Exploring Social-Emotional Supports in Preschool: A Mixed Methods Case Study of a Preschool for All - Expansion Program

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Social-emotional development has been linked to overall success in school; however, there is limited research on how Preschool for All-Expansion (PFA-E) programs, developed to support children at risk of academic underachievement, impact the social-emotional development of children enrolled. This thesis examines the impact the PFA-E program has on the social emotional development of children enrolled as well as how it impacts development. Data was collected through deidentified Ages and Stages Questionnaires for eight children. This data showed there was no statistically significant change in the social-emotional development of children enrolled; however, four parents and four PFA-E teachers were interviewed, and their perception of children’s development compared to the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework did show there was an impact on social-emotional development for children enrolled. Interviews also underwent thematic coding to understand how the program was impacting social-emotional development. Parents and teachers highlighted the importance of parent – teacher relationships, guidance and modeling, routine, and consistency. Teachers also shared a unique perspective
focusing on the important role curricular approach and professional development in their ability to support children’s social-emotional development.
EXPLORING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS IN PRESCHOOL: A MIXED METHODS
CASE STUDY OF A PRESCHOOL FOR ALL - EXPANSION PROGRAM

BY

HAILEY A. MANZANO

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Thesis Director:
Dr. Melissa Clucas Walter
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DEDICATION

To my children for being my biggest motivators throughout this journey. And to the PFA-E teachers changing the future one child at a time.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LIST OF TABLES | vi |
| LIST OF APPENDICES | vii |

## Chapter

1: INTRODUCTION

| Background | 3 |
| Problem Statement | 6 |
| Purpose Statement | 7 |
| Significance | 7 |

2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

| Theoretical Foundation | 8 |
| Development of Social Emotional Competence | 10 |
| Importance of Social Emotional Competence | 16 |
| Effects of Environment on Social Emotional Development | 17 |
| Impacts of Preschool on Social Emotional Development | 18 |
# Chapter Page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Emotional Intervention</th>
<th>21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaps in Literature</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: METHODS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and Recruitment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: RESULTS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: DISCUSSION</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ASQ-3 Data Results</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Parent/Teacher Interview Questions</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Demographic Questions</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Strong social-emotional development is an important foundation on which all other aspects of development are built. Children who have positive responsive relationships early in their childhood have an increased likelihood of achieving healthy social emotional development, academic success, and overall lifelong success. Learning is not an isolated activity. School success requires children to understand and cooperate with others, exhibit emotional and behavioral self-control, and problem solving (Klein, 2002), all of which depend on a child’s healthy social emotional development. Having a strong social-emotional development is especially important for children who are considered “at risk” of academic failure due to “language, cultural, economic, and like disadvantages” in their environments (Gaylor et al., 2012). Healthy social-emotional development is especially important for these children because it aids in their ability to be resilient against the adverse experiences they may face in their environment, as well as gives them the confidence to explore new situations and master learning challenges (Klein, 2002). Most children who are considered to be “at risk” come from families with low-income, and socioeconomic status is arguably the most consistent predictor of psychological and academic dysfunction difficulties (Klein, 2002). The combination of economic hardship and limited access to supportive services and resources places children from families with low-income at a continuous disadvantage, impeding their social development and academic achievement (Klein, 2002).
In this context, access to full day, high quality childcare plays a pivotal role in supporting families with low-income by providing a secure and dependable environment for their children. The Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) has been instrumental in providing high quality childcare services for children at no expense to qualifying families. The ECBG program includes providing preschool education primarily for “at-risk” children from the age of three years until kindergarten entry (5 years before September 1st) and the prevention initiative for “at-risk” children birth to three years (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2020). High quality childcare is limited and the programs available are often costly, making them less accessible to families with low-income. This funding helps ease the financial burden for qualifying families. The Preschool For All - Expansion (PFA-E) program, funded by ECBG, is free for families, allowing for less financial stress and more work opportunities, thereby reducing overall family stress and improving resource accessibility.

Illinois’ implementation of the PFA-E program, funded through ECBG, is an example of an initiative that emphasizes the importance of supporting children’s social-emotional development because it mandates the use of a social-emotional curriculum or model (ISBE, 2023) while providing high-quality educational services. While existing research on PFA-E programs may be limited, one evaluation demonstrated children in PFA programs showed a significant improvement in social skills and attention, as well as a decline in problem behaviors (Gaylor et al., 2012). This study seeks to further examine the impact of PFA-E programs on social-emotional development by examining how two PFA-E classrooms support the social-emotional development of enrolled children.
Background

The Preschool for All (PFA) program, established by Public Act 94-1054 in Illinois in July of 2006, provides preschool for “at risk” children ages three to four years old for a minimum of two and a half hours each day (part day) (ISBE, 2022). In 2015, Illinois received The Preschool Development Grant – Expansion (PDG-E) to help enhance its infrastructure to provide high-quality preschool programs and to expand the capacity for high-quality full-day preschool programs for three- and four-year-old children in high-need communities (Pavkov et al., 2020). Through this grant, both new and existing part day PFA programs were given the opportunity to expand into Preschool for All-Expansion (PFA-E) programs, which operate the same length of instructional time as first grade classrooms within the school district (ISBE, 2022). The PFA-E program was specifically designed to address the needs of children experiencing challenging circumstances such as poverty, homelessness, involvement in the child welfare system, or experiencing multiple risk factors (Pavkov et al., 2020). The program's components aid in ensuring children deemed “at risk” have access to high-quality care and education to better their opportunity and successful transition to kindergarten. The PFA-E program components include:

- Recruitment, Enrollment, and Records: Programs are mandated to prioritize enrollment for all children 3-5 years of age deemed at risk of academic challenges through a screening process. Recruitment and outreach occurs year-round to ensure the program is continually reaching unserved or underserved populations. Records must include documentation using ISBE Behavior Support Plan and ISBE Program Transition when necessary to address serious and ongoing challenging behaviors.
• Children with Disabilities and English Learners: Arrangements are made for children with disabilities to participate in the program, but no more that 30% of children enrolled may have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), excluding speech only IEPs. Programs must administer a Home Language Survey for all children who come from a language background other than English. Programs must offer an appropriate English learning program based on the needs of their students, and teachers must hold an ESL or bilingual endorsement that corresponds with the teaching assignment and classroom demographics.

• Early Learning Environment, Scheduling, Curriculum and Assessment: Programs must provide a healthy and safe environment with appropriate and well maintained indoor and outdoor spaces. PFA-E programs are expected to serve 20 students; however, the number of children can be reduced to meet square footage limitations or be reduced depending on the number of children with IEPs. Staff to child ratios are set at one adult for every ten children, not exceeding 20 children. Scheduling guidelines are aligned with ECERS-3 recommendations. PFA-E programs must meet for the same length of instructional time as a first-grade class in the local district and for no less than five hours. Curriculum and instructional practices are aligned with Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards (IELDS). Children’s portfolios should showcase their work to illustrate progress over time. Lesson plans reflect individualization for children that connect to the IELDS.

• Social-Emotional Learning: A social-emotional curriculum or model is mandated for PFA-E programs. As part of the curriculum teachers must identify and talk about feelings, as it is critical to the social-emotional development of children. Identifying and talking about feelings promotes positive social interactions and is a predictor of school success. Expulsion due to a child's behavior is prohibited. For children with significant ongoing
challenging behavior, forms for ISBE should be used. Building relationships, both with children and families, is central to helping promote children’s social-emotional development.

- Parent and Family Engagement: The program is designed to be financially accessible to parents, with no fees charged and no requests for parents to provide any supplies or snacks. The program must provide and document opportunities for parent education or involvement, and a system should be in place to continue ongoing communication between school and home.

- Community Collaboration: PFA-E programs must develop relationships with other community services and help families establish a medical and dental home for children enrolled in the program. Collaboration with local Head Start agencies through an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) is required. It is beneficial for PFA-E program to also have a relationship with a mental health consultant to ensure children are receiving the resources they need.

- Qualified Educators, Professional Development and Program Improvement: PFA-E teachers must hold a current and registered Professional Educator License with an Early Childhood Education endorsement. Written professional development plans must be in place for all staff members.

- Program Accountability: Monitoring visits are conducted every two to four years, with classroom observations using the ECERS-3 and program compliance review using the ISBE ECBG 3-5 compliance checklist. If a PFA-E program is in a licensed center that includes non PFA-E classrooms, it is rated through the ExceleRate Licensed Childcare path and not rated by ISBE.
Of particular note and relevance to the current study is the explicit requirement for PFA-E programs to implement a social-emotional curriculum or model (ISBE, 2022). One example of a social-emotional model being used in Illinois is the Pyramid Model (ISBE, 2022), which provides a tiered intervention framework of evidence-based interventions for promoting the social, emotional, and behavioral development of young children (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2023). This model helps early educators build skills for supporting nurturing and responsive relationships, creating supportive learning environments, providing targeted social-emotional skills, and supporting children with challenging behaviors (Pyramid Model Consortium, 2021).

Problem

Although the PFA-E program requires frequent monitoring visits, limited research has been conducted on the program, and researchers have not yet explored the impact of the PFA-E program on the social-emotional development of children. A descriptive study conducted by Pavkov and colleagues used a mixed-method approach to examine some of the mentioned key components of the PFA-E program (2020); however, it did not specifically focus on or examine the social-emotional development of children. Despite the lack of research conducted on PFA-E programs, the significance of social-emotional development in early childhood has been well established (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016) with research demonstrating that social and emotional skills are linked to early academic progress (Shala, 2013). The combination of social-emotional learning instruction and a safe and responsive school environment provides children the opportunity to experience positive outcomes, such as a decreased chance of developing mental health issues, reduction in suspensions, and improved academic outcomes (ISBE, 2022). Therefore, it is essential
to examine the PFA-E program further, focusing on its impact on the social-emotional
development of enrolled children.

Purpose

The PFA-E program is a fairly new initiative with its original grant being awarded to
Illinois in 2015. As such, not much research has been conducted examining the benefits for
enrolled children. Given that social-emotional development serves as the foundation for all other
development, it is essential to investigate the impact of the PFA-E program on children’s social-
emotional development. Children need healthy social-emotional development in order to achieve
academic success. Therefore, the purpose of this mixed method case study is to examine how the
NIU PFA-E Program supports the social-emotional development of the enrolled children.
Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: 1) Do children enrolled in PFA-E show
an increase in their social-emotional development over the course of the academic year; and 2)
How does the PFA-E program support the social-emotional development of the children enrolled.

Significance

Addressing social-emotional development is especially important for “at-risk” children,
given the increasing expulsion rates in early childhood education. According to the National
Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), approximately 8,710 three- to four-
year-olds are expelled or pushed out of their state funded preschool or prekindergarten classrooms
each year (NAEYC, 2016). These young children often experience expulsion due to challenging
behaviors, such as aggression, tantrums, and noncompliance (Stegelin, 2018).

The significance of this research extends beyond “at-risk” children and encompasses all
children in early childhood education programs. Should the research demonstrate improvements
in the social-emotional development of the children enrolled in the PFA-E program, it could encourage more programs to strive to provide high-quality care and adopt a social-emotional curriculum. This, in turn, could broaden access to such programs, giving more children the opportunity to achieve academic success and overall lifelong success.

The benefits of this research do not solely rely on positive outcomes. If the study reveals no significant improvement in the social-emotional development of the children enrolled in the PFA-E program, it would call for the need for more comprehensive program evaluation and increasing the access to and quality of professional development for teachers. Further research on the program could help shine a light on the importance of funding for early childhood education programs and the continuous professional development of educators. The aim of this study is to not only contribute to understanding of program effectiveness and children’s outcomes, but also to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers to enhance early childhood education programs and promote the lifelong success of children.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a review of Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial development, which examines how both psychological factors and surrounding environments and interactions impact a child's mental health and social behaviors. This theoretical framework is relevant to this research, as children in PFA-E have often experienced risk factors that could potentially hinder their social-emotional development. Next, a concise overview of the development of social-emotional competence in preschool aged children, as outlined by the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF; Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021) is provided. The subsequent sections examine critical aspects of this research, including how the environment affects social-emotional development, literature findings on the effects of preschool on social-emotional development, and social emotional interventions. This section concludes with a synthesis of the literature and highlights gaps in the research that inform the focus of this study.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this research is Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial development (Erikson, 1950). Erikson theorizes that our personalities develop in a predetermined order through eight stages from infancy into adulthood. During each stage we experience a psychosocial crisis/conflict which becomes a turning point for our development. The successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and development of basic virtues that
can be used to help future crises/conflicts. Incompletion of one stage does not prevent someone from moving onto the next; however, the crisis/conflict in the stages not completed can return as problems in the future (Erikson, 1950). The focus of this research is on the third stage of Erikson’s development, Initiative versus Guilt, which occurs between ages three to five. Children in this stage begin to assert themselves in social situations, and by doing so, begin to form a sense of initiative, as well as confidence in their ability to lead others and make decisions. If children in this stage are continuously criticized, punished, or treated as a nuisance, they will form a sense of guilt and are more likely to develop poor social skills and become overly dependent on others.

The psychosocial approach looks at how both psychological factors and surrounding social environments and interactions influence a child's mental health and behaviors. Erikson’s theory applies to this research as it is examining the social-emotional development (mental health) of preschoolers who are considered “at risk” and how their participation in the PFA-E program impacts their development. Children in this program have been deemed “at risk,” and any of the risk factors they have experienced could make their completion of Erikson’s stages more difficult, delaying their social-emotional development.

Development of Social-Emotional Competence

According to the American Psychological Association (2022), social-emotional competence is defined as “the ability to evaluate social situations and determine what is expected or required, recognize the feelings and intentions of others, and behave in a way that is appropriate for the given social situation.” The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF; Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021) draws from an extensive and comprehensive body of research to delineate essential skills, behaviors, and knowledge across key
areas of learning and development. The central domains of the framework include: Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. This study focuses on the social and emotional development domain of preschoolers, which includes four sub-domains: Relationships with Adults, Relationships with other Children, Emotional Functioning, and Sense of Identity and Belonging. Each of these four sub-domains contains their own goals, or broad expectations for children’s learning and development, which are further described in the next section.

Sub-Domain 1: Relationships with Adults

Goal P-SE 1: Child engages in and maintains positive relationships and interactions with adults.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children are expected to engage in positive interactions with adults, demonstrate the ability to separate from trusted adults when in familiar settings, and use these trusted adults to help solve problems. We expect to see some progression in development from 48-60 months (4-5 years). Children should show excitement in their interactions with trusted adults, be able to separate from trusted adults with minimal distress, and initiate interactions with adults and participate in longer reciprocal interactions with both trusted and new adults. By 60 months (5 years), children indicate reaching the goal by interacting readily with trusted adults, engaging in some positive interactions with less familiar adults, showing affection and preference for adults who interact with them regularly, and seeking help from adults when needed.

Goal P-SE 2: Child engages in prosocial and cooperative behavior with adults.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children will sometimes engage in prosocial behaviors with adults such as responding to adults and following directions; however, they may sometimes demonstrate uncooperative behaviors such as refusing adults requests, but these moments can
typically be resolved with support from adults. By 48-60 months (4-5 years), children often engage prosocial behaviors with adults such as responding appropriately to their requests and directions without assistance or prompting and uncooperative behaviors become rarer and can usually be resolved with minor supports. The indicators at 60 months (5 years), include engaging in prosocial behaviors with adults, attending to adults when asked, following adult guidelines and expectations for appropriate behavior, and asking or waiting for adult permission before doing something when they are unsure.

**Sub-Domain 2: Relationships with Other Children**

**Goal P-SE 3: Child engages in and maintains positive interactions and relationships with other children.**

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children sometimes engage in and maintain interactions with other children without or minimal support from adults, and spontaneously engage in prosocial behaviors such as sharing with other children or may do so when prompted by adults. By 48-60 months (4-5 years), children should start sustaining interactions with other children more often and for increased periods of time, demonstrate prosocial behaviors with other children with minor or no prompting from adults, and is starting to show preference for playing with certain children. Indicators at 60 months (5 years), include engaging in and maintaining positive interactions with other children, using a variety of skills for entering social situations with other children, taking turns in conversations and interactions with other children, and developing friendships with one or two other children.
Goal P-SE 4: Child engages in cooperative play with other children.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children will often play with others for at least short periods of time, during this play children work together to plan and act out their play in a coordinated way. Progression in development around 48-60 months (4-5 years) occurs when children are able to play with others for longer periods of time and play will become increasingly coordinated. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include engaging in joint play with at least one child (coordinated goals, planning, roles, and games with rules), demonstrating willingness to include others’ ideas during interactions and play, showing enjoyment of playing with other children, and engaging in reflection and conversations about past play experiences.

Goal P-SE 5: Child uses basic problem-solving skills to resolve conflicts with other children.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children begin to recognize and describe social problems and suggest solutions to the conflict with guidance and support from adults. Around 48-60 months (4-5 years), children become increasingly better at recognizing and describing social problems, suggesting solutions to conflicts, and compromise when working or playing with other children. Children may be able to solve simple conflicts on their own but may seek out or need adult support in more challenging conflicts with others. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include recognizing and describing basic social problems in books or pictures and during interactions with other children, using basic strategies for dealing with common conflicts, expressing their feelings, needs, and opinions during conflict, and seeking adult help when needed to resolve conflicts.
Sub-Domain 3: Emotional Functioning

Goal P-SE 6: Child expresses a broad range of emotions and recognizes these emotions in self and others.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children express a broad range of emotions and can recognize and describe the emotions of others. Around 48-60 months (4-5 years), children continue this development by noticing more complex or subtle emotions in their self and others. Children use words to describe their own feelings when prompted and may even begin using words without prompting. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include children recognizing and labeling basic emotions in books or photos, using words to describe their own feelings, and using words to describe the feelings of adults or other children.

Goal P-SE 7: Child expresses care and concern towards others.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years) children often, but sometimes briefly, pay attention to others in distress. The child may seek out adult support to help the child in distress. From 48-60 months (4-5 years), children consistently pay attention when others are distressed and begin to respond with care either by getting adult support, or by providing reassurance and support on their own. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include making empathetic statements to adults or other children and offering support to adults or other children who are distressed.

Goal P-SE 8: Child manages emotions with increasing independence.

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children manage less intense emotions independently but may need adult support for more intense emotions. By 48-60 months (4-5 years), children have an expanding range of strategies for managing their emotions, but sometimes seek adult support.
for managing the most intense emotions while still showing an increasing skill in managing the emotions independently. By 60 months (5 years) children indicate increased emotional independence by expressing feelings in appropriate ways for their situation, look for adult assistance when feelings are too intense, and use a range of coping skills to manage emotions with the support of an adult.

**Sub-Domain 4: Sense of Identity and Belonging**

**Goal P-SE 9: Child recognizes self as a unique individual having own abilities, characteristics, emotions, and interests.**

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years) children can describe their own physical characteristics and behaviors, as well as describe their likes and dislikes. Progression is shown at 48-60 months (4-5 years) when children can describe a larger range of individual characteristics and interests and communicate how they are similar or different to other people. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include children describing themselves using several different characteristics and demonstrating knowledge of their uniqueness such as their talents, interests, preferences, and culture.

**Goal P-SE 10: Child expresses confidence in own skills and positive feelings about self.**

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children express enjoyment in accomplishing daily routines and new skills and may seek adult attention to these accomplishments. They may begin to share their own ideas or express positive feelings about themselves particularly when prompted by adults. From 48-60 months (4-5 years), children enjoy accomplishing a greater number of tasks and share these accomplishments with other children and adults. Children start to make more contributions to group discussions and share these ideas with or without adult prompting.
Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include children showing satisfaction or seeking acknowledgment when they complete a task or solve a problem, expressing their own ideas or beliefs with groups or other children, and using positive words to describe themselves.

**Goal P-SE 11: Child has a sense of belonging to family, community, and other groups.**

Between 36-48 months (3-4 years), children can communicate feeling a sense of belonging to family and an emerging sense of connections to other communities through words or other forms of expression. From 48-60 months (4-5 years), children have a sense of belonging to family and community and can communicate in detail about these connections with or without prompting from an adult. Indicators at 60 months (5 years) include children identifying themselves as being a part of diverse groups, relating personal stories about being part of diverse groups, and identifying similarities and differences about themselves across familiar environments and settings.

**Importance of Social Emotional Competence**

Early brain development is profoundly shaped by a child’s exposure to both positive and negative experiences, ultimately shaping their capacity to learn and succeed in school and life. Children entering school are expected to have the social maturity to comply with school routines; however, there are many variations in children’s social competence, largely influenced by their early experiences with preschool and other caregivers. Decades of research have consistently demonstrated that participation in high-quality early childhood programs is closely associated with greater social-emotional competence (Shala, 2013). Social – emotional competence is an important aspect of development for preschool children. Children who are socially and emotionally competent are likely to be successful in academic and social areas of life in the future. Conversely,
children who lack social and emotional competence during their preschool years are more likely to have a challenging time transitioning into kindergarten, be unprepared academically, develop a variety of social and behavioral challenges, and experience long-term problems academically and socially (Shala, 2013).

Effects of Environment on Social Emotional Development

Multiple studies have shown adversity has detrimental effects on a child’s social and emotional development, essentially encompassing their mental health. The challenging environments and experiences often encountered by “at risk” children may lead them to struggle with the successful completion of Erikson’s stages, furthering the delay in their development. Importantly, “at risk” children are more prone to experiencing what is known as toxic stress. Toxic stress occurs when our body’s stress management system is activated for frequent or prolonged periods of time. Children can experience toxic stress when they are exposed to uncontrollable and stressful events without the support from a responsive caregiver (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). It is crucial to recognize that children rely on adults to help them work through times of stress because they are new to the world and their brains are still not fully developed. What may not seem stressful to an adult may feel overwhelming for a child because they are still learning and developing. Prolonged exposure to toxic stress can cause damage to a developing brain, particularly affecting its architecture and neural connections. This damage can lead to life-long challenges in learning, behavior, and mental health. Furthermore, extended exposure to toxic stress can cause the stress management system to react more frequently and for longer periods to situations that may not normally be stressful (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). This lower threshold for stressful situations and higher stress
responses is where we start to see challenging behaviors arise in some children. It is not that children want to “misbehave”, but their systems are being overwhelmed, and they may perceive nonthreatening situations as threatening (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015), their natural instincts take over, and they have a fight or flight response.

Impacts of Preschool on Social-Emotional Development

With responsive and supportive caregivers, children become increasingly better at expressing their emotions, identifying others’ emotions, initiating and sustaining friendships, and understanding acceptable and unacceptable behaviors through social interactions, all of which begin to illustrate their social-emotional competence (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Preschool provides a unique setting for children to form their first nonfamilial relationships and further the development of their social-emotional competence through play with peers. Play supports this development by giving children opportunities to engage in social interactions that allow them to practice problem solving skills, perspective taking, learning social rules and boundaries, and self-regulation during conflict. Children who fail to develop proper social-emotional competence are more likely to develop early-onset behavior problems, with up to 50% of those children displaying a more significant clinical behavior disorder when they are older (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Early prevention to improve social, emotional, and behavioral problems early on is essential to reduce the risk of developing future behavior disorders.

Improving children’s social and emotional skills has been brought to focus due to evidence showing children’s emotional competence and behavioral regulation are critical components of school readiness. Recognizing the importance of early prevention and intervention to address social and emotional challenges serves all social-emotional learning. Preschool programs have
been created and implemented nationwide to address these social and emotional skills, including Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum (Greenburg & Kusché, 2006), the Incredible Years Program (Webster-Stratton, 2018), and the Tools of the Mind (Bodrova & Leong, 2006) program (Rojas & Abenavoli, 2021). The Head Start CARES study (Morris et al., 2014) evaluated the effects of these three approaches by randomly assigning 100 Head Start centers to receive one of the interventions or to serve as a control group without receiving an intervention. Head Start CARES tested each intervention’s impact on teacher’s practices and child outcomes in the spring of the preschool year and compared them to the team’s theory of change for each approach.

PATHS is a child-focused program that requires planning lessons to teach children the social-cognitive skills that underlie self-control, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills. Teachers receive training in strategies and reinforce the behavioral display of skills throughout their day. Teachers accept children’s feelings, respond to their emotions, and engage children in problem solving behaviors to managing their emotions. Teachers are also encouraged to model and reflect on emotions, and children are encouraged to think, label, and discuss theirs and others' emotions. Using data from the Head Start CARES Study (Morris et al., 2014), Rojas and Abenavoli (2021) found PATHS showed small to moderate improvements in children's knowledge and understanding of emotions, social problem-solving skills, and social behaviors.

The Incredible Years program’s primary focus is training teachers to directly promote children’s adaptive social behavior and reduce problem behaviors by strengthening the teacher-child relationship, proactive classroom organization, social-emotional coaching, praise, and incentives to motivate children to learn, and proactive discipline and strategies. The Head Start
CARES Study (Morris et al., 2014) showed improvement in children's knowledge and understanding of emotions, problem-solving skills, and social behavior; however, it did not show the expected impacts on behavioral regulation, except for the highest-risk children (Rojas & Abenavoli, 2021).

Lastly, the Tools of Mind program targets cooperative play, behavioral regulation, and social problem-solving skills. The Tools of the Mind program has children practice emotional functioning and behavioral regulation throughout the school day during tasks that require them to use those skills. Results of Tools of the Mind in preschool studies have had mixed results (Farran & Wilson, 2014; Solomon et al., 2018); however, several studies, including the Head Start CARES Study (Morris et al., 2014), have shown positive impacts on children’s knowledge of emotions (Rojas & Abenavoli, 2020).

These findings from the Head Start CARES study and Rojas and Abenavoli (2020) underscore the critical role of teacher training, teachers modeling emotions and behaviors, as well as recognizing and discussing emotions and behaviors with children. These studies show preschool programs with a social-emotional foundation can have a positive impact on the social-emotional competence of children, especially when teachers are adequately trained. It is also important to recognize the research showed even if impacts were low for preschool children in some areas overall, they still had a positive impact, especially for those deemed high-risk (Rojas & Abenavoli, 2021). These small but positive impacts further emphasize the importance of social-emotional curriculum and approaches in an early learning environment as both prevention and intervention for social-emotional problems.
Social Emotional Intervention

One effective intervention for addressing social-emotional problems is Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) (Dunlap & Fox, 2015). PBS seeks to understand the underlying reasons for a child’s challenging behaviors and develop strategies to prevent the occurrence of problem behaviors while also teaching children new skills to further develop their social-emotional competence (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2023). An example of a program wide PBS system in Illinois is the Pyramid Model. The Pyramid Model was uniquely designed to address the needs and contexts of programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (Dunlap & Fox, 2015). The Pyramid Model is a multi-tiered intervention framework of evidence-based interventions for promoting the social, emotional, and behavioral development of young children. The Pyramid Model aids in providing the most effective interventions needed to immediately support the child to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Developed from the public health model, there are three tiers of intervention practices within the Pyramid Model starting with universal promotion for all children. In this first tier there are two levels of practice, nurturing and responsive caregiving relationships and high-quality supportive environments. The first level of practice is the provision of nurturing and responsive caregiving, which focuses on the relationships a child has with family, caregivers, and teachers. This level also addresses the need for partnerships with families and collaborative relationships between intervention and classroom team members. Some practices in this level include actively supporting child engagement; embedding instruction within a child's routine, planned, and play activities; responding to children; promoting and encouraging communication attempts by children with language delays or disabilities; and providing encouragement to promote skill learning and
development. The second level within the first tier focuses on the provision of supportive environments. This will focus on the promotion of a child’s social and emotional development through predictable and supportive environments and family interactions within the home and the community. Practices at this level include children receiving instruction and support in inclusive environments that support the development of social skills and peer relationships. In early education settings, this level refers to the design of the classroom and programs to meet the standards of a high-quality education. This can be done through the implementation of curriculum that fosters all areas of child development; developmentally and culturally appropriate and effective teaching approaches; design of safe physical environments that promote active learning and appropriate behaviors; positive and explicit guidance to children on rules and expectations; and the design of schedules and activities that maximize child engagement and learning (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2009).

Secondary or targeted preventions are focused on children who need additional support. This level focuses on providing explicit instruction in social and emotional regulation. All young children will require adult guidance and instruction to learn how to express their emotions appropriately, play cooperatively with others, and use social problem-solving strategies, however, it may be necessary for some children to be provided with more systematic and focused instruction to learn social-emotional skills. These skills may include identifying and expressing emotions; self-regulation; social problem solving; initiating and maintaining social interactions; cooperative responses; strategies for handling difficult emotions; and friendship skills (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2009).
Finally tertiary or intensive interventions are focused on children with persistent challenges. At this level, PBS is introduced to develop and implement a plan of individualized and intensive intervention. The process begins with convening a team to develop and implement the child’s support plan. The main team members will consist of the child’s family and teachers. A functional behavioral assessment is conducted to gain a better understanding of factors that are related to a child’s challenging behaviors. The functional assessment ends with developmental hypotheses about the functions of the child’s challenging behaviors by the team. These hypotheses are then used to create a behavior support plan which includes prevention strategies, replacement skills that are alternatives to the challenging behavior, and strategies to ensure the challenging behavior is not being reinforced or maintained. Since the behavior support plan is designed to address the home, community, and classroom routines where challenging behavior is occurring, the team also considers supports to the family and strategies to address the broader ecological factors that affect the family and their ability to support their child (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2009).

Gaps in Literature

Overall, there is limited research surrounding the PFA-E program and even less research showing the effects the program has on social-emotional development and what specifically is affecting the development. Academic performance seems to be the focus of most research conducted on the program, even though one key measurement in kindergarten readiness is social-emotional development (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019). These gaps demonstrate the need to investigate preschool teachers' implementation of practices that support the development of social-emotional competence across various settings and measurement methods for
comprehensive insights. (Rakap et al., 2018). To bridge this gap, the current study utilized multiple data sources to examine how two PFA-E classrooms support the social emotional development of enrolled children. Understanding how PFA-E programs impact social-emotional development can inform program improvements, teacher training, and ultimately benefit the children enrolled.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study included four PFA-E teachers and four returning parents of children enrolled in the PFA-E program. Researchers also accessed developmental screening data of approximately nine children enrolled during both the 2021-2022 school year and the 2022-2023 school year. Primary caregivers for this study were recruited through physical flyers, emails, and a verbal invitation to participate. Teachers were recruited through email and verbal invitation to participate. IRB approval was obtained for this study prior to data collection.

Three parents completed demographic surveys. Two of the three parents identified as female, and one identified as male. Two of the parents were between the ages of 31-40 years old and the other parent was between the ages of 41-50 years old. For current marital status, one parent was single and never married, one parent was divorced, and one parent was married. Parents reported a range of education, with one parent having less than a high school diploma, one parent with a high school diploma or equivalent, and the other parent with a master's degree. There was also wide variability in household income, as one parent reported their income as less than $20,000, and two parents reported their income as between $75,000 and $90,000. Parents also varied in their employment status with one parent working full time, one self-employed, and the other parent seeking opportunities. All parents had five people in their household.
Three teachers completed the demographic survey. All three teachers identified as female, were married, and were between the ages of 31-40 years old. In terms of education and experience, all three teachers hold a Bachelor's degree, as required by PFA-E. One teacher also has an Illinois Gateways to Opportunity Early Childhood Education credential level 5, and another teacher has a Gateways Infant/Toddler credential Level 5. Teachers also reported their teaching experience with one teacher having 16 years of teaching experience with 5 years of teaching PFA-E, one teacher has 17 years of teaching experience and 4 years of teaching PFA-E, and one teacher has 7 years of teaching experience with 2 years of teaching PFA-E. Teachers reported variability in for household income, with one teacher reporting between $35,000-$49,999, one between $50,000-$74,999, and the other over $125,000. All teachers identified as full-time for employment with one teacher also reporting they are currently a student. For household size, one parent listed their household size as three and two listed their household size as four.

Data Sources

**Parent Interview and Teacher Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four returning parents of children enrolled in the PFA-E program. Parents were given the option to attend an in-person interview, or a virtual interview based on their availability. All parents chose to participate in in-person interviews at the Child Development and Family Center (CDFC). These interviews took an average of 20 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The interview consisted of eight questions with eight additional sub questions regarding their child’s social-emotional development and experience with the program. Two examples of questions asked were: “In your opinion, what
has your child’s experience been like with the program?”, and “Have you noticed any changes in your child’s social-emotional skills since beginning the program?” (See Appendix A)

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with four current PFA-E teachers. These interviews were conducted in person at the CDFC. Interviews took an average of 15 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The interview consisted of nine questions with eight sub questions regarding the teachers' experience with the program. Examples of questions asked were: “Can you describe what a child’s typical day looks like in your classroom?”, “How has the program supported changes in children’s social-emotional development?”, and “How, if at all, has the PFA-E program supported you?” (See Appendix A)

**Demographic Data**

Demographic data of participants was collected through surveys using the online Qualtrics system, or through paper surveys. The surveys did not ask for names of participants to ensure anonymity. Parents were asked 10-11 questions regarding their demographics such as their household income, race, education level, and marital status (See Appendix B). Teachers were asked similar questions but had additional questions regarding their teaching such as “How many years of experience do you have teaching?”, “How many years of experience do you have teaching in PFA-E?”, and “Please list any other licensures, certificates, etc”. (See Appendix B)

**Developmental Screening Data**

In order to examine if children enrolled in the PFA-E program showed an improvement in their social-emotional competence, de-identified developmental screening data was accessed with the assistance of the PFA-E director. The developmental screening tool used for this program is the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, 3rd edition (ASQ-3; Squires & Bricker, 2009), which is an
accurate developmental screening tool used to assess developmental progress and catch delays in children ages zero to six years old. The ASQ assesses development in five domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social. ASQ scores fall within a white, grey, or black area. ASQ scores that fall in the white area show development appears to be on schedule. ASQ scores that fall in grey area means the child is approaching the cutoff and will need to be provided with activities and need to be monitored. Children with ASQ scores that fall in the black may need further assessment with a professional.

Parents completed ASQ-3 screenings in the Spring of 2021, and teachers completed the ASQ-3 screenings during registration in the Fall of 2022. Parents and teachers answered questions about the child’s development that was specific to their age by checking boxes listed as “yes”, “sometimes”, or “not yet”. After the ASQ was completed, it was scored (yes - 10 points, sometimes – 5 points, not yet – 0 points) and scores were compared to developmental norms based on the child’s age at time of assessment.

Analysis

Research Question One: Do children enrolled in PFA-E show an increase in their social-emotional development over the course of the academic year?

This research question was examined in three ways. First, in order to examine if there was statistically significant growth in social-emotional development in children enrolled in the PFA-E program over the school year, a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare ASQ scores in the personal-social domain for individual children from the Spring 2021 and Fall 2022 data using SPSS.
In addition to examining changes in individual scores, analyses were also conducted to examine the ratios of children in each cut off during the Spring 2021 and Fall 2022 semester. The ASQ is an accurate developmental screening tool used to pinpoint developmental progress in 5 areas of development. These 5 areas are Communication, Gross Motor, Fine Motor, Problem Solving, and Personal-Social. Each area has a total score of 60, but cutoff scores changed based on the child’s age. When examining the score chart of the ASQ there is a white, grey, and black area, each of these areas help determine what follow-up is needed with families. The white area is above the cutoff and signifies the child appears to be on track developmentally. The grey area is close to the cutoff and signifies the child may need some help and should be provided with learning activities and monitored. The black area is below the cutoff and signifies the child may need further assessment by a professional. Ratios of children in each cutoff during the Spring 2021 and then the Fall 2022 semester were compared to identify if there was a shift/improvement in social-emotional development.

Finally, this question was also explored qualitatively through interviews with parents and teachers. During interviews, parents were asked questions regarding perceived changes in their child’s social-emotional development and their perception of their child’s experience in the program. Likewise, teachers were asked questions regarding their perceptions about whether the program supported changes in children’s social emotional development. Interviews were then transcribed, and responses were deductively coded according to the Head Start Early Learning Framework for Social-Emotional Development (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021). Using this framework, the primary researcher closely examined responses to questions that specifically addressed changes in children’s social-emotional development across the four key domains: Relationships with Adults, Relationships with other
Children, Emotional Functioning, and Sense of Identity and Belonging. Any comments from the interviews that described changes in social-emotional development were coded using the corresponding HSELOF social-emotional development goals. Finally, excerpts within each domain were selected to provide illustrative examples of children’s growth across these four domains of social-emotional development.

**Research Question Two: How does the PFA-E program support the social-emotional development of the children enrolled?**

This research question was explored using interview data from parents and teachers. Interviews with parents and teachers were coded using a thematic analysis process (Saldaña, 2021), which is a widely recognized method known for its ability to reveal meaningful patterns and themes within qualitative data. This analysis followed a series of well-defined steps (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). During the initial coding cycle, each transcript was read and carefully examined. This close examination enabled the identification of in vivo codes, which included specific words, phrases, or expressions used by the interview participants themselves. Next, the in vivo codes were systematically organized and sorted into emerging themes. This process involved identifying commonalities, recurring ideas, and recurring language across the transcripts. A second coder, independent of the primary coder, reviewed the coded transcripts and themes to ensure the emerging themes were not solely dependent on the interpretation of a single coder. To provide an illustrative portrayal of these themes, excerpts were selected that best exemplified each theme.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Research Question One: Do children enrolled in PFA-E show an increase in their social-emotional development over the course of the academic year?

Quantitative results from ASQ data

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the PFA-E program on the social-emotional development of children enrolled in the program. A total of eight students attended during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years, but ASQ-3 scores were available for only seven students across both years. The average time between assessments was 13 months. ASQ-3 scores for both Spring 2021 and Fall 2022 were evaluated to determine if there were significant changes. As shown in Table 1, the mean ASQ-3 total scores for Spring 2021 (227.86) and Fall 2022 (257.86) indicate an increase. However, the paired samples t-test revealed that this change was not statistically significant ($t(6) = 1.27, p = 0.251$) and the effect size of the change was small ($d = 0.48$). The Personal-Social sub-domain of the ASQ-3 was also analyzed for changes. The mean personal-social scores for Spring 2021 (48.57) and Fall 2022 (46.43) indicate a slight decrease. However, the paired samples t-test also indicated that this change also was not statistically significant ($t(6) = -0.57, p = 0.589$) and the effect size was small ($d = 0.22$). These results collectively indicate that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean ASQ-3 scores (both total and personal-social) between Spring 2021 and Fall 2022, with effect sizes indicating small effects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spring 2021</th>
<th>Fall 2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASQ-3 Total Scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>227.86</td>
<td>257.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>53.69</td>
<td>27.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASQ-3 Personal-Social Scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>48.57</td>
<td>46.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>8.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The personal-social scores were analyzed further to examine the distribution of children that were within each predefined cutoff (white, grey, black). In Spring 2021, six out of eight children scored above the cutoff (white) for their personal-social scores, one child scored below the cutoff (grey), and one child was not assessed. In Fall 2022, seven out of eight children scored above the cutoff, with the same child who scored below the cutoff in the first year continuing to do so. This consistency in the distribution of scores from Spring 2021 to Fall 2022 further supports the conclusion that there was no significant change in social-emotional development as indicated by the ASQ-3 data.

**Qualitative results from interviews**

During interviews, parents and teachers were asked open-ended questions about their perceptions of changes in the social-emotional development of children. These questions addressed development in each key area of social-emotional development as outlined in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF; Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021). Parents and teachers, with their consistent day to day interactions with the children, possess valuable insights into their development. They can observe and celebrate
even the smallest milestones and improvements. Parents and teachers shared their perspectives on children’s development in each of the key areas of development, and their observations were aligned with the HSELOF goals for social-emotional development. These goals, informed by extensive research, describe the expected progression of children’s social-emotional development (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021).

Relationships with adults

The first goal in relationships with adults (Goal P.SE 1) is for children to engage in and maintain positive relationships and interactions with adults (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021). It is important to note that some of the children in this program, stemming from disadvantaged backgrounds, may initially find it challenging to trust and form secure relationships with adults such as their caregivers and teachers. Teachers are consistently interacting with children and their families and can observe the changes in interactions firsthand. For instance, Teacher 3 observed changes in the child’s relationship with adults as she noted,

“I’ve seen a lot of change with some children in terms of like trusting adults […] I’ve been able to see, like, children actually growing in their trust and faith in adults that are in their lives and make it easier for them to be able to interact with them and feel safe with them. I’ve also seen children just be able to just communicate better with their parents or caregivers where they can express their emotions better or just kind of handle overall transitions and things like that with their parents”.

Relationships with other children

Within this subdomain, the first goal (Goal P.SE 3) is for children to engage in and maintain positive interactions and relationships with other children. Positive interactions consist of prosocial behaviors such as sharing, taking turns, and engaging in conversations with peers. One parent recognized her child’s growth in this area, noting, “At one point she wanted it all to herself. But now she knows how to share” (Parent 1).
The third goal within this subdomain (Goal P.SE 5) is for children to use basic problem-solving skills to resolve conflicts with other children. Children demonstrate achievement of this goal by recognizing social problems and suggesting solutions when playing with other children. For example, one parent noticed her oldest child could recognize when her sister is having a problem by seeing she is upset and offering up solutions to help her solve her problem. This parent stated,

“She does like that problem solving. It's like, OK, what's this? Can I you know, how about I do this for you? Or you know, I know you're upset. I know you want this, but we can't have this right now. How about we do this? So, I see a lot of the problem solving that you guys do with her. [...] Her problem solving has been, I gotta say, that's like the biggest improvement I seen in [my child]”. (Parent 2)

**Emotional Functioning**

Turning to emotional functioning, the first goal (Goal P.SE 6) is for children to express a broad range of emotions and recognize these emotions in both themselves and others. Since they are still learning about emotions, verbalizing emotions can be a difficult task, particularly when dealing with negative emotions like anger and frustration. Children can demonstrate the achievement of this goal by expressing their emotions appropriately, whether through verbal communication or safe physical expressions. Parent 1 observed this change in her child when she saw her child was no longer acting out on her emotions and instead began to verbalize them. This parent noted, “She learned how to express instead of just, like, getting angry and upset. She's come a long way because she learned how to express her feelings and tell why she feels the way that she feels”.

The third goal in this subdomain (Goal P.SE 8) is for children to manage emotions with increasing independence. Managing emotions is more complex for children because they must first
identify the emotion they are feeling and then figure out how they are going to manage that feeling. The child will slowly learn more about their emotions and how they can help themselves manage those emotions with less assistance from an adult. Parent 3 noticed significant improvements in her children’s emotional regulation, especially her second child to go through the program, as she commented:

“My kids have some very big feelings and they have very strong personalities. I would say that the way they respond to a lot of situations I've noticed that like they. Uh, they might calm down a little bit quicker sometimes. My middle child in particular I think, has had a lot of changes in her emotional...she's been her emotional regulation has just improved significantly over like the past six months”.

**Sense of identity and belonging**

The second goal within this subdomain (Goal P.SE 10) is for children to express confidence in their own skills and positive feelings about themselves. Parents noticed this growth in various ways, such as children demonstrating increased independence and confidence in their abilities. For example, Parent 2 highlighted her child’s increased confidence, sharing,

“She's more confident. That's one thing she's more confident in than like before. But, you know, just watching her grow in confidence has been, like, really good. I can actually see it. Like now she's not asking or, you know, she's just doing it”.

Parent 4 also noticed her child’s increase in confidence by his willingness to push his own personal boundaries and try new things. She said,

“[My child] is very confident where like I think before we started the program, he was more timid. And so he wasn't willing to, like, push his physical boundaries or his, like, comfort level, where now he feels like I think he has a lot more confidence like he tries different things”.
Research Question Two: How does the PFA-E program support the social-emotional development of the children enrolled?

After parents and teachers were asked about the changes in children’s social-emotional development, they were asked how they believe the program supported those changes. These interviews were conducted individually; however, as they were conducted, common themes started to emerge about what factors parents and teachers thought supported positive changes in children’s social-emotional development. These themes centered around parent-teacher relationships, guidance and modeling, routine, and consistency. While parents and teachers shared similar thoughts on what they believed supported these changes in children, a notable distinction emerged between parent and teacher responses. In addition to the shared themes, teachers also emphasized how the educational aspects of preschool, such as curricular approach and professional development, supported changes in children’s social-emotional development.

**Shared Perspectives**

**Theme 1: Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Parent-teacher relationships, which consist of the interactions between parents and teachers, emerged as a central theme in both parent and teacher responses. The main interaction mentioned by both parents and teachers was positive and open communication. Children often navigate different dynamics and relationships at home and at school, which can cause their interactions to be different with their parents compared to their peers and teachers. Open communication between parents and teachers is essential to help parents get the resources they need to support their child at home. As one parent noted, “[Teachers] are willing to give us whatever material we need […] or if we’re having issues with something, then [teachers] give us
ideas of what we can do” (Parent 2). Both parents and teachers mentioned the importance of open communication in effectively supporting children. For example, Parent 1 said shared,

“She will be upset about something when she leaves school and get home, and I don't know about it, but seeing that y'all let me know how her day was. That's that's good, because now I can assist her now that she's not here with you guys. She's home. So now I can do it”.

Teachers also noted that it is also helpful for the child to see their parent and teacher making connections because building “the trust and communication with the families […] the child's more likely to open up to you and build that relationship with you” (Teacher 1).

Theme 2: Guidance and Modeling

The second theme that emerged from the analysis is guidance and modeling. In the classroom, guidance is how a teacher helps the child gain independence by equipping them with the tools and language needed to solve problems independently or collaboratively with peers. Teachers emphasized the importance of modeling social-emotional strategies for children, demonstrating how to address complex emotions and employ problem-solving skills. Teacher 1 highlighted the value of modeling through programs like Conscious Discipline by stating,

“The modeling, the conscious discipline curriculum that we use a lot about, like how to ask a friend to play problem solving skill like explaining to them like it's OK to feel these ways, but how can you problem solve and how can you interact with your peers in order to have a positive experience in preschool?”. (Teacher 1)

Preschool aged children are becoming more independent; however, they are still learning about their emotions and often need help addressing the more complex emotions. Teachers emphasized that guiding children in understanding and articulating their emotions is particularly important in preventing challenging behaviors. Teacher 3 explained,
“Some children don't even understand what they're feeling or why they're feeling it, so we give them a lot of the words. Like frustrated and sad and angry and upset or disappointed. And that really helps them because then they learn those words and then they can start saying that instead of acting on it”. (Teacher 3)

By providing children with the proper words to help them express their emotions, teachers empower them to verbalize their feelings rather than react physically. From the parents' perspective, teachers were effective in guiding and modeling for the children. Parents acknowledged that teachers use calm and clear communication, establishing safe boundaries for children. Parents believe this approach has significantly contributed to their children’s understanding of behavioral expectations. Parent 4 shared, “The way [the teachers] talk to the kids is very like calm and it’s very like the boundaries are very clear” (Parent 4). Parents felt teachers clearly explained to children what the expectations are and why those are the expectations, which really helped children. For example, Parent 2 added,

“It's so easy to just say no jumping on the sofa, it's like you guys explain, like why it's not good to be jumping from a sofa. You know you gotta be safe you gotta keep feet on the ground. So you take that extra step and that has helped [child’s name] definitely.”

Theme 3: Routine

The third shared theme is routine, which when daily events occur in order or occur regularly. Parents and teachers alike recognized the importance of routines for children. As parent 3 pointed out, “A routine is like really helpful to most kids, like knowing where you're gonna be everyday and knowing what you're gonna do. I think that's tremendously helpful”. Routines provide children with predictability, offering a clear picture of what to expect and what is expected of them throughout the day. Additionally, routines help prepare children for the structured
environment of kindergarten by establishing a consistent schedule. One teacher highlighted the importance of routine in the classroom stating,

“A typical day in the PFA classroom is definitely scheduled. Routine. That's something that we emphasis really hard in this program. We have to have so many minutes of curriculum time, so many minutes of outdoor time, so we have to follow a stricter schedule than the other classrooms […] I also really do like the consistent routine every day. You know, everyone thrives off routine”. (Teacher 1)

Theme 4: Consistency

The fourth theme is consistency. Consistency helps children because “consistency provides safety and security for the children and that's so important to help eliminate some of those behaviors” (Teacher 2). Consistency is beneficial to both teachers and children because:

“If you follow the schedule like it's supposed to be followed, you end up finding security in your own self because you know what happens next and that the kids, naturally they just gravitate towards it and then you notice the decrease in behaviors”. (Teacher 2)

Teachers being consistent with both the routine and their expectations of the children can help reduce challenging behaviors in the class. Parents also appreciate consistency in the classroom, particularly when there was a change in the home. Parent 1 acknowledged the support provided to her child during a time of transition at home, sharing,

“Helping her with her social and emotional developments because like y'all, work with her and she changed a lot. Going through a transition from home, and she's gotten better. Instead of getting worse. So, she's gotten better already, and it didn't take no time because y'all were consistent with her.”

The child was able to effectively cope with the change in her home because her teachers provided her with consistency and worked with her to understand the change happening at home.
Unique Teacher Perspectives

Theme 1: Curricular Approach

The first theme is curricular approach. The curricular approach serves as the guiding framework for what the teachers are trying to teach and a plan for how they are going to teach children. This program uses the Pyramid Model (ISBE, 2022), which uses evidence-based practices to promote healthy social-emotional development. A primary focus lies in targeted social-emotional learning, which aligns with tier two of the pyramid model that uses social-emotional strategies to prevent challenging behaviors. Some of these supports include self-regulation, developing social relationships, and learning to problem solve. Teacher 4 described how she implements this approach by “teaching kids how to interact with others, how to share and how to communicate and how to solve problems and things like that with their peers” (Teacher 4). Teaching these social-emotional skills “helps the children get ready for kindergarten [...] it helps them establish friendships and get used to routines, and just build some of those core skills needed for a school structure” (Teacher 3).

Theme 2: Teacher Resources and Professional Development

The second theme revolves around teacher resources and professional development. These resources and professional development opportunities are offered to support teachers in providing the best possible education and care for children in their program. The program “budget for us to go to basically provide us with supports and resources and to build on our education” (Teacher 2). Teachers highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development, which equips them with fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to enhance their classrooms and curricula. Teacher 1 acknowledged the value of annual conferences, noting, “When we get sent to our
conferences every year […] learning new way to add things to the class and or your curriculum” (Teacher 1). Professional development goes beyond conferences, extending to the opportunity to collaborate with experienced professionals. This collaborative effort assists teachers in creating action plans and addressing classroom challenges, as articulated by Teacher 2, "Getting the opportunity to sit down with [professionals] who have a wealth of knowledge and kind of help me come up with these actions plans, if you will, or something I might be struggling with in the classroom” (Teacher 2).
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to examine how the NIU’s Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) Program supports the social-emotional development of the children enrolled. This study was conducted by examining the ASQ-3 scores of children enrolled during both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years. Additionally, interviews were conducted with four parents of children enrolled for those years and four current PFA-E teachers. This study is unique in the way it specifically focuses on how the PFA-E program affects the social-emotional development of children enrolled. As previously noted, the PFA-E program is relatively new and has received limited attention in research, particularly concerning its effects on children’s social-emotional development. While the quantitative analysis did not reveal statistically significant changes in children’s social-emotional development, thematic analysis of interviews illuminated parents and teachers perceived notable changes. Moreover, common themes were uncovered regarding the factors supporting these observed changes, providing valuable insights into the program’s impact on the social-emotional development of enrolled children.
Research Question One: Do children enrolled in PFA-E show an increase in their social-emotional development over the course of the academic year?

In order to examine the effect of the PFA-E program on the social-emotional development of children enrolled, the ASQ-3 total scores and personal-social scores of eight children who attended the program during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years were examined, however complete data was only available from seven children for the analysis. A paired sample t-test was used to compare the results from the ASQ-3's. According to the results, there was no statistically significant change in the social-emotional development of children. To explore further, the personal-social scores from the ASQ-3 were analyzed to assess where children fell in relation to established cutoffs. These results showed there while there was no significant change in social-emotional development, there was at least a consistent level of development over time.

Quantitative assessments of children can provide a snapshot of their development at a particular point in time, whereas parents and teachers witness the child’s holistic development and growth over time. Parents and teachers have the privilege of observing children’s continuous development beyond the point of assessment, which means if parents and teachers frequently filled out these assessments on children then the assessments might reveal more substantial improvements. In addition to frequency, maintaining consistency in assessments is also important. The ASQ-3 assessments for Spring 2021 were completed by parents, whereas the ASQ-3 assessments for Fall 2022 were completed by teachers. Although quantitative data showed no statistically significant changes in social-emotional development, the perspectives of parents and teachers indicated they observed growth when measured against the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF; Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2021) goals. To summarize some of the growth, teachers noticed improvements in the children’s
relationships to adults by noting the child’s increased willingness to trust and communicate with the adults in their lives, parents and teachers. Parents also noticed changes in their child’s relationships to other children, as evidenced by their child’s ability to share, recognize others' emotions, and helping to problem solve in stressful situations. Parents were also able to recognize an improvement in their child’s emotional functioning. This was particularly evident in significant improvements in their child’s ability to verbalize their emotions and self-regulate. Finally, children’s sense of identity was improved, as parents recognized increased self-confidence to children’s willingness to test their own physical boundaries.

Research Question Two: How does the PFA-E program support the social-emotional development of the children enrolled?

Throughout interviews with parents and teachers, recurring themes emerged regarding the perceived factors of the PFA-E program that positively impacted children’s social-emotional development. These themes encompassed parent-teacher relationships, guidance and modeling, routines, and consistency. Teachers also shared unique perspectives regarding the value of curriculum, as well as professional development and teacher resources.

Parent-teacher relationships entail the dynamic interactions between parents and teachers. According to NAEYC, “Creating and maintaining partnerships with families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practice […] families have expertise about their children, and they play a critical role in their child’s growth and learning” (Steen, 2022). During interviews, both parents and teachers discussed the importance of fostering positive, open communication with one another. Communication between parents and teachers is important to ensure that everyone is well-informed about the child in order to best support them wherever they are. When parents communicate about their child it allows the teachers to understand the child
more, as well as give parents resources to support their child at home. A positive parent-teacher relationship can also contribute to building trust between the child and their teacher, reinforcing the notion that the teacher is a safe and dependable adult. Building the trusting relationship between the child and teacher also helps further the child’s social-emotional development in the subdomain relationships with adults goal P-SE 1 (HSELOF, 2021) by allowing the child to recognize their teacher as a safe and dependable adult making them more likely to trust their teacher and have positive interactions with them.

Guidance and modeling play pivotal roles in nurturing children’s growing independence. When adults engage in effective guidance, they create an encouraging environment where children are encouraged to embrace mistakes as opportunities for learning (Gartrell, 2021 NAEYC). Guidance helps children develop self-help skills and problem-solving abilities (Goal P-SE 5), gradually reducing their reliance on teacher assistance. One important way teachers achieve this is by established clear and consistent boundaries and expectations for children. When a child does not understand the expectations or boundaries and is unsure of how to approach a situation, teachers can model for them (ex. Checking on a child who was hurt). In the provided example, teachers are helping children in the domain of emotional function by helping them empathy and to show concern for others (P-SE 7). Guidance also relies on a child’s willingness to listen and follow the teacher’s guidance and expectations, which again emphasizes the importance of a positive relationship with the teacher. Students who allow teachers to guide them show growth in the subdomain of relationships with adults, aligning with goal P-SE 2, which highlights prosocial and cooperative behaviors with adults (HSELOF, 2021).

Routines are predictable daily events that happen in a consistent order. Children thrive in a routine-based environment as it provides them with “consistency, confidence, security, trust, and
a sense of safety” (Salmon, 2010) through allowing the child to know what they can expect to happen during the day and what the expectations are for them in the classroom. When the child has the knowledge of what to expect during their day, it can alleviate some of the stress and anxiety they may be experiencing with school (Wildenger et al., 2008). Children who understand the daily routine can find comfort in its predictability. For example, if the child is missing their parents, they can run through the daily schedule to see what events happen before their parent picks them up. Having a routine in this example helped a child to manage their emotions (P-SE 8) by providing a step-by-step schedule of their day. It provides the child with the knowledge and reassurance that their parents will return for them, as well as when they could expect that to happen.

Consistency is beneficial to both children and teachers. Teachers mentioned feeling more confident in themselves when they follow their routines consistently, and in doing so they experience fewer challenging behaviors from the children. From a developmental perspective, warm and consistent interactions with adults encourage learning and behavioral regulation (Brock, Curby, & Cannell-Cordier, 2018). Consistency in routines can help with behavioral regulation in children. This consistency provides children with a sense of comfort and predictability in their daily lives, enabling them to better manage their own emotions (P-SE 8). By decreasing this stress and uncertainty, teachers are less likely to see challenging behaviors from children. The warm and consistent teacher interactions can also help the child develop a positive relationship with their teacher. When children know what to expect from their teacher and understand the teacher’s expectations, they are better able to follow those expectations (P-SE 2).

In addition to these shared themes between parents and teachers, teachers also offered unique perspectives regarding the impact of curricular approaches and professional development. The choice of a curricular approach significantly influences the experiences of enrolled children.
According to the PFA-E regulations (ISBE, 2022), the use of a social-emotional model, such as the Pyramid Model (ISBE, 2023), is mandated. The Pyramid Model relies on evidence-based practices that promote the healthy social-emotional development of children. Teachers described using social-emotional learning strategies, such as teaching children how to share, problem solve, and engage in positive interactions with other children. All these strategies fall under the second tier of the Pyramid Model, which focuses on teaching specific social-emotional strategies to prevent challenging behaviors. These three strategies also help to further a child’s social-emotional development by assisting them in meeting the goals in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework subdomain relationships with other children by helping them to form positive relationships through sharing, which helps them to maintain positive interactions with peers (P-SE-3) and problem solving when conflict arises (P-SE 5).

Professional development and access to teacher resources play essential roles in keeping educators informed and adaptable in an ever-evolving educational landscape. Professional development offers teachers opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and practices within their field (NAEYC, 2019). While education traditionally emphasizes basic academic skills, early education professionals recognize that social-emotional development serves as the foundational basis for all other learning and development. Thus, teachers require ongoing professional development and access to resources to remain current with important topics related to the social-emotional well-being of children. Education is continuously changing and finding new ways to help children learn so it is important that teachers remain up to date through attending educational conferences and participating in professional development. It is important for teachers to continue expanding their knowledge because it impacts the way they teach, which, in turn, impacts their student's development. Engaging in ongoing professional development helps empower teachers
with new strategies and approaches to effectively support students across all key areas of their social-emotional development.

Implications for Practice

A fundamental implication for practice for all programs is maintaining consistency in assessments. Consistency in assessment would increase the availability and reliability of data, as assessments would be administered by one person (typically a teacher). This consistency would reduce variation in assessment results due to differing perspectives from parents and teachers. Standardized assessment procedures could lead to more accurate and comprehensive insights into changes in children’s social-emotional development.

Another implication for practice within early childhood programs is to promote and support positive parent-teacher relationships. Parents and teachers see different sides to the same child and often perceive the child’s behavior and development differently. Therefore, it is important that parents and teachers have a positive relationship that supports open communication about the child and their experiences between home and school. Positive parent-teacher relationships can be achieved through regular communication during drop offs and pickups, as well as through events such as family nights or parent-teacher conferences, which provide opportunities for parents and teachers to engage in meaningful conversations and get to know one another better.

A child’s first experience with school is most often preschool. Preschool is the time to get a child ready to succeed in a traditional school setting while still being developmentally appropriate by allowing them to learn through play. Since healthy social-emotional development supports all other aspects of development, it is imperative to enhance social-emotional development practices in the classroom. These practices provide children with a strong foundation to succeed.
Teachers are responsible for aiding in the development of this strong foundation for children to succeed in school. To help students, teachers should participate in professional development annually. Future implications for practice should include supporting teachers' access to professional development opportunities, and ensuring the professional development is of high quality.

Policy makers play a crucial role in supporting early education programs by developing policies that allocate resources to fund initiatives aimed at promoting social-emotional development. Recognizing the significance of these initiatives in the holistic development of children, policy support can help ensure that the necessary resources are available to enhance social-emotional development within early education settings.

Limitations

Quantitative Limitations

One limitation of this study pertains to the sample size of participants. The examination of ASQ-3 total scores and personal social scores of children enrolled during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years was constrained by a relatively small sample size of only eight children. Due to the small sample size this study was underpowered with insufficient data. Furthermore, the assessment was only conducted once per year (Spring 2021 and Fall 2022) rather than each semester, which limited the data available on each of those children.

Another limitation to the study was related to the assessment methods employed for the ASQ-3. As previously discussed, children may exhibit different behaviors when with their parents versus their teachers. The ASQ-3 assessments were completed by parents in Fall of 2021 and by teachers in Fall of 2022, potentially introducing variations in results due to differences in how parents and teachers perceive the child. Children’s responses during the assessment may also be
influenced by their comfort level at the time of the screening and whether the assessment took place in a natural setting for the child (such as during play) or if the child was asked to perform on command (Peterson & Elam, 2020). The Spring 2021 assessments were administered at the end of the school year, whereas the Fall 2022 assessments were administered at the beginning of the school year when children are just starting or returning to school. Children may have had little time to adjust to being back at school and may not have been ready to cooperate during their assessment which could result in lower scores. For example, within the dataset, one child’s total ASQ-3 score was 295 with a personal social score of 60 when assessed by the parent, but a total ASQ-3 score of 220 with a personal social score of 45 when assessed by a teacher. It is likely this decrease was not due to a decrease in the child’s social-emotional development, but rather differences in assessment practices between the two time points.

Qualitative Limitations

Coding subjectivity is one limitation to qualitative research. Coding is subjective because the themes are created based on the interpretation of results by the researcher. In order to minimize this limitation, triangulation was used. After children's names were removed from transcripts and themes were created, the documents were shared with the thesis director for review. Upon approval from the thesis director, a member check was conducted by emailing teachers to review the themes that were found, and teachers confirmed those themes.

Another limitation pertains to the replicability of the study. While the study could be replicated, it would involve different students, parents, teachers, or even programs, which may lead to different results. All PFA-E programs are required to use a social-emotional model and monitor children’s progress in the program, allowing for the possibility of replication. However, variations in results may arise due to differences in the chosen social-emotional model, as well
variations in documentation and assessment practices, including the frequency of assessments used to track children’s progress.

Generalizability

Although the findings of this study are important, the generalizability is low. This study was limited to observing children in one PFA-E program and its demographic of children. Not all PFA-E programs are the same. While PFA-E programs share requirements, such as the mandate to implement a social-emotional curriculum, there can still be differences in the programs, such as their selection of social-emotional curriculum and demographics of children being served.

Future Research

One significant implication for future research is the need to replicate the study with larger sample sizes. This could be done by conducting research on multiple PFA-E programs, tracking children from their initial enrollment in the program until their transition to kindergarten, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact on social-emotional development. It would be ideal to examine multiple PFA-E programs that implement similar social-emotional models using the same assessments. This research approach could result in more robust and generalizable results.

Another implication for future research would be to examine the PFA-E program’s fidelity of implementation of the social-emotional model they have chosen. While these programs are mandated to use a social-emotional model, it is imperative to assess whether teachers are effectively incorporating the model into their classroom and curricula. The benefits of the model may not fully reach the children if it is not being consistently and correctly implemented. The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT; Fox, Hemmeter, & Snyder, 2014) is an observational measure of how well teachers are implementing Pyramid Model practices in their classroom.
While it was outside of the scope and feasibility of this study, future research should utilize the TPOT to investigate alignment between the intended model and its actual implementation in practice.

Another implication for future research that was outside of the scope of this study would be to conduct a comparison of a PFA-E program to a regular preschool program. This research would help to examine what impact having a social-emotional model has on the children enrolled in PFA-E compared to the children in a regular class. It may also provide further information on the development in general of children who are deemed “at risk” compared to children who have not necessarily been identified as being “at risk”.

Conclusion

Although this study did not yield the anticipated results, the knowledge gained from this research benefits the field of early education. While the study revealed there were no statistically significant improvements in the social-emotional development of the children enrolled in the PFA-E program, noteworthy insights were gained from the perspectives of parents and teachers who reported growth in social-emotional development. The next logical step calls for more comprehensive program evaluation, such as observing how the program is implementing their social-emotional model, consistency in the assessment of children, and increasing both the accessibility to and quality of professional development opportunities for teachers. Additional research on the PFA-E program could support the importance of funding for early childhood education programs and the continuous professional development of educators Overall, this study underscores the importance of ongoing research and commitment to refining early education practices to benefit children's social-emotional development.
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APPENDIX A

PARENT TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Parent Interview Questions

1. What has your experience with the PFA-E program been like?

2. In your opinion what has your child’s experience been like with the program?

3. Have you noticed any changes in your child’s social-emotional skills since beginning the program?
   a. Have you noticed any changes in their interactions with adults?
   b. Have you noticed any changes in their interactions with other children?
   c. Examples: such as an easier time making friends, talking more, showing more independence?
   d. Have you noticed any changes in how they show and manage their emotions?
   e. Have you noticed any changes in their self-esteem?

4. What about the program do you think have supported these changes in your child?

5. How, if at all, has the PFA-E program supported you?
   a. In your ability to support your child’s social-emotional skills?
   b. How has it helped in your own personal development?

6. What are some aspects of the program that you enjoy?

7. How do you think the program could be improved to support you or your child?
   a. How could the program improve to support your child’s social-emotional development?

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience with the PFA-E program?
Teacher Interview Questions

1. What has your experience with the PFA-E program been like?

2. Can you describe what a child’s typical day looks like in your classroom?

3. In your opinion how does this program benefit children and families?

4. How has the program supported changes in children’s social-emotional development?
   a. ... in their interactions with adults?
   b. ...in their interactions with other children?
   c. … in their emotional functioning (how they express and manage their emotions?)
   d. ...in their sense of identity and belonging?

5. How, if at all, has the PFA-E program supported you?
   a. In your ability to support children’s social-emotional skills?
   b. How has it helped you in your own personal development?

6. What are some aspects of the program that you enjoy?

7. How do you think the program could be improved to better support children’s social-emotional development?
   a. How do you think it could be improved to support families in supporting their children’s social-emotional development?

8. How do you think the program could be improved to better support you as a teacher?
   a. How could it better support you in supporting children’s social-emotional development?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how the PFA-E program supports social-emotional development in children?
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS
Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
   a. 18-24 years
   b. 25-30 years
   c. 31-40 years
   d. 41-50 years
   e. 51-60 years

2. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Prefer not to answer

3. How would you describe yourself? (select all that apply)
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native American
   e. Latino or Hispanic
   f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   g. White
   h. Self-identify: ____________________
4. What is your gender? (select all that apply)
   a. Woman
   b. Man
   c. Transwoman
   d. Transman
   e. Non-binary, non-conforming, trans, gender queer
   f. Self-identify _______

5. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
   a. Less than a high school diploma
   b. High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
   c. Some college, no degree
   d. Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)
   e. Bachelor’s degree (e.g., BA, BS)
   f. Master’s degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)
   g. Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS)
   h. Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)
   i. *Teachers Only* Please list any other licensures, certifications, etc.

6. What is your current household income?
   a. Less than $20,000
   b. $20,000 to $34,999
   c. $35,000 to $49,999
   d. $50,000 to $74,999
   e. $75,000 to $99,999
6. $100,000 to $124,999

7. $125,000 to $149,999

8. Over $150,000

7. What is your current marital status?
   a. Single (never married)
   b. Married, or in a domestic partnership
   c. Widowed
   d. Divorced
   e. Separated

8. What is your current employment status? (select all that apply)
   a. Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
   b. Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)
   c. Seeking opportunities
   d. Student
   e. Retired
   f. Self-employed
   g. Stay at home parent
   h. Unable to work
   i. Other

9. How many people currently live in your household?

10. Are you bilingual
    a. Yes
    b. No
11. If yes to number 10, what other languages are you fluent in. (fill in the blank question)

12. *Teachers Only* How many years of experience do you have teaching? (fill in the blank question)

13. *Teachers Only* How many years of experience do you have teaching in PFA-E? (fill in the blank question)