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# A Phenomenological Study of Teachers and Mental Health Paraprofessionals Implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Program

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## Abstract

This study examined the lived experience of teachers and mental health paraprofessionals implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love curriculum in an alternative school setting. Social emotional learning curriculum implementation within the unique structure of alternative schools is important to investigate in order to better understand the unique needs of those providing services to students in this setting. This study utilized open-ended written prompts and two focus groups with teachers and mental health paraprofessionals for 10 weeks of implementation of this social emotional learning program. Participants reported changes in students and themselves and an increase in group cohesion. Five identified themes included *change in students*, *change in staff*, *group cohesion*, *awareness of student needs*, and *existing stability*; all of which have implications for future social emotional learning curricula. Suggestions for best practices for SEL implementation are included.

**Keywords:** choose love, social emotional learning, alternative school, school counselor

Monitoring the mental health and quality of life in children across countries and cultures is becoming more of a focus in literature in order to provide them with the supports and resources needed for healthy functioning (Stevanovic et al., 2015; Vostanis, 2015). Mental health concerns in children are now viewed as prevalent in several countries (Kato et al., 2015). Within the United States, one in six children between the ages of two and eight has been diagnosed with a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (Center for Disease Control, 2013). At this rate, these disorders are among the most prevalent health issues impacting school-aged children in the United States today (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Schools are assuming the responsibility of providing mental healthcare because of their accessibility to students (Hoagwood et al., 2007). Due to the high need for mental health services, school counselors are in a position to respond to these concerns through services and programs to provide the students with resources they need (Keys et al., 1998).

## Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are an example of interventions that can be implemented through classroom lessons and small groups in schools. Zins and Elias (2007) defined SEL as “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others” (p. 234). SEL programs aim to teach skills to support successful interactions with peers, promote effective learning and cognitive skills, and encourage prosocial actions over aggressive behavior through self-regulation and relational skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2019a; Jones et al., 2017). They equip students with the social and emotional awareness to function more adaptively. Implementation requires interdisciplinary collaboration between school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers in the development of new programs designed to facilitate social and emotional learning (Clark & Breman, 2009; Maras et al., 2015). With the collaboration required for implementation, it is essential to explore and understand the experiences of the teachers and staff who administer these programs in the classroom.

The implementation of these various programs has resulted in improvements in peer relationships and social competence (Raimundo et al., 2013). Improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance have been measured in students after the implementation of SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011). More specifically, SEL programs are shown to enhance aspects of executive functioning, including organization and task completion (Lemberger et al., 2018). These results indicate SEL programs are influential in promoting more adaptive functioning in students. In addition to intrapersonal change, research indicates these programs generate interpersonal change as well. DeLay et al. (2016) indicated the programs are likely to promote more diverse friendships among students as well as decrease bullying and other aggressive behavior (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2002) since they offer “enhanced focus on educating students as whole people” (Zulkey, 2017, p. 26). Even one year after treatment, implementation of the programs was correlated with less aggressive fantasies in children, increased academic skills according to teacher reports, and improved reading achievement scores and school attendance (Jones et al., 2010). SEL thus appears to have a positive impact in many important areas for student welfare. According to Durlak et al. (2011), it is recommended that SEL curriculums are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit, or SAFE, to

maximize these results. Core components of evidence-based SEL programs include social skills, identification of feeling of self and others, and coping or relaxation techniques (Lawson et al., 2019).

SEL programs have been utilized with diverse populations. Meta-analysis reveals SEL participants improve in social-emotional skills, attitudes, and indicators of well-being regardless of race or socioeconomic status (Raimundo et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2017). Programs were found to be effective with various populations, including Portuguese students, at-risk youth, African American male students, and those identified as gifted who lacked in social awareness (Coelho et al. 2017; Graves et al., 2017; Larrier, 2017; Peterson, 2015). SEL programs are recommended for children diagnosed with autism, emotional behavior disorders, and ADHD (Berard et al., 2017; Daunic et al., 2013; Singh & Squires, 2014). Improvements have been studied in programs applied across a variety of ages (Yang & Bear, 2018). The social and emotional regulatory skills emphasized have been shown to benefit a wide range of children.

### **SEL Program Implementation**

These benefits are only seen with careful consideration to implementation. SEL programs are frequently implemented school wide. According to Bowers et al. (2017), the leaders are frequently the school counselors who obtain administrative permission to implement SEL programming as they “are ideally positioned to infuse SEL values and practices in a school” (p. 7). Trained in social and emotional domains (Van Velsor, 2009), they infuse the lessons into the Deliver component of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2019). This component includes direct services in classroom instruction and small groups and indirect services through consultation and collaboration with teachers, parents, and administration (ASCA, 2019). Due to this role, the school counselor is most often the person introducing SEL programs to the school and may even conduct the training within their leadership role. With the counselor as the leader in SEL program implementation, some teachers may embrace it wholeheartedly into their curriculum and classroom management. Others may vary in their implementation of school wide program, using some of the SEL language, combine the program with existing ones, or choose to not implement it at all (Martinson & Vilcina, 2017). It is thus vital that the school counselor understand the impact of implementing SEL programs from the perspective of teachers and paraprofessionals.

Those with more teaching experience are more likely to see value in SEL programming (Van Huynh et al., 2018). Teachers’ reported comfort level with the material determined their confidence in program receptiveness from their students (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers with lower stress and higher job satisfaction are more likely to have more support for and comfort with SEL program material

(Collie et al., 2015), suggesting that teachers develop their own social and emotional abilities to implement programming. The social and emotional competence of teachers impact their implementation of SEL programs as teachers report improvements between themselves as faculty and with their students (Martinson & Vilcina, 2017; Zinsser et al., 2015). Slaten et al. (2015) recommended programs be applied with cultural competence, in authentic relationship with students, and in a collaborative environment after investigation into teacher experience and reported improvements in student and staff dynamics. While literature explores the impact of SEL programming on teachers, an understanding of how other staff in schools, such as paraprofessionals or teaching assistants, experience the implementation is less understood. It is also essential for all classroom staff to develop a comprehensive understanding of effective curriculum application strategies to promote the consistent implementation of SEL programming in schools (Anderson et al., 2015). Understanding how teachers and other staff are impacted by their application of the curriculum provides direction for how to do so more effectively. Additionally, this understanding offers support for policy change to develop best practices to maximize student benefit. Currently, the research is lacking in regard to SEL implementation by paraprofessionals.

### **Alternative School Settings**

Alternative schools are ideal settings to study this more comprehensive impact of SEL programming because there are typically better staffed to provide students with the support they need as compared to more traditional schools (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018). These academic settings are typically attended by students who can greatly benefit from SEL programming. Alternative schools target “students who have already disconnected from school” (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018, p. 3) mentally and socially. They facilitate nontraditional education with the goals of integrating students back into a more typical student body. While there has been limited research conducted in alternative school settings, existing studies indicate SEL programming is also effective in these environments. While some alternative schools have school counselors to provide this instruction, many do not (O'Brien & Curry, 2009). An educational intervention focusing on forgiveness was correlated with increases in forgiveness and hope within alternative school students (Freedman, 2018). SEL programs have been shown to increase student independence within alternative school settings through their emphasis on social responsibility (Slaten et al., 2015; Szlyk, 2018) and increases perceived employability according to teachers (Perzigian, 2018). Studies outside of the United States indicate SEL programs are also effective in their capacity to increase students’ engagement attending alternative schools (Fish, 2017; McCallops et al., 2019).

An estimated 500,000 students are enrolled in alternative schools in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Therapeutic day treatment (TDT) programs are considered alternative school settings and “provide services to help children improve behaviors, strengthen relationships, and enhance emotional well-being” (Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, 2019, para. 2). For many years, TDT programs have offered more intensive psychosocial attention for children with emotional or behavioral issues that are unable to thrive in a traditional educational setting (Nyre et al., 2003). These issues often include aggression, hyperactivity, defiance, social isolation, anxiety, and developmental delays, which prevent children from benefitting from a typical school setting (Banerjee & Castro, 2005). To offer a more supportive environment for these students, TDT staff receive additional training on child development and biopsychosocial issues (Banerjee & Castro, 2005). With this additional training, there is typically a greater emphasis on social-emotional interventions rather than purely academic to provide more holistic care for students (Banerjee & Castro, 2005). These interventions can include modeling, positive reinforcement, and play therapy sessions as well as classroom instruction (Banerjee & Castro, 2005). SEL curriculum offers an effective form of classroom instruction for TDT staff to meet the unique needs of their students.

### **Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement**

The Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement (JLCLM) is an SEL program with increasing popularity in schools. It was created by Scarlet Lewis to commemorate her son, Jesse Lewis, who died in the Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012 (JLCLM, 2020), and is based on the idea of infusing love into classrooms to develop loving habits that will last a lifetime (JLCLM, 2020). The Choose Love Movement aims to nurture the values of courage, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion in action. A curriculum was developed to focus on the character values for grades pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup>.

Each unit contains four to six lessons with an educator guide and includes the following: a list of student objectives, educator preparation, focused awareness, discussion, an activity, and transfer of learning. Lessons incorporate the use of mindful relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, and reflection for the purpose of teaching students to increase their awareness of emotions, regulate their feelings in the moment, and manage their feelings when appropriate. The program aims to instill in students, the ability to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy and compassion for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. The lessons are developed in a way that they can be selected at the teachers’ discretion and have step by step, easy to use directions. The teacher can use their own professional judgement to incorporate all lessons or the ones that best fit their students’ needs. The lessons offer standards

to align with the Common Core State Standards as well as with ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student success (JLCLM, 2020).

The program is provided online and free of charge for educators and parents in order to equip students to develop their emotional and relational capacities in order to help them engage more effectively in an academic environment (JLCLM, 2020). The program material has been downloaded more than 40,000 times by educators in more than 85 countries, with an estimated 1,718,000 students receiving lessons (JLCLM, 2020). While it has been implemented broadly, research into effective implementation strategies has not been conducted and thus is greatly needed to demonstrate its ability to generate change and establish it as an evidence based treatment. However, the aforementioned success of other SEL programs imply it would be successful in developing social and emotional learning within students (DeLay et al., 2016; Durlak et al., 2011; Raimundo et al., 2013). In order to determine this success, researchers sought to explore the implementors’ perspective by asking, “What is the lived experience of teachers and mental health paraprofessionals (MHPPs) implementing the Choose Love curriculum at a therapeutic day treatment school?” This information serves to inform MHPPs and teachers who are on the frontlines of program implementation. These findings can extend to school counselors about how to best implement SEL programs in their respective school settings to fulfill the Deliver component of the ASCA National Model (2019) by providing direct services to students in classroom lessons or small groups or offering indirect services, such as training teachers.

### **Method**

Phenomenological design is utilized when research goals call for a deep understanding of a particular shared experience or phenomena. In this type of study, researchers reduce the participants’ experiences to a core meaning or essence (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers chose to utilize transcendental phenomenology specifically, which includes a systematic analysis of data and requires researchers to abandon previously held assumptions about the experience being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Instead, the perception of the participants is considered the “primary source of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52), which is then reduced to a core meaning or essence of the experience. The researchers of this study sought to understand the lived experience of faculty and staff implementing the Choose Love curriculum daily over the course of 10 weeks at two therapeutic day treatment (TDT) school campuses in the southern United States.

The objective of this research was to gain a deep understanding of the teachers and mental health paraprofessional (MHPP) experience who implemented the curriculum and draw potential conclusions for future SEL implementation. MHPPs were included in this study because

they spend the most time with the students, meeting with them individually, in small groups, and in the classroom along with the teacher. Studies of SEL program implementation including MHPPs have also not been conducted up to this point. This objective can best be achieved through qualitative analysis of their experience that will provide a richer understanding of the impact of the Choose Love curriculum and potential insight into effective SEL program implementation.

### Curriculum and Training

Prior to beginning this study, the Choose Love curriculum was extensively reviewed to select and create the needed lessons. The elementary curriculum included 17 lessons per grade. In order to implement the lessons daily for 10 weeks, a total of 50 lessons were needed. Therefore, 33 additional age appropriate mindfulness lessons were selected by the primary researcher, who is a counselor educator and former elementary counselor, to align with the foundational topics in the Choose Love curriculum. These mindfulness lessons were integrated with the established curriculum by implementing them on alternating days. The original Choose Love secondary curriculum contained more lessons than the 50 needed for junior high and high school. To address this excess, specific lessons were selected by a counselor educator, who is a former high school counselor, for daily implementation over the 10-week duration of this study.

TDT faculty and staff at both campus locations received a two-hour training from Scarlett Lewis, founder of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, as a part of their professional development in-service training as they sought to incorporate a SEL program into their school. The purpose of the training was to introduce the teachers and MHPPs to the program and to show them how to access and utilize the lessons. Prior to this training, other SEL programs had been implemented in the TDT at varying degrees. Due to the receptiveness of faculty and staff to the initial training, administration agreed that Choose Love would be a good choice for an SEL program as teachers and MHPPs expressed confidence in its potential impact, increasing the likelihood of their investment and adherence to the program. Due to the schools' previous experiences with SEL programs and the simplistic nature of JLCLM with step by step directions and daily lessons prepared, the additional training was completed in two hours.

Upon IRB approval, and one week prior to beginning the study, the counselor educator faculty provided an additional one-hour training at each site to review the curriculum, disperse the lessons, discuss the purpose of the research, and gain informed consent. Both faculty members were former school counselors who had experience implementing SEL curricula in schools and were knowledgeable about SEL programs. Each classroom teacher and MHPP received a drive that contained all the lessons as well as lists of needed materials for their specific age group. The research site had no school counselors to implement the program but did have

MHPPs who conduct lessons in the classroom. Both TDT teaching faculty and MHPPs, along with site directors, were trained together to promote cohesion in understanding. MHPPs provided the lessons directly to the students, and the classroom teachers were encouraged to utilize the language in their daily classroom activities to facilitate integration of the language and concepts into daily interactions. After completing the training, teachers and MHPPs were given a jump drive with the lesson for each day and a list of needed materials (markers, paper, etc.) according to their grade level.

### Participants and Sampling

Criterion sampling was utilized to determine appropriate participant selection based on eligibility criteria. The primary criteria for selection was based on participants' employment as an instructor (either a teacher or MHPP) at a TDT facility that identified as having the potential to benefit from an SEL curriculum in the southern United States. Two TDT campuses were identified as meeting these criteria. This study included a total of 51 participants; 29 participants from Campus One and 22 from Campus Two. Campus One had 21 MHPPs and eight teachers, and Campus Two included 16 MHPPs and six teachers. All participants were using some combination of conscious discipline, level systems, point systems, or a token economy within their classrooms prior to the implementation of the Choose Love curriculum. Phenomenological studies have been known to range in sample size from 1 to over 300 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While some researchers may consider 51 to be a larger sample, it was important to the researchers to include all willing participants from both campuses in order to gain a full understanding of the experience. Additionally, because participants were interviewed through focus groups rather than individual interviews, the larger sample allowed for saturation of data. Demographic information was not collected from participants, beyond their status as an MHPP or teacher within the TDT.

### Researcher Reflexivity and Bracketing

When conducting qualitative research, the investigators must position themselves within the context of the research and address personal culture and life experience around the phenomena studied. Additionally, they must bracket information or beliefs that may impose bias on the findings (Etherington, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this research was to arrive at an accurate and detailed description of the lived experience of the participants, not an interpretation based on personal opinion. Self-reflection on the part of the researchers, as well as acknowledgement of the subjective nature of qualitative research (Patton, 2015), is crucial to this process. This bracketing, or *epoche*, is considered the first step in phenomenological reduction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this study,

one researcher was a former elementary counselor who is experienced in teaching social emotional concepts. Both researchers were licensed professional counselors, experienced in working with at-risk youth. Both researchers have utilized SEL with clients and students and have seen beneficial results from this type of curriculum. However, it was important that the researchers did not assume everyone has had or will have this same experience. Researchers used established methods of trustworthiness, such as triangulation, prolonged and persistent engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing, to ensure personal assumptions and opinions were not imposed on the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Establishing Trustworthiness

Measures of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established through a variety of methods set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Ravitch and Carl (2016), Shenton (2004), and Kornbluh (2015). Credibility was addressed through methods of triangulation, thick description of methods and participant experience, multiple data coders, dialogic engagement, and structured reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data was triangulated through multiple focus groups, member checking, and consideration of the existing literature regarding the JCLM and SEL program implementation in comparison to findings. Additionally, credibility was gained from prolonged and persistent engagement in the field, researcher memos and debriefing, and member checks (Shenton, 2004). The primary researcher for this study met with participants at Campus One four times over the course of 12 weeks and three times with participants from Campus Two over the course of 12 weeks. Further, there was frequent email communication to answer questions regarding lessons and to obtain written qualitative response information.

Transferability was achieved through rich descriptions of participants' experiences, thorough documentation of the data collection, data analysis process, and a clear framework of researcher reflexivity, assumptions, and biases all ensured research credibility (Kornbluh, 2015). Dependability was addressed through rich descriptions of participant experiences, peer debriefing, member checking, and an audit trail. Confirmability was addressed through data triangulation, member checking, the use of a peer debriefer, and consistent researcher reflexivity. Peer debriefing was utilized as the researchers discussed their experiences and perceptions, investigated appropriateness of research design, recognized researcher bias, and considered alternative interpretations as the researcher begins data analysis (Shenton, 2004). Researchers processed these experiences with one another and with the peer debriefer who viewed focus group videos. Researcher memos were also used to prepare for these debriefing interactions as well as for the member checks. This is the final criterion for establishing trustworthiness and helped to strengthen dependability and

confirmability by ensuring the congruence of the experience and the thematic analysis (Shenton, 2004).

### Data Collection

Collected data included written responses (gathered through open prompts) and two focus groups, for the purpose of prolonged engagement with participants. The second focus group also served as a member check for participants to be sure that the researchers were interpreting their experiences accurately. The written qualitative response prompts regarding current classroom climate and anticipated benefits and challenges of implementing the curriculum were completed by all teachers and MHPPs anonymously at both campuses, to ensure honesty, after receiving the Choose Love training. Questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage rich and detailed descriptions from participants (Wholey et al., 1994). The seven prompts focused on current classroom dynamics and can be found in Appendix A.

After the written responses to the prompts were completed, MHPPs began implementing the curriculum with the students. University counseling faculty conducted a semi-structured focus group during week five, which was the halfway point of the study, at both locations to evaluate teacher and MHPP perceptions of the program and offer needed supports. Questions were intentionally open-ended to encourage rich responses. These six items highlighted classroom impact by asking questions as well as personal emphasis and can be found in Appendix B. This focus group was video-recorded for the purpose of later data analysis.

Finally, the university counseling faculty returned after week 10 for a second focus group with Campus One. This final focus group served, in part, as a member check to ensure teachers and staff were being accurately represented in the interpretations by the researchers and in the themes emerging from the data. This focus group was also video-recorded for the purpose of later data analysis. This final focus group was not conducted at Campus Two. Shortly after the first focus group with Campus Two, it became apparent that the participants were not implementing the curriculum due to other external issues. Campus Two was a newly established TDT campus, and participants appeared to feel understaffed and overwhelmed by the students, causing them to abandon much of the JLCLM curriculum after the first half of the study. This lack of implementation was verified by the program director. Consequently, the researchers and site director decided it would not be beneficial to conduct a final focus group. However, reported findings do include data from the written responses and initial focus groups with both Campus One and Campus Two, and the final focus group with Campus One.

Questions during the final focus group incorporated data from the previous data collection by asking for updates in identified areas for desired change within the classroom, reported changes in classroom dynamic and management styles, and fulfillment of expected benefits and challenges in curriculum implementation. Identified themes from the

previous written responses and focus groups were implemented to develop a more holistic understanding of teacher and MHPP perception and application of the Choose Love curriculum.

Focus groups were chosen as a primary method of data collection in part due to the phenomenological design of the study. That is, focus groups can be helpful in understanding construction of meaning and experience within a specific population and context. Such understanding contributes to knowledge around the “what,” as well as the “how,” and “why,” (Barbour, 2007) which are exactly what transcendental phenomenological analysis examines and synthesizes.

### Data Analysis

The investigators used multiple forms of triangulation to ensure trustworthiness in their analysis: written responses to open-ended prompts and two focus groups, member checks, existing literature, and peer debriefing (Denzin, 1978). The written responses and videos of focus groups, along with the facilitator notes, were utilized in the coding process. The peer debriefer was a master’s level graduate student who also viewed the video tapes and established themes, which were utilized to ensure credibility once the researchers had completed their own analyses. The student had completed multiple research courses as a part of both her bachelor’s and master’s degree programs and also received specific training from the researchers regarding coding and establishing themes. Moustakas’s (1994) steps for transcendental phenomenological reduction (i.e., a modified Van Kaam method) were utilized to analyze the collected data. All participants were provided pseudonyms upon coding to protect their identities.

Initial steps of analysis were focused on researcher bracketing, or *epoche*, in which the researchers attempted to recognize and put aside their own assumptions and biases to avoid imposing them on the collected data. This was achieved through engaging in researcher reflexivity, positioning themselves in the research, and ongoing discussions with the peer debriefer. Following the researchers’ *epoche*, phenomenological reduction began with the collection of significant statements into clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This enabled the researchers to take the next step in the phenomenological reduction process and write textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon experienced by participants in the study. The textural description is the verbatim description that the participant provided (Moustakas, 1994). Significant statements were identified and grouped into clusters of meaning, which began to emerge as specific themes. These statement clusters were synthesized into textural descriptions reflecting the verbatim phrasing used by the participants. Next, structural descriptions were developed, reflecting the contextual meaning behind the face value of the textural descriptions. The structural description takes into account the context of the participants’

words (Moustakas, 1994). Together, both types of descriptions were synthesized into complete textural-structural descriptions, which were compared to those from the peer debriefer. The synthesized textural-structural descriptions provide a rich account that utilizes both participants’ words and meaning to generate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, resulting in reduction to the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Both researchers reviewed the emergent themes and engaged in dialogue around these thematic identifications to ensure the findings accurately reflected the collected data. Additionally, initial themes were presented to and discussed with the focus groups as a form of member checking, to verify that statements were understood correctly. The peer debriefer also examined the themes along with participant descriptions of experience and provided additional feedback and suggestions regarding shifts in perspective, alternate theme names, or confirmation that the theme accurately reflected described experience. Several initial emergent themes were apparent from the written responses, including a need for consistency and structure, a volatile student climate, the use of conscious discipline, and a token system. As focus groups took place and coding continued, the final themes became prominent and were integrated to precisely reflect the participants’ described experiences.

### Results

Qualitative research is inductive and allows for patterns and themes to emerge as the data is collected and as analysis takes place. Final themes from this research included *change in students*, *change in staff*, *group cohesion*, *awareness of student needs*, and *existing stability*. Each theme is discussed below with exemplifying quotes for support and explanation.

#### Change in Students

Many participants reported observed changes in their students after implementing the Choose Love curriculum, especially with regard to displayed compassion, application of coping skills, and increased vulnerability and sense of safety. Teachers and MHPPs alike shared that prior to implementation of the Choose Love curriculum their classroom felt “on edge” and that their students often appeared mistrustful of both adults and peers, often due to trauma history and mental health diagnoses. After implementing the Choose Love curriculum, participants described students demonstrating more compassion to one another and were able to verbalize that compassion using the Choose Love vocabulary. During the first focus group, Tanya observed, “My kids have been using the Choose Love language outside of the lessons.” Arti noted, “I saw kids showing more compassion, and they labeled it as that.” During the second focus group, Emil described his class’s reaction to a student who is behaviorally disruptive: “A lot of our kids have been showing compassion toward him, but

he has no empathy and no remorse for what he does. The other kids are like, 'I feel bad for you.'"

Teachers and MHPPs also detected a difference in utilization of coping skills in getting their social and emotional needs met. Participants described that, over time, their students became more skilled in expressing their needs to others in appropriate ways. This reflects a change that aligns with a statement made by Chantel in the initial written responses,

I would like for the kids to feel more empowered over their moods and feelings. I want them to 'choose' how they respond to problems rather than just react to them.

I want them to build confidence in knowing that they have the ability to problem solve and work.

TDT faculty noted students applying the Choose Love mindfulness coping skills in class and on other areas of campus, which appeared to increase feelings of safety in their environment. Carolina identified the application of Choose Love skills by noticing, "I've been hearing a lot of kids taking breaths." Similarly, Merlin stated, "They're definitely using the verbiage and identifying coping skills more." Increased feelings of vulnerability and safety appeared to accompany these coping skills, with several descriptions of students being tearful in class and peers being willing to console them. Caterina expanded on this sentiment, saying,

I have felt like our kids have felt more safe with us...

We had two of them fall asleep during our guided meditation. In our job, for a kid to feel that safe... for a kid to fall asleep shows a level of trust.

These feelings of safety may be from the implementation of the Choose Love program at the student level, but also from the changes the program was creating in the teachers' and MHPPs' behaviors and attitudes.

### Change in Staff

Both teachers and MHPPs reported more warm and compassionate feelings towards their students after implementing curriculum. Initially, participants described hoping for increased empathy toward students, and reduced frequency of power struggles, passive aggressive behaviors, and favoritism toward "good" (i.e., well-behaved) students. These changes were reflected as early as the first focus group with description of warm feelings toward students possibly driven by seeing students become more compassionate with each other. Arti expressed, "Watching them be so compassionate with each other really does warm my heart to see." Similarly, Merlin noticed, "I see the students using the lesson time to become more vulnerable with me and each other." After recounting a story about how his class told him that they were grateful for him, Emil said, "It made me feel closer to them."

By the end of the curriculum, many teachers and MHPPs shared feeling as though they had developed more social-emotional awareness as well and were better able to respond to their students without engaging in power struggles or

other frustrations that they often fell into earlier in the year. Leila claimed, "I feel like I have been a little bit more empathic and composed with my kids." There were changes reported in internal processing as well. Caterina shared, "I find after applying the curriculum I find myself saying, 'What do I need to do to be calm and collected in this time?'" Carolina said, "I'm feeling different about this place than I ever have before."

### Group Cohesion

Before the curriculum was being applied, participants reported a lack of unity among teachers and MHPPs. They described a lack of teamwork, issues with consistency between teacher-student interactions, and a great deal of favoritism toward certain students which often resulted in rejection responses from students. Several participants expressed excitement and confidence in the curriculum's ability to foster a sense of cohesion among the staff. Carolina stated, "I'm excited for the staff to utilize the Choose Love curriculum because I believe it will not only be a strong program to teach social skills but will connect the staff and students due to a common focus." Similarly, Arti stated,

I am very excited for the Choose Love program, and parents I have talked to about it are very excited as well.

I think it has a lot to offer, but I also recognize it requires a lot of buy-in from all parties involved. I am very eager to see where this program takes our classroom, kiddos, and families.

As researchers returned to the campuses to collect data, developing cohesion among teachers and MHPPs was observed as they were increasingly more comfortable with one another during the focus groups. During the first focus group, Leila reported, "They've been using the language more with each other, and I guess we have as well. It's a movement kind of." During the second focus group, Judith shared, "I think what builds the most empathy with each other is going through things together... like recognizing hardships together and talking about what it's like here." Tanya added, "Our sense of empathy and compassion has increased as a team because we all know what the day is going to be like." The togetherness and cohesion expressed by the TDT staff appeared to help them feel and express greater levels of compassion toward each other as well as the students on campus.

### Awareness of Student Needs

Despite the initial culture of disunity articulated by participants, it was clear that many of the participants shared an awareness of the needs of students in regard to SEL prior to the Choose Love curriculum. Many of the teachers and MHPPs expressed discontent with the social and emotional care provided within the environment. They frequently made statements emphasizing the environmental issues within the classroom, and a desire to see better classroom placement that would be conducive to specific student



needs. They also expressed a lack of social and emotional competence of their students, describing bullying behaviors and problems resolving interpersonal conflicts appropriately. Caterina mentioned, "I would like to see more classrooms practicing more patience and empathizing and less demanding and impatient and unempathetic."

The awareness of the social and emotional skill deficiencies was also paired with a hopefulness for students' abilities to change once needs were met. Leila stated,

A couple kids in our class resist physical touch, talk of feelings - anything seemingly uncomfortable for them relating to expressing themselves effectively or accepting support from others. It may get worse before it gets better for them, but I have high hopes that this will be helpful for them.

Other staff also mentioned hope for social-emotional growth through consistency of the 10-week curriculum focused on love and mindfulness, which they believed would benefit students' self-perception and interactions with the world around them. After implementing the curriculum, Chantel reported changes in how the students were discussed between teachers and MHPPs, "As a team, when we decompress at the end of the day, we talk more about what this kid needs." This increased awareness of and focus on student needs was also apparent in a suggestion made by Judith, who said, "The lessons need to offer more opportunities for students to actually interact with one another to practice what they are learning." It became apparent over the course of the curriculum implementation that student needs became a priority, possibly because students were able to express themselves in a way that was better understood by the TDT staff. The staff seemed to move from a general awareness of student needs (with no clear idea of how to meet them) to a more focused understanding of what each student needed from them along with a method of discussing how these needs could be met within the TDT environment.

### Existing Stability

Participants emphasized the salience of the stability and structure needed to effectively implement the curriculum. There was a consensus that effective engagement of students would require more consistent and assertive approaches to the classroom structure. Chantel expressed uncertainty about curriculum implementation, by saying, "The team feels overwhelmed due to the high level of needs in this classroom. I believe they see this as just something else they have to try to do when they already feel overworked and understaffed." Additionally, Leila expressed concern about their own familiarity with the material due to a lack of preparation time,

I am not sure we feel like we have been given enough time to prepare for this. We have been given very limited training and are just now seeing the material and have very little prep time before we start incorporating it. There is not a lot of time for planning built into the

workday, especially due to the high level of needs in our classroom, so all this prep work will have to be done in our personal time at home.

Additionally, participants emphasized the desire for stability from students, not just staff. Caterina said, "The more structure and consistency [the students] had with [the programming], the more they bought into it." However, the structure for the curriculum began with the implementation from the staff; if the staff were not able to implement the curriculum in a structured and consistent way, the students may not see the benefits of it.

This stability was also significant at an institutional level. Campus One was well established, appeared to have a strong administrative support system, and a general structure in place for the TDT environment. Conversely, a lack of stability was obvious at Campus Two, which was newly established, understaffed, and reported a general consensus of being overwhelmed even prior to the start of the study. This instability created a great deal of problems for Campus Two's ability to implement the Choose Love curriculum appropriately and effectively.

### Essence of the Experience

The aim of this phenomenological research was to gain an understanding of the core essence of the lived experience of teachers and MHPPs implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love curriculum with K-12 students in TDT programs. Through the textural and structural synthesis and exploration of themes, the essence of the experienced phenomena appeared to be the ion of positive change in students and staff and an increased feeling of cohesion. As the curriculum was implemented, the staff reported observations of changes in staff-student, staff-staff, and student-student interactions that appeared more empathic, more vulnerable, and more skilled at coping and verbalizing appropriately. However, these changes were not without frustration from teachers and MHPPs alike, with concerns about stability and structure of their institution, as well as concerns around the time necessary to prepare and understand the curriculum. Findings demonstrated that stability, structure, and support were integral to the SEL program to be implemented successfully within this TDT setting.

### Discussion

Overall, there were several participants who viewed the implementation of the Choose Love positively for both themselves and their students in many ways. Participants perceived changes their students' displayed compassion, coping strategies, and vulnerability, which validates existing literature that explores the social benefits of SEL programs (Martinson & Vilcina, 2017). The observed change in social and emotional well-being also supports existing SEL research on the increase in facilitator capacities (Zinsser et al., 2015). Participant descriptions indicate this change occurred at a teacher and MHPP level in this study.

According to Tyre et al. (2018), it is important for facilitators of school programming change to study results and detect changes for them to continue with the new programming effectively.

Participants also displayed more cohesive behavior with one another. Both MHPPs and teachers shared unity in their concerns with the existing culture for their students and appreciated the unity that the new curriculum developed among them. This supports existing research that claims the facilitation of SEL programming opens up more opportunities to apply social and emotional skills (Zinsser et al., 2015). Additionally, as indicated by the literature, these shared experiences surrounding a new and unfamiliar event were correlated with increased group cohesion (Wyatt, 2013).

Participants in the study exhibited the high familiarity with the needs of their students that the aforementioned literature emphasizes (Hunter et al., 2018). Facilitators adjust SEL programming according to the diverse needs of students to optimize its effectiveness (Garner et al., 2014). The teachers and staff who are implementing the programming are aware of student needs to make appropriate adjustments and accommodations. The school counselor is trained in meeting the various needs of students and can also offer input into how to best implement SEL programs with their student population (Betters-Bubon et al., 2016). The professional school counselor is trained in both mental health and social emotional learning, and therefore, in an ideal position to gauge the type of program that would be the best fit and to lead in implementation. There was no school counselor at either of the campuses, making it more difficult to meet the needs of the larger student body. Additionally, in the state where this study was conducted, all participants were required to hold the RSPMI certification. There was a great deal of variance in requirements, ranging from holding a bachelor's degree to a GED. The variability of the participant qualifications could potentially impact the validity of needs assessments of the MHPPs. In the state where the study took place, a new bill was passed within the last year, requiring school counselors to spend 90% of their time in direct and indirect services to students (School Counseling Improvement Act of 2019). Implementing SEL programs as a part of their classroom curriculum could offer one way to meet this requirement. Training teachers to implement these programs could serve as indirect services to students. Unfortunately, the suggested school counselor to student ratio in the state are almost double those suggest by ASCA (2020), which impedes the counselor's ability to meet this requirement. Positive results from implementing direct and indirect services to students in this way could support further policy change for school counselors, such those supporting a more reasonable student to counselor ratio.

Furthermore, this research could also be used to advocate for requiring school counselors in alternative settings due to the high needs of students and for faculty and staff to be trained in SEL programs. Moore et al. (2020) stated,

School counselors play a critical role in educating school personnel and parents about the relationship between mental health issues and behavioral issues as well as affirming and validating sociocultural factors that may also be impacting the well-being of the student" (p. 12).

Students in TDT programs could obviously benefit from this advocacy.

Results indicate that additional training would have established an increased comfort level for MHPPs and teachers to create stability. In alignment with the literature, an established familiarity and comfort needs to be established with participants for optimal implementation of SEL curriculum (Collie et al., 2012). Most schools have school counselors in their buildings. They have pre-established relationships with teachers and staff and can be available to provide support and feedback on a daily basis as a member of the school community (Cholewa et al., 2016). Due to the lack of familiarity with the participants, the previous training they received from founder of Choose Love and the simplistic nature of the implementation of JLCLM program, only an additional two-hour training was conducted. It would have been helpful to provide specific application examples for their student population for teachers to feel more confident in their reinforcement of the material since the primary lessons were administered by the MHPPs (CASEL, 2019b). More structure of the program was also emphasized for participants. This result correlates with existing research from Stoiber (2011) claiming, "Infrastructure matters, and must be addressed, for a shared understanding and responsibility of SEL initiatives between consultants and the school to happen" (p. 52). This structure according to our results included reviewing prior lessons and streamlining lesson time. It is essential to ensure faculty and staff feel capable to apply new programs that are implemented in school settings to ensure their success (Lamont et al., 2018).

Campus Two was a newly established site with new faculty, staff, and leadership. As such, the site was still working toward stability. Results between the two campuses emphasized the importance of SEL programs being implemented in established systems and by facilitators that have the capacity to handle changes in their existing structures. A degree of structure and support need to be in existence prior to incorporating new changes within school programming (Honig, 2009). This stability aligns with research that indicates more experienced teachers' tendency to value SEL more than less experienced and less stable teachers (Van Huynh et al., 2018).

The results reveal an aspect of participant investment that had not been previously explored in the research. Participant investment can be evidenced by the creative approach to a familiar curriculum (Arifani & Suryanti, 2019), which was evidenced in the study by participants tailoring the Choose Love curriculum to the interests and learning styles of their students. These creative approaches included utilization of more hands-on activities, using mindfulness exercises,

incorporating collage or physical movements rather than journaling, and promoting collaboration through role play activities. In their suggestions, participants revealed that they were critically thinking about the curriculum and student preferences, revealing their investment. It is important to incorporate staff input in SEL program implementation to promote teacher investment. According to the literature, facilitator value of social and emotional learning yields most effective programming results (Collie et al., 2015). Additionally, the results also indicate a strong support of similar responses to SEL programming from MHPPs and teachers. This understanding from a MHPP perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of SEL program application and should be used to influence policies related to SEL and alternative education.

### Implications

From the results, there are considerations to be made in future Choose Love and SEL program implementation to maximize effectiveness. These considerations apply to policies for implementation, best practices for curriculum application, and suggestions for school counseling programs to ensure the success of SEL programs.

### Policies for SEL Implementation

It is important to ensure the facilitators of SEL programming demonstrate their own social and emotional competencies through an awareness of the needs of their students in these areas and indicate a receptiveness to these values. Thus, to ensure the success of SEL programs, it is necessary to conduct thorough assessments to ensure the identified school and teachers have the capacity to effectively implement it (Bumbarger, 2015; Stoiber, 2011; Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). Existing literature derives characteristics of teachers who promote social and emotional learning in the classroom (Jennings & Frank, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and may provide an appropriate gauge for teacher readiness for implementation (Bettors-Bubon et al., 2016).

Assessing the faculty and administration stability prior to implementing an SEL program can offer insight into the school's readiness to initiate a new program and ensure maximum gains through effective implementation. This assessment would consist of analysis of teacher and administrative turnover rates, teacher absenteeism rates, and duration of current curriculum (Kini, 2017). An assessment would likely offer more in-depth information regarding the student needs teacher and MHPP attitudes, so specific adaptations to the curriculum could be made. Before implementation, the setting of the program has a degree of functional stability in order to maximize flexibility that is required to introduce new programming. This stability refers to developed relationships between administration and staff as well as current curriculum implementation. Evaluating the context of the setting sets up the program for success.

### Best Practices for Implementation

Beneficial SEL programs are typically very structured and consistent in their delivery with intentional monitoring for fidelity to the original curriculum (Humphrey et al., 2010). Despite this focus on curriculum fidelity, the significance of program flexibility is also emphasized in existing literature. It is important for those implementing the curriculum to be familiar with the needs of students to adjust programming according to these needs (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Hunter et al., 2018;). This familiarity would allow the program to be tailored in the future to the target this specific population and to maximize receptivity. SEL programs are less effective when they do not adapt programming according to race and ethnicity, SES, gender, disability status, parenting involvement, and school level factors (Garner et al., 2014). These accommodations can include linguistic adaptations, more relevant names and scenarios, and acknowledgement of existing diversity. SEL programs are more likely to be effective when the content is tailored to make it accessible to a wide variety of students. For example, all of the students at TDT had a diagnosis related to their mental disorder, and some also had diagnosed learning disabilities. Participant suggestions to add more hands-on activities or those with movement and creativity would also maximize the potential for learning for these students.

Participants in this study did attempt to make some creative adaptations to accommodate student need, even though they were asked not too for the fidelity of the research. This seems to be an important aspect since as previously mentioned, it has the added benefit of increasing participant investment in the program. SEL programs take the professional judgement of those implementing the curriculum into consideration as it can allow them to meet student need and take ownership, while still maintaining fidelity. Suggestions could be offered for curriculum adaptations and the school counselor could also have conversations with teachers and paraprofessionals to inspire creativity while also ensuring fidelity is met. Some programs, such as Primary Project (Cowen et al., 1996), incorporate teacher professional judgment into their evidenced based practice to ensure that the students are best served by including appropriate teacher, administrator, and parent input.

It is of the utmost importance to provide flexibility within operation, especially with consideration to facilitator input into programming. Expertise of teachers and MHPPs is valuable, as they are most familiar with the unique needs of their students, and their suggestions are prioritized in program continuation to promote optimal functioning. This flexibility according to student need as identified by teachers supports existing literature on incorporating culturally responsive SEL programs across schools internationally (McCallops et al., 2019).

International implementation of SEL curriculum highlights the significance of cross-cultural flexibility according to the country of the program's origin

(Wigelsworth et al., 2016). It is essential to adapt cultural values, making the curriculum relevant to the context in which it is taught (Castro et al., 2004). The core values of courage, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion emphasized in the Choose Love curriculum may be discussed differently within the culture in which it was developed. Courage, for example, may refer to a personal courage within an individualistic culture, whereas courage in a collectivistic culture would refer to courage to do what is best for the whole. Values considerations, linguistic adaptations, and relevant examples are adjusted when implementing across cultures to resonate with the audience. Only SEL programs that allow for this flexibility will be successful outside of their countries of origin.

### **School Counseling Program Development**

School counseling programs can equip students with skills needed to successfully implement SEL curriculum. As previously mentioned, professional school counselors, as leaders and collaborators in their schools, are in the best position to gauge the best programs for their particular school needs (Better-Bubon et al., 2016) and to implement them as a part of their core curriculum as a part of the deliver component as defined by ASCA (2019), aligning them with state standards and ASCA mindsets. Additionally, as a leader in SEL, they can also take the lead in working with administrators to ensure proper training for holistic investment and implementation by teachers in the school. School-based clinicians who are contracted with the school from outside agencies would benefit by collaborating with the school counselor and educate themselves on SEL programs being offered in the school, so that they may also utilize common language in their role in working with students and teachers. Programs that focus on needs assessments for schools and fostering collaborative skills, such as vision casting and communication, prepare future school counselors for effective SEL curriculum implementation. Additionally, school counseling programs can seek to familiarize students with a variety of SEL programs to ensure they are able to select the program that best meets the school's needs.

### **Limitations**

Researchers consider limitations to their conducted research. In this case, the first limitation was that the two TDT schools represented small and unique settings. The population of these schools is different from the typical public or private school system as it is completely comprised of students with varying diagnosed mental health and behavioral needs. While steps were taken to promote transferability, it is important to note that there are limits to the scope of transferability due to the unique context of the research sites and participants. The reported findings may not transfer to traditional school settings or to settings in which students do not struggle with mental and

behavioral health issues. Second, Campus Two was not able to effectively implement the curriculum, and researchers were unable to continue collecting data at that location. As previously mentioned, a thorough assessment of the schools, prior to implementation, would have been beneficial in making needed adaptations to fit the unique student needs. While this was not done, the information gained will still serve the schools well as they plan for future implementation. Third, the brief nature of the training for the participants was also a limitation. An assessment would likely have highlighted the need for more in-depth training for those implementing the program. Walking through some of the lessons to role model their use specifically with their student population would have been very beneficial and more training overall could have increased the success of implementation. Fourth, demographic information was not collected from the participants beyond their status as teacher or MHPP. The population in which the TDTs are located is predominantly Caucasian. Having more specific demographic information regarding the teacher, MHPP, and student population would have provided specific cultural implications. In the future, cultural demographics could provide more in-depth implications for implementation. Fifth, the JLCLM appeared to have some limitations. It was created in a way to offer easy utilization and no specific training is thus required to utilize it. The lessons are created in a manner that allows those teaching it to pick and choose the lessons that they want. In this study, the lessons were specifically chosen to be taught in a specific order to ensure fidelity. Those implementing the curriculum also suggested including more activities, which utilize creativity, mindfulness, and physical movement to make it more enticing for students. Having a specific structure in terms of when lessons are taught and training for those implementing could increase the fidelity of the program. Finally, it was difficult to monitor the fidelity of teachers and MHPPs administration of the curriculum. There was likely variation in how instructors facilitated the curriculum, which may have led to variability in its impact on students and staff alike (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). However, the focused and emergent nature of qualitative research allows for these limitations without damaging the integrity or rigor of the research. Having a school counselor at both sites as a part of the educational team may have mitigated some of the limitations. As a part of their role in the school, they could have served a vital source in terms of assessment, the ability of the faculty to implement the SEL program and the specific training needs and offered consistency and been on site to manage needs as a part of the school team.

### **Future Research**

Future research with regard to the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement curriculum can take the suggestions listed by participants, either explicitly or through interpretation, into

consideration. The curriculum may benefit from including more activities, which utilize creativity, mindfulness, and physical movement. Exploring the effectiveness of alternatives to writing, such as drawing or writing music, for all ages may be beneficial. Results also called for the inclusion of opportunities for the students to practice the skills being taught with one another through role plays. All of these methods could be included in SEL programming as creative methods to instill social and emotional learning. With regard to general SEL implementation strategies, there needs to be more exploration into the effects SEL programs have on school cultures and dynamics. If administrators are able to see the changes these programs make in their staff and students, they can be treated with the gravity deserved to develop them holistically. It would also be beneficial to implement the values of the Choose Love curriculum in other cultures and countries to determine the program's flexibility to adapt to other value systems. Assessing the school to specify an in depth understanding of their needs and providing adequate training is also imperative to success.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of teachers and MHPPs of implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love curriculum with K-12 students in TDT programs. Participants saw changes in students and themselves, especially with regard to group unity. They indicated the significance of adequate preparation, established stability, and staff investment. These factors are important considerations in implementing SEL programs, so they can be effectively carried out and continue to change to social emotional culture of schools and offer school counselors as SEL leaders in their schools with important implications for doing so.

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**Appendix A**  
**Open-Ended Written Response Questions**

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1. I am a....
2. How would you describe your classroom climate?
3. What form of classroom management do you currently utilize?
4. What do you feel is working well in your classroom?
5. What would you like to change about your classroom climate or management?
6. What benefits do you anticipate from incorporating the Choose Love curriculum into your classroom, if any?
7. What challenges may arise while incorporating the Choose Love curriculum in your classroom, if any?
8. Include any additional relevant thoughts or feelings about Choose Love and/or your classroom climate that you haven't yet covered.

**Appendix B**  
**Focus Group Questions**

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1. How is it going with the Choose Love curriculum?
2. Are you noticing changes in the classroom, if so what are they?
3. Are you noticing challenges implementing the program?
4. How does the curriculum fit with your current form of classroom management?
5. What changes would you like to see?
6. How do you see yourselves changing as a result of this experience?