been serving in her present job for nearly five years. She is married with one little boy. Specialist 3 has been teaching for ten years in the same district, the district from which he had graduated. He is married but does not have children. While he teaches at the elementary level, he has spent a number of years as an assistant high school baseball coach. Specialist 4 has been

teaching for a total of nine years. She spent her first three years teaching at the junior high school level and was assigned to split her time between the junior high school and the primary school beginning in her fourth year. It was not an assignment she had requested, but as the least experienced teacher in her department, she was selected and had to comply. Prior to teaching in her current job, she had experience as a long-term substitute in a nearby urban high school. She is married with two young children, a son and a daughter.

Data Collection

Research data consisted of interviews with all seven participants as well as eight classroom observations of each of the three first-grade teacher participants. Interviews ranged from 25 to 45 minutes in length, and classroom observations were between 30 and 40 minutes long. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed within a week following the interview, and classroom observation notes and memos were converted into typed field notes immediately following the observations to ensure that details would not be forgotten over time. Field notes included a section at the end in which connections with research-supported prosocial strategies were documented. Connections between findings and prior research in this area will be explored in Chapter Five. Interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility of responses and the ability to take detours that might provide additional insights. Interview protocols are provided in Appendices A and B.

Data and Analysis

Qualitative data consisted of a total of seven interview transcripts and twenty-four sets of observation field notes. Table 1 demonstrates the richness of the data set. All seven interviews were coded manually during open coding. The three first-grade teacher interviews were

conducted before special area teachers were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed and coded in the order in which they were conducted. Typed observation field notes were then coded in the order in which the observations had occurred. Because each teacher was observed twice weekly for a four-week period, observations were coded one teacher at a time. During the open coding process, previously coded data was revisited frequently to ensure consistency of coding and to allow the researcher to provide more comprehensive descriptions of codes and themes. Codes emerged organically from the data and were not pre-determined prior to analysis. The researcher used triangulation to strengthen the validity of the data. In investigating the proactive strategies employed by first-grade teachers, triangulation sources included classroom observations, interviews with first-grade teachers, and interviews with specialists. When collecting participants' observations of behavioral trends among first-grade students, triangulation was achieved through interviews with first-grade teachers, specialist interviews, and member checking around any data that could have been interpreted in multiple ways. Reliability concerns were addressed by having two critical peers code anonymized portions of data until 100% inter-rater reliability among the researcher and both critical friends was achieved.

Following the manual coding process, data were uploaded into the Quirkos software program. The program provides visual representations of coded data by code, by theme, by demographic parameters delineated by the researcher, and by keyword search. This additional step offered a simple way of analyzing and viewing data from a number of perspectives. In addition to providing numeric data around codes and themes in the form of tallies and percentages, the visual representations helped to illuminate areas of overlap and relationships between and among codes and coded data.

Table 1. Description of Qualitative Data Sources

Data Source	Word Count
Interview with Teacher 1	5,998
Interview with Teacher 2	7,026
Interview with Teacher 3	7,338
Interview with Specialist 1	5,844
Interview with Specialist 2	6,138
Interview with Specialist 3	7,839
Interview with Specialist 4	3,682
Field Notes from Observation 1 of Teacher 1 (1-1)	1,487
Field Notes from Observation 1-2	1,628
Field Notes from Observation 1-3	1,469
Field Notes from Observation 1-4	2,052
Field Notes from Observation 1-5	2,135
Field Notes from Observation 1-6	1,173
Field Notes from Observation 1-7	1,696
Field Notes from Observation 1-8	1,650
Field Notes from Observation 2-1	1,7071
Field Notes from Observation 2-2	1,3691
Field Notes from Observation 2-3	1,5161
Field Notes from Observation 2-4	1,2351
Field Notes from Observation 2-5	1,4241

Table 1 (continued)

Field Notes from Observation 2-6	1,341
Field Notes from Observation 2-7	1,3721
Field Notes from Observation 2-8	1,427
Field Notes from Observation 3-1	1,045
Field notes from Observation 3-2	1,263
Field Notes from Observation 3-3	1,369
Field Notes from Observation 3-4	1,416
Field Notes from Observation 3-5	1,025
Field Notes from Observation 3-6	1,403
Field Notes from Observation 3-7	943
Field Notes from Observation 3-8	968
Total Word Count	77,978

Codes and Themes

Four major themes emerged as a result of the coding process, and each theme was comprised of three to eight subcategories. The following sections of this chapter will define themes and categories and will provide examples of each code in the form of narrative explanations, quotes from research participants, and graphic displays, where applicable.

Building Relationships

The theme of building relationships is defined in this study as efforts the teacher makes to build a classroom community or to establish a family atmosphere, embrace family relationships,

and reinforce family relationships outside of school. This theme was divided into three separate categories: Connecting School and Home, Sense of Community or Family, and Communication.

Connecting school and home.

Data in this category included any actions, discussions, or activities in which students were connecting relationships they have at school to relationships they have at home. Of particular note is that the vast majority of the codes in this category (96%) came from classroom teachers rather than from specialists. The sources of these codes were divided evenly between observation and interview data. Teacher 1 stated, “Here’s what your family does at home, and here is what your family does at school.” Another participant said, “We should respect whatever is happening at home...whatever kind of family it is” (Teacher 2). One teacher regularly connected classroom and individual student situations with situations she and her young daughter have experienced together (Teacher 1).

Sense of community or family.

This category included ways in which teachers built a sense of community or family within the classroom setting. This code was by far the most frequently occurring in the theme of Building Relationships, and appeared in every interview and classroom observation without exception. This category manifested itself in numerous ways. Some examples included teachers intentionally greeting each student by name each morning, consistently referring to the class as a family when speaking to or about the group, planned team-building activities, talking to children as equals, attention to students’ physical and emotional needs, taking the time to learn about their students’ lives, interests, and experiences, encouraging students to take ownership for their roles in the community by assigning them jobs and responsibilities. Observation data reinforced and supported statements made in interviews, as the classroom atmospheres exuded warmth,

connection, support, and the kind of familiar communication that might typically occur between siblings or between parents and children.

Communication.

While communication is an essential classroom element across the board, this specific category focused upon creating and maintaining lines of communication connecting parents, teachers, and students. A common thread in this theme was the desire for more communication among teachers, particularly from one grade level to another. While all of the first-grade teacher participants in this study shared about their own practice of seeking out their students' previous teachers and upcoming teachers to share and gather information, the school does not have a system or protocol in place for this type of professional collaboration. Additionally, teachers shared their feelings around how to communicate with first-grade students. "I'm a big believer, huge believer, in talking to kids in a normal tone. To me, effective classroom management is not talking to your student like he or she is a newborn" (Specialist 3). Teacher 2 shared that "You can have a conversation with a kid and, you know, respect them as a six-year-old." In considering communication between home and school, teachers expressed that parents are generally on board with what teachers share via take-home folders and during telephone calls and parent-teacher conferences. One first-grade teacher and one specialist did express concerns around parental accountability and parents not consistently checking and signing papers that have been sent home (Teacher 1; Specialist 2).

Positive Personalities

This theme illuminated the characteristics of teachers and students that are integral to a successful classroom. It was comprised of three subcategories: Positive Student Characteristics, Teacher Disposition for Change, and Teacher Holistic Perspective.

Positive student characteristics.

This subcategory includes teacher observations of the inherent characteristics of first-grade students that are amenable to positive change. All participants expressed genuine love and respect for first-grade students and provided examples of ways in which first-grade students are open to new experiences and positive growth (Table 2). Teachers shared the following statements about first-graders: “I don’t know of any grade level that shows more growth” (Teacher 2). “They all have an underlying sense, I think, of what is right and wrong” (Teacher 3). “Kids can read the adult and who, who actually cares” (Specialist 2). “First grade seems to be the perfect middle of they love to be there, they understand what it means to be a student, and there’s not a lot of outside influence from the day that seems to come with them” (Specialist 3).

Table 2. Positive Student Characteristics

Positive Characteristic	Frequency
Caring	7
Excited	7
Developed Student Skills	6
Happy	5
Understand Expectations	5
Willing to Learn	5
Drama-free	2
Honest	2
Innocent	2
Intuitive	2

Table 2 (continued)

People-Pleasing	2
Risk-Taking	2
Show Tremendous Growth	2
Supportive	2
Concrete Thinkers	1
Flexible	1
Playful	1
Problem-Solvers	1
Resilient	1
Value Routines	1
Wise	1

Teacher disposition for change.

This category refers to beliefs or dispositions held by teachers that lead them to facilitate change. Because first-grade teacher participants were those nominated by their peers as particularly skilled at facilitating positive change and promoting prosocial behaviors, an examination of dispositional characteristics seemed a meaningful pursuit. A common thread among the first-grade teacher participants was an inclination and willingness to challenge the status quo. One participant shared, “I don’t know how much homework does, like the traditional sense of homework.” Instead of graded academic homework, she sends home a BINGO-type board for students to choose activities to complete at home. While some choices are more academic, most choices intentionally include activities that promote family time and connection.

She additionally shared that her inclination to prioritize social and emotional needs before academics stemmed from her own “tough upbringing” (Teacher 1). Teacher 2 asked, “Do you know how many sidebar conversations I’ve had in the office to say can you please do this?” Teacher 2 also regularly tells her students, “Good things happen when you do good things” (Teacher 2). Further, Teacher 2 asked, “Why do [we] have to accept it? Why can’t we do something about it?” Each teacher viewed her students as individuals and measured progress in terms of personal growth. When asked what her goals were for students by the end of the school year, Teacher 2 stated, “Well, to me, it’s all about progress in first grade. So it depends who you were when you came in.”

Because the specialist teachers work with all students and teachers, they shared their observations of first-grade teacher characteristics, particularly those whose classes consistently show the greatest social and emotional growth over the course of each school year. Specialist 1 observed, “She (Teacher 2) doesn’t come from a condescending or intimidating place...the overall message is kind and respectful and expecting that from them” (Specialist 1). Specialist 4 remarked, “How are they smiling and disciplining someone at the same time? Like, just unbelievable.” Additionally, some of the specialists commented about how much they have learned from observing first-grade teachers interacting with their classes. “I think I’ve learned hopefully as much as the students are learning” (Specialist 2).

Teacher holistic perspective.

This subcategory included teachers’ statements and beliefs about the importance of addressing the needs of the whole child. Because social and emotional learning is not included explicitly in the school’s curriculum or tiered intervention framework, teachers choose to address or not address students’ non-academic needs, in large part, based upon their own perspectives

and philosophies around educating children. All of the first-grade teacher participants expressed the sentiment that unless students' non-academic needs were addressed, they would not be able to make academic progress. Additionally, teachers shared that their primary goal for students was for them to be "good people." Teacher 1 shared that her holistic perspective originated from remembering her own childhood. "I think my own personal experiences let me realize that these kids are battling a lot more than academics" (Teacher 1). Teacher 2 asserted that "there's so much social and emotional issues going on with kids these days that we have to get cleared up before anything is allowed to soak into their brains." One special-area teacher observed that "the best teachers are using moments from recess, you know, problems that one kid comes up with and maybe using that problem to share with the [class], make it a teachable moment" (Specialist 2).

Obstacles

This theme included factors that participants viewed as contributing to non-academic challenges in the classroom and was divided into four subcategories: Non-Academic Needs of Students, Outside Stressors, Inside Stressors, and Causal External Factors.

Non-academic needs of students.

Without exception, all first-grade and specialist teacher participants named what I have coded as "non-academic needs of students.". This category includes student needs that are not academic but which need to be taught at school or at home. I grouped the non-academic needs that emerged in order to ascertain which concerns were most prevalent (Table 3).

Table 3. Non-Academic Needs of Students

Non-Academic Need	Frequency
Problem-solving	12
Following directions	11
Patience	10
Coping skills	9
Social interaction	9
Bodily control	7
Confidence	5
Adult Attention	5
Focus	5
Empathy	4
Impulse control	3
Respect	3
Teamwork	3
Kindness	2
Trust	1

Teachers remarked upon overall trends they have observed as well as more serious student-specific behaviors that affect instruction and the classroom environment. Teacher 1 talked about “one little girl who throws a lot of tantrums...and when she doesn’t get her way, she full-out tantrums and sobs.” One first-grade teacher recalled a student whose outbursts were difficult to contain because he did not understand that his behaviors were hurtful and

inappropriate. “I don’t know how you make someone understand that what you just did was, was harmful or hurtful to someone when they don’t grasp that” (Teacher 3). One specialist described these situations as “one student who is hijacking the class” (Specialist 1). Another specialist estimated that in each class, there are “one or two kids who really need help” (Specialist 4).

In terms of overarching trends, teachers agreed that students exhibit a large variety of emotional needs. Several participants noted that students want everything immediately and lack patience; they interrupt or begin talking without first gaining the attention of the person to whom they wish to speak. They also become upset when they are not chosen first or chosen at all for classroom activities or privileges. Another recurring trend was the lack of coping or problem-solving skills. Teacher 3 spoke about a pervasive tattling problem in her classroom due, in large part, to the fact that students lack the skills to solve disagreements on their own. Classroom teachers remarked on the need to provide repeated reminders, particularly after a weekend or a break from school. Teacher 2 feels that “for a lot of them, I’m pushing the reset button every Monday.”

Outside stressors.

For the purposes of this investigation, outside stressors were those circumstances outside of school that cause or exacerbate stress for students, families, and teachers. All teacher participants were cognizant of the fact that as human beings, our lived experiences both directly and indirectly affect what happens in the classroom setting. Many first-grade teacher responses mentioned the fact that some families were “struggling to survive” (Teacher 1), with single-parent households or parents working multiple jobs to support their children. Teachers additionally commented on how busy families’ lives have become and cited examples of children not being able to complete homework because they spend entire evenings rushing from

one activity to the next. Teachers expressed frustration, in some cases, about the fact that parents were quick to complain about homework being assigned or to make repeated excuses about why their children were too busy to complete assignments. Teacher 3 shared, “this is one of the first years I’ve been told I give too much homework.” Another common thread was the belief that parents do not necessarily communicate with children much at home, or that the type of message sent to children ran counter to the message conveyed at school. One first-grade teacher speculated that perhaps Monday felt like a reset each week because “nobody talked to them all weekend or they were allowed to do whatever they wanted or some combination of the two” (Teacher 2). Specialist 1 provided an example of a student who experiences emotional outbursts in school because he has been taught that “guys don’t show emotions.”

Inside stressors.

Inside stressors included circumstances in school that cause or exacerbate stress for students, families, and teachers. The consensus among teachers, particularly classroom teachers, was that they felt they were “on their own” in solving problems within the classroom. They expressed a desire for building-wide consistency and support but cited examples of whole-school programs and initiatives that had started and then “fizzled out” (Teacher 1). Some teachers described instances in which they had requested support and did not receive it. In a like manner, teachers felt that they were fighting an uphill battle in trying to teach and reinforce behaviors that were not being communicated or supported building-wide. “Once the top stops caring, then other people stop caring, then other people stop caring, and it um, it just lost its power” (Teacher 1). One teacher communicated her shock and disappointment that the school does not house an emotional support classroom. She felt that “we are doing a disservice to those kids” (Teacher 2) in not identifying and addressing problems as early as possible. There was an overarching sense

that problems are fixed with a “Band-Aid” or swept under the carpet instead of being acknowledged and addressed head-on. Teacher 3 shared her frustration with the scheduling of meetings; “I couldn’t even go to advocate for my own kid. Like, it just seems like there’s a disconnect there.”

Causal external factors.

The final subcategory in the theme of obstacles was termed Causal External Factors and was defined as socioeconomic, environmental, or cultural factors outside the classroom that contribute to non-academic classroom challenges. While this study was not explicitly intended to uncover the root causes of students’ needs, an understanding of the contributing factors is helpful in identifying strategies used by effective teachers and the thought processes underlying instructional choices. All teachers, most unprompted, expressed feelings and observations around why so many students struggle socially and emotionally. Teacher 1 shared her concerns that families may not be interacting with children much at home. She referred to a lack of balance in students’ lives and the worry that “families aren’t taking that time to just be a wholesome family and have dinner table conversations and share.” Classroom teachers additionally expressed serious concerns around technology replacing human connection. “Tablets are taking over the world right now with parenting” (Teacher 1). Teacher 2 said, “I have just as much to offer as a computer game does. You can get academics from an iPad and stuff and everything, that’s great, but what you can’t get are those soft skills of wait time, don’t interrupt.” Another frequently-mentioned topic was that schools can no longer assume or predict students’ social or emotional competency when they begin school. Teacher 2 felt that “the biggest difference between now and 15 years ago is that it was easier back then to mold them into being respectful students, polite students because they already had some of that at home.” The overwhelming belief among

participants was that families are hurried and overly busy for various reasons and that rushing from one thing to the next has had problematic implications. All three first-grade teachers shared the opinion that parents are very quick to give children what they want or solve problems for their children in an effort to save time, which results in children who have not practiced problem-solving. One teacher used the metaphor of “lawnmower parents or snow blower parents...because they just push, bulldozer, they just push everything out of the way so there’s no issues for the kids anymore” (Teacher 3). Teachers additionally noted that because parents are busy, they often do not read papers that have been sent home and do not sign or return papers in students’ take-home folders. “Children major in the study of their parents” (Teacher 2). When students see parents who do not appear to prioritize school, the students begin to internalize the belief that education is not important.

Strategic Counters

The fourth and final theme, Strategic Counters, is defined as actions taken in response to obstacles. This theme included eight subcategories: Emotional Intervention, Social Intervention, Behavioral Intervention, Promoting Student Autonomy, Providing Support, Identity Shift-- Becoming a Parent, School-Wide Programs, and Extrinsic Classroom Rewards.

Emotional intervention.

This category included ways in which teachers addressed students’ emotional needs and development. Multiple participants mentioned the importance of building a trusting relationship with each student. Teachers also spoke about helping students to name their feelings and identify the magnitude of a problem. Is this a “big problem or a little problem?” (Teacher 3). One teacher expressed a realistic view around teaching children to cope with difficult situations in “trying to get them to take a little bit of ownership because the truth is, maybe their family situation will

never get better” (Teacher 2). Participants also shared ways in which they noticed that students were experiencing strong emotions and how they helped those students to break down their thoughts or to find mindful ways to de-escalate. Specialist 1 shared that “some of the mindfulness stuff that we learned was really helpful” and that when she noticed that a class seemed agitated, she would take a break from instruction and allow time for meditation. Another specialist shared her belief that every lesson should include protected time for allowing students to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Specialist 2). She attributed her philosophy around providing an emotional outlet by stating that we can all remember our two favorite teachers, not because of what they taught us but because of how they made us feel. Participants relayed some of the strategies they used to help students to regulate strong feelings: count to 10, deep belly breaths, draw a picture, take a walk, get a drink of water, or think of something you could do to improve the situation at this moment. Specialist 3 felt strongly that schedules and routines were crucial in his ability to help students to manage emotions. He shared the example of having to teach his classes in a different room on days when the gym is used for an assembly or special event. Days before the location change occurs, he explains to the students that they will be meeting in a new place for the day and walks the class to the new room so that they will know exactly what to expect.

Social intervention.

The category of social intervention included ways in which teachers addressed students’ social needs and development. First-grade teacher participants regularly provided direct instruction around how to have a conversation. “This is what a conversation looks like—we have to listen. You listen with your ears and your heart and you care about what the person says” (Teacher 1). “Be respectful of your partner. Look them in the eyes if you’re talking to them”

(Teacher 2). Another recurring social need was students' desire for instant gratification or attention. Teacher 1 spoke about how she handles students interrupting lessons or conversations. She shared that she gives them the "one moment" finger wag, and if that is not effective, she says, "Hold on. I'm talking with _____ right now and I'll be with you in one moment." She follows up with the students by explaining that she wants to hear what they have to say and be able to offer them her full attention. "Look, you were telling me this awesome story and I wasn't ready to listen to you. So I don't want you to waste what you were saying, but you need to wait." Another teacher intentionally created scenarios in which her students practiced patience and waiting. She had her students line up a few minutes early prior to leaving the classroom for lunch or specials, and told them, "This is called waiting. You're not moving on to the next thing. Yes, you might be done something else. It's like when you're a grownup and the light has turned red and you're waiting. Or you're trying to check out at the grocery store and the line is long. You can't get mad about that. You just have to [wait]" (Teacher 2). Teacher 3 spoke about a persistent tattling problem in her class, due, in her opinion, to students' limited ability to problem-solve. Instead of providing immediate solutions, she talked students through the thought process of how to solve the problem. "Ok, so what's the problem? What can you say?" She additionally introduced the "Tattling Toro" in the classroom, a little bull with a box and slips of paper where students could write down non-urgent things they wanted her to know without interrupting instruction. "You report something to me if someone is hurt, if you are hurt, if someone broke a rule, then I need to know. Otherwise, you need to go and solve the problem yourself or write it down."

Behavioral intervention.

The category of behavioral intervention included ways in which teachers addressed students' behavioral needs and development. A number of participants emphasized their belief in providing structure for students and embedding opportunities to practice behaviors the class has yet to master. "We have lined up more and sat down, lined up, sat down, lined up more than we've done in a long time" (Teacher 2). She added that "everything you read, everything, it says that children crave structure." Specialist 3 explained his feelings around routines, both procedural and around behavioral expectations. "I think to me, the number one thing that helps...is a routine. But not necessarily just a routine in how things are done, but a routine in how issues are dealt with. Another frequent assertion was that rules and consequences need to be clear and consistent. Teacher 2 described her communication with the students as "to the point" and explained to the class early on that "you don't get to do things that are a privilege if you don't behave." Another participant stressed consistency and observed that in certain situations, like field trips or special occasions, some teachers seem to relax their expectations. "If it bothers you on the first day, it should bother you on the sixth or seventh day" (Specialist 3). In sharing their observations of first-grade teachers, specialists noted that "first-grade teachers all sort of present this very calm persona" (Specialist 1). They additionally observed that first-grade teachers' expectations are consistent regardless of location. "She was like, 'listen—last time we didn't have a good art class. What do we need to do to fix this?'" (Specialist 1). Some participants offered ways in which they proactively address student behaviors by giving positive praise, providing stretch and movement breaks, reading stories from the school's library of social/emotional learning books, and serving as a positive role model. The overwhelming consensus was that it is preferable to handle discipline and address behaviors within the classroom instead of filling out disciplinary referral forms or sending students to the office.

Promoting student autonomy.

This category encompassed teacher-constructed interactions or situations that allowed for student voice or choice in the classroom setting. All first-grade teacher participants regularly spoke to students about choices when addressing both academics and non-academic concerns. “You are the only one that can make your choices and you have to make good ones” (Teacher 1). “You are in control of your bodies, so it’s up to you to make a good choice” (Teacher 2). Teacher 3 spoke about reassuring students that they are good people. “No, you just made a bad choice.” Participants also recalled situations in which they coached students through the problem-solving process rather than providing solutions. “How are we going to solve this?” (Teacher 3). During observations, it was evident that teachers had embedded student choice into classroom routines. For example, when students were instructed to begin stations, many of them chose to use one of a variety of flexible seating options offered in the classroom (Teacher 1).

Providing support.

The category of providing support included ways in which teachers offered support to students, often through displays of compassion or empathy. Teacher 1 recalled an instance in which a student had been reluctant to trust her and was acting out on a daily basis in class. “Look. I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here for you.” She additionally spoke about ways in which she empathized with students’ feelings or circumstances at home. “That does stink that that happened, and I’m sorry that happened. I’m sorry you feel that way.” Teacher 2 added, “We should respect if, say mom or dad have to work second shift.” Specialists also shared some of the ways in which they connected with students, particularly when they saw them in the hallway or cafeteria and noticed that they seemed upset. “It seems like you’re having kind of a rough day today. Is that true? It seems like you’re really upset this morning. Did something

happen before school?” (Specialist 1). Another specialist shared about expressing empathy in the moment and letting students know that she would carve out time to talk with them later about their feelings. “I care about how you feel. If you are in the red zone and angry and need me, I can’t do it right now, but I save, you know, ten minutes a day just to talk” (Specialist 2).

Sometimes, support took the form of simple acts like offering a student a Band-Aid or sitting with a student who was feeling unsure about how to complete an assignment. During one of my observations, a teacher shared that three students were feeling sad because their parents had been unable to come to school to have lunch with them that day. She told me that she had intentionally sat with them at lunch to make it feel special for them. During a separate observation, I heard her telling a student that she looked tired that day and asking how she could help the student to feel more awake. She then took the student’s hand and jumped up and down with her 10 times.

Identity shift—becoming a parent.

This category applied to participants who had expressed a shift in perspective after having a child or children of their own. Two participants with young children imagined what it would be like to manage homework on top of their already busy evenings.

I only have one three-year-old, um, and I just, seeing how busy our evenings are and how much I just want to be with her in the evening and I don’t want to be stressed out. I can’t imagine her having to do sheets of homework and fighting that battle” (Teacher 1).

I know even now, like [husband’s name] teaches, I teach. We both get home. I pick up [son’s name] and by the time we’re both home, [husband’s name] is home by 4-ish. We’re home, I’m home with [son’s name] by 4:45. Then I’m making dinner and if he had homework to do, it would be, ok, sit down and do this (Teacher 3).

Teachers who were also parents or about to become parents also shared about walking the line between teaching their children to solve problems and jumping in and offering solutions. “I’ll admit I’m slightly helicopter-y and maybe that’s because he’s only three years old and so I do feel I still need to watch out for him” (Teacher 3). The children of two of the first-grade teacher participants occasionally play together, and Teacher 3 recalled times in which she needed to be reminded to allow the children to work out disagreements on their own. “I go to say something and [Teacher 1] will be like, you know, put her arm up and be like, ‘Stop. Like you’re, you’re harming their development.’ Because they need to figure, [it out], you know.” One specialist who was expecting her first child expressed her concerns about raising children in our current climate. “Since I’m gonna have a son, how do you raise boys outside of toxic masculinity?” (Specialist 1). Another specialist expressed the opinion that many of students’ non-academic needs start at home. “I think it’s a lot a parent thing because, at this point in my life, I’ve figured out how hard it is to parent” (Specialist 4).

School-wide programs.

This code referred to actual or proposed school-wide programs designed to support students and teachers. All teachers appreciated designated building-wide morning meeting time and used it for building relationships and practicing social interactions. Another larger-scale intervention that teachers found helpful was the “How to Be a Good Student” segments that had been created by Teacher 2 and Specialist 3 and added to the televised morning announcements.

Participants also shared programs and interventions they felt would be important to consider. First-grade teachers expressed their disappointment about the discontinuation of the Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (PBIS) that the building had used for several

years because they felt it had been integral in both communicating and rewarding expectations on a larger scale and allowing students to be recognized by building principals. Teacher 2 felt that every grade should have its own guidance counselor due to the number of social and emotional needs among primary students and expressed her disappointment and disbelief that the building does not house an emotional support classroom. Finally, teachers universally shared the opinion that transition meetings or communication among teachers from one grade level to the next was an important missing piece.

Extrinsic classroom rewards.

The final category, extrinsic classroom rewards, referred to non-academic rewards given to students in return for meeting expectations. Teacher 1 felt that “something tangible” was especially meaningful to young children but shared that it was difficult to hand out stickers or other rewards given the busy-ness of the classroom environment. She does award play money to students when she is able to find the time. One specialist felt that it would be helpful to offer rewards in common areas like the cafeteria for good behavior and for showing kindness. She proposed handing out tickets and holding regular drawings in which students could earn prizes (Specialist 2). One first-grade teacher participant used monkeys as a whole-class reward system. When the class had earned a certain number of monkeys, they would receive something special. Teacher 3 used a point system to reward individual students. During one observation when students were engaged in stations, she rang a soft bell three times and addressed three students who were working quietly at their table by saying, “Those points were for you.”

Qualitative Data Summary

The rich volume of data collected provided a strong overview of the classroom environment in each of the three first-grade classrooms. Data additionally offered seven distinct

sets of observations around the strengths and non-academic needs of first-grade students. Given the volume of data and the focus of this investigation of proactive rather than reactive strategies used by first-grade teachers, data have been distilled to separate and isolate the prosocial strategies that emerged from interview transcripts and classroom observations (Table 4). The table includes only those codes relevant to the question. These prosocial strategies address research question 1. How to first-grade teacher participants proactively promote prosocial skills in the classroom? Tables 2 and 3 have already provided a visual representation around responses to research question 2. What behavioral trends have classroom teachers and specialists observed among first-grade students?

Table 4. Prosocial Strategies by Code

Code	Prosocial Strategies
Connecting School and Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nightly reading bags to encourage family interaction • Referring to the class as a family • Teachers sharing about their own home and family experiences • Making cards and special gifts to give to loved ones on holidays
Sense of Community/Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on building family relationships within the classroom • Addressing all students by name when they arrive each morning • Team-building activities • Modeling appropriate social behaviors (for example: welcoming guests to the classroom) • Providing opportunities for students to share their personal experiences and feelings • Serving in a quasi-parental role when needed (examples: getting Band-Aids,

<p>Table 4 (continued)</p>	<p>reminding students not to put fingers in mouths...)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding time for students to work with partners and small groups • Assigning classroom jobs and responsibilities
<p>Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiating contact with previous or upcoming teachers to learn and share about individual students • Speaking to students as equals without using baby talk or patronizing • Honest, frank conversations when improvement is needed • Collaborating and brainstorming with colleagues about how to best serve students
<p>Teacher Disposition for Change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging the status quo (prioritizing social and emotional growth over academics) • Emphasis upon individual progress as evidence of growth • Consistent communication and modeling of growth mindset • Encouraging students to express their feelings • Modeling kindness and respect
<p>Teacher Holistic Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary emphasis is upon social and emotional learning • Getting to know students on a personal level • Willingness to take detours from the planned lesson when unexpected situations arise • Consistent message to students that they are safe and cared for
<p>Emotional Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally building and reinforcing trust with students

<p>Table 4 (continued)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting resilience and teaching coping skills • Teaching students to identify the magnitude of a problem • Helping students learn to name their feelings • Emphasis on student choice and how bad choices do not mean students are bad people • Intentionally calm demeanor • Incorporating Mindfulness activities • Carving out time each day to allow students to share their feelings • Consistent routines and expectations • Teachers sharing about their own difficult emotions
<p>Social Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly teaching students how to have a conversation and providing ample opportunities to practice • Teaching students how to navigate disagreements appropriately • Giving students practice delaying gratification • Acknowledging when students have handled a social situation successfully as a model for the class • Teaching students the difference between tattling and reporting • Collaborative projects • Encouraging and recognizing good manners • Teaching students to be good citizens (example: turning off the faucet when brushing teeth, recycling) • Explaining non-verbal communication and using it with students on a regular basis
<p>Behavioral Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching children how to be good students • Clear and consistent expectations and consequences

Table 4 (continued)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis upon making good choices • Reading stories from the school’s new library of social-emotional learning books • “Blurt Beans” (students received beans and would lose one for blurting something out) • “Tattling Toro” (a place for students to write down their tattles instead of interrupting a lesson) • Providing movement or stretch breaks • Structured routine • System for gaining or regaining class attention • Pointing out students who are doing the right thing • Flexible seating options • Strategic arrangement of classroom and seating chart • Choosing quiet students first for activities
Promoting Student Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on student voice and choice • Allowing students to perform leadership roles (“Teacher for the Day”) • Having the class vote
Extrinsic Classroom Rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stickers • Play money • Monkeys • Points

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this action research study was to determine what proactive prosocial strategies were being employed in first-grade classrooms by teachers who were recognized as being particularly skilled at promoting prosocial skills. Second, the study sought to ascertain the behavioral trends selected first grade and special area teachers have observed among first-grade students in a rural primary (K-2) school. The theoretical framework for this investigation centered around the holistic paradigm which strives to meet the individualized needs of the whole child—to attend to not only academics, but also to students’ social, emotional, and spiritual selves. While the research site does not currently employ a SEL curriculum, I envision that in the future, the successful strategies already employed by participants could be used to inform professional development. Additionally, it is my hope that the results of this study and its supporting body of literature might be included in the site’s tiered intervention structure to provide more intensive small-group or individual practice of social and emotional skills for students who are not mastering those skills in a whole-class setting.

In order to collect data around observed behavioral trends and strategies being used by first-grade teacher participants, I framed my inquiry around the following research questions:

1. How do first-grade teacher participants proactively promote prosocial skills in the classroom?
2. What behavioral trends have classroom teachers and specialists observed among first-grade students?

Using the two research questions as a guide, I collected qualitative data in the form of interview transcripts and field notes from classroom observations. This chapter closely examines the qualitative data and draws preliminary conclusions in relation to the research questions.

Following preliminary conclusions, I discuss limitations for the study as well as implications for future research and practice.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Extant Literature or Theories

This section will illuminate connections between the findings of this study and the existing literature. First, I will discuss research-suggested proactive, prosocial strategies in relation to the strategies employed by the three first-grade teacher participants in this study and will compare them with the codes that emerged from collected data. I will then make connections among trends participants have observed and the problematic future implications of leaving those student needs unaddressed. Finally, I will address participants' epistemologies as they relate to the holistic paradigm and the ASCD Whole Child recommendations for the state of Pennsylvania.

Proactive prosocial strategies.

This section highlights correlations among observed proactive, prosocial strategies employed by first-grade teachers and research-supported strategies and interventions for increasing and supporting prosocial behaviors. While classroom observations yielded a great deal of data, this inquiry was focused upon proactive strategies; therefore, the discussion will not address actions taken by teachers in reaction to social, emotional, or behavioral concerns.

Correlations among research-supported strategies and emergent codes as well as the frequency of occurrence by classroom teacher participants are displayed in Table 5.

Describing or elaborating upon desired behavior is one effective means of helping young students to learn and practice prosocial behaviors (Corso, 2007). This strategy appeared quite frequently during classroom observations and took various forms. Teacher 1 used this strategy in the following ways: complimenting students or “catching them being good” and then describing what they were doing well aloud to the rest of the class, setting clear expectations for student behavior and social interaction prior to group and partner activities, reminders about the positive attitude she expected while students were working, and choral responses to prompts around expected behaviors. I observed Teacher 2 giving short verbal reminders prior to activities, explicitly instructing students around how to have an effective conversation, talking students through thought processes around social choices, acknowledging students who were doing something well and describing their actions or choices in detail for the class, reviewing previous class discussions around social norms and expectations, and providing direct instruction around reading and interpreting nonverbal cues. Teacher 3 demonstrated this strategy by choosing students who were meeting expectations as volunteers or participants in preferred activities, and debriefing about issues she had noticed and providing instruction around how to avoid or solve those issues in the future. In all three classrooms, this strategy was employed not as a stand-alone SEL lesson, but as a consistently-embedded feature regardless of the time of day or academic subject area.

Modeling desired behavior for students is another research-supported strategy for increasing prosocial student behaviors (Corso, 2007; Garner, 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teacher 1 demonstrated this strategy by politely greeting and saying goodbye to classroom visitors, modeling active listening when students were sharing, offering help when students appeared to be struggling, having students “be her mirror” and copy her actions,

offering classroom visitors the most comfortable seats or a snack, and consistently using polite manners when conversing with students or adults. This strategy appeared in Teacher 2's classroom in the form of acknowledging when someone had done something kind “([paraprofessional] was nice enough to already give you your journals”), talking through her thought process of coping when something in the lesson did not go as planned, reframing negative comments or assertions as positive opportunities for growth, being open to the possibility that situations may not turn out as hoped or expected, actively participating in mindful moments during the televised morning announcements, and intentionally performing activities in a way that helped to keep the classroom clean and neat (“I'm cutting this over the trash can because we care about our classroom”). Teacher 3 demonstrated this strategy by noticing when someone seemed distressed and asking how she could help, creating class thank-you cards for a college student who had been serving as a classroom helper, a consistently pleasant demeanor and facial expression, being willing to admit when she did not know the answer to students' questions and helping them to find the answer, deliberately using a calm, quiet voice when students' voices had gotten too loud, providing examples of verbal responses (“this is how you give a one-word answer”), and complimenting individual students on a job well-done.

A third research-documented strategy for improving and supporting prosocial behavior is providing opportunities for students to practice desired behavior in small or large-group settings (Corso, 2007; Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell, & Bedesem, 2012). While this strategy was evident in a variety of classroom activities, it was particularly apparent during morning meeting times. Teacher 1 allowed teachers to share individually and had the remainder of the class practice active, respectful listening. She additionally demonstrated this strategy by expecting students to continue classroom activities independently when she was unexpectedly called away and by

offering opportunities for peer teaching. Teacher 2 intentionally incorporated mindfulness into her daily routines, included both verbal and nonverbal sharing activities, allowed students to converse quietly while they were journaling, and intentionally created situations in which students practiced patience and waiting. In a like manner, Teacher 3 frequently had students share their ideas with a buddy.

Reacting to others' emotions is yet another research-supported proactive, prosocial strategy (Garner, 2010). It enables teachers to build and foster trusting, secure relationships in the classroom. During one observation, a little boy was very upset and was crying because a special lunch with parents had ended, and he was having difficulty saying goodbye. The teacher took him just outside the classroom door, got down on his eye level, and helped him to work through his feelings. A few minutes later when the class was engaged in stations, she told the same student that she had a free station and would love to work with him individually (Teacher 1). Teacher 1 demonstrated this strategy in other ways as well: empathizing with a student who had shared about a sad experience over the weekend, excitedly talking with a student who was close to losing his first tooth, stopping to have an honest conversation when the class groaned about an assigned activity and providing a special, more comfortable seat and a stuffed elephant to hold for a student who was having an emotionally difficult day. Teacher 2 reacted to students' emotions by reassuring them when they were worried about a classmate, asking questions when a student shared a story about her mother who had recently passed away and noticing when a student looked especially excited about something she had read. Teacher 3 used this strategy in similar ways: having a whispered conversation with a student who looked agitated during morning meeting, being excited about a student's upcoming birthday, allowing a student to sit with the college student who helped in the classroom when his parents could not attend a class

event, and helping to alleviate worry around a timed activity by encouraging the class (“Instead of worrying about it, keep working the whole time. See how far you get!”).

A related strategy for supporting prosocial behaviors is to teach students about emotions (Garner, 2010). While explicit teaching occurred far less frequently than participants reacting to emotions, I did observe this strategy being used in one classroom. In response to students who were perseverating around an event that had occurred the previous day, Teacher 2 stated, “Let’s not make a problem last longer than it has to.” On a separate occasion, Teacher 2 was teaching a science lesson in which the brassica the students had grown was nearing the end of its life cycle. A number of students were feeling upset. Teacher 2 had a conversation with the class about the life cycle and what would happen next; “We can’t be sad that the life cycle is almost over.” Teacher 2 often embedded teaching about emotions into lessons in various subject areas. When students expressed their frustration about having to wait for something fun, Teacher 2 made a connection to a Frog and Toad story they had read in which the main characters had to use willpower so that they would not eat all of the cookies.

Another way teachers can promote prosocial behaviors in the classroom is to foster supportive relationships within a caring community (Cheon, Reeve, & Ntoumanis, 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This strategy correlates directly with the code I referred to as “Sense of Community or Family.” While I will offer specific examples of this strategy being used, I must also emphasize that a sense of community or family was evident in the classroom environments, participants’ demeanor with the students, and the culture of each of the three participants’ classes during every single classroom observation. Teacher 1 consistently referred to the class as an “elephant family” (an elephant is their classroom animal). In addition, she regularly noticed and addressed students’ needs in an almost parental manner. On a day when

lunch was scheduled to be served later than usual, she provided a breakfast of animal crackers and fruit for her students. She also allowed students a voice in classroom decision-making. On one occasion, the class groaned and complained when Teacher 1 told them they would be working with their “trunk buddies.” She paused the lesson to allow them to express their feelings and told the class, “I can’t make it better if I don’t understand.” Teacher 1 also encouraged and acknowledged students supporting one another. When one student told a classmate that he hoped the classmate would earn his Lego reward that day, Teacher 1 replied, “What a kind response!” When students accomplished something difficult or significant, Teacher 1 would often stop the class to have them perform a cheer for their classmates. Teacher 2 encouraged and recognized students when they helped one another or did something kind without being asked.

Autonomy-supportive teaching, defined as instructional delivery through an interpersonal tone that supports students’ need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Reeve, 2016), is another research-supported strategy for improving students’ prosocial behaviors. This strategy was demonstrated frequently in all three participants’ classrooms. Teacher 1 regularly allowed class discussions to flow naturally without strictly requiring students to raise hands. She treated these discussions as conversations and validated and recognized all points of view. In addition, she spoke with the class about how learning is not automatic; in one instance, she shared about her husband, an engineer, and some of the situations in which it had taken him multiple failed attempts before “getting it right.” She designed instructional situations in which students were empowered to problem-solve, and congratulated them for taking risks. During one observation, she praised a student by saying, “Good job thinking like a scientist!” Teacher 1 used a friendly, interpersonal tone and instinctively inserted humor into her teaching whenever it was appropriate. She additionally created a culture in which students knew the routines and were able

to implement them independently. Whenever Teacher 1 was called to step away from the class or a small group, students were prepared to take over as “sound instructors” or facilitators and continue activities until she was able to return. Teacher 2 verbally recognized students who were using independent problem-solving strategies and encouraged others to do the same. She additionally referred to the students as writers, readers, and scientists. At Easter time, she gave each student a bag of goodies and then talked with them about why she had chosen those particular items; she had given each student a pencil and a small journal because they were becoming such wonderful writers and she wanted them to be able to practice writing whenever they chose. Teacher 3 was very transparent with her students about her own mistakes and talked the class through her thought process in correcting errors or working through unexpected situations. She also employed a practice of choosing students to be the “teacher for the day” and allowing them to help with morning routines, lunch count, choosing table groups for activities, and many other classroom activities. Teacher 3 also encouraged students to make smart choices; instead of micromanaging larger projects, she talked with the class about the tasks involved and the time frame in which they needed to be completed. She then expected the students to formulate a plan that worked for them.

Crane (2017) cites teacher openness as an additional strategy for promoting prosocial skills and behaviors and defines openness as the willingness to take detours, incorporate students’ feedback, and practice active listening. The three participants in this study were all quick to seize teachable moments and take detours from the lesson. During a writing activity, one student asked a question about the importance of bees. Teacher 1 had an in-depth conversation with him and even offered him a resource he could use to learn more. During a morning meeting, a student had shared concern about a nest of baby rabbits in her backyard;

Teacher 1 explained how rabbits make their nests and described ways the students might protect the nests if they found them at their own houses. When the class expressed disappointment in being asked to work with buddies, the teacher listened to their concerns, shared her reasons for the assignment, and then modified the assignment to allow students to choose whether to work alone or with a partner (Teacher 1). On another occasion, two boys became very excited when Teacher 1 mentioned robins in a story she was sharing with the class; they had been doing research about robins. The teacher paused the story and allowed the boys to share several facts about robins that they had learned through their independent research (Teacher 1). During a science lesson, Teacher 2 solicited feedback from students about the images on the screen. When one student correctly guessed that the image depicted bioluminescence, the teacher had the student explain bioluminescence to the class and tell them how he had become so knowledgeable. Teacher 3 incorporated student feedback in her lessons on a regular basis. One student encountered an unfamiliar term in a book he was reading during a small group activity, and the teacher used her phone to look it up and share more about it with the group. In helping students to pre-plan for a science activity in which they would be building insects, a student shared that she was thinking about using a pencil to make compound eyes. The teacher asked probing questions of the whole class to determine whether and how that strategy might or might not work.

Finally, research supports the strategy of coaching students through conflict situations as a means of promoting prosocial behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). While this strategy appeared less frequently than others, I felt it was important to include, particularly given the fact that classroom observations were conducted during academic subject areas and that the majority of this type of coaching likely occurred at recess or during unstructured times of the day. Teacher

I demonstrated this strategy beautifully one day when a student became upset about another student sitting beside him on the carpet again. The teacher said, “Let’s talk about this. Why is this bothering you?” She used the boys’ responses to help them understand that not sitting together did not mean they were no longer friends; instead, the first student was trying to make a good choice for his body at that moment. The boys agreed to sit apart on the carpet but planned to play together at recess later that day. Teacher 2 employed this strategy when dealing with a girl who repeatedly shouted, “Stop it!” to the other students in her table group. She went outside the classroom door and had a private conversation with the student about why she was upset. She then talked the student through a more appropriate strategy for handling her frustration. When the student returned, the teacher observed as the student implemented the new strategy to communicate with her classmates.

Table 5. Research-Supported Strategies Organized by Code and Frequency

Research-Supported Strategy	Frequency During Observations	Related Emergent Code(s)
Describing/Elaborating Upon Desired Behavior (Corso, 2007)	Teacher 1: 13 Teacher 2: 23 Teacher 3: 20 Total: 56	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Emotional Intervention • Social Intervention • Behavioral Intervention
Modeling Desired Behavior (Corso, 2007; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)	Teacher 1: 16 Teacher 2: 11 Teacher 3: 17 Total: 44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Intervention • Social Intervention • Behavioral Intervention
Practicing desired behavior in large or small-group settings (Corso, 2007; Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012)	Teacher 1: 5 Teacher 2: 14 Teacher 3: 2 Total: 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Disposition for Change • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Non-academic Needs of Students • Social Intervention • Behavioral Intervention

Table 5 (continued)

<p>Reacting to emotions (Garner, 2010)</p>	<p>Teacher 1: 12 Teacher 2: 7 Teacher 3: 5 Total: 24</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Community/Family • Communication • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Non-academic Needs of Students • Emotional Intervention • Providing Support
<p>Teaching about emotions (Garner, 2010)</p>	<p>Teacher 2: 4 Total: 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Disposition for Change • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Non-Academic Needs of Students • Emotional Intervention
<p>Fostering supportive relationships within a caring community (Cheon et al., 2018; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)</p>	<p>Teacher 1: 12 Teacher 2: 6 Total: 18</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Community/Family • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Social Intervention
<p>Instructional delivery though an interpersonal tone that supports students’ need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Reeve, 2016)</p>	<p>Teacher 1: 13 Teacher 2: 14 Teacher 3: 17 Total: 44</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Community/Family • Communication • Positive Student Characteristics • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Emotional Intervention • Social Intervention • Providing Support
<p>Teacher openness—the willingness to take detours, incorporating student feedback, and active listening(Crane, 2017)</p>	<p>Teacher 1: 15 Teacher 2: 6 Teacher 3: 5 Total: 26</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Community/Family • Communication • Teacher Disposition for Change • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Emotional Intervention • Social Intervention

Table 5 (continued)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Student Autonomy
Coaching students through conflict situations Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)	Teacher 1: 2 Teacher 2: 1 Total: 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Disposition for Change • Teacher Holistic Perspective • Non-Academic Needs of Students • Inside Stressors • Emotional Intervention • Social Intervention • Behavioral Intervention • Providing Support

Trends observed among first-grade students.

This inquiry stemmed from a problem of practice I had personally experienced in my setting. In Chapter 1, I detailed my observations around students’ struggling to be patient, solve conflicts, communicate effectively, take turns, or cope with emotions in socially-appropriate ways. As I reviewed the literature, I found evidence linking social and emotional competence to academic achievement and other future outcomes for children. One of my goals was to determine whether my problem of practice was shared by my participants and to link the most pervasively-observed trends to research-documented potential future implications. Participants’ observations of students’ non-academic needs are represented in Table 3 in Chapter Four. This section will draw connections among those non-academic needs emerging from the data that correspond with the literature I reviewed.

The most frequently-occurring non-academic need cited by the seven participants was students’ ability to solve problems. This observation was consistent with my own experience as well as much of the previous research I encountered. According to Greenberg et al. (2017), 40 to 60 percent of U.S. high school students are chronically disengaged. Sadly, students who have not

fully developed their problem-solving abilities often shut down when faced with material they find difficult. Problem-solving ability can affect students in both academic and non-academic domains; children who struggle to get along with peers or resolve interpersonal conflicts are not able to receive the full benefit from academic instruction (Gresham & Elliott, 2014). Further, the inability to problem-solve when peer conflicts arise can result in reduced peer acceptance, which can influence academic success in young adulthood. Students who are not accepted by peers may also struggle to establish supportive relationships with teachers (Rabiner, Godwin, & Dodge, 2016). Problem-solving is a key component of executive functioning, as it encompasses students' ability to use information to make decisions. The literature suggests that kindergarten students who have not developed executive functioning skills struggle with organization and self-regulating their learning (Geary et al., 2009; Geary et al., 2012). Executive function correlates with other participant-named non-academic needs as well, including impulsivity, empathy in the form of perspective-taking, and attention or focus.

Participants additionally mentioned coping skills as a significant non-academic need for first-grade students. For the purposes of this study, emotional regulation will be included under the umbrella of coping skills. This assertion was consistent with the results of Sotardi's (2016) longitudinal study indicating that elementary students felt underprepared to cope with stress using effective, socially-appropriate strategies. Often, students who have not yet learned or consistently practiced socially-appropriate, healthy coping skills are more prone to outbursts and externalizing behaviors in the classroom. However, students who are able to regulate and cope with emotions consequently form stronger social relationships and therefore receive greater benefits from positive teacher attention, help from peers, and modeling of academic skills (Cooper et al., 2014). Additionally problematic is the prospect that students who exhibit high

relational aggression may be more likely to engage in substance use or abuse as they grow older (Quigley & Maggi, 2014).

Many of the other non-academic needs of students cited by the research participants intersect with the needs I have already discussed in relation to the extant literature. Others are more behavioral in nature. For example, social interaction relates to interpersonal problem-solving and coping skills when students encounter conflict with peers or adults. Bodily control is closely related to coping skills pertaining to impulse control, emotional regulation, and externalizing behaviors. For the purposes of Table 3, needs were separated and quantified. However, there exists quite a bit of intersectionality around students' non-academic needs and potentially troubling future implications of not adequately addressing those needs.

The holistic paradigm.

The theoretical framework for this investigation centered around the holistic paradigm, which aims to address and develop all aspects of the experience of being human: intellect, physicality, spirituality, emotions, and social competence. It additionally focuses upon strengthening relationships among individuals and between individuals and the environment. Finally, it embraces and encourages individuality and different ways of knowing (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). As this case study included the three first-grade teachers identified as possessing particular skill in promoting prosocial behaviors, it came as no surprise that all three of the participants consciously embraced a holistic philosophy and incorporated it into all aspects of their instruction and the classroom environment.

One problematic concern around the current focus upon performativity and standardized testing in education is the fact that children are experiencing so many stressors; difficult family circumstances, financial needs, increased media exposure, and health issues are only a few of the

lived experiences that influence students' abilities to function in the classroom setting (Elias et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 2017). Participants in this study consistently asserted their beliefs that students' non-academic needs are as important as academic concerns, and more importantly, that students could not learn effectively unless their emotional needs were addressed first. Teacher 1 spoke about building students' confidence and empathizing with their life circumstances as she remembered her own difficult childhood. Her number one priority is to help her students to become good people and to feel good about themselves and their abilities. Teacher 2 shared a very similar philosophy. "You wanna raise a good human being. I don't know why we don't spend more time on just respect, politeness, manners, and all that other stuff will fall into place." Teacher 3 used her classroom space and non-instructional time as a means of building confidence and addressing students' non-academic concerns. Her room was filled with posters around the "power of yet" and growth mindset. She shared about how she uses her time at recess to coach students on solving interpersonal or social conflicts when they arise. These assertions were confirmed by observations from special-area participants. "The best teachers are using moments from recess, you know, problems that one kid comes up with and maybe using that problem to share with the, make it a teachable moment" (Specialist 2).

Research suggests that employing tenets of the holistic paradigm may help to equalize outcomes for students of low SES and those who struggle with executive functioning including the ability to cope with and regulate strong emotions (Lillard et al., 2017). Students in a classroom that supports attempts at self-regulation are more likely to form a self-concept that promotes future negotiation of self-regulatory challenges (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Teacher participants in this study were well-informed about their students' individual circumstances and challenges both inside and outside of school. Teacher 1 spoke about families struggling to

survive financially while parents navigated multiple jobs or worked third shift. Teacher 2 echoed this sentiment and explained her belief in the importance of teaching coping and resilience to students. She acknowledged that the difficult circumstances causing students' strong emotions might not change and talked about empowering her students to take ownership and responsibility for growing and learning even in the face of adversity. Teacher 3 shared that a number of her students came from single-parent households and that in helping students to manage emotions, she is cognizant that students may be receiving mixed messages. One student, in particular, had been told by his father that boys do not show emotions and that he should "man up" when he was feeling upset. Because the setting for this study does not explicitly include SEL in the curriculum, there exists no way of assessing students' self-regulatory or emotional competence. According to Blair and Diamond (2008), a fundamental goal for primary schools should be the development of a curriculum that supports self-regulation and uses appropriate measures to assess its effects upon students' cognitive, social-emotional, and academic abilities. Participants chose to attend to students' emotional well-being because of their own epistemologies, but several expressed their frustration that there is currently no system in place for measuring students' progress or providing more intensive supports for those students who would benefit from additional practice opportunities.

ASCD whole child recommendations for Pennsylvania.

ASCD's Whole Child Snapshot (2015) for Pennsylvania provides an overview of how well Pennsylvania is comprehensively meeting the needs of students at various developmental stages ranging from early childhood to postsecondary education. The report is divided into six key tenets: healthy, safe, engaged, supported, challenged, and sustainable. It compares Pennsylvania's statistics with those of other states and recommends action steps toward a holistic

educational approach that prepares Pennsylvania's students to serve as productive citizens. At the time of the report, 20% of children in Pennsylvania were living in poverty. To provide a setting-specific context, nearly 40% of the students in the research setting have been identified as living in poverty. The average student-to-counselor ratio in Pennsylvania is 394:1, which is significantly higher than the American School Counselor Association's 250:1 recommendation or the nearly 350:1 ratio in the research setting. The percentage of Pennsylvania students scoring proficient or higher on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was 40% in fourth-grade reading and 42% in eighth-grade math, compared to the national average score of 34% in both domains.

State-specific recommendations were detailed in Chapter 2. For the purposes of this section, I will illuminate connections among these recommendations and the actions, beliefs, and recommendations of my research participants and provide greater insight around how these recommendations compare to the current practices employed in the research site. Under the category of health, ASCD recommends that schools connect families in need with free or low-cost physical and mental health services. The site does provide information to families about low or no-cost medical insurance, and a mobile dental service visits each school year to provide services to qualifying students. An area of need, according to research participants, exists in the domain of mental health. As stated above, the approximate student to counselor ratio in the research site is 350:1, which exceeds the recommendations of The American School Counselor Association. Participants in this study expressed concerns around needing more counselors to meet the growing emotional needs of our students. Teacher 2 stated multiple times that she believes every grade level should have a guidance counselor. The two guidance counselors in the research setting provide both individual and small-group counseling as well as teaching guidance

classes to students once per six-day cycle. Specialist 1, one of the school counselors, expressed that it can be very difficult for her to navigate and juggle the teacher/counselor roles as well as find time to talk with all of the students who need her. Teacher 2 additionally shared that she feels that the school should have an emotional support classroom. The site does not currently house an emotional support room, but the intermediate school (3-6) building does offer emotional support. Teacher 2 feels that the school is doing a disservice to students in not providing structured emotional support services as early as possible instead of using “Band-Aid” solutions until students reach third grade. Finally, teachers expressed their desire for a means of evaluating students’ social and emotional progress. Without data, it can be difficult to identify and solve problems or effectively communicate with stakeholders. The current primary report school card consists of academic grades and a work ethic grade. Participants felt that work ethic does not adequately address or assess the social and emotional domain (Teacher 1). Implementing some form of social or emotional assessment would allow teachers to identify students who are not responding to whole-class interventions so that those students might receive more intensive interventions in an individual or small-group setting.

Within the category of safety, ASCD recommends that schools take the action step of supporting SEL and character development. While opportunities for character development and SEL often occur organically in the primary setting, they are not explicitly included or assessed in the research site building-wide. As I had mentioned in Chapter 2, the school counselors do use the Second Step curriculum with students during once-per-cycle guidance lessons. However, the program is not being implemented school-wide or taught as frequently as the creators of the program recommended. In recent years, the school library has purchased a collection of SEL books for teachers to use with students. Again, however, there are no procedures or guidelines in

place around the use of these materials. Individual teachers may choose whether or not to use the books. Supporting SEL was named as a priority of all classroom teacher participants. First-grade teachers stated that they prioritize SEL before academics and believe that unless students' emotions are under control, they will not be able to learn effectively. Teacher 1 felt strongly that students could not learn unless their basic needs were being met. She emphasized the importance of growth in all areas: social, emotional, and academic. Teacher 2 expressed the need to assume a parental role sometimes with her students. This could take the form of reminding them to wash their hands or providing a Band-Aid for minor cuts or scrapes. "If you ignored all that, you couldn't get any academics done" (Teacher 2).

To promote engagement, ASCD suggests that school districts measure and report family engagement activities such as volunteer rates and parent involvement data. The district does keep a master list of volunteers who have completed the required documentation. However, it is an option for individual teachers to keep records of volunteers within their own classrooms. When parents attend school functions or parent-teacher conferences, they are required to sign a sign-in sheet. It might also be worthwhile to track and report parent involvement in the day-to-day functioning of the classroom: completion of reading bags, signing student agenda books, returning papers in students' folders, or contacting teachers. Two of the three first-grade teacher participants noted that parents seemed particularly disengaged during the school year when this study was conducted. All teachers recognized the fact that parents and students are hurried and busy much of the time rushing from one activity to the next. However, Teacher 2 relayed that parents seemed willing to "blow-off" homework or make excuses for their children when assignments were not completed. "I've had full folders go home on Friday. They still have full folders come back on Monday. Nobody's looked at them. Rarely do they [parents] sign their

reading slips.” Teacher 3 stated, “This is the first year I’ve been told I give too much homework.” She further shared that the homework assignments she sends home typically take five to ten minutes to complete and that she believes that is a reasonable expectation. In addition, some participants expressed concern around the message families send to students about the importance of school. “Well, we don’t hang that up. My mom just takes that and puts it in the trash” (Teacher 2, quoting one of her students). Teacher 2 stated, “If they [the students] keep bringing stuff home and you’re not even looking at it, they’re not fools.” She asserted that students very quickly internalize the message that what they do in school does not matter.

Finally, ASCD recommends that Pennsylvania schools address the category of challenge by measuring student growth and performance across all domains including academic areas as well as social and emotional competence. Given the current focus upon performativity in education, a great deal of data exists around students’ academic performance. Students in the primary K-2 setting are too young to participate in standardized state tests; however, they are regularly assessed in core areas and data is used to determine appropriate interventions for students who need more intensive instruction. At the present time, the research site does not employ any means of measuring or tracking students’ social and emotional growth. Without an assessment structure in place, no system exists for identifying students who are not demonstrating competence or for designing individualized plans for improvement.

Limitations

Because this was an action research study, its findings necessarily apply only to the site of the inquiry. While it is my hope that educators in comparable settings may be able to use my findings in addressing similar problems of practice, the data collected pertained to a specific group of participants in a particular setting. In considering equity and the effectiveness of

identified strategies, it is important to consider the demographics of the research site: at the time of the study, the student population was .74% Asian, 11.87% Hispanic, 2.82% Black, and 80.71% White (School Performance Profile, 2017.). The percentage of students living in poverty at the time of the study was 38.3% based upon the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch (S. Nelson, personal communication, November 15, 2017). It is further important to recognize the limitations in using self-reported data, as participants' reports were taken at face value. Memories are reconstructions, and as such, are not independently verifiable. Triangulation through member checks and verifying claims through classroom observations was intended to help to mitigate the bias inherent in self-reporting.

Additionally, as an insider in the setting, my positionality may have affected the types of interview responses I received as well as participants' instructional choices during classroom observations. In the same way, my experience having worked for many years with the participants could potentially allow my personal biases to affect how I conceptualize and represent my observations and conclusions.

Implications for Research and Practice

As action research is cyclical in nature, findings and discoveries in each cycle organically lead toward new curiosities and wonderings to be addressed in future cycles. Future research in my site might include an investigation of how teachers operationalize the construct of school readiness and how they feel responsibility for non-academic learning should be divided between the school and the home. In addition, replication of this study in a different setting might provide some interesting insights that might add to our understandings of generalizability.

In terms of practice, I believe that our teaching colleagues are one of our greatest untapped resources. While we spend all day in the same physical space, we rarely or never visit

one another's classrooms or have the time for in-depth peer learning. Using what I have gleaned through this line of inquiry and after comparing my data to the tenets of the holistic paradigm, I would like to encourage stakeholders to consider staff development around best practices for moving toward a more holistic approach. Further, I aim to present my findings to the administration and to open a conversation about including social and emotional interventions in our RTII tiered intervention framework.

Conclusion

Education as a system needs to expand its focus beyond academic performativity to educate and nurture the whole child—body, mind, and spirit. In our ever-changing society, children are faced with innumerable stressors, and they enter school with varying degrees of social and emotional competence. We can no longer afford to assume that parents will address children's non-academic needs. Given the problematic future implications of low peer acceptance or underdeveloped executive functioning skills, it is imperative that schools include some provision for SEL in the curriculum and design more intensive interventions for students who are not mastering SEL in a whole-class setting. One of our greatest underused resources in schools is the expertise and experience of our colleagues. While we share space in the same building, we rarely or never have the opportunity to observe or speak with our fellow educators and to learn from their philosophy, insight, or experience. In using a process of community nomination, I learned that there was a clear consensus around who is especially skilled at promoting prosocial behaviors among students. However, simply recognizing the experts is only half of the solution; the next step is to use their expertise to improve teaching and learning building and district-wide.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for First-Grade Teacher Participants

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for First-Grade Teacher Participants

1. What do you enjoy about working with first graders?

This is a conversational start in order to put the interviewees at ease. I am trying to get a sense of their attitude/motivation in working with young children and their specific needs in order to contextualize the proactive strategies employed in the classroom.

[PROBES: Was first grade the level you chose or was it just the job that became available? Have you taught other grade levels or subjects during your teaching career? How long have you been teaching overall and at the first-grade level?]

2. What are some of the unique challenges in working with students in first grade?

[PROBES: Do you find the greatest challenges to be academic or behavioral in nature? Can you provide an example (or examples) of challenging situations you have encountered in the classroom?]

3. In your opinion, how should responsibility be divided between the school and the home?

[PROBES: Does the school have a responsibility to address and intervene in non-academic areas? How do you address individual students' needs in the classroom when students have had such varied lived experiences?]

4. Think specifically about your class. What are your overall impressions of the class socially/behaviorally?

[PROBES: What unique challenges does your class present this year? Can you speak to their strengths and needs in interacting socially? What is your sense in terms of the support your students are receiving at home?]

5. By the end of first grade, where do you feel students should be functioning academically, behaviorally, and socially?

[PROBES: What factors allow or do not allow students to reach that expected level? How is success measured in each of these areas?]

6. Is there any additional wisdom you wish to share or anything else you would like to say?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Specialist Teacher Participants

Appendix B**Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Specialist Teacher Participants**

1. What do you enjoy most about working with first graders?

This is a conversational start in order to put the interviewees at ease. I am trying to get a sense of their attitude/motivation in working with young children and their specific needs as well as the depth of their experience in working with this age group.

[PROBES: What unique characteristics to first-grade students bring to your classroom?

How long have you been teaching? Of that time, how many years have you worked with first graders?]

2. What are some of the unique challenges in working with students in first grade?

[PROBES: Do you find the greatest challenges to be academic or behavioral in nature?

Can you provide an example (or examples) of challenging situations you have encountered in the classroom?]

3. Think about all the first-grade classes you teach and their interactions with you and with their classroom teachers. What proactive strategies, interventions, or phrases have you observed first-grade teachers using with their students?

[PROBES: What correlations exist, if any, between strategies you have observed and the behavior of students in your particular special? What strategies have you observed (insert name of first-grade teacher participant) using with his or her class during the years you have worked with him/her? What relationship, if any, have you observed between those strategies and (participant's) students in your classroom, in general?]

4. From your observations of student-teacher interactions, does teacher experience seem to play a role in the presence or effectiveness of proactive prosocial strategies used by classroom teachers?

[PROBE: What similarities or differences have you observed among strategies used by novice and experienced teachers?]

5. Have you found any proactive strategies of your own to be particularly effective in managing students' social/emotional behaviors?
6. Is there any additional wisdom you wish to share or anything else you would like to say?