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## Unmasking Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic - The Social Emotional Learning of Early Elementary Students

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

**Unmasking Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic -  
The Social Emotional Learning of Early Elementary Students**

A proposed research paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

Department of Teaching and Learning

In partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Urban Education

(Urban Education, Literacy Concentration)

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4 April 2024

Social Emotional Learning of Early Elementary Students

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This research paper written by Jahnessa Chanontree, Katie Musfelt, Miranda Myers, Linnea Trujillo is approved and accepted by faculty of the Department of Teaching and Learning, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Urban Education.

April 4, 2024  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to understand how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) influenced academic engagement in the early elementary classroom. Research was grounded on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory which purports that behavior is influenced by a person's social experiences throughout their lifetime. Researchers sought to find the connection between the influence that student behavior had on their social experiences, in correlation to their home life and school environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to investigate if there were long-lasting effects of living through the COVID-19 pandemic on student's SEL, specifically in how they engaged with peers, adults, and assignments in the classroom. The researchers implemented a mixed-method data analysis approach and administered a quantitative survey and qualitative interview to gather data from 97 caregivers of Catholic school students. Additional data was gathered from teacher observations, field notes, and student samples. Participants included caregivers of students (ages 2-5 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), enrolled in kindergarten through second grade(s) during this study. This research may help educators and caregivers understand the influence that SEL can have on academic engagement of students in early elementary classrooms through the lens of the constructivist paradigm, which seeks to understand and explain more about the world in which we live.

**Keywords:** anxiety, Catholic school, COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, early elementary classroom, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), student engagement

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to Study**

Most people become educators because they have an innate desire to help others learn and grow. Educators are continually looking for ways to improve their teaching and identify practices that will engage students and help them develop as individuals. Having a student who is engaged in learning is crucial to a positive learning experience. When people are engaged with what they are doing or who they are spending time with, they feel a connection and are motivated to participate. People can show outward signs of behavioral engagement, but there are also inward factors of cognitive and emotional engagement that should be considered as well. Emotions play a key role in how people feel connected to things in their lives and can positively or negatively influence engagement (LoBue & Ogren, 2022). This is especially significant in the early elementary classroom setting as this is where students begin their foundation of learning. Having a positive relationship with teachers and peers can set students up for success for the rest of their lives. This study sought to understand how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) correlated with engagement of early elementary students in the classroom who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Emotions affect how people socialize with family, friends, and peers, as well as how they interact at work, school, and in society. Aspects of SEL within a classroom setting include how a person feels and interacts towards school, peers, and their teachers. SEL looks at how students manage their emotions, set and meet goals, and work with others. Understanding how SEL influences student engagement is of great interest to both caregivers and educators as it can provide insight for adults, who are an important component in a student's academic journey. When an inclusive SEL culture is present in the classroom, students are offered a supportive space to take part in learning and practicing the application of skills they need for critical thinking and problem solving. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, it had a sudden and incredible impact on the world and its' ripple effect caused a disruption in education for students. Students were isolated, schools were closed, and peer relationships suffered as the pandemic

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spread across the world. Student experiences varied greatly during this time and impacted home and school environments in different ways. A new reality of distance learning and social distancing set in and families were forced to adapt to a new set of standards if they wanted their student's education to continue. The return to in-person learning was challenging as students had to relearn how to engage in learning after being isolated from classrooms for an extended period of time. These life experiences have had lasting effects on children and continue to shape who they are as students today.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to offer educators and caregivers an understanding of the influence that SEL can have on academic engagement of students in early elementary classrooms. It aimed to better understand how students (ages 2-5 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), enrolled in kindergarten through second grade(s) during this study, engaged in the classroom. The research also sought to understand how the different home and educational experiences students had during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their engagement in the classroom. Through information gathered from caregivers about their families' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with educator observations from the classroom, the scope of this research examined how SEL influenced engagement in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to investigate if there were long-lasting effects of living through the COVID-19 pandemic on student's SEL, specifically in how they engaged with peers, adults, and assignments in the classroom.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study examined the relationship between SEL and student engagement in the classroom and looked at how a student's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way they engaged in their classroom. It explored behavioral engagement and how students interacted with completing assignments or tasks, and cognitive and emotional engagement which looked at an educator's observations of student attitudes towards work, peers, and school in general. The research focused on the correlation between SEL and



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engagement and how it impacted student success in school. It also investigated what life outside of school was like for students during the COVID-19 pandemic, including whether or not they continued their education in person or virtually, how much exposure to peers they had, and how their family dynamic changed during this time. Understanding the context of student experiences provided useful background knowledge about information educators may not typically have access to from an educator-student relationship perspective. The findings in this study aimed to offer insight to educators who seek to understand how to best reach and support their students in the classroom and engage them in positive social emotional relationships with learning, peers, and teachers. Understanding more about how SEL and engagement are related may also influence the way educators approach teaching, assessing, and assigning work to students either as individuals or in group settings.

### **Research Questions**

This study may help educators and caregivers understand the influence that SEL can have on academic engagement of students in early elementary classrooms through the lens of the constructivist paradigm, which seeks to understand and explain more about the world in which we live. The central question was further explored by looking at the following key topics of interest:

1. How have COVID-19 pandemic experiences affected a students' SEL in the classroom today?
2. What is the relationship between a student's SEL and engagement in the early elementary classroom?

### **Definition of Terms**

In this study there were some terms that required conceptual definitions in order to make the research more clear. These terms include:

**Cognitive** is the conscious mental ability to understand, communicate, and reason independently.

**Early Elementary** refers to students enrolled in kindergarten, first, and second grades.

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**Hybrid School** is a combination of both in-person and virtual classroom learning that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to accommodate social distancing practices.

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** is an integral part of education and human development.

Social Emotional Learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (“Fundamentals of SEL.,” 2023).

**Socialization** a student’s ability to interact and communicate verbally, physically, and emotionally with others.

**Student Engagement (engaged)** is how present (attendance and participation) or interested a student seems to be in their learning in the classroom and the level of connectedness to their peers, teacher, and school community.

Some of the conceptual definitions mentioned above have additional operational definitions that help to understand how the researchers intended to utilize these concepts in this study. These terms include:

**Cognitive** a student’s conscious ability to independently think, communicate, recall, and engage in learning.

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** an analysis of survey results received from caregivers, including questions about SEL.

**Student Engagement** the Teacher of Record’s analysis of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive observations in the classroom.

### **Thematic Research Cluster/Group**

The researchers conducting this study were comprised of teacher scholars within the Catholic school community of Northern California who worked solely with early elementary students enrolled in kindergarten, first, and second grades. Each researcher began their classroom teaching career after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and their students have

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only been those who experienced the pandemic. Over the past three years these researchers have observed many student deficits in SEL in the classroom, including the ability to have sustained attention, a lack of self awareness, difficulty interacting and communicating with peers and teachers, and struggling to complete tasks or assignments in a timely manner. This research will benefit educators who want to understand more about the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on students and how their SEL relates to their engagement in the classroom. Educators can use this knowledge to help create a positive learning environment that can be modified for individual students. In creating a supportive classroom for students, educators can provide a space where negative social behaviors are reduced with improved classroom management and student engagement.

### **Summary**

The nuclear family is an important part of a student's world and their home environment can influence their development in every other aspect of their life including social, emotional, and physical well-being. Adults and primary caregivers are a student's first educator and help shape the foundation, beliefs, and values that a child will hold towards education and engagement in school. SEL begins at home and extends into the classroom which is why the importance of SEL is of great interest to educators, caregivers, and society at large. The COVID-19 pandemic was a historical and unexpected event that affected the home and school environments of elementary school students around the world. Students experienced a myriad of feelings such as isolation, depression, anxiety, and fear, which may have implications for the rest of their lives. In addition, many students have encountered developmental difficulties like speech and reading delays, fine and gross-motor development, and limited social skills due to isolation from the outside world. In one way or another, the pandemic has influenced the way students engage and feel connected to learning, peers, and their school as a whole. This research looked at how the experiences students had during the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect their engagement and SEL within the classroom. In the next chapter, the researchers reviewed relevant studies that contributed to the importance of this research topic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Conceptual Framework

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory suggests that there are eight developmental stages of psychosocial growth that a person moves through during their lifespan in order to help them become a confident and successful member of society. The eight stages are as follows: Stage 1: Trust Versus Mistrust, Stage 2: Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt, Stage 3: Initiative Versus Guilt, Stage 4: Industry Versus Inferiority, Stage 5: Identity Versus Role Confusion, Stage 6: Intimacy Versus Isolation, Stage 7: Generativity Versus Stagnation, and Stage 8: Integrity Versus Despair. This theory purports that as people move through the eight developmental stages, their behavior is influenced by their social experiences. One strength of Erikson's theory is that it shows a complete view of development throughout a lifespan. Each stage builds on each other and shapes a person's identity, which can positively or negatively impact their social relationships (Sutton, 2020).

One critique of Erikson's theory suggests that development can not be tied to a specific age and each stage does not need to be completed sequentially in order to advance to the next stage (Syed & McLean, 2018). Erikson believes identity develops during the ages of 13-21 in the Identity vs. Confusion stage (Sutton, 2020). However, the researchers in this study were early elementary school educators who believed that students begin establishing their identity at an earlier age. As students enter their primary years of education they start to gain independence and a sense of identity, away from their parents and caregivers.

Students enrolled in early elementary classrooms, during the duration of this study, would have been in the Initiative vs. Guilt stage during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Erikson, during this stage, children are learning how to become secure in their surroundings by making independent choices (Sutton, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created environmental factors that restricted the opportunity for independent decision making and the development of interpersonal skills such as problem-solving, negotiating, risk-taking, taking initiative, and verbal and non-verbal communication. The invisible barriers created by

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social distancing limited a student's ability to explore their surroundings, interact with others, and feel confident in their choices. As Sutton (2020) writes, children must find a balance between initiative and guilt to successfully complete this stage, and failure to do so can lead to individuals questioning their sense of purpose in the world. According to Erikson's theory, early elementary school children are transitioning out of the Initiative vs. Guilt Stage and into the Industry vs. Inferiority Stage, where their world becomes much more about education and developing competencies that are both academic and social. The researchers utilized the constructivist philosophical paradigm as the foundation of their research to form a deeper understanding of how each developmental stage influenced student engagement behaviors exhibited in the early elementary classroom.

### **Early Elementary Classroom**

The early elementary classroom is a place of learning and serves a dual purpose as it is a space where students can explore social interactions with others. Throughout history, many factors have influenced how students engage with peers, teachers, and curriculum. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented conditions that changed the way classrooms operated. In the fall of 2020, schools had to decide which approach they were going to adopt to continue offering curriculum instruction for their students. Some schools opted to remain virtual, some returned to in-person learning, and others offered a hybrid model that combined both distance and in-person instruction (Pressley, 2021).

Literacy was undoubtedly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the study conducted by Baş et al. (2023), researchers investigated the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on 18 primary school students' reading skills. The dependent variable was the students' reading skills and the independent variable was school closures as a result of the pandemic. The study discovered students' reading fluency and comprehension skills regressed while distance learning. It also found that teachers felt disconnected from their students because they could not motivate or engage them in learning the same way they could if they were teaching face-to-face. The evidence showed that when students were separated from their

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classroom environment, it had a powerful effect on how they engaged with academics. During their time in kindergarten, first, and second grades, children begin to form their foundation for future learning, including cognitive, social, and emotional development (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005).

In addition to academic learning, students discover a lot about themselves as individuals during their time spent in the classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a major challenge because students were no longer attending school in person. In a study done by Timmons et al. (2021), the researchers examined data obtained from interviews of early childhood educators in grades kindergarten, first, and second grades, as well as parents of students in those grades. The data explored the successes and challenges of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five different findings were discovered, which are as follows: First, there were concerns with equity and students having access to technology and resources, as well as the skills to be able to use them. Second, a lack of legislation around distance learning meant that the style and frequency of instruction was inconsistent for students. Third, the lack of in-person learning and community caused a significant social-emotional impact on students and it changed the way they interacted with teachers and peers. Fourth, the quality of instruction diminished because teachers were no longer able to differentiate instruction for varied learners and parents became teachers with little or no knowledge of curriculum, which made it difficult to support their children. Finally, adults took on many roles during this time including, caregiver, teacher, and employee/boss, which led to feelings of being overwhelmed and inadequate while trying to keep up with all of the demands being placed on them. While there may have been challenges, the research concluded that both teachers and parents were able to successfully support their students while distance learning. However, the long-term effects of how students would be affected once they returned to school were unknown since this study occurred at the beginning of the pandemic. These findings added weight to the argument that students were affected socially, emotionally, and academically because they were not engaged in learning in the same way that they would have been if they were learning in person.

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Recent studies like these shed new light on the importance of in-person learning in the early elementary classroom, which previous studies had not addressed because the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning did not exist. In the study done by Baş et al. (2023), researchers made a clear connection between the importance of teachers' feelings of being able to motivate their students and student engagement and success. The study done by Timmons et al. (2021), revealed the importance of the classroom setting in establishing an equitable learning environment where students can grow academically, socially and emotionally. Both of these studies showed how important it is for students to be present in the classroom to grow their competence and build a successful learning foundation that does not create feelings of inferiority and cause them to question their place in society (Sutton, 2020). When students are in a classroom setting, teachers are able to formatively assess their learning on an ongoing basis and then adjust their curriculum accordingly, this includes assessing their social-emotional well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic made educators acutely aware of the importance of having in-person instruction to support both academics and social emotional learning. This study intended to explore the role of social emotional learning in the classroom and how it impacted student engagement.

### **Student Engagement**

Effective classroom learning environments strive to create teaching strategies that foster high levels of student engagement in the classroom. Student engagement is a key factor in a students' education and refers to the motivation and participation that a student demonstrates in a classroom setting. Students who are engaged in content are more likely to learn, perform well academically, and develop skills needed for the future. There are many factors that lead to student engagement and it can vary from student to student.

The research in the study by Klosky et al. (2022), gave background to how students' learning and academic engagement was related to remote learning that occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The individuals included in the study were eight school administrators and 26 essential working parents of children in kindergarten through third grades.

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The data collected included surveys, virtual interviews, and focus groups. As the surveys were conducted, the study mentioned that the houses were typically loud, chaotic, and would not be a good fit for students while remote learning. Additionally, the findings mentioned that another barrier with distance learning was technology. Teachers reported that they handed out paper copies of work, especially in the younger grades, because technology at home was inadequate. Teachers found the handouts would not get turned in or they would be incomplete. At home the parents reported that their child began losing interest in school and parents had a difficult time motivating their child to stay on task. The study found that teachers, administration, and parents saw a decline in student engagement. Additionally, the many barriers that students faced while remote learning and the impact it had on their engagement was brought to light. Lastly, parents from the study shared that when their student went back to in-person learning, they saw improvements in the student's mood, school performance, and participation with learning.

The findings conducted by Pietarinen et al. (2014), highlighted the important connection between a student's cognitive and emotional engagement as well as the relationship with peers, teachers, and learning environment. The study was conducted with 170 students from three different schools. The research used a structural equation modeling (SEM) system to test participants. The report found students who were accepted and liked by their peers, had support from their teachers, and received fair treatment were key factors that impacted the student's well being and social engagement at school. Whereas, students who were less liked and less involved in academic activities, had reduced academic achievement. The study concluded that a student's emotional engagement contributed to their cognitive engagement, which the research described as a person's personal investment in learning. Additionally, the relationship students had with others contributed to their emotional and cognitive engagement.

The first study provided insight about how student engagement declined from online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shared information about what families and students struggled with at home and how student engagement changed as a result. The second study showed the connections a student had with others at school directly correlated to engagement.



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The COVID-19 pandemic required students to engage in distance learning and limited interpersonal connections with teachers and peers, which led to a decrease in engagement. The research showed the importance of providing a supportive and engaging classroom for students to help them develop healthy emotional and cognitive behaviors. This study examined the importance that student engagement had on learning and how it is influenced by SEL.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Educators observe their students' behaviors and emotional wellness every day. Student actions in the classroom stem from what they are experiencing from different aspects of their lives, which can affect their cognitive learning. By understanding what students are experiencing, teachers and caregivers can support students' emotional well-being by educating themselves on Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

The study conducted by Wiglesworth et al. (2021), highlighted the effects SEL had in schools. According to the study, SEL is a process in which strategies and skills are developed to help manage emotions that individuals encounter. This study supported that SEL programs are necessary in schools and explained why students and teachers benefit from them. The study addressed the importance of SEL because it explained how the COVID-19 pandemic affected children and adolescent's well-being during and after the pandemic. The study found that of the 621 schools who participated, SEL was ranked as a top priority in schools. Additionally, SEL programs were shown to be effective when they included proper training, recruitment, and took measures to update school practices, policy documentation, and SEL curriculum. The results of the study concluded that students' attitudes towards self and others, behavior regulation, and social interactions positively increased when a strong SEL program was present.

In the study conducted by Steed et al. (2022), research looked at the importance of an effective SEL culture in the classroom in order to understand the implications it can have on preschool, kindergarten, first, and second grade students. The design of the study involved 1,154 teachers who taught preschool through second grades in public and private schools in the Western states of the U.S.; participants completed an online survey regarding their SEL

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program. The result of the study found that 52.48% of the early childhood teachers agreed that their school's SEL approach was effective and additionally, 52.32% stated that their own classroom approach to SEL benefitted their students. The study highlighted key elements needed for SEL to be effective such as consideration of their students' developmental needs and intentional inclusion in their school's SEL program.

These studies highlighted the importance of a SEL program in schools and how it benefitted elementary classrooms. By learning about SEL, educators and caregivers can understand and find ways to help their students develop healthy emotional behaviors. This was especially relevant as many students were exposed to distance learning while social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research conducted by Chambers et al. (2022), measured various effects the pandemic had on families. The findings concluded that parents believed their child's emotional well-being was greatly impacted during the pandemic year. Parents shared their belief of the importance that SEL had on their child's development and how parental stress may have played a role in the way their children were expressing emotions at home. Emotional health became strained during this time and families felt the impact of it in all areas of life.

The findings from the three studies offered insight about the importance of SEL in the early elementary classroom and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' emotional well-being. The first study provided reasons why SEL programs were important in schools and how they can be effective; it also indicated that SEL was seen as a priority in education. The second study supported how SEL was seen as beneficial in classrooms and it was evident that students' well-being was affected during and after the pandemic. The third study looked at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected families' and concluded that parents believed their child's emotional well-being suffered during this time. This study aimed to understand the influence SEL had on student engagement in the classroom, following the pandemic.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

Teachers have observed a shift in student behavior following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted everyday lives and daily routines in families

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across the globe. Each family had a unique experience due to their available resources, however there were many shared experiences that have impacted the SEL of students that can be observed in the classroom today. Many face-to-face interactions were replaced with a screen contributing to a myriad of issues observed in students today, including an imbalance in their social emotional learning, digital game addiction and absenteeism from school.

The study by Barnett & Jung (2021), offered insight into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education. Their research drew from the National Institute for Early Education Research's December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey, which highlighted several key findings. First, it indicated the pandemic led to a significant reduction in preschool enrollment, affecting access to early education. Second, the quality of preschool programs were impacted by the shift to remote learning and limited face-to-face interaction between educators and students. Third, caregivers had to take on a greater role in facilitating their children's learning, which was a burden to many families. Additionally, the report emphasized the social and emotional development challenges that affected young children from the disruption of their daily routines and social distancing. The study also highlighted the economic hardships experienced by parents, especially mothers, due to the pandemic's impact on employment and childcare responsibilities. Many mothers were faced with juggling working from home, while facilitating student learning and caring for their children. Lastly, the study highlighted the effects on children with disabilities and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) along with the need for targeted support to address these inequities as many were undiagnosed and underserved.

The study conducted by Santibañez & Guarino (2021) investigated the impact of student absenteeism on academic and social-emotional outcomes. The study highlighted that chronic absenteeism had negative effects on both academic achievement and social-emotional well-being. It revealed that students who missed more school days tended to perform poorly in their academics and were at an increased risk of falling behind. Prior to the pandemic, student absences averaged approximately seven days. After the onset of the pandemic, absences averaged ten days with the highest instances in kindergarten and tenth through twelfth grades.

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The study emphasized the importance of addressing absenteeism, especially in the context of the pandemic, where remote and hybrid learning models presented new challenges for students' attendance and engagement. The findings confirmed the need for strategies and interventions to address the negative effects of absenteeism and support students' social emotional development.

The study by Şenol et al. (2023) investigated digital game addiction among preschool children during the pandemic. It evaluated the impact of digital games on student's social-emotional development along with the supervision and guidance from parents and caregivers. The research highlighted that social distancing during the pandemic contributed to an increase in preschool student's access to digital devices. This resulted in increased screen time and digital game engagement along with decreased face-to-face communication with individuals outside of their home environment. The increase in digital gaming was found to have negative impacts on the social-emotional development of young children. The study emphasized how excessive game addiction can negatively impact student's social interactions and social emotional development. Their research drew off UNICEF's report, *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*, which indicated the increase in digital game usage has contributed to an increase in children's physical health concerns including metabolic problems, poor sleep, and visual impairment. In addition, children have displayed symptoms of withdrawals, including irritable and aggressive behaviors. Parental guidance was identified as a crucial factor in addressing these negative effects. The research suggested that parents who actively monitor their children's digital activity and act as a positive role model with their own digital devices, can help reduce the impact of digital game addiction on social-emotional development. This study provided valuable insight into the challenges faced due to increased screen time during the pandemic and the important role caregivers play in managing these challenges to support positive social-emotional development in their children.

The findings from the three studies offered helpful insight regarding the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on various aspects of education along with the social-emotional

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development of students in classrooms. Barnett & Jung's research highlighted the significant disruptions in early childhood education and the increased burden on parents due to the pandemic. It highlighted the need for additional support in order to address educational inequalities, especially for students with special needs that were not supported or identified during the pandemic. Santibañez and Guarino's study emphasized the impact of student absenteeism on both academic performance and social-emotional well-being with a call for strategies to address these effects. In addition, the research of Şenol et al. highlighted the negative effects of digital game addiction among preschool children that was intensified by the pandemic. The vital role parental guidance played in managing screen time and promoting healthy social emotional development was also discussed. Together, these studies offered insight into the many challenges that influence student social-emotional learning and called attention to the importance of proactive measures which are necessary to support the social-emotional development of early elementary students. The researchers in this study sought to provide an understanding of student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and help educators acknowledge and support their students' SEL needs in early elementary classrooms.

### **Summary**

Research has shown the importance that the early elementary classroom can have on a students' sense of self and relationship with peers and learning. An important aspect of a students' classroom experience is how they engage with their surroundings. Healthy social emotional behaviors can have an impactful influence on engagement, which is why it is important to understand more about SEL. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way students engaged with learning and there is still much that is unknown about the long-term effects it may have had on students in the early elementary classroom in relation to SEL. In the next chapter, the methodology for this study will be outlined.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This study aimed to understand how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) influenced academic engagement in the early elementary classroom. This research explored past experiences of students who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, and looked at how they engaged with their peers, teachers, and environment in their current classroom setting. This study may also offer insight into best practices for how educators and caregivers can better support their students' SEL and overall academic growth.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How have COVID-19 pandemic experiences affected a students' SEL in the classroom today?
2. What is the relationship between a student's SEL and engagement in the early elementary classroom?

To better understand how SEL influenced student engagement, the researchers took a mixed-method data analysis approach and administered a quantitative online survey and qualitative interviews to gather data from caregivers. Surveys were distributed to caregivers of students in kindergarten, first, and second grades in four different Catholic schools in Northern California (see Appendix A). These surveys helped the researchers gain background knowledge of student experiences prior to their current educational setting. The caregiver surveys utilized a combination of 5-point Likert scale ratings and open-ended questions to gather data. The Likert scale is defined as: 1-A Great Deal, 2-Somewhat, 3-About Half the Time, 4-Little, and 5-Not at All ("What is a Likert scale?," 2023). Researchers conducted follow-up interviews with a select sample of participants to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences (see Appendix B).

Additional data was gathered from teacher observations, field notes, and student samples. Based on teacher recommendations and observations in the classroom, each of the four teacher-scholar researchers selected two students, whose caregivers opted-in on the surveys, for their student's classroom behaviors to be observed and included in this study.

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During the duration of the study, the researchers had regular and frequent access to student participants, resulting in the familiarity of their behaviors and classroom engagement. This data helped the researchers look at how SEL was displayed and observed in the classroom. This information was used to help understand more about the influence of SEL on engagement.

This mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive view of the experiences that students had during the COVID-19 pandemic and what teachers were observing in the classroom. The surveys provided background on a large sample size and the interviews allowed the researchers to elaborate on initial findings. By asking questions and gathering data from both families and teachers, the researchers were able to understand more about their subjects.

### **Sample and Population**

This study was conducted using an explanatory, sequential, mixed-method approach where teacher scholars first administered surveys to the identified sample group to collect quantitative data. Following the surveys, the researchers conducted interviews with selected participants to collect qualitative data and gain further insight into the initial findings. These findings were then combined with teacher observations and student work samples to help researchers better understand student behaviors.

The sampling method used was non-probability sampling. The participants were selected based on convenience and proximity to the teacher scholars conducting the research. The sample size included 97 Catholic school families, located in Northern California, with students currently enrolled in kindergarten, first, and second grades for the 2023-2024 school year. However, for unknown reasons some participants chose not to engage with the survey. The survey collected participant demographic data including religious affiliation, race, primary language spoken at home, and educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This sample was selected by the researchers who were teacher-scholars and sought to understand more about early elementary students, specifically how SEL influenced academic engagement. The researchers were familiar with developmental norms observed in the classroom for students in kindergarten, first and second grades and had convenient access to

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student participants on a regular basis throughout the duration of the study. Due to the frequency and time spent with students, the researchers were aware of student behaviors and were able to identify when they deviated from healthy social, emotional, and cognitive behaviors. Through this sample, the researchers were able to deepen their understanding of how prior experiences, outside of the classroom, may have impacted students' social-emotional learning in the classroom today.

### **Instrumentation and Conceptual Framework**

This study observed and analyzed the role of SEL and how it influenced engagement in the classroom. The methods for collecting data included a mixed-method approach that gathered information from caregiver online surveys and interviews, as well as teacher observations and student work samples from the classroom. Prior to administering the survey, all participants were given an online consent form. The online consent form ensured participant confidentiality and provided information on the intent of the study, any potential risks, and how the findings would be used to help support students in the classroom. Upon consent, participants were then provided with a list of defined terms (see Appendix C) to help them understand what was being asked throughout the survey questions. The terms that were defined were: Behaviors, Cognitive, Early Elementary, Hybrid School, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Socialization, and Student Engagement (engaged).

This caregiver survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale to determine the degree to which caregivers related to the questions pertaining to their students' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collected data reflected how caregivers felt about their student's engagement in different learning environments. Based upon participants' willingness to share additional information about their student's past experiences, the researchers selected a small sample of families to participate in follow-up interviews. This allowed the participants to elaborate on their experiences with open-ended answers that expanded on their initial survey responses.

The follow-up interviews were conducted based on the trends of the participants' responses. The researchers grounded their study on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and



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sought to find the connection between the influence that student behavior had on their social experiences, in correlation to their home life and school environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided the researchers with additional information to support their findings on what they have observed in regards to student SEL and influence on academic engagement.

### **Data Collection**

Quantitative data was collected through caregiver surveys, while qualitative data was collected through caregiver interviews, teacher observations, and student samples. Data collected through surveys provided researchers breadth in understanding themes of student learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected through caregiver interviews provided depth to understanding more about the participants' lived experiences, which were unknown to educators. The data from the observations that teachers conducted provided information that families would not have knowledge of and helped bridge the understanding of how home and classroom experiences contributed to SEL.

Prior to answering the survey questions, participants were provided with a list of definitions for relevant key terms (see Appendix C). The interview and survey questions that were used in this study were created to ensure that the questions were clear, unbiased and that there were a selection of answers using a 5-point Likert scale for the respondents to choose from. Survey data results measured responses based upon the mode. Survey data was further analyzed and synthesized to identify common trends and coded by themes.

In January 2024, an online survey was distributed to all caregivers of student participants included in this study, enrolled for the 2023-2024 school year. The survey was accessible to participants for two weeks. One week after the completion of the survey, interested participants were contacted to schedule an interview date that occurred within the following two weeks. Interviews were offered via phone call or in-person based upon participant's preference and availability.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study the researchers first analyzed the quantitative data. The researchers looked for trends in survey data based upon the frequency of responses for each question. The responses helped to identify emerging themes and gave researchers a better understanding of how prior learning experiences may have contributed to a student's SEL in an educational setting. Trends looked at experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and researchers anticipated these trends would include: varying educational experiences, socialization with others, and overall social-emotional well-being.

The quantitative data helped support additional findings revealed in caregiver interviews. Interviews provided qualitative data from caregivers who indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. The purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This data was combined with classroom observations from the teacher scholars to support the findings that SEL had on student engagement. The qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed for deeper, more significant, themes related to this topic of study. The researchers reviewed and recorded interviews and notes from classroom observations to analyze and synthesize data into coded themes.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The researchers aim in this study was to provide valid and credible evidence about how SEL influenced engagement in the classroom. Credibility was established through: 1) Member Checks - a select group of participants were chosen to discuss and elaborate on initial findings from the survey, 2) Triangulation - surveys, interviews, observations, and work samples were reviewed for common themes, and 3) Subjectivity - researchers drew upon lived experiences and personal knowledge to support the findings.

The researchers identified that there may be some limitations to their work. Limitations in this study may affect the trustworthiness of the data collected and analyzed. Researchers identified one such limitation as having caregivers who were interviewed who may not correctly

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recall events from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. March 2020 was the beginning of the pandemic, which was three and a half years ago and could be difficult for caregivers to recall specific responses to questions due to the amount of time that has elapsed. Interviewers asked general questions that did not require exact answers, but instead answers were rated using a Likert scale.

Another limitation that was considered was that caregivers could be hesitant to share personal information about their family for fear of judgment. The researchers were aware that participants would be sharing personal information and may have reported inaccurate data if they thought responses could be traced back to them. To increase the authenticity of the data, the researchers offered an option to have participants omit their names and submit an anonymous survey to help ensure privacy.

One other possible limitation was that the researchers' subjectivity could skew the way data from participant results was interpreted and may also influence data analysis. Each researcher also had their own personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic ranging from working in the classroom to having children of their own who experienced the disruption of a lack of in-person learning. To reduce subjectivity, each researcher reviewed and interpreted all data gathered to offer multiple viewpoints of analysis.

### **Issues of Ethics**

All researchers conducting this study have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Social and Behavioral Research program courses to ensure the protection of all subjects involved in this study. Conducting research pertaining to early elementary students can raise several areas of ethical concerns. The researchers understood that including minor students in their study would gather data about a vulnerable group. To minimize risk and protect this vulnerable group, no students were directly interviewed, nor were any names used as identifiers. To gather background knowledge and data on their experiences, caregivers of these students voluntarily participated in this study by responding to an invitation to complete a survey. It was clearly communicated that their participation in this study was

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voluntary and separate from all other academic coursework. Furthermore, the decision to participate would not have a positive or negative effect on a student's academic standing in the class. Prior to completing the survey, all caregiver respondents received an informed consent providing them with information on the intent of the study, any potential risks, and how the findings would be used to help educators and caregivers support students in the classroom. Measures were taken to keep all personal information confidential and no data was printed or redistributed. The researchers did not anticipate any risk to participating caregivers nor their students, as they took efforts to keep all personal data secure. Prior to conducting the research there was one conflict of interest identified. One of the teacher-scholar researchers had a personal relationship with one of the enrolled students in a participating classroom. To avoid a conflict of interest, this student was not included in the study. By addressing these ethical considerations, researchers helped contribute to the responsible and respectful conduct of research on early elementary students. These practices protected the participants and enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings.

### **Summary**

The research design, methods, setting, and participants have been carefully curated to inform the researchers about student educational experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have influenced their engagement in the classroom. The inclusion of data from both home and school as well as information from caregivers and teachers, provided the researchers with a comprehensive view of a student's past lived experiences as well as their current educational setting. A variety of methods were used including surveys, interviews, teacher observations, and student work samples to cross-check for emerging themes and test the researchers' hypothesis of how SEL contributed to classroom engagement. In the next chapter, findings will be presented and themes will be described.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Caregiver Survey

Dear Caregiver,

This survey is part of the capstone project for our masters program in Urban Education at Loyola Marymount University. We are conducting research about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role it plays in the social emotional development of young children in the classroom.

The research team includes, Miranda Myers, Linnea Trujillo, Katie Musfelt and Jahnessa Chanontree, who are all Catholic school educators. We would like to invite you to take part in a brief survey so we can learn more about your child's experience during the pandemic. Before completing the survey, please read over the definition of terms and agree to the informed consent form. This survey should only take about 5-10 minutes to complete.

You may choose to remain anonymous or provide your name for a follow-up interview. Your personal data will not be shared outside of our research group and will be destroyed at the end of the study. Participation in this survey is voluntary and separate from your child's academic coursework. I hope you will consider being a part of this study.

Link to the survey:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeea5K3uHLnq2olZHkzC9vaNrxVV4STH3F1ir31OYp7FCelwQ/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeea5K3uHLnq2olZHkzC9vaNrxVV4STH3F1ir31OYp7FCelwQ/viewform?usp=sf_link)

#### Caregiver Survey Questions:

##### Family Information

1. How many adults are currently living in your household?

Answer Response: 1, 2, Other

2. How many children (under the age of 18) are currently living in your household?

Answer Response: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more

3. What religion does your family practice?

Answer Response: Catholic, Prefer not to answer, Other

4. What is the primary language spoken at home?

Answer Response: English, Spanish, Other



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### Student Information

5. What is the current age of your child (month and year of birth, ex: 01/2017)?

Answer Response: open-ended response

6. What grade is your child currently enrolled in?

Answer Response: Kindergarten, First Grade, Second Grade

7. Including their current enrollment, how long has your child been enrolled in their current school?

Answer Response: 4 years, 3 years, 2 years, 1 year or less

8. For the 2020-2021 school year, what was your child's learning environment (please include preschool experience)?

Answer Response: In-person Learning, Remote or Distance Learning, Hybrid (both in-person and remote learning), Home-school Learning, Other

9. If student was attending in-person or hybrid school, how often did they attend?

Answer Response: 5 days a week, 4 days a week, 3 days a week, 2 days a week, 1 day a week, N/A

10. If your student participated in remote learning, how engaged (socially, emotionally, and cognitively) do you feel they were with learning?

Answer Response: A Great Deal, Somewhat, About Half the Time, Little, Not at All, N/A - Student participated in in-person learning.

11. During the pandemic, how often did your child engage with other children (siblings, cousins, neighbors, or friends) in a social setting? This does not include time spent at school.

Answer Response: A Great Deal, Somewhat, About Half the Time, Little, Not at All

12. What type of academic or social activities did your child participate in where other children were present? Examples: sports, clubs, playing with friends or neighbors, etc.

Answer Response: open-ended response

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13. In thinking about your child's use of technology (computer, tablet, TV, video games, etc.), do you feel it increased while they were social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021)?

Answer Response: A Great Deal, Somewhat, About Half the Time, Little, Not at All

14. If you believe your child used more technology (computer, tablet, TV, video games, etc.) after the pandemic began, on average, how much more time do you think was spent on electronic devices?

Answer Response: 30 minutes/day, 1 hour/day, 2-3 hours/day, 4+ hours/day

15. On average, how much time does your child currently spend using technology (computer, tablet, TV, video games, etc.)?

Answer Response: 30 minutes/day, 1 hour/day, 2-3 hours/day, 4+ hours/day

16. What behaviors are you observing in your child that you believe to be a long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic? Examples: a) Does your child seek or avoid interactions with others? b) Does your child easily play with other children? c) Can your child clearly articulate their thoughts and feelings? d) Is your child able to sustain attention with an activity for 15-20 minutes by themselves?

Answer Response: open-ended response

17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your child's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer Response: open-ended response

18. If selected, are you willing to participate in a brief follow-up, phone interview with your child's teacher to discuss your child's pandemic experience? If, "yes" please include: 1) your name and 2) the name of your child's teacher below.

Answer Response: open-ended response

### **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

#### **Caregiver Interview Questions (students who participated in in-person learning):**

1. What did a typical learning day consist of for your child during the August 2020 through May 2021 school year?
2. In your opinion, how engaged (socially, emotionally, and cognitively) do you feel your child was with in-person learning?
3. Do you feel your child's social, emotional, and cognitive needs were met while in-person learning? Please explain.
4. What type of technology/media did your child consume during the pandemic?
  - (TV, tablet, gaming)
  - (movies, shows, music, games etc.)
5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your pandemic experience that you believe may influence your child's current social emotional learning?

#### **Caregiver Interview Questions (students who participated at-home learning):**

1. What did a typical learning day consist of for your child during the August 2020 through May 2021 school year?
2. In your opinion, how engaged (socially, emotionally, and cognitively) do you feel your child was at home or with home learning?
3. As a caregiver, to what extent did you participate in supporting your child's home learning?  
(A Great Deal, Somewhat, About Half the Time, Little, Not at All)
4. Do you feel your child's social, emotional, and cognitive needs were met while at home/home learning? Please explain.
5. What type of technology/media did your child consume during the pandemic?
  - (TV, tablet, gaming)
  - (movies, shows, music, games etc.)

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6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your pandemic experience that you believe may influence your child's current social emotional learning?

### **Caregiver Interview Questions (students who participated in remote/hybrid learning):**

1. What did a typical learning day consist of for your child during the August 2020 through May 2021 school year?
2. In your opinion, how engaged (socially, emotionally, and cognitively) do you feel your child was with remote learning?
3. As a caregiver, what role did you play in supporting your child's remote learning? (A Great Deal, Somewhat, About Half the Time, Little, Not at All)
4. Do you feel your child's social, emotional, and cognitive needs were met while remote learning? Please explain.
5. What type of technology/media did your child consume during the pandemic?
  - (TV, tablet, gaming)
  - (movies, shows, music, games etc.)
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your pandemic experience that you believe may influence your child's current social emotional learning?

### **Appendix C: Definition of Terms for Participants**

**Caregivers:** The following terms are provided to help you better understand the questions that are being asked in this survey.

**Behaviors** actions and practices that student regularly takes part in.

**Cognitive** is the conscious mental ability a student has to understand, communicate, and reason independently.

**Early Elementary** refers to students enrolled in kindergarten, first, and second grades.

**Hybrid School** is a combination of both in-person and virtual classroom learning that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to accommodate social distancing practices.

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** how a student is able to develop social and emotional skills to be able to manage emotions, maintain relationships, and make decisions.

**Socialization** engaging with others in a social or academic setting

**Student Engagement (engaged)** the manner in which a student appears to connect with something socially, emotionally, and cognitively.