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## Student Well-Being in Middle Schools: The Impact of Mental Health on Young Adolescents

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***Student Well-Being in Middle Schools: The Impact of Mental Health on Young Adolescents***

An Honor Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
*Middle Grades Education.*

By

*Tamaya Varnedoe*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Elizabeth Barrow*

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a crucial period for emotional and physical development. It is important to acknowledge the physical and emotional changes to an individual's mental well-being as it can affect their social and emotional habits. The purpose of this study is to identify the role mental health plays in the academic success of young adolescents by exploring Social & Emotional Learning (SEL) programs within middle schools. Through this research, the research seeks to determine the best practices teachers and counselors recommend to adequately support middle school students.

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## Introduction

I have been studying the topic of mental health in young adolescents. Through my research, I hope to bring more awareness to students' mental health as a pathway to make academic achievement and excellence attainable. Furthermore, I want to establish and define what well-being is among middle school students. According to Rimpela (2002), "indicators of well-being are divided into four categories: school conditions (having), social relationships (loving), means for self-fulfillment (being) and health status" (p.79). Young adolescents experience some of the most pivotal changes among any other age group during their lifespan. These changes bolster physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development and growth. Children during this time are usually beginning to experience a variety of emotions, both positive and negative that could heavily impact their academic performance. This could be related to their social life as they navigate cliques and peer relationships or more emotional as they begin to explore and question who they are. Likewise, the bodily changes they undergo are likely to make them feel awkward and uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, there is a stigma surrounding mental health in our society that makes it harder for people to express their mental health concerns and issues openly. According to Bulanda et al. (2004), "mental illness stigma could prevent adolescents from seeking help for mental and emotional stress, and it could leave youths even more isolated as they experience rejection from peers" (p.73). There is an obvious need to address the mental state of our youth as indicated in current studies and research. A study was conducted that states, "approximately 20 percent of youths suffer from a mental disorder that produces at least mild functional impairment" (Bulanda et al, 2014, p.73). If

this is true, what measures we are taking to ensure that we are prioritizing the mental health of young adolescents and setting them on the path for academic achievement? The purpose of this research is to identify the role mental health plays in the academic success of young adolescents by seeing how teachers and counselors define student well-being. Through this research, we should be able to determine the best practices that teachers and counselors recommend to efficiently support middle school students' wellbeing. Furthermore, this research will determine practical ways that teachers can combat mental health crises that arise in the classroom.

### **Research Questions**

This study consists of three focal research questions. The main question that this study focuses on is "How do middle school teachers describe well-being among middle school students?" Follow up questions to be addressed are: "What best practices do teachers and counselors recommend when working with middle school students and supporting their well-being?" and "What should teachers do when they encounter a mental health crisis with a student in school?" Ultimately, the goal for this study is to receive insight into how teachers and counselors view student well-being and how they can best support the total wellbeing of young adolescents.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Overview of Mental Health**

Mental health concerns among students are more common than most people might think. Humphrey (2018) discusses the intersection between education and mental health which is relevant to this research project. In the article, mental health is a major

issue for young adolescents as there is a need for intervention but also a lack of resources. Although set in the United Kingdom this article is relevant because it addresses the mental health crisis impacting our youth. I believe that this article functions as an opening into what mental health is and how it affects young adolescents. In Bulanda et al (2014), they argue that youths in middle school experience a considerable amount of change as they are trying to navigate friends, family, and puberty. During this time, mental health is likely to develop adding pressure to an already tense period in young adolescents' lives. Bulanda et al (2014) talks about an approach to fixing the issue through a youth led approach whereas the previous article does not really explain how to combat this issue of mental health problems in young adolescents but rather brings awareness to the topic in general.

Similarly, to the other articles, O'Connor et al. (2017) looks at the long-term implications that positive mental health exposure could have on young adolescents during their transitional period into adulthood. This article shares a likeness to Humphrey (2018) as this study is held in Australia demonstrating that mental health is a global phenomenon. Strahan and Poteat (2020) asks middle level students about their views on social-emotional learning while also addressing the impact that this type of learning has on students' academic progress. This article coincides with the theme of mental health. Researchers on this study were very careful about considering the change that young adolescents experience when conducting this study. Overall, it was concluded that the mental health or emotional wellbeing of students does contribute to their development. More importantly, it heavily impacts their academic growth and mindset. Finally, Rimpela and Konu (2002) delve in the idea of well-being, a topic that looks at students as

a whole, but is inclusive of multiple aspects like school conditions, social relationships, means for self-fulfillment and health status. All of these factors contribute to the mental health of a student and more importantly, their overall wellbeing.

### **Special Social-Emotional Programs**

This group of articles is significant as they are grouped based on their very specific programs being linked to social-emotional learning for young adolescents. These articles had some type of special circumstance or focus on addition to discussing mental health issues in middle school students. Watson and Mowling (2020) delve into the correlation between mental health and physical education. Physical health can be a great measurement of one's mental health. In this study, physical educators are given techniques to effectively help students who present mental health concerns. Furthermore, this article is special as it showcases an opportunity to see students in a different setting other than the traditional classroom as student behavior and socialization could drastically change.

Although it contrasts the other articles, it is important to my research as it demonstrates the need for social-emotional learning in all content areas. Students could behave differently depending on the class as physical education could be a trigger for some students who detest gym or a motivator for those who enjoy it. McBride et al. (2016) comments on the effectiveness of implementing a social-emotional program to combat academic disinterest and to prevent disciplinary incidents. The study was primarily conducted through a service-learning program that encouraged students to engage in their academics. The particular circumstances qualify this article for this theme

as it takes a service-learning approach to combat the negative behavior occurring in the school.

All of these articles in this section have an overarching theme of mental health but differ in their approaches or focuses. Reicher and Matischek-Jauk (2017) fits into this theme because of its specific focus of preventing depression in young adolescents.

Depression is a very common, well-known mental illness that many people experience over their lifetime, including young individuals. In fact, adolescence is the primetime for depressive-like symptoms to appear and occur. The social emotional learning program was found to decrease the depression of young people as well as reduce bullying, foster socialization, positive emotional competency, and improve the classroom environment overall.

Lemberger et al. (2018) explores how evidence-based intervention influences social-emotional learning as a way to foster academic growth through mediators. This article aligns with this theme as mediators were utilized to evaluate the role SEL programs played in academic growth. As stated, prior, the specificity of this program approach warrants this article in this grouping. It appears that the use of school counselors or mediators did indeed positively influence the school culture and academic growth of this school population. The final article of this group is “Students’ emotional and cognitive engagement as the determinants of well-being and achievement in school” (Pietarinen et al, 2014). This article discusses the relationship between emotional and cognitive exposure as a determination of well-being and achievement at school.

Pietarinen et al. (2014) considers emotional health which is often linked to mental health



as well as academic achievement and how these factors might correlate or impact one another.

### **The Role of Ethnicity on Mental Health**

The theme of this grouping is the relevance of ethnicity to mental health in young adolescents. I noticed that these articles acknowledged the ethnic makeup of the school populations that these studies focused on. Albright et al. (2019) talks about the need for social-emotional education as research has shown that what student's feel, think, and believe heavily impacts them. In particular, career success, college readiness, mental health, and relationships. Since this research was done on outlier schools, these schools all have similar demographics compared to other peer schools. This article specifically mentions that a portion of the population across these schools was minority groups like African Americans, Hispanics, etc. These students were actually able to benefit from this program as they are often marginalized compared to the majority culture.

Barry and Price (2018) analyze the journey of one middle school as they install a social and emotional learning initiative into the curriculum. Schools across the country are becoming aware of the necessity for mental health education in some capacity. The population of the target school is diverse as 55% of students are white, 35% are Hispanic and 8% are African American leaving 2% for other ethnicities. Ethnicity can play a major role in how mental health is approached and discussed. In the end, the SEL program proved to be beneficial to this target school, especially the minority students.

Knight et al. (2019) functions as an outlet to explain the integration of social-emotional programs into school curriculum. This particular study mentions upstream

programs which operate as primary prevention. Through these programs, students gain life skills necessary to navigate relationships and situations that could be troublesome. For this study, 64 students from an urban private school were chosen to participate in the program. The majority of participants were white representing 72.6 percent of the population. The remaining 27.4% were African American, Asian, and Hispanic students. Although the SEL program was helpful in increasing students' emotional intelligence and communication skills, the school lacked diversity as an incredible amount of the sample group was white. This could be a problem as I question if other schools present the same statistics.

Wallender et al. (2020) mentions information about fostering an inclusive classroom. Social-emotional learning is one way to facilitate that inclusivity. This study focused on getting students to cultivate self-regulation, self-awareness, and problem-solving skills in an educational context. How students experience these skills could differ for everyone depending upon a factor like ethnicity. Regardless, social-emotional education is needed and is quite beneficial for middle school students.

This literature is highly important to the education field as social-emotional learning is becoming more prominent. Schools are beginning to realize the value of mental health education and awareness. Research has shown that students are more likely to do well academically when their mental and emotional health is considered. Investing in student well-being will promote overall better health and higher academic achievement in school. This literature will help teachers to better teach their students as they will understand the student as a whole. Also, mental health research can help to catch mental

health issues when they first appear, possibly functioning as a prevention to mental health problems that could worsen as children mature.

Furthermore, from this literature teachers will be better equipped to handle mental issues that arise in the classroom. For example, Watson and Mowling (2020) talks about the connection between mental health and physical health in relation to physical education classes. Another tackles the idea of mental health through a service-program. Some of the articles (Humphrey, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2017) are not from the perspective of American schools but rather they are from around the world displaying the need for mental health education in schools across the globe.

One of the major weaknesses of the literature is that the actual studies conducted might be somewhat biased or limited. For example, Humphrey (2018) is based in the United Kingdom which could impact how mental health is approached as culture and location could contribute to a difference in opinion or perspective. Additionally, some of the sample groups in this research are too small (Wallender et al., 2020). For instance, Wallender et al. (2020) conducted their study at one school which creates a very limited and biased sample population. Therefore, their research only represents one small, isolated population and therefore these programs are not adaptable to other school contexts.

Also, in-depth research of how ethnicity or race impacts how students react to SEL programs is limited and/or completely missing. Similarly, none of the research included in this literature review addressed the role socio-economic status or gender plays

in how middle school students react to social-emotional learning or if physical location is also a contributor to the effectiveness of an SEL program.

This research study hopes to build off of the previous literature to determine how teachers and counselors define student well-being and how their interaction with young adolescents has cultivated what student well-being means to them. Furthermore, this research hopes to determine how their college education prepared or did not prepare them to deal with health crises that may arise in the classroom. Finally, this research will discuss best practices according to these participants to ensure that the whole child is being nurtured and cared for within the school environment.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

To answer the research questions, this qualitative study included various stages. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Qualitative research entails discussion with the participants to get a more in-depth and personal account of one’s experience in relation to the research topic. “What all qualitative action research studies have in common is that they make use of only qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and analysis of documents or artifacts” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, 53). This qualitative study included interviews and analysis of the interview transcriptions. These interviews were semi-structured as the interviewer provided a list of questions to address how middle school teachers and counselors

describe well-being, best practices for promoting student wellbeing, and suggestions for teachers when encountering a mental crisis in the classroom (see appendix). Furthermore, participants were asked to answer the questions provided but if other questions arose during the facilitation of the interview, then these answers were also included as data. This study took place in Southeast rural Georgia. The study was approved by the institutional IRB and participants were asked to sign a virtual consent form. Participants were recruited through emails sent out to the principals of all of the middle schools in the area. The participants sought out for this study were specifically middle grade teachers and counselors. The grade band for this study was teachers and counselors who worked with students between grades sixth and eighth.

### **Data Collection**

The interview questions were created by the researcher to satiate the target of the research questions. The interviewer read each question aloud and gave the participants time to answer to the best of their ability. It was necessary to discuss with these participants through a semi-structured interview their thoughts and feelings regarding this intriguing matter. All interviews were held on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform and lasted no more than thirty minutes. During the interviews, the participants answered the questions prepared prior to data collection.

Participants shared their thoughts on student well-being and what that means to them as well as their perception of mental health through the lens of an educator. Other questions about their preparedness through their college education and support from their school were included as well to gauge their opinion on the importance of mental health

education and advocacy. Participants were asked questions such as “How do you define student well-being?” and “What has your experience with student well-being been like?” At the end of the interview, participants were able to share anything else that they did not get to mention based on the questions read providing their final thoughts and feelings.

## **Participants**

For this qualitative study, I interviewed two individuals with both teaching and counseling experience as well as two classroom teachers, all with various levels of experience with young adolescents. Their expertise ranges from first year counselors to veteran teachers with twenty years of commitment to the education field. These participants were established through email correspondences and promotion of the study by word of mouth.

Participants who took part in this interview (see Table 1) are Francesca Franks, Sarah Sanders, Bella Beckham, and Courtney Chester (pseudonyms for participants and schools). Both Sarah Sanders and Bella Beckham teach at Major Middle School. Sarah Sanders became a teacher non-traditionally which might alter her perspective and opinion as she did not go through a traditional teacher preparation program but has over a decade of experience with young adolescents in the classroom. Bella Beckham started off as a teacher and then shifted to school counseling after about eight years in the classroom. Courtney Chester teaches at Southside Middle School. Ms. Chester has been in the education field for a total of fifteen years. She was a third-grade teacher for nine years and kindergarten teacher for five years. This is her first year as a school counselor. Francesca Franks does not currently teach at a school, but she does have over twenty

years of experience as a classroom teacher and school counselor for both middle and high school students.

**Table 1:** Participants

Teacher	School	Counselor or Teacher	Experience
Francesca Franks	Retired	Both	20+ years
Sarah Sanders	Major Middle School	Teacher	10+ years
Bella Beckham	Major Middle School	Counselor	8 years
Courtney Chester	Southside Middle School	Both	13 years

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of this qualitative study was to see how teachers and counselors alike view the concept of wellbeing as it pertains to young adolescents. Furthermore, this study functioned as a means to see how teachers and counselors address mental health concerns that arise at school and if they feel equipped and supported to tackle such issues.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and filler words such as um, yea, eh were removed as they had no impact on how the data is conveyed. To analyze this data, a codebook was created. I took an inductive approach and analyzed the transcriptions provided from the interviews to see which words were the most prominent and effective for the purpose of this study.

This approach allows me to look at the data that I collected and build my codebook from this existing data. This codebook allowed me to flush out any commonalities among the data. Table 2 showcases the recurring words found in the

transcripts that helped to answer my research questions. The words displayed in Table 2 were the most prominent among the interviews. These function as my guide to answering the research questions for this project.

**Table 2:** Codebook

Word	Number of Appearances in Transcriptions	Codename
Student Well-being	18	SWB
Mental health	37	MH
Whole child	2	WC
Teacher	31	T

### Findings

This research study was crafted to gain the perspective of teachers and counselors through interviews on their definition of student well-being as well as if they felt prepared and supported to address mental health crises at their school. Therefore, my goal was to address three research questions drafted at the beginning of this study. The questions are: “How do middle school teachers describe well-being among middle school students?” “What best practices do teachers and counselors recommend when working with middle school students and supporting their well-being” and “What should teachers do when they encounter a mental health crisis in the classroom?”

Most of the participants had similar comments regarding the questions asked. Many felt like their college education did not completely prepare them for the mental health aspect of student well-being. Furthermore, the majority said that they saw a shift or



difference in how mental health education is addressed after the novel Coronavirus Pandemic and every one of the participants said they felt supported by administrators when mental health crises arose. Also, each participant had a similar response for their definition of student well-being. Lastly, when asked about best practices or how they support students emotionally and mentally; all of the participants mentioned the importance of fostering positive relationships and building rapport with students.

### **Defining Student Well-being (SWB)**

Participants were first asked to define student well-being, in their opinion. A word that came up through most of the interviews was “whole child” or at the very least the way they described student well-being indicated that they were talking about the whole child and what that looks like. Ms. Francesca Franks described student well-being as, “Body, mind, and spirit. Feeling good, able to do their schoolwork, have good friendships, have good relationships all around with parents, peers, teachers. So good health. Good mindset” (February 14th, 2022). Then when asked about her experience with student well-being, she stated,

*oh wow, it's run the gamut, I have dealt with kids that are doing well and I have dealt with kids who have been considering suicide. So, it runs the gamut from those that are doing well to those that are not doing so well. (February 14th, 2022).*

Mrs. Sanders expressed that she defines student well-being as

*just knowing how they are not just looking at them physically but how they think and feel about themselves if they have positive attitudes. If I see that they are upbeat, not depressed, that they are just normal. Well, no such thing is normal but they're just regular kids, not having a whole lot of things to worry about, or things like that. So, one that just seems to be carefree (February 21st, 2022).*

When asked about her own experience with student well-being she stated,

*“...I watch their actions, their expressions, all of those things to kind of get a feel for how I think they’re doing, and I feel like I can pick up on if there’s something different going on with them (February 21st, 2022).”*

Then, during the interview with Ms. Beckham when asked about student well-being, she said, “It’s being okay in all of the areas, mental health, physical health, emotional wellbeing, all the areas” (March 3rd, 2022). Then she explained that her experience with students’ well-being had been mixed as she said, “some students are more successful than others. I can see that some students struggle a lot more than others and sometimes it’s more obvious” (March 3rd, 2022). Her own experience with student well-being

*I don’t even know if Coronavirus has been the factor but the longer, I spend as a counselor, the more important mental health and wellbeing, becomes a priority and I’m feeling as a resource or referring to doctors or medical professionals that has become a lot more common, I think then it used to be (March 3rd, 2022).*

Finally, Ms. Chester described student well-being as

*Student well-being is looking at the whole child, both their academics, their social behavior, all of these modalities together and just trying to make sure that what they go through on a daily basis is addressed (March 8th, 2022).*

When asked about her own experiences with student well-being, she explained,

*I think no matter what role you play, be a teacher, counselor, custodian who knows anyone in the student body throughout the schools. I think the biggest role that we play is relationships trying to build and maintain relationships with students (March 8th, 2022).*

Ms. Chester was the only participant to use the word whole child when asked to define student well-being. However, all of the participants indicated that student well-being included an aspect of caring for and addressing the needs of students physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially.

### **Preparedness in the Classroom**

Teachers are asked to do way more than what their titles might indicate. Often, teachers are functioning as counselors to students since they spend so much time with them. This might lead to the conclusion that teachers are fully equipped and educated to handle the mental health crises that appear in the classroom. However, three of the four participants in this study unanimously felt that their college education did not prepare them to discuss, teach, or deal with mental health regarding young adolescents nor did it prepare them to deal with mental health crises that might arise in the classroom. For instance, Ms. Chester stated,

*Truthfully, I can't quite say that we had a lot of courses that really focused a lot on student well-being. Obviously, in the counseling program you know we think about the different modalities of students, but I also believe that what we are taught in classes or college courses that it's a lot different than when you truly get into the field itself (March 8th, 2022).*

On the contrary, Ms. Franks felt like,

*Undergraduate, I was actually a math major and only later that I decided I was going back to be a teacher and I went to Jefferson Saints University (pseudonym for university) for post-bachelor classes and so I don't remember during that time frame addressing student well-being. But of course, we are talking a long time ago. You know, we're talking mid 80's here. I don't remember that, but for some reason graduate school via school counselor I do feel like they were equipping us to deal with student's well-being (February 14th, 2022).*

So, from the perspective of a teacher she felt less prepared especially during the decade in which she attended school. However, the additional education and her degree in counseling definitely equipped her. Mrs. Sanders said,

*Well, I am going to say, and I say this for two reasons: I am not a traditional teacher or education student. Now my B.S. degree is actually in business administration, so I went back after working into business for a few years and I got certified. Since then, I have gotten my masters and my specialists and my leadership as an add-on certificate in education but even with all of that training since my B.S., I do not feel like I feel now. They need to have a class specifically to teach new teachers how to deal with things like social emotional learning... (February 21st, 2022).*

Ms. Beckham felt similarly to Mrs. Sanders and Ms. Franks as she said,

*I would say that my undergrad did not really prepare me at all, I graduated in 2001, it really wasn't something that we talked about back then but I was also studying to be a teacher and why we didn't talk about what it was, but it's probably changed from that point (March 3rd, 2022).*

However, she did say that,

*When I was learning to be a counselor, we talked about different counseling strategies and techniques and theories and that as far as medical health or medication or things like that I don't have a lot of experience firsthand being the person that kind of delegates that information or passes that information along but I think we have more of a team focused approach now then we used to that we do need to have mental health and physical health and academic pieces all in check for students to be successful (March 3rd, 2022).*

Overall, the general response was that these teachers felt like their undergraduate did not prepare them for the mental health crises that might arise in their classrooms.

Even additional schooling from a master's degree or specialists' degree did not seem to suffice as an efficient means for teacher preparedness. However, the counselors

interviewed from this study seemed to be more prepared and educated on mental health.

Although, Ms. Beckham and Ms. Franks both expressed that because of the time period that they received their degree that mental health education was not as prominent or

discussed much. This showcases how the idea of mental health education has evolved

over the years, although there is still more work to be done.

### **Best Practices for Teachers & Counselors**

The next portion of this study focused on identifying what best practices are in the eyes of teachers and counselors to address the potential mental health crises that arise in the classroom. These interviews presented the perspective of the teachers and counselors who see these students day in and out. Furthermore, it brings into question how these

crises are being addressed and what can be done to improve how we engage with young adolescents emotionally and socially. Ms. Franks commented that:

*One of the concerns that I have is: we as school counselors are taught short term counseling and the kids nowadays they're having, like really deep issues and I see more students with actual serious mental health diagnosis, until we had started to partner with one of the local counseling centers but there were only like two counselors for the whole entire school system and so I would like to see, in the state of Georgia, not just the state of Georgia, but nationally (February 14th, 2022).*

Then she continues to say,

*I would like to see more mental health clinicians in the school system, and I know there's a lot of legality and all of this other stuff, but I think it's very much needed because in middle school and high school you start to see the issues come to the forefront more and more kids are either having suicide ideations or actually attempting (February 14th, 2022).*

Unfortunately, Ms. Franks states,

*I've encountered students that have attempted more than once and they're in and out of mental health facilities. And so, when they're coming back, I feel like they need more than what the counselors can always offer them because we aren't clinically trained. Even though we can deal with some things, I do feel like the mental health clinicians need to be in the school setting (February 14th, 2022).*

From the perspective of Ms. Franks, she feels as if the counselors only can do so much, that well educated and trained clinicians need to be within the school walls as the school counselors are ill-equipped to handle all of the needs of the student's population themselves. This is even more prevalent as Coronavirus was shown to negatively affect the social and emotional health of children everywhere.

When asked about resources available to her as both a school counselor and teacher, Ms. Franks said,

*The school counselor was available, you referred students to the counselor and as a counselor, always a resource for the teachers as well as for the students and the administration, and we had ongoing staff development related to student's well-being especially in the past. A few years here since students' well-being has been*

*declining because of life circumstances and we had people from the outside, clinicians come in and train us and we also were able to refer students out and we've worked with a community a lot of times (February 14th, 2022).*

In Ms. Franks' opinion, she believes that as the times have changed that mental health clinicians are a necessary part of ensuring student-wellbeing and promoting positive social and emotional health. The school counselors are not equipped enough to address all social and emotional needs on their own. Therefore, it is necessary to put a professional, mental health clinician in every school as a resource.

Ms. Beckham says that:

*The counselors across the country all gather once a month for a PLC. We will have speakers from different agencies in the community come and talk to us about what their services or resources are we have time to share strategies and different experiences we've had with the other counselors across the county so I think we get to see it's different than it would be as a teacher but we do get to have community that works together to share experiences with (March 3rd, 2022).*

Finally, she said that,

*Being a counselor is definitely different from being a teacher. I don't have hard data and test scores necessarily that are directly connected to what we do but the success of students and overall success I mean that is what drives us (March 3rd, 2022).*

Ideally, Ms. Beckham's training provided her with the platform to share with other strategies and ways of connecting with students that will ensure they are being cared for emotionally and socially. Through her experience as a counselor, she is able to engage with students on a day-to-day basis regarding their emotional and social well-being.

### **Quotes to Live by**

Throughout the interviews, there were statements made by some of the participants that truly stuck out and personified the whole point of this study. Mrs.

Sanders said towards the end of her interview that “you learn to love on them a little bit more, that's what this pandemic has taught me” and “Now my motto is, I try to treat all of my students like I would want someone to treat my child” (February 21st, 2022).

Furthermore, she says,

*You have to love what you do. You really have to care about the students. The whole child. Not just how they're going to perform on a test because once a student knows that you care, they're going to work hard for you. You can reach them academically but not until you reach them emotionally (February 21st, 2022).*

The motivation behind this research is ultimately seeing how we can intervene where and when there are these social and emotional gaps. Teachers have such a hard job yet a rewarding one. We are privileged to be able to interact with these kids every day to teach them not only academically but also how to address and manage their emotions and socialize with each other. This is what social emotional learning is all about as we teach these students how to be kind, responsible human beings.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to see how teachers and counselors define student well-being as well as receive insight into how they feel their college education prepared them for the potential mental health crises that may arise in the classroom. Finally, I wanted to know how they currently handle these predicaments. It was determined that both teachers and counselors feel like building positive student relationships and cultivating rapport with their students will allow safe spaces for mental health education or social-emotional learning to occur.

From the literature that I previously reviewed, I hypothesized that teachers would feel ill-equipped to support students mentally especially since there is still a stigma on

mental health education and awareness. Ms. Franks, for instance, did not feel like her undergraduate program prepared her to address mental health. Granted, she attended school during the 80's. However, Ms. Beckham also felt like her undergraduate program did not fully prepare her either and she attended school almost twenty years later. This shows that perhaps, teacher preparation courses are not giving teachers the tools and skills they need to combat such issues before entering the classroom.

I also assumed that the participants I talked to would define student well-being as looking at the whole child or ensuring that all needs of that child are being met. Each participant gave a variation similar to this. Likewise, I expected that the school counselors would have felt more prepared to address student well-being as that would have directly been a part of their college education. The counselors interviewed were asked about external forms of professional training and development which flows into the category of social-emotional learning and its impact and occurrence in schools as mentioned in Albright et al. (2019) which states, “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life [...]. It includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others (36-37).”

Besides bringing awareness to mental health and student well-being; there are many benefits to this research for young adolescents. Each participant mentioned the importance of formulating healthy student-teacher relationships and how this greatly contributes to student well-being. Pietarinen et al. (2014) states:

Students whose relationships with teachers are characterized by greater closeness and less conflict have, for example, been shown to exhibit lower levels of aggression and other conduct problems, to be better accepted by their peers and to achieve at higher levels (pg. 41).



Therefore, one could infer that “emotional engagement in teacher–student relationships has also been found to have significant implications for students’ future academic achievement and social and behavioral outcomes” (Pietarinen et al., 2014, 41).

Ultimately, an emotionally healthy relationship between teacher and students leads to social acceptance from peers, higher levels of academic performance, and lower levels of aggression.

From this research, participants stated that they were addressing mental health in a number of ways or made suggestions about how to further combat mental health crises. For example, Ms. Franks made it clear that she believes every school should have a mental health clinician available to help aid this issue. Over the course of her career, she has seen severe cases that require the aid of a professional. She felt as though school systems need that added support to truly address and meet the needs of all students. A recurring theme was having positive relationships with students as making that emotional connection will lead to the academic success that students should strive for.

Finally, Ms. Beckham mentioned how she enjoyed and benefited from the training and community group setting provided through her county that gave her many of the strategies and materials she uses to do her job and implement social emotional learning. According to Knight et al. (2019) regarding a social emotional program, “Students who participated in the program during both school years were shown to have increased their social and emotional competency skills, became more aware of their own emotions, and used more positive strategies when facing adverse situations (pg. 218).” In the end, the goal is very simple. To create a space within school walls where students are

able to mature socially and emotionally with support from the teachers and counselors who serve them and excel academically.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of this study was the small sample population (n=4) interviewed. Small sample sizes mean there is a limitation on the data that can be analyzed as the potential opinions, thoughts, and feelings of more participants could have changed the findings of this research. The input of these four individuals does not define the experience of all teachers and counselors who interact with young adolescents on a daily basis. It would have been better to include the input of more participants on such a serious and pertinent study; however, time constraints limited the recruitment period for this project. Furthermore, location also contributed to the limitations of this study as the majority of the participants reside in the same county and district. Perhaps, broadening the participants pool to outside counties, districts, and states would have yielded compelling and differing results.

### **Future Research**

The direction of this research could expand in a number of ways. The research could be continued with a larger pool of participants from varying counties, districts, and regions. Although this specific study focused on young adolescents or middle school students, mental health does not only pertain to these aged students. Therefore, this research could move in the direction of studying the student wellbeing of high school students and potentially elementary students from the perspective of the teachers and counselors that serve them.

Teachers and counselors probably have the closest relationship with said students but there is still space to invite other opinions and perspectives from administrators, and teachers of non-traditional subjects like art, music, and physical education. Their insight could bring an entirely new perspective and continue to destigmatize mental health as we push the conversation forward. Also, all of my participants were female. I believe having individuals of the opposite sex could be insightful especially since men make up a much lower percentage of the teacher population.

Lastly, part of my literature review described the role of ethnicity on mental health. This would be an interesting factor for future research as access to mental health education and resources has been found to vary depending on ethnicity and location (Wallender et al., 2020) as well as how different ethnic groups might interpret the importance of mental health education could be incredibly interesting.

### **Conclusion**

Mental health is an essential component of teaching and caring for the whole child. The changes those young adolescents experience physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially only deepen that truth especially in a world trying to readjust after the novel Coronavirus. This leaves many teachers, administrators, and counselors wondering what the next step is to serving students who have undergone such a life-altering event.

With the stigma of mental health still floating in the shadows, this study functions as a way to bring more awareness to this topic in regard to the education system and to measure the comfortability of middle school teachers when addressing mental health crises and education. If we are to truly care for young adolescents then we must address

the whole child, mental health included as the lack of attention for this aspect could prove detrimental to the success and development of middle school students. Ultimately, if we want to set our students up to be successful in all facets of life, then we need to address their mental health. We cannot say that we truly care for students if we ignore or minimize such a crucial aspect of who they are and who they can become.

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## Appendix

### Teacher interview questions

1. How do you define student well-being?
2. What has your experience with student well-being been like?
3. Did your college education prepare you to combat mental health issues that arise in the classroom?
4. What resources does your school supply you with to combat such issues?
5. How has mental health awareness and education changed over the course of your teaching career?
6. Do you feel supported by faculty and staff to discuss or address mental health in the classroom? Why or why not?
7. What type of professional development or training is being administered to teachers to expand your mental health knowledge?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

### Counselor interview questions

1. How do you define student well-being?
2. What has your experience with student well-being been like?
3. How did your college education prepare you to combat mental health issues that arise in the classroom?

4. In what ways do the administration at your school respond efficiently to mental health crises?
5. Do you feel supported by faculty and staff to engage with students regarding mental health?
6. Do you think mental health education and advocacy is prominent in Bulloch county schools?
7. Do the teachers that you interact with integrate the resources or education that you provide? If so, what forms of education are you providing to assist teachers?
8. How could your school improve upon their delivery of mental health education?
9. What external professional training or development is being used to make mental health awareness and education more known?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?



