

**Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social/Emotional Development of Children and
Adolescents**

Jeremy Sever

School Of Education, University of Washington, Tacoma

TEDUC 599 B

Dr. Weinstein

June, 2025

Abstract

This research explores the social/emotional and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown and remote schooling policies on children and adolescents. Research from around the world regarding students from preschool to high school was examined. Four themes were identified: general impacts of the pandemic on all students, differences in the impacts based on the age of the students, patterns pertaining to socioeconomic status, and the ramifications for students with disabilities. The paper goes on to examine how practices at a specific action site (a Title 1 school in Western Washington) could be aligned with recommendations made in the research, and then explores implications for future research and transformed practice in the schools.

Keywords: social emotional development, COVID-19 pandemic, remote schooling, preschool through high school, demographics

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social/Emotional Development of Children and Adolescents

This paper is an examination of the research on the social/emotional and mental health impacts of the switch to remote schooling and the school absenteeism that resulted from the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on school-age children. Part of this paper will analyze differences and similarities in the effects of the lockdowns, based on the variety of national and regional lockdown policies, as well as differences based on demographics. It will also discuss suggested strategies and interventions in the post-COVID era. Social/emotional development in children refers to developing an understanding of themselves, their feelings, and their interactions with others. It affects their ability to form and sustain relationships; experience, manage, and express emotions; and engage with their surroundings (Help Me Grow MN, n.d.).

COVID-19

In December 2019, patients in China began to develop flu-like symptoms, which public health officials in that country attributed to a novel coronavirus in January 2020. Soon, the virus began to be referred to as COVID-19 (an abbreviated version of “Coronavirus Disease 2019”). The virus quickly spread around the world, and on March 11, 2020, after more than 118,000 cases and 4291 deaths in 114 countries, COVID-19 (or COVID for short) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As a result, countries around the world imposed a variety of travel restrictions, social distancing measures, lockdowns, and remote/online schooling policies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Schools were suspended in 190 countries, affecting more than 1.6 billion students worldwide (Mazrekaj & De Witte,

2024). Lockdown and school closure policies varied by region, but worldwide, schools were closed for an average of 79 instructional days. In general, schools in lower-middle-income countries were closed for longer periods (115 days on average) than in high-income countries (53 days on average) (Golberstein et al., 2020, as cited in Almeida et al., 2022). This paper will examine the impacts that these various school policies had on the social-emotional development of children.

Importance of this Topic

As briefly described above, COVID-19 had a variety of significant worldwide impacts, and the myriad ramifications are beyond the scope of this paper. I chose to focus on the social-emotional development of children because of the impacts I have personally seen in my family, my teaching practice, and my community. As a practicing special education teacher and a parent of two teenagers who were in school during the lockdown (currently aged 15 and 18), I feel that I am personally witnessing struggles with social-emotional development in the students in my teaching practice, as well as my own children and their friends. The students in the region where I live participated in remote or hybrid schooling from March 2020 to June 2021 (Olympia School District, 2023). I took a 3-month leave of absence from work at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year to stay home with my children.

My students were all part of the generation that was affected by the lockdown. In my opinion, current students were affected by social/emotional delays as a result of the isolation imposed by the lockdown, and I feel that their interactions at school, at home, and in all social situations continue to be affected. I think that my students, and my children, could directly benefit from my understanding of this issue and how it affects them, and from any

social/emotional supports that may be determined to be beneficial as a result of the research. I was not a teacher pre-pandemic, but many of my colleagues report that student behaviors, social interactions, and emotions are different now than they were before the lockdown period. Due to my personal experiences as a teacher and parent, I want to more fully understand this issue to implement supports in my family and teaching practice and assist other parents and teachers to do the same.

I believe that the ramifications of this issue are felt not just by the students themselves, but by their families, friends, and communities as a whole. I feel that families were affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to: lost social connections; trauma derived from personal illness, family illnesses, and deaths; and internal family strife due to the stress of the lockdown policies combined with the extra time spent together in close quarters. I believe that the remote learning policies that accompanied the lockdowns affected the academic growth and social-emotional development of students worldwide, due to the challenges of remote learning and the absenteeism of certain students resulting from a lack of school participation. Schools must prepare for the possibility of a future pandemic, especially in a time when world health systems are weakening, due in part to a recent decrease in support from the United States under the Trump administration, on which global health systems are heavily reliant (Singer, 2025).

Purpose and Focal Questions

While I feel that both academic and social/emotional growth were impacted, the purpose of this paper is to examine the specifics of how the lockdown affected the social/emotional development of students, and to use an understanding of these effects to

determine appropriate current and future supports for the impacted students. I hope to gain an understanding of the specific effects that the lockdown policies had on students overall, as well as how these effects may have varied based on students' backgrounds and circumstances during the pandemic. I would like to use this knowledge to better serve the students in my own teaching practice, and to understand what future interventions and policies could be beneficial to *all* students who lived through the pandemic. In this paper, I will attempt to answer the following focal questions:

- According to the research, what were the impacts of the lockdown policies imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social/emotional development of children and adolescents?
- Does the research indicate that variations in lockdown policies had impacts on the social/emotional development of students?
- Does the research indicate any differences and/or similarities in the impacts on social/emotional development based on demographics?

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research on the social/emotional and mental health effects of school absenteeism and the switch to remote schooling that resulted from these lockdowns. The lockdown and school closures that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the lives of school-age children all over the world. During the pandemic, a variety of things occurred: students stayed home and participated in remote schooling, which cut off direct access to teachers and hands-on, collaborative learning; many parents stayed home from work or worked remotely; most social

activities ceased; masks were worn and social-distancing policies were enacted in public places; and there were few opportunities for extracurricular activities. The review will analyze the specifics of the social/emotional effects of the lockdown and the differences and similarities based on student demographics that are documented in research drawn from studies from around the world.

In this literature review, I will examine four themes that appear in the research on this topic. I will begin with a general assessment of the impacts of COVID on the social-emotional development and mental health of children and adolescents. Next, I will examine comparisons of the impacts on different age groups. Third, I will explore the patterns that arise pertaining to socioeconomic status. Finally, I will explore the ramifications of the COVID lockdown for students with disabilities.

General Assessment of COVID Impacts

This section will describe some of the general trends found in the research about the social/emotional impacts of the COVID lockdown policies around the world. It will include findings in the research about factors related to policy and a brief discussion of social/emotional learning (SEL) interventions implemented during and after the pandemic. Interventions will be discussed further in a later section of this paper.

The research examined overwhelmingly indicates that the socio-emotional development and mental health of school-age children were affected by the policies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In their literature review analyzing 96 sources, Lehmann et al. (2021) examined parent and student surveys representing nearly 43,000 students (aged 6-13) from 9 countries on 3 continents (Europe, North America, and Asia), documenting increased emotional

problems, hyperactivity, and conduct problems on the return to in-person schooling. They also found that parental depression was an indicator of children's emotional symptoms, and that studies with larger sample sizes showed more significant effects. Parent surveys in Pakistan had similar findings, with 100% of the 120 primary school parents participating in a quantitative survey agreeing that social distancing significantly affected communication, social learning, and academics (Ali et al., 2024). A survey of K-12 teachers in the Midwestern United States by Brockmeier et al. (2024) found that during the lockdown, students seemed to experience increased loneliness and depression, lower quality friendships, motivational struggles, lack of a sense of school community, and increased absenteeism.

In addition to surveys, other types of research showed similar findings. Piryatinskya and Ewaldb (2024) conducted a case study of 2 students in Massachusetts, one a 12-year-male and the other a 13-year-old female at the onset of the lockdown, with data taken 3 years later. In their study, they found that, after the period of remote learning, the students had new or increased challenges with organizational skills, maintaining attention, anxiety, and depression. In Israel, Ebert et al. (2022) examined medical records for 380 children and adolescents who underwent psychiatric evaluations, comparing the referrals of a group from 14 months prior to the lockdown to those of a group from during the lockdown and finding a significant difference in the characteristics of the referrals. The researchers claim that this indicates the likelihood that during the lockdown, many children developed educational, social, emotional and behavioral gaps, as well as lost coping skills for everyday problems. Santibanez and Guarino (2021) looked at four years' worth of administrative panel data to approximate the impact of the pandemic by analyzing the effects of absenteeism and finding that social-emotional development was

impacted. While this study did not examine data from the pandemic years, the researchers claim that the data is relevant, due to the fact that a significant number of students did not fully participate in remote learning opportunities. They further suggest that the students who participated less were more highly impacted by the lockdown period than other students.

All studies examined pointed toward a general trend toward decreased in-person social interactions during COVID being connected to social/emotional and mental health difficulties, however there were several notable exceptions related to specific aspects. An Irish study compared questionnaires given to eighty-one 8–12-year-olds three months prior to the March 2020 lockdown with the same questionnaires given to the same students on the return to in-person school in September, 2020. This study found that overall, self-reported ability to manage peer relationships declined, and spending quality time with parents and playing with friends during the lockdown had positive effects on social functioning. However, sibling interactions during the lockdown appeared to have no effect (Hanley et al., 2024). In a Turkish case study of 11 parents of students aged 3-10, Keles and Ozbey (2022) found that, in some cases, there was an increase in the quality of familial interpersonal connections during the lockdown period. Other studies found that students with social anxiety thrived in the online learning environment, due to the lack of pressure of social interactions (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021).

In general, the research suggests that the negative social-emotional and mental health effects increased over time and that the longer the lockdown period in a particular location, the more severe the symptoms (Hamilton, et al., 2021; Lehmann et al., 2021). In a global literature review looking at more than 1.6 billion K-12 students from 190 countries, Mazrekaj and De

Witte (2024) found that loneliness, anxiety, and depression rates increased with a lack of socialization; the rise of sedentary behavior and fall in physical activity correlated with mental health issues; and these factors were affected by parental stress, which also increased. The social-emotional and learning deficits were found to be greater in countries with longer closures and/or higher infection/mortality rates.

Japan had lockdown restrictions that were less strict than many other countries. A study in that country involving a comparison of questionnaires given to parents of 420 4-9-year-olds (different but equivalent groups) given in September 2019 and April 2020 had mixed findings. The study indicated that during the pandemic, children were more kind and helpful, but that they struggled to form and maintain friendships. The researchers found no significant changes in emotional distress, aggressive or disruptive behavior, or hyperactivity (Moriguchi et al., 2024). These findings were inconsistent with studies from other countries with stricter lockdown policies, such as Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, where the effects were more severe (Creswell et al., 2021; Orgiles et al., 2020, as cited in Moriguchi et al., 2024).

In some countries, students still had the option for in-person learning, and parents were allowed to decide if their children would attend school in person or remotely. One of these countries was Turkey. A study by Gunindi (2022) in that country involved parental surveys given before the 2020-2021 school year and at the end of the first trimester. The participants were parents of 296 five-year-olds, 159 of whom attended in-person school and 137 of whom attended online. When comparing the results of the surveys of the two groups, the researcher found that the lockdown policies adversely affected development. This study also noted that the extra parental time that resulted from remote schooling was not productive due to COVID-

related “financial insecurity, increased health concerns, lack of social and physical activities, and psychological problems” (Janssen et al., 2020, as cited in Gunindi, 2022, p. 661). Finland provided the option of in-person daycare and preschool during the pandemic. In a survey returned by twenty parents of preschool-age children given relatively early in the pandemic, Linnavalli and Kalland (2021) found that children who stayed home were lonelier than those who attended daycare, and that the children who stayed home experienced a decline in prosocial behavior. They also found that the parents of children who were removed from daycare experienced a deterioration in their relationships with their children.

Several studies discussed the effects of SEL supports that were implemented during and after the pandemic. A survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions given to 120 K-12 teachers in the Midwest United States compared schools with SEL programs during the pandemic and those without, and found that social/emotional struggles were less likely when schools had implemented these programs, leading the researchers to stress the importance of implementation of SEL programs as the pandemic recedes (Brockmeier et al., 2024). Based on six semi-structured individual interviews and four focus groups involving twenty-three participants (five school admin, two counselors, two teachers, five SEL coaches, and nine mental health professionals) serving 6691 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students in Texas, Schlag et al. (2024) found that the implementation of SEL supports was facilitated by normalizing talk about mental health and adult collaboration when providing SEL content and mental health support, and that implementation was impeded by insufficient staffing, student absenteeism and resistance to SEL practices by both teachers and students.

Comparison of Age Groups

Many studies looked at K-12 students as a whole, and some of these studies described differences in the social/emotional effects of the lockdown policies based on the ages of the students. Other studies focused on specific age groups. In this section, I will look at these studies and examine how they describe the social/emotional impacts on different age groups.

Studies from a variety of locations looked at the social-emotional effects on young children, from those born during the pandemic to those who were pre-K or Kindergarten age during the lockdown. In their analysis of twenty research papers, Rodriguez-Monge et al. (2023) found that the percentage of children under five who were at risk of not achieving their developmental potential increased following the pandemic. In a United States-based study utilizing teacher questionnaires examining students' school-readiness, Murphy et al. (2023) found that approximately 80% of the 154 respondents indicated that pre-K and Kindergarten students' functioning was *worse* or *much worse* after the pandemic than it was prior to the pandemic, and no respondents said that overall functioning was much better than before the pandemic. According to the same study, "children struggled most with emotional regulation, adhering to classroom rules and routines, and literacy skills... (and) were experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, conduct problems, and a lack of social skills" (Murphy et al., 2023, pp. 557-558). A study by Deoni (2022, as cited in Murphy et al., 2023) found that children who were born during the pandemic showed delays in "verbal language skills, motor skills, and overall cognitive development" (p. 553). The meta-analysis by Rodriguez-Monge et al. (2023) indicated that many delays in young children (e.g., the ability to recognize the emotions of others) were likely a result of children's lack of exposure to non-verbal cues,

such as facial expressions, due to mask mandates. Studies of younger children in other countries, such as Germany (Oppermann et al., 2024; Dillmann et al., 2022) and Finland (Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021) indicated similar results to the above-mentioned studies.

Much data suggests that the social-emotional effects of the lockdown may have been most significant among middle school students. Santibanez and Guarino (2021) found that negative social-emotional effects of absenteeism were largest in middle school-aged students (methodology of the study described above). In a study based on survey returned by 395 students at a racially diverse middle school in the southern United States, Bates and Harrell (2023) also described profound effects on middle school students, indicating that they self-reported significant losses in social-emotional competencies. A literature review looking at the approximately 55 million K-12 students in the United States by Almeida et al. (2022) found that different age groups were differently affected, and that preadolescents suffered more profound effects than older adolescents (Creswell et al., 2021, as cited in Almeida et al., 2022). In a study from a Title 1 school in the Northeastern US that used surveys of approximately 500 students from grades 4-6 to determine what the researchers described as the significant ramifications of the pandemic, the authors (a social-emotional counselor and a professor-in-residence supporting admin, teachers, and staff with inclusion and SEL) found that students reported a significant increase in the amount of stress about both the current situation and the future; a decrease in feeling a sense of support from others; an increase in dangerous and destructive behaviors; and an increase in emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety (Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). Bae et al. (2024) gave surveys to 3252 Korean middle and high school students from 5 middle schools and 5 high schools in the Fall of 2019 (prior to the pandemic)

and again in the Spring of 2020 (during the closures). They found that, in the various social/emotional categories assessed (engagement, optimism, perseverance, cooperative learning, and relationships), students' self-ratings generally declined. They also found that students who had higher ratings for social/emotional competencies prior to the pandemic experienced a smaller degree of negative effects.

Other studies indicated a correlation between increased age and more significant social/emotional impacts of the lockdown policies. In a previously cited study, Hanley et al. (2024) found that the only difference in the social/emotional effects of the lockdowns was that "the protective effect of spending quality time with parents on poor emotional awareness was smaller for older children" (p. 1459). Llorent et al. (2023) conducted student surveys of 792 Ecuadorian primary school students in January and February 2020 (just prior to the lockdown) and in July 2020 (after five months of remote learning). They found that the increased internet usage that accompanied remote learning correlated with more instances of antisocial online behavior (cyberhate), and that there were more of these instances as the age of the students increased. While the survey of the parents of 90 students by Dillmann et al. (2022) looked at younger children (aged 7-38 months), they found that parental stress increased and child social-emotional behavior scores decreased as children's age increased.

Socio-Economic Status

This section will describe a theme that arose in the research indicating that the social/emotional well-being and mental health of students of low socio-economic status (SES) were more profoundly affected than students of higher SES. The research indicates a variety of

SES-related factors as reasons for this discrepancy, including the average length of time away from in-person learning, trends in family/home life, and access to resources.

Studies from various parts of the world indicate similar correlations between socioeconomic status and the social-emotional effects of the COVID lockdown on children. In their meta-analysis of the approximately 55 million K-12 students in the United States, Hamilton et al. (2021) found that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students from lower-income communities were more likely to have longer periods of separation from in-person schooling, as well as more profound social-emotional effects. Bates and Harrell (2023) found that students previously receiving school-based support services were most affected, especially those from single-parent households (methodology of the study described previously). In a brief literature review, combined with anecdotal evidence from the experiences of the seven authors working with low SES K-12 students in Pakistan, Hamoda et al. (2021) noted that remote learning did not provide adequate social/emotional support for these students. Almeida et al (2022) pointed out that school closures disconnected students from resources that facilitate healthy development (methodology of the study described previously).

Several studies with data taken before and after the lockdown period highlight the connection between SES and the severity of the social/emotional impacts of the pandemic. Oppermann et al. (2024) utilized multiple data-collection models (family questionnaires, preschool center manager questionnaires, and researcher observations) in a longitudinal one-group pretest-posttest study of 228 3-7-year-olds in Germany. Their research indicated that the restrictions imposed to slow the spread of the virus had longer lasting consequences for children's emotional functioning, particularly for disadvantaged groups; that the problems were

more pronounced among families with lower income and educational backgrounds; and that peer problems increased among families with lower educational backgrounds. Ebert et al. (2022) found a “statistically significant increase in the number of (K-12) children with behavior problems among low-income families” (p. 795) (methodology of the study described previously). In a longitudinal study involving the guardians from 81 Chilean families with students in kindergarten during the pretest and first grade during the posttest, Santa-Cruz et al. (2022) found a greater mental health impact on children who were living in poverty.

The correlation of SES and more pronounced social/emotional effects appears to be based on multiple factors. In surveys involving the parents of 2088 K-12 students from all fifty U.S. states, Cox et al. (2023) found that significantly more non-white children learned virtually relative to other modes of learning, and that children learning virtually had significantly lower quality-of-life scores, with quality-of-life defined as the “development of self-temperament and relationships with others” (p 442). Several previously cited studies noted that with the rapid shift to electronic platforms during remote schooling, students from low SES populations often had difficulty with remote learning and took longer to catch up due to a lack of access to technological resources, (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021). In many low SES families, parents had to keep working during the pandemic due to their status as essential workers (i.e., working for grocery stores, delivery services, construction, etc.). This left many students to care for themselves and their siblings, and making participation more difficult (Jones, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021). Some students also had to contribute the family finances by taking on jobs of their own (Hamilton et al., 2021). The research cited indicates that above factors affected both academic achievement and mental health. Several studies noted that systemic inequalities that

were already in place were exacerbated by the pandemic, and that the problems associated with these inequalities were compounded (Jones, 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022). Students from low SES populations are overwhelmingly Black and Brown, and Jones (2021) refers to the negative outcomes related to the combination of systemic racism and COVID-19 as “dual pandemics.”

Special Education

This section will describe another theme arising in the research, relating to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the social/emotional health and development of students with disabilities. The research indicates that some of the specific needs of these students may not have been taken into account and that many teachers did not have adequate resources to provide for these students.

Children who were already prone to developmental delays, had special education needs, or were diagnosed with conditions such as autism spectrum disorder experienced more profound social-emotional effects than their typically developing peers (Rodriguez-Monge et al., 2023) (methodology of the study described previously). A study in Connecticut used qualitative interviews of sixteen educators (eight elementary general education teachers, three elementary special education teachers, and five related service providers), all with at least 5 years of experience, currently employed in a district utilizing remote learning (two schools: one hybrid, one remote), and with at least one special education student, to assess the social-emotional learning (SEL) of students with disabilities. The researchers found that SEL deficits and student disengagement were observed by 100% of the interviewees; that 100% of the participants indicated that students had little to no understanding of school expectations on the return to in-

person learning; and that 100% of the participants indicated that students struggled with self-regulation, coping skills, impulsivity, conflicts, perseverance, disengagement, problem-solving, and empathy (Petlik, 2024).

Research from around the world indicated that students with disabilities were highly impacted by the policies resulting from the pandemic. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by Ashworth et al. (2023) combined mixed methods surveys of 893 parents and 55 children (ages 5-16) with qualitative interviews of 10 parents and 4 children. The researchers found that the needs and rights of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were not given enough consideration during the pandemic; that remote learning didn't work well for most SEND students; and that this resulted in short- and long-term impacts to mental health and social, emotional, academic, and physical development. The study further found that existing challenges to equitable access to services were compounded by COVID restrictions (Ashworth et al., 2023). The study by Santa-Cruz et al. (2022) yielded similar results, finding that mental health impacts were greater on students with special education needs because the additional stressors from the pandemic compounded previously existing problems (methodology of the study described previously). In a previously cited Turkish case study that examined the social/emotional ramifications of the pandemic on students classified with a variety of disabilities (including autism, ADHD, specific learning disabilities, hearing impairment, speech delay, OCD, and mild mental disabilities), Keles and Ozbey (2022) found increases in behavioral problems (such as temper), struggles with concentration and following directions, shyness, fear/anxiety, boredom, loneliness, and screen addiction.

The lockdown policies also affected the ability of special education teachers to effectively meet the needs of their students. Focus group interviews conducted with 9 professionals working with 5-9-year-olds at a SEND specialist school in the United Kingdom found that COVID impacted teacher planning due to an inability to get to know individual students, something that is particularly important for students with disabilities. The interviews indicated that students struggled with independence, behavior (specifically increased time to learn expectations and a reluctance to follow rules), and social-emotional school readiness on the return to in-person learning (Wythe, 2022). In addition, Almeida et al. (2022) found that the return to school was made more difficult for SEND students due to lost access to specially designed instruction during the pandemic (methodology of the study described previously).

Summary

All of the research examined indicated that there were detrimental socio-emotional and/or mental health impacts on school-aged students who were removed from in-person schooling during the pandemic. The research suggests that the effects were especially profound among the following populations: students from countries/regions with stricter and/or longer lockdown policies, middle-school-age students, students from families with a low socio-economic status, and students with disabilities. A common theme indicated throughout the articles examined was the importance of social-emotional supports and interventions for students, families, and teachers in the post-pandemic era, with a particular focus on the most highly impacted populations. Future sections of the paper will further discuss recommendations for interventions to address this issue, including what I am seeing and doing in my current teaching practice and what I would like to implement in the future; provide a discussion of gaps

in the current research and the need for future research; and offer a discussion of differentiating the effects of the pandemic from co-occurring factors (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement, social trends, parenting trends, increased screen use, social media, etc.).

Action Plan

This paper has been an examination of the research on the social/emotional impacts of the remote schooling policies and the school absenteeism that was the result of these policies on school-age children and adolescents. Various policies were enacted worldwide, and the schooling of all students was affected. As described in the Literature Review section of this paper, a significant amount of research indicates that the hybrid and remote schooling policies that resulted from the COVID-19 lockdowns were significantly impactful on the social/emotional development of school-age children and adolescents. These impacts affected students returning to in-person learning, and the effects continue to this day. The documented effects include increased anxiety and depression; struggles with interpersonal relationships and a sense of community; and difficulty with focus, motivation, and engagement. In examining the research on this topic, four themes arose: 1) general impacts of lockdown policies, 2) impacts on specific age groups, 3) correlations of impacts with socioeconomic status, and 4) impacts on students with disabilities. Much of the research recommended interventions and supports for students, families, and school staff in the wake of the pandemic. In this section, I will describe recommendations from the research and compare these recommendations with what is currently being done at my current teaching site. Recommendations for future implementation by teachers, administration, and the school district will be described.

The site I am utilizing for my action plan is a Title 1 elementary school (Pre-K to 5th grade) in Western Washington with approximately 700 students. It is an ethnically diverse school with the following demographics: 40% White, 30% Hispanic/Latino, 20% Two or More Races, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Black, <1% Indigenous (numbers are approximate). More than 60% of the students are considered to be economically disadvantaged, and approximately 30% of the students have IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) for special education services (U.S. News & World Report, 2025). It is one of the more ethnically diverse schools in its district (the district is approximately 70% White, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and 10% two or more races - other races similar to the school). It also has a higher population of economically disadvantaged students and students with special needs than the district as a whole (20% economically disadvantaged and 10% special education) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). In my current position as a special education teacher at this school, I am one of three full-time Resource Room teachers and IEP case managers, working with students who spend the majority of their time in their grade-level general education classes. I work with students in small groups, providing specially designed instruction toward their IEP goals in reading, writing, math, social skills, and/or adaptive skills. My current caseload consists of 35 students in grades K-2.

General Recommendations

All of the research examined indicated that there were social/emotional impacts of the school policies enacted as a result of the COVID lockdowns. Many of the effects were similar across all student demographics. The research indicates that longer and/or more strict lockdown policies correlated with more significant impacts (Hamilton et al., 2021; Lehmann et al., 2021). The research found that implementation of social/emotional supports before and

during the lockdown correlated with less significant impacts (Brockmeier et al., 2024; Schlag et al. 2024). The following table examines recommendations provided by the research to address some of the issues faced by students of all ages, as compared to current practices in my school.

Table 1

General Recommendations

Research Recommendations	Current Practice	Recommendations for Implementation
Schools and districts should adjust curricula and time and scope of subject areas to include mandated social emotional learning (SEL) to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Brockmeier et al., 2024; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Murphy et al., 2023; Petlik, 2024; Schlag et al., 2024).	District requires general education classes to have 20 minutes of designated SEL time and the district has adopted a SEL curriculum. Fidelity of implementation varies depending on the teacher.	District should assess whether 20 minutes is adequate and adjust the time as needed. District should employ SEL experts to assess curricula for effectiveness and monitor its implementation by teachers.
Schools should provide social/emotional check-ins and supports for students and their families to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Gunindi, 2022; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023; Schlag et al., 2024).	School has one school counselor and one mental health specialist (who works for multiple schools) to support the families of 700 students. This staff size is inadequate to provide sufficient social/emotional check-ins and supports.	District should provide two additional school counselors* and two SEL coaches (one for grades K-2 and one for grades 3-5) to support students' families. Mental health specialist should be dedicated to a single school.
Districts should provide social/emotional and mental health supports for teachers as they navigate the challenges that result from the struggles of students impacted by the pandemic (Hamoda et al. 2021; Schlag et al., 2024).	District provides professional development for teaching SEL, but little mental health support for teachers beyond reminders about self-care in newsletters. As indicated above, staffing for mental health support is inadequate.	In addition to the staffing increases described above, the district should provide an additional mental health specialist for the school to support teachers.

* Recommended student-to-school counselor ratio is 250-to-1 (American School Counselor Association, 2025)

Best Practices for Different Age Groups

Some research compared the social/emotional impacts of the lockdown on different age groups, and other research focused on specific age groups. While children and adolescents of all ages were affected, much of the research indicates that the severity of the impacts of remote schooling policies increased with age up until middle school, the age that was most profoundly affected (Almeida et al., 2022; Bates & Harrell, 2023; Hanley et al., 2024; Llorent et al., 2023; Santibanez & Guarino, 2021). The following table examines recommendations provided by the research to address some of the issues faced by students of specific ages, as compared to current practices in my school.

Table 2

Best Practices for Different Age Groups

Research Recommendations	Current Practice	Recommendations for Implementation
For young children - districts should provide high quality preschools and early childhood education to prepare for the possibility of future events that may result in remote schooling policies (Gunindi, 2022; Linnavalli and Kalland, 2021; Oppermann et al., 2024; Rodriguez-Monge et al., 2023).	My school has a developmental preschool (one of 4 at the 13 elementary schools in the district). The preschool has high quality teachers, but all classes are in overload, and the school has no room to expand.	The district should accommodate the growing population, by opening two new preschools.
For older students – districts should provide periodic social/emotional check-ins and social/emotional supports for middle and high school students to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Bae et al., 2024; Bates & Harrell, 2023).	District has SEL curricula for middle school and high school to support social/emotional needs, but instructional time is limited to short advisory periods. Time and staffing is inadequate to provide sufficient one-on-one check-ins.	Schools should increase the time designated for SEL to at least 30 minutes/day, and teachers should integrate SEL throughout the day.

For older students – districts and schools should provide instruction and supports about online behavior (e.g., cyberbullying) due to an increase in remote and hybrid learning options in the wake of the pandemic (Llorent et al., 2023; Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024).	Lessons on bullying occur beginning in kindergarten and continue through high school, with lessons focusing on cyberbullying beginning in fourth grade. Bullying lessons appear early Fall quarter.	Schools should use research-based practices to make sure that adequate time is devoted to teaching cyberbullying lessons. Bullying lessons should be revisited in Winter and Spring quarters.
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Socio-Economic Status

Much of the research indicates a correlation between lower socio-economic status (SES) and more profound social/emotional effects of the lockdown. The research indicates that there are multiple reasons for this correlation, including the average length of time away from in-person learning (Hamilton et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2023); trends in home life, such as increased responsibility due to the absence of caregivers who were required to continue working (Jones, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021); lack of access to technology required for remote learning (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021); lack of access to mental health supports (Almeida et al., 2022; Hamoda et al., 2021); and exacerbation of previously existing structural inequalities (Jones, 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022). The following table examines recommendations provided by the research to address some of these issues, as compared to current practices in my school.

Table 3

Socio-Economic Status

Research Recommendations	Current Practice	Recommendations for Implementation
Schools should provide families with access to technology in case of future	School provides tech for student use in classrooms but	District should provide funding to set up a system to give families in need access

disruptions to in-person schooling (Almeida et al., 2022; Hamoda et al. 2021).	not for families to use at home.	to technology, school should allow students to take school computers home.
Districts should provide low-income families with counseling, parental training, SEL coaches, etc. to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Almeida et al., 2022; Gunindi, 2022; Lehman et al., 2021; Santa-Cruz, et al., 2022; Schlag et al., 2024).	School has one school counselor and one mental health specialist (who works for multiple schools) support the families of 700 students.	District should provide two additional school counselors (see recommendation in Table 1), and two SEL coaches (one for grades K-2 and one for grades 3-5) to support students families. Mental health specialist should be dedicated to a single school.
Districts and schools should examine structural inequalities to prepare for the possibility of future disruptions to in-person schooling (Jones, 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Oppermann et al., 2024).	District provides regular professional development opportunities on equity. School has an Equity Committee, but with limited time and resources.	District should continue to provide equity professional development. School should provide time at staff meetings for the Equity Committee’s work to be implemented.

Special Education

A great deal of research indicates that students with disabilities were more profoundly impacted by the pandemic than their typically developing peers and that the specific needs of these students were not always taken into account when providing remote schooling options (Ashworth et al., 2023; Keles and Ozbey, 2022; Petlik, 2024; Rodriguez-Monge et al., 2023; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022). Research indicates that special education teachers were often not provided with adequate resources to support their students (Almeida et al., 2022; Wythe, 2022). The following table examines recommendations provided by the research to address the needs of students with disabilities, as compared to current practices in my school.

Table 4

Special Education

Research Recommendations	Current Practice	Recommendations for Implementation
Schools should provide social/emotional supports for families of students with disabilities to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies and to prepare for the possibility of future disruptions to in-person schooling (Hamilton, et al., 2021; Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022; Wythe, 2022).	Many students with IEPs have services in Social Skills, but providing supports for families beyond IEP meetings and check-ins about student performance is difficult due to all special education teachers having caseloads in overload and shortage of other staff to provide family support.	District should provide the school with more special education teachers (one additional Resource Room teacher and one additional Self-Contained teacher), two additional counselors (see recommendation in Table 1), and a dedicated mental health specialist to reduce caseloads and allow for increased communication with and support for families.
District policies and funding should prioritize the social/emotional needs of students with disabilities to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Ashworth et al., 2023; Hamilton, et al., 2021; Keles & Ozbey, 2022).	Special education teachers are in overload and are not always provided the resources that they need to support their students. District resists hiring new staff, leading to extended periods of overload for teachers.	District should allocate additional funds to provide more staff and resources for students with disabilities (see above). District should be proactive in hiring special education staff as student numbers increase.
Schools and districts should adjust curricula and time and scope of subject areas to include mandated social emotional learning for students with disabilities to compensate for the effects of the lockdown policies (Keles & Ozbey, 2022; Petlik, 2024).	District requires general education classes to have 20 minutes of designated SEL time and the district has adopted a SEL curriculum. Students with IEPs for social skills receive additional SEL support.	In an attempt to prevent students from requiring Tier 3 SEL supports, Tier 1 and 2 supports should be assessed for effectiveness by SEL experts, and modified as needed.

Summary

In the above action plan, I described the recommendations in the research as they pertain to the themes that I found: a general assessment of the lockdown's impacts on social/emotional development, comparison of age groups, factors related to socio-economic status, and implications for students with disabilities. I compared the recommendations of the

research to what I have observed in my current teaching practice and made suggestions for further improvements. In the next section, I will discuss the research questions posed in the Rationale section of the paper, describe further thoughts on the ideas presented in the Action Plan, discuss recommendations for future research, and provide a brief description of my research process.

Discussion

This paper has examined the research on the social/emotional and mental health impacts of the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on school-age children. The paper aims to investigate how the lockdown affected students' social/emotional development and use an understanding of these effects to explore appropriate current and future supports for the impacted students. On examination of the research, four themes arose: 1) general social/emotional impacts of the pandemic policies, 2) variations of the impacts based on the age of the students, 3) implications of socio-economic status, and 4) ramifications for students with disabilities. The research consistently found that there were social/emotional impacts on students of all ages and that some of the more significantly impacted groups were middle school-age students, students of low socio-economic status, and students with disabilities. I utilized multiple databases, cross-referencing the COVID-19 pandemic and social/emotional topics, to find thirty peer-reviewed articles on which I based the paper. Following the review of the literature, I examined recommendations made by the literature, if and how they are being applied at the school where I currently work, and what would be required to apply them where current practice is insufficient, based on the recommendations.

In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to answer the three research questions presented in the Rationale section; explore the implications of the research findings for teachers, students, and schools; look at suggestions for future research; and describe the parameters and limitations of my research process.

Findings

In this section, I will examine the research questions proposed at the beginning of the paper:

- According to the research, what were the impacts of the lockdown policies imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social/emotional development of children and adolescents?
- Does the research indicate that variations in lockdown policies had impacts on the social/emotional development of students?
- Does the research indicate any differences and/or similarities in the impacts on social/emotional development based on demographics?

For each question, I will analyze what answers the research provides, followed by a discussion of the findings in the context of my Action Site and a comparison of what the research says to what I see in practice in the school and district where I work. Following that, I will speculate about future trends pertaining to this topic. The research examined findings from various sources, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, and mental health specialists, from a wide range of locations worldwide, and using a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Regardless of the source of information, the research indicated similar findings and recommendations.

Social/Emotional Impacts of COVID Lockdown

The first question asked how the lockdown policies imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the social/emotional development of children and adolescents. The research I analyzed in the course of writing this paper overwhelmingly indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the social/emotional development and mental health of children and adolescents worldwide. While it must be acknowledged that there is some difficulty in differentiating the effects of COVID from co-occurring events (such as the Black Lives Matter movement, cultural shifts, parenting trends, and increased screen use/social media), researchers in general attempted to isolate these factors as much as possible. At times, the co-occurring factors likely interacted with the effects of the pandemic (e.g., while the time spent on screens and the use of social media were already on the rise before the pandemic, the isolation and online schooling resulting from the lockdown likely increased these things even more).

A variety of social/emotional and mental health impacts are described by the research. Several studies indicated detrimental impacts on the general mental health of students (Ebert et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024). Impacts on interpersonal relationships and other externalized factors included delays in communication skills (Ali et al., 2024; Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024), delays in social skills (Ali et al., 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Oppermann et al., 2024; Petlik, 2024), effects on external temperament and behavior (Brockmeier et al., 2024; Cox et al., 2023; Ebert et al., 2022; Lehmann et al., 2021; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023; Petlik, 2024), and the ability of young children to learn non-verbal cues (Rodriguez-Monge et al., 2023). Impacts on emotions and other internalized factors included loneliness (Ali et al., 2024; Linnavalli and Kalland, 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024),

depression and anxiety (Ali et al., 2024; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Oppermann et al., 2024; Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024), lack of motivation (Brockmeier et al., 2024), delays in coping skills (Ebert et al., 2022; Petlik, 2024), and deficits in attention and planning skills (Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024).

The research indicates multiple reasons for these impacts. Several studies discussed the trauma, emotional distress, and stress that resulted from the pandemic and the policies associated with it (Almeida et al., 2022; Hamoda et al. 2021; Hanley et al., 2024; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). Stressors described included the illness and/or death of family members and/or friends, strained family relationships as a result of quarantine policies, and the general lack of social interactions outside of the family. Some researchers also indicated that many students did not fully participate in remote schooling, and that the resulting absenteeism also impacted social/emotional development and mental health (Santibanez and Guarino, 2021; Schlag et al., 2024). Multiple studies also indicated that high levels of parental stress correlated with more significant impacts on their children (Dillmann et al., 2022; Lehmann et al., 2021; Linnavalli and Kalland, 2021).

Some research described differential effects based on several factors. Studies indicated that students who were assessed for social/emotional factors and indicated higher competencies before the pandemic, or who received high-quality SEL interventions before or during the pandemic, showed less significant effects (Bae et al., 2024; Brockmeier et al., 2024; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). Other studies indicated that a higher number of social interactions during the pandemic correlated with less significant social/emotional impacts (Hanley et al., 2024; Lehmann et al., 2021; Linnavalli and Kalland, 2021).

At the school where I work, described in the Action Plan section of this paper, there is evidence of all the impacts described above. There has been an increase in behavioral problems and interpersonal struggles between students. Many students require intensive direct instruction on how to *be a student* appropriately. A large number of students require interventions from the school counselor, mental health specialist, and PBIS (positive behavioral intervention and support) staff. Many students have qualified for special education services in the areas of social/emotional, adaptive skills, and communication, all areas indicated in the research to be highly impacted in the wake of the pandemic (see references above). Many of these students qualify for special education *only* in one or more of these areas, but not in any academic areas.

Several recommendations from the research to combat these issues were described in the Action Plan, some of which have been implemented in my school, to varying degrees, and some of which have not. One recommendation is an increase in SEL (social emotional learning) instruction. While the district has adopted a required SEL curriculum, the time allocated for implementation does not appear to be adequate to meet the significant social/emotional needs of the students, and at times, SEL instruction is cut to make time for other things. Due to the time limits of the school day, with requirements for academic instruction, specialist time (music, art, PE, and library), recess, and lunch, it is difficult to set aside adequate time for SEL. One possible solution to this problem is to incorporate SEL into the other parts of the day, as academic subjects are taught.

Another recommendation of the research has to do with staffing. According to the recommendations, the number of staff available to support the social/emotional needs of the

students in my school is insufficient. For example, one school counselor supports a student body that, according to the American School Counselor Association, should have three (see Action Plan, Table 1). SEL coaches to assist teachers and assess curricula are available, but limited. The staffing needs required to support students are significant, and the district in which I work is not meeting those needs. This is likely due to the budgetary constraints that face all school districts – something that is not likely to improve as the current administration of the United States dismantles the Department of Education.

Differences Based on Variations in Policies

The second question asked about how variations in lockdown policies impacted the social/emotional development of students. The research indicates that, in general, longer and/or stricter lockdowns correlate with more severe social/emotional impacts, and that the effects increased over time (Hamilton et al., 2021; Lehmann et al., 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024). A study by Creswell et al. (2021), cited by Almeida et al. (2022), found that emotional difficulties increased when restrictions were at their peak and decreased when the restrictions were eased. A study by Moriguchi et al. (2024) was conducted in Japan, where lockdown restrictions were less strict than in many other countries. Their study found that, when comparing data from before and during the pandemic, there was “no significant difference in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, or hyperactivity between these two periods” (Moriguchi et al., 2024, p. 7). These findings were inconsistent with studies from other countries with stricter policies, such as Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, and the researchers hypothesized that the different results were due to the differences in policies.

In some countries, families had the option of either continuing with face-to-face learning or switching to a remote model. In Turkey, this option was in place, and a study there found that, while all students were affected by the stresses of the pandemic (such as family health concerns, financial insecurity, etc.), students whose families selected the remote option suffered more severe social/emotional consequences, suggesting that this was the result of additional stressors, such as reduced social interaction and physical activities (Gunindi, 2022). A study of preschool-age children by Linnavalli and Kalland (2021) in Finland, where in-person daycare was optional, found that children who stayed home were lonelier and experienced a decline in prosocial behavior and a deterioration in their relationships with their parents, as compared to children who remained in daycare.

My Action Plan site had a relatively long (1 year and 3 months) period of remote schooling, and the effects have been significant. It is not in the scope of this paper to compare specific data from my school and/or district with that of other regions with shorter/longer or less/more strict policies, but the observational evidence that I see at my site is in line with that of other locations described in the research.

Variations Based on Demographics

The third question asked about differences and/or similarities in impacts on social/emotional development based on demographics. There were several demographic areas where the research indicated differential implications from the pandemic. These were explored in the Literature Review section of this paper, as I described the themes that arose in the research. In the following subsections, I will further discuss the demographic areas of age, socio-economic status, and students with disabilities.

Age. The research studies examined in this paper utilized a variety of approaches in looking at this topic. Some studies looked at a wide range of age groups, looking at patterns common to them all and examining variations among age groups, while other studies focused on specific age groups. The consensus among researchers appears to be that the age group with the most significant social/emotional impacts was that of students who were middle-school-age during the lockdown (Almeida et al., 2022; Bae et al., 2024; Bates & Harrell, 2023; Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023; Santibanez and Guarino, 2021). Dillmann et al. (2022) found that parental stress was higher in parents of older children and that students' social/emotional and behavioral scores decreased as the age of the students increased. The study by Hanley et al. (2024) indicated that spending quality time with parents had less of a positive effect on older children than on younger children. In addition to the isolation and lack of in-person socialization that was common to all age groups, older children also experienced more cyberbullying as a result of the increased screen use that resulted from the lockdown policies (Llorent et al., 2023).

I first thought about the topic of the social/emotional impacts of COVID when I started teaching and noticed social/emotional delays in the younger students I work with. I primarily work with grades K-2 (as a special education Resource Room teacher). My one year of student teaching was in a third-grade class, during the first year of in-person schooling following the lockdown. During my student teaching, I felt that there were likely significant effects from COVID, as I observed students struggling to navigate being back in school after such an extended period of remote schooling at such a young age. Based on my own experiences, I initially expected the research to show that younger students were the most impacted. I felt that the lack of socialization at early developmental stages would result in more significant effects than

on older students, so I was somewhat surprised to learn that the research indicated that middle-school-age students were the most highly impacted. However, being the parent of two students who were middle-school-age during the pandemic, I understood that there were significant impacts on that age group as well.

Since my Action Plan site is an elementary school, not a middle school, I do not have personal experience with the implementation of the practices recommended in the research at the middle-school level. However, I can speak to the practices at the elementary school level and how they prepare students for middle school. My school district provides social/emotional instruction throughout elementary, middle, and high school. The curriculum covers similar topics in all grade levels, increasing in sophistication as the students get older. Lessons in bullying begin in kindergarten, with specific lessons focused on cyberbullying beginning in fourth grade, but time for SEL is limited in all grades. As described in the Action Plan section, increased time for SEL is recommended, including more lessons in cyberbullying, but as described above, time constraints in the school day make this difficult.

Another age group that was the focus of multiple studies was that of children who were in preschool during the pandemic, then began elementary school on the return to in-person learning. This age group faced its specific challenges. The study by Murphy et al. (2023) indicated that students in this age group lacked basic school-readiness skills, based on the results of surveys given to teachers from the Head Start program. Rodriguez-Monge et al. (2023) discussed the difficulties that young children had due to a lack of understanding of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, as a result of a decreased number of social interactions and the facial masking policies that were in place during and after the lockdown period. Dillmann et al.

(2022) found that higher stress levels in the parents of young children were associated with lower social/emotional behavior scores.

To help with the social/emotional development of young children, much of the research recommended high-quality early childhood education (Gunindi, 2022; Linnavalli and Kalland, 2021; Oppermann et al., 2024; Rodriguez-Monge et al., 2023), and while my district has several developmental preschools, they lack adequate space, staff, and resources to sufficiently support the students. While the district has acknowledged these needs, budgetary constraints (and likely intra-district politics) have kept these recommendations from being implemented. The elementary school where I work is similarly overwhelmed, and these same impediments prevent sufficient staffing and support from being enacted.

Socio-Economic Status. Much research indicates a correlation between lower socio-economic status (SES) with more substantial social/emotional impacts of the lockdown, finding that the effects are more prominent in historically marginalized populations (Hamilton et al., 2021; Jones, 2021). Significantly affected groups included students living in poverty (Santa-Cruz et al., 2022) and those previously receiving school-based support services (Bates & Harrell, 2023). Jones (2021) describes what she refers to as dual pandemics of COVID and systemic racism. In addition to, and likely as a result of, the unique impacts on students of low SES, these students have also taken longer to catch up to their peers (Almeida et al., 2022).

Multiple possible reasons for the trend of more significant impacts being felt by low SES populations have been posited, some school-based and some home-based. School-based reasons include a lack of access to technology (Hamoda et al. 2021; Jones, 2021), insufficient staffing, and increased absenteeism (Schlag et al., 2024). A study by Cox et al. (2023) found that

more non-white than white students participated in virtual learning, and that this correlated with lower quality-of-life scores, something that the researchers claim also aligns with other studies. Home-based reasons include lower family educational levels (Oppermann et al., 2024); larger households (Santa-Cruz et al., 2022); and the fact that many parents had to work during the pandemic, leaving students on their own (Jones, 2021).

The Action Site that I looked at is a Title 1 school, with a relatively high percentage of students from historically marginalized populations and many students from families living in poverty (more than 60%). As predicted by the research, this school also has many struggles with disruptive student behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and other examples of students not acting appropriately in a school setting. At this time, we are completing the fourth school year after the return to in-person learning, and these problems continue to occur at a higher rate than before the pandemic. Recommendations from the research regarding staffing to support social/emotional and mental health needs, and greater access to technology to address discrepancies in student access have likely not been implemented due to budgetary constraints. I feel that it is important to prioritize these things to support the future success of students.

Students with Disabilities. Many studies described how students with disabilities were more significantly impacted by the pandemic than most other students. Santa-Cruz et al. (2022) found this to be the case, except for the area of externalizing problems, where they found no significant differences between students with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Other studies found that the behavior and social/emotional development of students with disabilities were profoundly impacted by the pandemic (Keles & Ozbey, 2022; Petlik, 2024; Wythe, 2022). The study by Ashworth et al. (2023) found that there were both short- and long-

term impacts on students with disabilities. Further research will be required, as the post-pandemic years progress, to determine the extent and specifics of the long-term impacts. Several studies indicated that certain students, with disabilities that are tied to social anxiety, thrived with remote schooling (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021). As a result, many districts have continued to provide remote options for these students.

In general, however, remote schooling was not beneficial for students with disabilities, and many students lost access to the SDI (Specially Designed Instruction) required by their IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) (Almeida et al., 2022; Ashworth et al., 2023; Wythe, 2022). Overall, special education students' needs and rights were not adequately considered (Ashworth et al., 2023). In addition, special education teachers were unable to get to know their students well enough to sufficiently plan for their individualized needs (Wythe, 2022).

My Action Site is a school with a high number of students with IEPs (approximately 30% of the student body). Many of these students receive services for social skills, adaptive skills, and communication, all areas described by the research as heavily impacted by the pandemic policies. There are quite a few students at the school who receive services *only* in one or more of those areas. As described above, this school has significant behavioral challenges and social/emotional needs. This school has both a high number of students of low SES and a high number of students with special needs, two of the factors indicated by the research as resulting in significant post-pandemic social/emotional struggles. Research recommendations for increased special education staff, counselors, and other staff to support SEL needs and assess SEL curricula have likely not been implemented due to budgetary constraints, but it is essential for these things to be prioritized to support student needs.

As described in the research, some students thrived under the remote schooling model, particularly those whose disabilities resulted in social anxiety (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021). As a result, the district in which I work has maintained several remote school options for these students. This has been very beneficial for certain students. One example from my own experience is a student who was attending in-person school, but whose anxiety prevented him from any meaningful school participation. He spent a large portion of his day highly distressed and trying to elope from school, causing great stress to himself and monopolizing one of the school behavioral team members (of which we have an insufficient number) as they prevented him from leaving the building. When he was regulated, he still did not participate with his class, but sat at a desk in the hallway and colored. This went on for many months, with multiple strategies attempted to support him. Switching to a remote option has enabled him to begin accessing his education. It should be noted, however, that using this option for students who would be better off learning how to be in school with other students could be detrimental to their social/emotional development, and educators and parents should be careful with the decisions about which students should utilize this model.

Speculation on Future Trends

In this section, I will provide some thoughts on what the future might hold regarding social/emotional struggles resulting from the pandemic, and methods to address these struggles. The generation of students who were impacted by the pandemic is likely to feel the effects for quite some time. These students will grow up, and most will likely develop tools to aid with their social/emotional delays and struggles with mental health, however, they will never regain their lost developmental stages. So, although the struggles are likely to improve,

they are also likely to continue to some degree, due to the gaps in developmental stages experienced by these students (Bae et al., 2024; Ebert et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2021; Hamoda et al., 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024).

We are now entering a time when students who are beginning school were either very young or not born yet during the pandemic. While these students do not have the direct social/emotional effects of experiencing the lockdown and the resulting remote schooling policies, their older siblings and parents did have this experience. As a result, the social/emotional impacts of the pandemic will likely be passed down to younger students, due to the lingering impacts on their older family members (Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023). In addition, eventually, the students who lived through the pandemic will have children of their own, and the social/emotional delays and mental health struggles that they may have experienced as a result of the pandemic may affect their parenting and the social/emotional health of their children. Research has shown that trauma is not only passed down through generations by the actions of traumatized individuals, but also genetically (Mate and Mate, 2022). As a result of these factors, the world is likely to feel the mental health effects of the pandemic for quite some time, and family involvement will be crucial for the social/emotional recovery of students (Lehmann et al., 2021; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022; Wythe, 2022).

I believe that most schools and districts will recognize the likelihood of the need for significant social/emotional support in the wake of the pandemic, and that many will do their best to support students. Social/emotional learning and supports can help students to recover from the direct effects of the pandemic, and also from the impacts of structural inequalities that were exacerbated by the pandemic (Jones, 2021; Llorent et al., 2023). I think that schools and

districts ultimately care about the needs of their students and will do their best to support them. Unfortunately, there are many barriers to the implementation of this support, because although the schools may care about student needs, I am not sure that the policymakers always do, and budgets for education are limited. The recent dismantling of the United States Department of Education by the Trump administration is but one example of this. In addition, many poorer regions around the world lack access to the capital, resources, and necessary staff required to implement the recommendations, regardless of the intentions and desires of policymakers (Almeida et al., 2022; Jones, 2021; Schlag et al., 2024). Because of these factors, I feel that, in many locations around the world, adequate support for students is not likely to be implemented.

One thing that came out of the pandemic is the implementation of remote options in many school districts for those who benefited from this model. These options are likely to continue, especially as the world relies more and more on technology in general. It is also crucial that the world's educational systems continue to be prepared for the possibility of future disruptions (Piryatinskya & Ewaldb, 2024). As I described in a previous section of this paper, some students who might be better off with in-person learning may utilize this option to the detriment of their social/emotional development. Another possible use of technology is through the use of online platforms to deliver universal and targeted school mental health interventions to address the mental health of both students and teachers. These online platforms can be flexibly adapted in response to diverse mental health needs and can help to minimize the burden on health care systems (Hamoda et al. 2021).

Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and Schools

As previously discussed, the social/emotional impacts of the pandemic are likely to be felt for quite some time, and efforts should be made to alleviate and combat the resulting struggles. The most important things to be done are to provide resources for students, families, and teachers to support social/emotional needs and mental health. Schools must provide schoolwide support and targeted interventions for those students who demonstrate higher needs. It may also be necessary to examine the Social/Emotional instruction standards to see if they continue to be adequate as students face new challenges due to the effects of the pandemic. I feel that the requirements for special education identification should be examined as well. Perhaps the criteria for a student to be declared disabled should change, since an entire generation is impacted by developmental delays as a result of COVID-19. It is important to intensify the support for *all* students through increased SEL instruction, staff to support mental health and social/emotional needs, and resources for school staff and families. Bae et al. (2024) recommend periodically diagnosing whether students have successfully achieved developmental stages and, if they have not, implementing targeted interventions. It is also essential to assess the effectiveness of the interventions and change them as needed. Keles & Ozbey (2022) recommend that special needs children should be given 1:1 education to support their IEP goals when face-to-face instruction is interrupted. Unfortunately, due to constraints such as budgetary factors and lack of political will, it is likely that in many locations, recommended support will not be provided. This will result in teachers and other staff working directly with students being required to work through these problems with inadequate

resources. Parents, teachers, and other school staff must advocate for adequate supports for their students.

Utilization of technological platforms can also be effective, such as continuing options for remote schooling. This can be very beneficial for certain students, but caution should be exercised to ensure that these options are appropriate for the specific students utilizing them. An increased reliance on technology and remote options may be detrimental to the social/emotional development of certain students, and schools should proceed with caution.

There are other things that teachers and schools can do. Something that might help avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement is refraining from labelling kids as “The COVID Generation” (or something similar) (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024). This is a simple thing to implement, and it does not cost anything, making it possible anywhere. Schools should also address the effects of COVID in conjunction with co-occurring factors, such as increased screen use and systemic racism, through the use of RES (Racial-Ethnic Socialization), RP (Restorative Practices), and UDL (Universal Design for Learning). This would require district policy changes and professional development in many locations, but the implementation of many of these policies is relatively inexpensive and is likely to be beneficial to students.

Implications for Future Research

While there is much clear information to be taken from these studies, there are certainly some unanswered questions and opportunities for additional research. Some ideas for future research were brought up in the literature. An examination of the long-term effects as the pandemic recedes into the past will be important “to understand the trajectory of adolescent mental health experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the long-term impact of

the lockdowns and social isolation” (Ebert et al., 2022, p. 795). Studies could also examine current school readiness and the possibility of a “shift in standards and expectations to accommodate the developing needs of students” (Murphy et al., 2023, p. 559). Future research could also look at post-pandemic interventions and “document the evolution of student behavior and what factors facilitate improvement over time as the pandemic recedes” (Brockmeier et al., 2024, p. 229). Hanley et al. (2024) recommended looking at larger, more diverse samples, stressing the importance of consistent, high-quality social interactions, even during sudden school closures (preferably in-person) to reduce stress and develop social skills. Gunindi (2022) recommended future studies to make comparisons with students who received no education, in-person or online. Almeida et al. (2022) recommended further research to understand the reasons for individual variations in the effects of the pandemic, including the potential for resilience and adaptation.

Other future research areas could include looking at other co-occurring factors (Black Lives Matter movement, cultural shifts, parenting trends, and increased screen use/social media) and how these factors combine with the isolation imposed by the lockdown to affect social-emotional development. There is also a need for more studies specifically based on special education, such as an examination of qualification criteria for social skills intervention versus increased schoolwide interventions and individualized supports that do not require the designation of a disability. Possibly the most important areas for future studies, in terms of support for students, will be looking at the effectiveness of SEL interventions and other supports to determine what should be provided for students and families in post-pandemic times, and determining the best ways to monitor mental health and social-emotional learning to inform

future decision-making. Using a variety of research models, both qualitative and quantitative, for this future research could provide very helpful information to support students in the coming years.

Limitations of the Project

This paper drew from research studies published between the year 2021, when some lockdown policies were still in effect, and 2024, when the most recent research on this topic was published at the time of writing. Due to the nature of the topic, no research was published before 2021, although several studies contained data taken before the pandemic in addition to data from during or after the lockdown policies were in effect (Bae et al., 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Moriguchi et al., 2024; Oppermann et al., 2024; Santa-Cruz et al., 2022). My research process involved searching the databases ERIC and Google Scholar for combinations of keywords such as “Social/Emotional” OR “Social/Emotional Learning” AND “COVID-19” OR “pandemic”. I initially looked specifically for studies about early childhood, because that is the group of students with whom I work. Then I decided to broaden the scope to examine the effects on different age groups. Later searches involved refining the search criteria to also include “special education” and “socioeconomic status” as I noticed themes related to these areas arise. At first, I focused on research about social/emotional effects *after* the pandemic, but then I also included data taken *during* the lockdown. Further articles were located by looking at the references found in the article by Mazrekaj & De Witte (2024), which was itself a literature review.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic was a fairly recent event at the time of writing, the available research was somewhat limited and only pertained to relatively short-term effects of

the lockdown policies. As time progresses, more studies will likely shed more insight into this topic, and long-term impacts can be examined. Another limitation of this project relates to the site that I examined in the Action Plan section. Some of the comparisons described in the Literature Review were unable to be explored fully in the Action Plan. Since the site examined was a Title 1 elementary school in a specific location, I was unable to fully examine comparisons to older students and variations in lockdown policies. To a lesser extent, comparisons based on socio-economic status were also difficult, since most families from the school are of similar status.

Conclusions

This paper examined the research on the social/emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence is quite conclusive that there are significant effects on all students. The research also indicated especially profound effects in certain populations, including students in regions with stricter and longer lockdowns, students with a low socio-economic status, students with special needs, and students who were middle-school-age during the pandemic. Both universal and targeted supports for students, families, and school staff are essential to address the significant social/emotional and mental health impacts of the pandemic. To aid in the future success of students, the recommended social/emotional supports should be prioritized by policymakers.

References

Ali, S., Uzair ul Hassan, M., & Parveen, I. (2024). Shifting to online mode: Analyzing parents' perceptions of social distancing and its effects on academic and social learning of primary school students. *Pakistan Journal of Distance and Online Learning*, 10(1).

Almeida, M., Challa, M., Ribeiro, M., Harrison, A. M., & Castro, M. C. (2022). Editorial perspective: The mental health impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(5), 608-612. DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13535

American School Counselor Association. (2025). *Student-to-school-counselor ratios*.

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/about-school-counseling/school-counselor-roles-ratios>

Ashworth, E., Bray, L., Alghrani, A. & Kirkby, J. (2023). 'Vulnerable and abandoned'—The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, health and social care provision for children with SEND: Children and parents' perspectives. *Children & Society*, 37(6), 1915-1932. DOI: 10.1111/chso.12774

Bae, S. H., Jo, M. G., & Han, S. I. (2024). Unmasking student dynamics: the impact of COVID-19 on social-emotional development and learning engagement. *International Journal for Research on Extended Education IJREE*, 11(2), 46–71.

<https://DOI.ORG/10.3224/IJREE.V11I2.05>

Bates, S. & Harrell, D.R. (2023). COVID-19 school closures: Disruptions in school-based support services and socioemotional loss among middle school students. *Journal of School Health*, 94(3), 209–218. DOI:10.1111/josh.13421

Brockmeier, L., Brass, N. R., Bergin, C., & Imler, M. (2024). The return to in-person school:

Teacher reports of student behavior and social–emotional learning. *Children & Schools*, 46(4), 223–231. DOI:10.1093/cs/cdae019

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, July 8). *CDC Museum COVID-19 timeline*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>

Cox, C. F., Messiah, S. E., & Knell, G. (2023). Learning modality and quality of life among US

school-age children during the Coronavirus pandemic. *The Journal of School Health*, 93(6), 441–449. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13298>

Dillmann, J., Sensoy, O., & Schwarzer, G. (2022, March). Parental perceived stress and its

consequences on early social-emotional child development during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 20(4), 524-538. DOI: 10.1177/1476718X221083423

Ebert, T., Goldshmid, N., Sabo, E., & City-Elifaz, E. (2022, December). Effects of COVID-19

lockdowns on the development of educational, social and emotional gaps among children: a retrospective chart review. *Israel Medical Association Journal*, 25(12), 791-796. PMID: 36573771

Gunindi, Y. (2022). The effect of online education on children’s social skills during the COVID-19

pandemic. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 14(5). DOI: 10.26822/iejee.2022.270

Hamilton, L., Gross, B., Adams, D., Pilcher Bradshaw, C., Cantor, P., Gurwitch, R., Jagers, R.,

McBride Murray, V., & Wong, M. (2021, August). How has the pandemic affected

- students' social-emotional well-being? A review of the evidence to date. *Center on Reinventing Public Education*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED614131>
- Hamoda, H. M., Chiumento, A., Alonge, O., Hamdani, S. U., Saeed, K., Wissow, L., & Rahman, A. (2021). Addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown for children's mental health: Investing in school mental health programs. *Psychiatric Services, 72*(6), 729-731. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.202000597>
- Hanley, A., Symonds, J. E., & Horan, J. (2024). COVID-19 school closures and children's social and emotional functioning: the protective influence of parent, sibling, and peer relationships. *Education 3-13., 52*(8), 1452-1463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2154615>
- Help Me Grow MN. (n.d.). *What is social and emotional development*. <https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/HelpfulRes/Articles/WhatSocialDev/index.html>
- Jones, J. M. (2021). The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism: Navigating our path forward. *School Psychology, 36*(5), 427-431. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000472>
- Keles, O., & Ozbey E. Z. (2022). Families with special needs children in Turkey during the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET), 9*(1), 85-103.
- Lehmann, J., Lechner, V., & Scheithauer, H. (2021). School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic: psychosocial outcomes in children - a systematic review. *International Journal of Developmental Science, 15*, 85-111. DOI:10.3233/DEV-220322
- Light-Stevenson, M. A., & Elder, B. C. (2023). Identifying and responding to students' social-emotional learning needs related to COVID-19. *International Journal of Whole Schooling,*

- 19(1), 75-96. <https://research-ebsco-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/c/2onyl7/viewer/pdf/xegse7d65r>
- Linnavalli, T., & Kalland, M. (2021, August 17). Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the social-emotional wellbeing of preschool children and their families. *Education Sciences, 11*, 435. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080435>
- Llorent, V-J., Seade-Mejia, C., & Velez-Calvo, X. (2023). Lockdown, cyberhate, and protective factor of social-emotional and moral competencies in primary education. *Media Education Research Journal, 31*(77), 105-114. DOI:10.3916/C77-2023-09
- Mate, G., & Mate, D. (2022). *The myth of normal: Trauma, illness, & healing in a toxic culture*. Penguin Publishing Group.
- Mazrekaj, D., & De Witte, K. (2024). The impact of school closures on learning and mental health of children: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 19*(4), 686-693. DOI: 10.1177/17456916231181108
- Moriguchi, Y., Sakata, C., Mench, X., & Todo, N. (2024). Socio-emotional behaviors of Japanese children during the COVID-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional study. *SAGE Open, 14*(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241268800>
- Murphy, K., Giordano, K. & Deloach, T. (2023). Pre-K and kindergarten teacher perception of school readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 52*(3), 551–561. DOI:10.1007/s10643-023-01462-2
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). *Education demographic and geographic estimates*. <https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/5305850>

Olympia School District. (2023). *In-person and remote learning updates*.

https://osd.wednet.edu/our_district/district_information/fall_2020_school_reopening_plans

Oppermann, E., Blaurock, S., Zander, L., & Anders, Y. (2024). Children's social-emotional development during the COVID-19 pandemic: Protective effects of the quality of children's home and preschool learning environments. *Early Education and Development, 35*(7), 1432–1460. DOI:10.1080/10409289.2024.2360877

Petlik, A. (2024). The impact of remote learning on the social and emotional needs of students with exceptionalities. *British Journal of Special Education, 51*(1), 85-97.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12498>

Piryatinskya, I., & Ewaldb, J. (2024). Unveiling the hidden impact of school closures and remote learning: academic and emotional challenges. *Journal of Education and Learning, 13*(6), 25-31. DOI:10.5539/JEL.V13N6P25

Rodriguez-Monge, M., Iglesias-Pena, I., & Chiappelli, F. (2023, September 30). CoViD-19 effects on social-emotional development: impact of early intervention. *Bioinformation, 19*(9), 889-892. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10625367/>

Santa-Cruz, C., Espinoza, V., Donoso, J., Rosas, R., & Badillo, D. (2022). How did the pandemic affect the socio-emotional well-being of Chilean schoolchildren? A longitudinal study. *School Psychology, 37*(1), 85-96. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000493>

Santibanez, L. & Guarino, C.M. (2021). The effects of absenteeism on academic and social-emotional outcomes: Lessons for COVID-19. *Educational Researcher, 50*(6), 392–400. DOI:10.3102/0013189x21994488

Schlag, K. E., Torres, E., Gasperecz, J., & Guillot-Wright, S. (2024). A schoolwide social emotional learning and student mental health initiative: Influences on implementation during a transition back to in-person learning. *School Mental Health, 16*, 1336-1348.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-024-09704-3>

Singer, P. A. (2025, May 5). How to fill the America-shaped hole in global health. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/opinion/health-who-membership-trump.html>

U.S. News & World Report. (2025). *Best elementary schools rankings*.

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/washington>

Wythe, J. (2022). An exploration into the implications of the Covid-19 restrictions on the transition from Early Years Education to Key Stage 1 for children with special educational needs and disability – a comparative study. *British Journal of Special Education, 49*(4), 605-627. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8578.12430