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## Early Childhood Educators and Students Lived Experience with Conscious Discipline: Taming the Wild Things

Sierra Rosa Dinges

Missouri State University, [Sierra0594@live.missouristate.edu](mailto:Sierra0594@live.missouristate.edu)

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**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH  
CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE: TAMING THE WILD THINGS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Early Childhood and Family Development

By

Sierra Rosa Dinges

December 2020

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# **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE: TAMING THE WILD THINGS**

Education

Missouri State University, December 2020

Master of Science

Sierra Rosa Dinges

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the essence of student and teacher perceptions of relationships through the implementation and exposure to the program and curriculum Conscious Discipline. The methods used were student interviews, teacher interviews, and a focus group. Participants were video and audio recorded and interviewed, and the focus groups were transcribed. The researcher looked to find themes between the interviews. The study found that teachers' perspectives of relationships included understanding that behavior is a form of communication of an unmet need. Student perspectives showcased that their perspective of their teacher was positive. Three themes were found from the perspective of the School Family: safety, trust, and love.

**KEYWORDS:** social-emotional learning, Conscious Discipline, relationships, perceptions, trauma informed practices, phenomenology

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December 2020

Approved:

Elizabeth King, Ph.D., Thesis Committee Chair

Sarah Jean Baker, Ph.D., Committee Member

Denise Cunningham, Ph.D., Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my “Wild Things” in room 112. Thank you for taming me. 143.

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## CHAPTER I: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is understanding and being able to manage emotions, specifically within social contexts (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). This type of learning is an imperative part of developing young child's whole sense of self. While there are many different formats to Social-Emotional curriculums and interventions, all typically follow a similar model in which they focus on understanding and managing emotions while relating and forming positive relations with others (McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt, & Duncan, 2017). While Social-Emotional Learning has been studied for a long time, the research is still becoming concrete due to the subjectivity of the topic itself (Craig, Brown, Upright, & DeRosier., 2016). Most evaluations of SEL interventions revolve around questionnaires, outside observation, and self- rating scales which makes the information subjective in nature (Craig et al., 2016.) However, social-emotional interventions have been found successful especially for those students who are at-risk for trauma or have behavioral needs (Bailey, Stickle, Brion-Meisels, & Jones, 2019). The National Child Traumatic Stress Institute defines childhood trauma as:

Those who have been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the events have ended. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, such as intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Institute, by the age of sixteen more than two thirds of children have reported at least one traumatic event. Children who have been

exposed to trauma are at-risk for both behavioral and academic challenges in elementary school settings (O’Neill, Guenette, & Kitchenham, 2010). In fact, “environmental factors such as poverty, chronic stress, and trauma can affect brain development to influence children’s capacity to focus attention, recall information, exercise planning and self-control, and get along with others, thereby affecting their lifelong learning, behavior, and health” (Jones, Bailey, & Partee, 2016, p. 53).

Conscious Discipline is a program and curriculum that that is built on the foundation of the importance of human connection. It is an inclusive, multidisciplinary self-regulation program that integrates social-emotional learning, school culture, and discipline. The program and curriculum is “a comprehensive, multidisciplinary self-regulation program that integrates social-emotional learning, school culture and discipline. It is brain-based research and our internal states dictate our behavior. Its goal is to provide systematic changes in schools by fostering the emotional intelligent in adults first and children second.” (Bailey, 2015, p. 12).

In our current American society, the pressure put on and anxiety demonstrated by young children is enormous (Craig et al., 2016). Kindergarten is no longer a place for children to develop a love of learning, but more of a high-stakes testing and academically rigorous environment. This is compounded by, more and more children being exposed to trauma and not being taught the skills to regulate their emotions in a safe and helpful way (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). American early childhood classrooms have a potent mix of anxiety ridden and emotionally underprepared children combined with developmentally inappropriate academic practices. This dangerous mix creates a climate of emotional outbursts and frustration, and not just for the children.

As a Kindergarten/ First-Grade Looping teacher in a Title I trauma sensitive school, I have seen these effects firsthand. Studies show that children's brains grow ninety percent within the first five years of life (Dennis, 2000). During this period, the brain's plasticity makes information easy to absorb (Dennis, 2000). However, children who have been through extreme stress and trauma can have negative effects on their brain development and cause issues such as inattention, anxiety, and lack of self-control. Studies have shown a rise in the number of children starting school without the proper self-help or social emotional skills (Bassok et al., 2016). With these conditions, it will be important to add to the body of research on how we better equip our classroom teachers to mitigate for the ever-growing number of children that enter or reach school or enter schools without social emotional skills.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to study the phenomenon of relationships between students and teachers when Conscious Discipline is being used in early childhood classrooms in a trauma sensitive school. The study looked to uncover the essence of teacher and student experiences with Conscious Discipline and how Conscious Discipline impacted student to teacher relationships. Furthermore, the study compared the lived experiences of both the teachers and students with Conscious Discipline exposure. This research study used the following questions:

1. How are teachers using Conscious Discipline to cultivate student-teacher relationships in early childhood classrooms?
2. How are students experiencing Conscious Discipline to develop student-teacher relationships in early childhood classrooms?
3. How are students experiencing the essence Conscious Discipline compared to teachers?

## **Research Design**

The design of this research will be a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were four teachers individually interviewed and a three-person teacher focus group, as well as individual interviews with students. The teacher focus group meet once, in an interview style format (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The teachers answered open-ended questions in their interview. The students were asked open-ended questions during their interview and also had opportunities to draw or write. The focus group and interview sessions were videotaped and then transcribed. Participants were given pseudonyms if quoted. The researcher also participated in the teacher focus group and kept a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis. The data was analyzed for common themes that emerged from the data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Significance of the Study**

This study will assist in understanding the impact of the social-emotional learning program and curriculum, Conscious Discipline, on student-teacher relationships in early childhood classrooms (prekindergarten through third grade) in a trauma sensitive school. While this study is limited to one public school and seven early childhood classrooms, the intent is to understand the essence of the lived experiences of the teachers and students using Conscious Discipline to develop relationships between students and teachers.

### *Assumptions*

1. Teachers will be honest when participating in focus group or interview.
2. Teachers will implement Conscious Discipline with fidelity.
3. Students will participate and be able to articulate thoughts in one-on-one interviews.

### *Limitations*

1. The small number of participants limits the generalization of the results.
2. One of the classroom intervention teachers is the primary researcher, therefore there may be unintentional bias of implementation or analysis.
3. The group of participants is limited to the Midwest region of the United States.

### *Definition of Terms*

1. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)- the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.
2. Trauma-Sensitive School- as a school that puts not only understanding trauma, but also trauma impact on student learning at the forefront of everything that is done at the school to support students and their families.
3. Emotional self-regulation- to the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is imperative to children's overall development as well as creating a positive learning environment (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). While there is ample research on the understanding and implementation of social-emotional learning and interventions, Social-Emotional Learning Interventions are still not extensively executed (Low, Cook, Smolkowski, & Defosses, 2019). Furthermore, according to the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2012), twenty-six percent of children will witness a traumatic event before the age of four. Therefore, social-emotional learning should be more widely and diligently implemented to help young students be more prepared for school, increase academic outcomes, as well as create overall more empathetic and socially intelligent people.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as, "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003, p. 1). Social-emotional learning is imperative for several reasons. First, "SEL programs can improve students' academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes, as well as classroom climate and teacher practices" (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 12). Second, SEL has essential effects on students in lower socio-economic areas and for students that have been through trauma (Bailey, et al., 2019). Finally, social-emotional learning has presented positive outcomes through a variety of different interventions in different environments and cultures (McClelland, et al., 2017).

## Trauma and the Child

Dr. Van Der Kolk (M.D) the pioneer researcher on trauma with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) says in his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015),

Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors. Research by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witness their mother being beaten or hit (p. 1).

Trauma is all around and what effects one person effects another person completely differently. Trauma impacts everyone, but how it impacts children is quite powerful.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Examples include witnessing violence, physical, sexual, emotional abuse, have a family member attempt or die by suicide. In addition, unstable household environments can also cause a traumatic experience. ACEs are common. Approximately sixty percent of adults report Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or trauma (Gerwin, 2013). The CDC also reported nearly one in six adults in a twenty-five state survey reported they had experienced four or more types of ACEs.

There are many long-term effects of children growing up with toxic stress. For example, they may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships. They may struggle with their mental health or job stability (CDC, 2020). “These effects can also be passed on to their own children. Some children may face further exposure to toxic stress from historical and ongoing traumas due to systemic racism or the impacts of poverty resulting from limited educational and economic opportunities” (CDC, 2020). While SEL curriculums and programs seek to help



students be successful in social-emotional areas, the unintentional lack of diversity and culture competence can create environments and experiences that can hinder students of color.

Therefore, it is imperative that educational professionals become educated in how to incorporate SEL in a culturally responsive way (Ford, 2020). In addition, research states that childhood trauma and stress is the leading cause of morbidity, mortality, and disability in the United States alone (Edwards, Shipman, & Brown, 2005). However, caregiving, such as teaching, can ease the negative effects of stress on children (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

### **Attachment and Trauma**

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) which is typically formed in the first few years of a child's life, explains how the relationship between the parents influences later development and relationships. There are three types of attachment: secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent (Ainsworth, 1979). When positive forms of attachment are neglected, especially in infancy, this can lead to negative effects in brain development and emotional trauma that effects children in elementary settings (O'Neill et al., 2010). Children who experience early trauma may suffer long-lasting deficiencies that can be irreversible or partially irreversible (Cook et al., 2005). Trauma can manifest in elementary classroom settings fear, hyperactivity, aggression, problems in younger children and depression and self-harming behavior (Gabowitz, Zucker, & Cook, 2008). Furthermore, "Children with attachment disruptions or insecure attachments appear to expect to be ineffective with peers and teachers based on their previous experiences in relationships. When teachers were viewed as more caring, the drop-out rate of such children decreased" (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

## **Understanding Trauma Sensitive Schools**

Schools across the nation began to notice a pattern of a significant increase of the amount of students that were having adverse childhood experiences or were at-risk for these experiences. Some schools are attempting to become trauma sensitive by training their educators to recognize signs of trauma, encouraging teachers to structure their classrooms to minimize potential stress triggers, and additional therapeutic supports such as counseling to students most impacted by complex trauma (Howell, Thomas, Sweeney, & Vanderhaar, 2019). These trauma sensitive schools try to help teach regulation and social-emotional skills, so students can become successful in other aspects of their learning.

## **Benefits of Social-Emotional Learning**

Early interventions are key to helping children in learning coping and regulation skills. The CDC recommends teaching social-emotional learning to help prevent and support childhood ACES. Research shows that children who do not meet social and emotional targets in kindergarten can create challenges for teachers in later years (Conners-Burrow, Patrick, Kyzer, & McKelvey, 2017). Social-emotional and academic competence in early childhood have been regularly recognized as imperative forecasters of later functioning (Masten et al., 2005; Olsson, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2013; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Conners-Burrow et al., 2017; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017). Existing research suggests that SEL programs may be particularly important for low-income students, as they are more likely than their affluent peers to be at risk for social, emotional, behavioral, and academic problems (Evans & English, 2002; Raver, Blair, & Willoughby, 2013 as cited in Conners-Burrow et al, 2017). Furthermore, recent studies have found that SEL programs tend to have the greatest effect

on students that struggle with academics, behavior, or live in a lower socio-economic area (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011 as cited in Connors-Burrow et al., 2017).

Teacher and student relationships can have some of the greatest effects on SEL outcomes. Teacher and child relationships are formed through interactions such as, moments of shared interest and problem setting and solving. (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Research shows that the quality of teacher-child relationships has a strong link to children's social-emotional functioning (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Furthermore, increases in the quality of teacher-child relationships over the course of elementary school have a correlation to decreased internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). A positive classroom environment has a strong effect on elementary student's academic achievement in both math and reading (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008).

SEL interventions and curriculums have many benefits for children in early childhood, specifically those who are living in lower socio-economic areas. By creating a positive classroom environment and facilitating purposeful teacher-student relationships, children are more likely to be successful not only in areas of SEL, but academics as well.

### **Conscious Discipline Beliefs**

Conscious Discipline is a brain-based social-emotional learning program that focuses on social-emotional change first within adults, and then within children. While traditional discipline compliance models focus on obedience, awards and punishments, rules, external control, and rejection, the Conscious Discipline community model focuses on connection, community, internal-regulation, acceptance and the Seven Skills of Conscious Discipline, see Table 1 (Bailey, 2015). Conscious Discipline connects the head and the heart by believing that

controlling and changing oneself is possible and has a powerful impact on others, connectedness governs behavior, and the conflict is an opportunity to teach (Bailey, 2015).

Table 1. Seven Powers of Conscious Adults

Seven Powers of Conscious Adults	Outcome or Goal of Power
Power of Perception	No one can make you angry without your permission
Power of Acceptance	Accepting the moment as it is without trying to control
Power of Love	Seeing the best in ourselves and in others
Power of Unity	We are all in this together
Power of Attention	What you focus on is what you get more of
Power of Free-Will	The only person you can change is you
Power of Intention	Mistakes are opportunities to learn

The School Family is the foundation to building successful schools by meeting the need of human connection. The brain is a social organ and by creating a School Family it fosters optimal learning states which include high challenge but low stress, optimizes brain development for academic success, models how values link to both home and school, embeds resilience into school culture, models shared power and democracy, fosters conflict resolution, increases social-emotional learning and promotes the effectiveness of consequences (Bailey, 2015).

The School Family starts with educators understanding the Brain-State Model. This model states there are three parts of the brain: the brain stem, which is the area in control of feeling safe, the limbic system, which is control of the emotional state, and the pre-frontal cortex where problem-solving and critical thinking takes place (Bailey, 2015). Once educators

understand these areas of the brain and how being in each brain state impacts behavior, then educators must become educated on the seven powers of conscious adults.

When it comes to implementing the School Family, teacher-child relationships are put at the forefront. Dr. Bailey states, “Caring relationships create an optimal environment for learning, alter our physiological state, and prime the brain for plasticity” (Bailey, 2015, p.75). Routines, rituals, and structures provide opportunities to implement social-emotional components and add depth in meeting school standards (Bailey, 2015). Routines are defined as “how we teach expected behavior in classrooms and schools” (Bailey, 2015, p. 79). Routines provide predictability and consistency. An example of a routine would be the steps to wash one’s hands after using the restroom. Visual routines answer the question, “Am I safe?”

Rituals are defined as, “an expression of unity that is designated for togetherness and connection” (Bailey, 2015, p.76). Authentic rituals are essential because the connection of these rituals capture and reflect the needs of the group, establish relationships, voice beliefs and celebrations, and heal wounds from hurtful experiences (Bailey, 2015). An example of a ritual would be a greeting or goodbye song as the children enter and leave the classroom. Rituals answer the question “Am I loved?”

Classroom structures is defined as, “the purpose to practice our social and emotional skills in the context of meaningful life events. Structures scaffold executive skills and on a physical level provide supporting materials for routines, rituals, and skills practice” (Bailey, 2015, p. 80). In order to maximize learning, the classroom teacher must create an environment where students can process their emotions. Structures answer the question, “What can I learn from getting along with others?”

## **Practices of Conscious Discipline**

In order to achieve optimal learning, every child must experience a sense of safety (Bailey, 2015). Tools for creating safety are represented by the acronym N.A.R.C.S. (noticing, assertiveness, routines in pictures, composure, and the safekeeper and safe place). Noticing is the act of verbally describing a child's non-verbal actions without judgement with eye contact to foster connection (Bailey, 2015). For example, "I notice that your hands are in fists and your face is scrunched up. Assertiveness is the voice of "no doubt" to communicate clearly and diligently focus on the desired behavior (Bailey, 2015). Routines in pictures promotes a sense of safety and predictability (Bailey, 2015). Composure is the ability to self-regulate and is essential to creating a sense of safety (Bailey, 2015). The role of the safekeeper follows this mantra "It is my job to keep you safe and it is your job to keep it that way". The classroom safe place is a physical location in the room where children can go to regulate their emotions. It has tools to help children calm themselves away from the group. There are five steps to help children regulate once they are in the safe place.

The first step is for the child to realize they are upset and remove themselves to the safe place. The second step is for the child to calm themselves by choosing one of the four breathing strategies (S.T.A.R, Drain, Balloon, or Pretzel). The third step is for the child to identify how they feel by using a feeling buddy or an image from the I Choose board. The fourth step is for the child to choose an activity from predetermined choices such as lotion, books, drawing supplies, or manipulatives. The final step is for the child to learn how to solve the problem. For young children most require assistance from the teacher (Bailey, 2015).

The emotional state plays a role on how one forms relationships, create memories, and express emotions (Bailey, 2015). The combined tools for the emotional state are REJECT:

rituals, encouragement, jobs, empathy, choices, and the school family (Bailey, 2015). As stated before, rituals provide opportunities to connect. Encouragement is accepting the children as they are and by noticing and encouraging helpful behavior (Bailey, 2015). By giving every child a job or purpose in the classroom, this activates the higher centers of the brain by being of service to others (Bailey, 2015). Empathy teaches emotional regulation and teaches children to take personal responsibility for their actions (Bailey, 2015). Choices help children feel in control, fosters cooperation, and enhances decision-making (Bailey, 2015). Calling the group of students in the same classroom a “School Family” and using a healthy family model meets the children’s connection needs (Bailey, 2015).

The executive skills can be accessed in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain and requires relaxed alertness that is supported by positive emotions (Bailey, 2015). The combined tools for problem-solving is SPACE- solutions, positive intent, academic integration, consequences, and executive skills (Bailey, 2015). Solutions is problem-solving and focusing on solutions rather than placing blame. Positive intent is focusing on the positive in even the most challenging children or moments. Academic integration is the process of implementing both social-emotional learning and academic content. Consequences include giving effective and appropriate consequences to help children examine and reflect on their behavior. Executive skills are where adults help to scaffold children’s development to help them be successful (Bailey, 2015).

Social-emotional learning has positive effects on students’ social-emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and academic learning opportunities. Through the implementation of Conscious Discipline children are given the opportunity to learn, practice, and apply social-emotional skills. One of the greatest impacts on social-emotional learning is positive student-

teacher relationships and a positive classroom environment. When these practices and models are put into place, children are more likely to be successful in SEL and academic domains.

Social-emotional learning is important in preparing the whole-child for success. Through examination of program and curriculum Conscious Discipline and trauma-sensitive learning, it is evident that SEL curriculums and interventions contribute skills to assist children in being successful in not only areas of social-emotional learning, but academia as well. Therefore, Social-Emotional Learning should be more widely implemented and executed in order to increase better social, emotional, and academic results as well as giving students the tools to be more emotionally intelligent.



## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The study is phenomenological in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “A Phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). This study employed methods to understand the common meaning and lived experience from both students and teachers of utilizing the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline in a trauma sensitive school. This study was approved by the Missouri State University Institution Review Board (IRB-FY2020-120), dated August 10, 2020, with my previous name of Sierra Smith as the investigator, as seen in Appendix A. “This starting point of phenomenological research is largely a matter of identifying what it is that deeply interests you or me and of identifying this interest as a true phenomenon, i.e., as some experiences that human beings live through” (Creswell, 2013, p. 40). I was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how Conscious Discipline impacts students and teachers in early childhood education.

There are many features of phenomenology research (Creswell, 2013). They include: focus on a phenomenon, exploring the phenomenon with people that have experienced the phenomenon, recognizing the subjective and objective nature of this type of research, bracketing of the researcher, data collection- most often through interviews with those that have experienced the phenomenon, and systematic data analysis to explain "what" has been experienced by the participants and "how" it has been experienced. (Creswell, 2013, p. 79).

While this study included many of the elements for phenomenology research, I was purposeful in choosing to not bracket myself from the research. I participated in the research process with the participants by engaging in dialogues with them during the interviews and a

focus group. Together we were constructing meaning to our lived experiences of using Conscious Discipline in our early childhood classrooms with students.

## **Research Design**

COVID-19 or Coronavirus was an unexpected challenge to this study. This virus impacted the design and analysis of this research in several ways. First it delayed the timeline of the data collection and shorted the time of dwelling. This also caused a challenge when interviewing the students and teachers in addition to transcribing and listening to audio recording due to both participants having to wear a mask. Furthermore, it was difficult for the researcher to read or interpret facial expressions due to the mask covering a majority of the face.

## **Participants**

The first step in the research design was to select teacher participants. I emailed the early childhood teachers (pre-kindergarten through third grade) and the special class teachers in my school (the site of the study) about the study and asked who would be interested in participating in an interview or a focus group session. The teachers that volunteered to be participants, then were interviewed by me during a time that they selected. Most of the interviews occurred at school after school. The interviews were recorded by using computer video or Zoom recordings, as well as an audio recording. The audio recordings were then transcribed within one week of the interview. Educator background and education experiences posted below are in Table 2.

The next step was creating student participants. I selected students based on the rapport that I had with students with the hopes that this would help students feel most comfortable with sharing their truth during the interview. The students that were

Table 2. Educator Background and Experience

Teacher Participant	Educational Background	Total Years Teaching	Total Years Teaching in EC (PK-3rd Grade)
Pre-Kindergarten Teacher	BS in Elementary Education (Certified birth to 6th) Master's in Curriculum and Instruction	8 years	8 years
Kindergarten Teacher	BS in Elementary Education (1-6), Additional certification in Early Education (birth-3rd). Master's in Counseling (in progress)	7 years	6 years
First Grade Teacher	BS in Early Childhood Master's in Early Childhood and Family Development	8 years	8 years
Second Grade Teacher #1	BS in elementary education Master's in Differentiated Instruction	6 years	4 years
Second Grade Teacher #2	B.S in Elementary Education Master's in curriculum and instruction.	4 years	3 years
Third Grade Teacher	B.S. in Elementary Ed. (Early Childhood Certification transferred to MO as 1-6 Bachelors in Elem. ED) Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction Specialist in Curriculum Leadership (in progress)	6 years	6 years
Art Teacher	BS in Art Education with additional certification in elementary education 1-6.	10 years	10 years

approached to participate were students that I have previously had as students in our classroom or I work with their caregiver at our school. Students were asked to participate and like the teachers could remove themselves from the study at any point. Students were interviewed during the school day at the time their homeroom teacher desired. Table 3 shows the participants of the research study, including myself (I was one of the K/1 looping teachers).

Table 3. Participants

Teachers Interviewed	Students Interviewed	Teacher Focus Group
1 Pre-Kindergarten Teacher	1 Pre-Kindergarten Student	2 2/3 Looping Teachers
1 K/1 Looping Teachers	1 Kindergarten Student	1 K/1 Looping Teacher
1 2/3 Looping Teachers	2 First Grade Students	
1 Specials Teacher (Art)	2 Third Grade Students	
Total Teachers: 4	Total Students: 6	Total Teachers: 3

### Interview Design

The interviews were partially structured (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Additional, open-ended questions were asked throughout each interview to probe the participants thinking and gain a deeper understanding of their thinking, their response, and their feelings. The interviews were video recorded, so I could listen to participants responses again during data analysis while also noting non-verbal reactions, such as students shaking their head “yes” or “no”. I also gave students an opportunity to draw or write about their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The student interviews consisted of open-ended questions and conversations that were video recorded (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also kept a reflective journal throughout the

research experience documenting questions, ideas, and connections made metacognitively (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Site of the Study**

The study took place in a public school in a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri that serves students in the surrounding neighborhoods. The school is a Title I trauma sensitive school. “Title I schools are a targeted assistance program, in which the school receives additional federal funding to provide additional services to children that are failing or most at-risk of failing academic standards. Schools in which children from low-income families make up at least forty percent of enrollment are eligible to use Title I funds to operate school-wide programs that serve all children in the school in order to raise the achievement of the lowest-achieving students” (U.S Department of Education, 2018).

Trauma sensitive schools are defined as a school that puts not only understanding trauma, but also trauma impact on student learning at the forefront of everything that is done at the school to support students and their families. Due to the high poverty in the neighborhoods that attend the site of the study this increases the likelihood that students will have high ACE score. And a higher ACE score indicates more trauma or being at-risk to experience trauma. Trauma can take many forms: homelessness, abuse, neglect, exposure to substance abuse, and poverty. The school that is the site of the study is a trauma informed school to better serve our students and their families in their community. This research site was selected as it is my place of employment.

I was the founding Kindergarten/First Grade looping teacher for the school when the school doors opened in August 2019. Before opening this new school, I worked at a different Title I and trauma sensitive school. I was an early childhood education and development major

for my undergraduate education and now have eight years of teaching experiences in early childhood classrooms. Finally, I was first exposed to the Conscious Discipline program and curriculum in the fall of 2012 in a training at my previous school. Since this time, I have been using the Conscious Discipline program and curriculum. Furthermore, I have continued to receive additional Conscious Discipline coaching training and training. I have additional knowledge and skills with not only implementing Conscious Discipline in my classroom, but also supporting other teachers use of Conscious Discipline in their classrooms.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection began with collecting data from the teacher participants. Teachers were interviewed either individually or with a small group, depending on the participant's preference. Teachers were asked nine questions, see Appendix B. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The next step in the data collection were the student interviews. Children were interviewed individually to answer questions about their experiences with their teachers. I also asked open-ended probing questions to solicit more information from the student participants, see Appendix C. All student interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Any student work created by the student was collected at the end of the student interview.

The third piece in the data collection was my reflective researcher journal. This journal was a living and breathing document of the experiences and themes I saw emerge from the data-teacher interviews, the teacher focus group, and student interviews and student work. In the journal, I wrote ideas, questions, anecdotes, and began synthesizing the data. After all data was collected, there will be a period of dwelling, so the essence of lived experience could more fully emerge. (Creswell, 2013).

## **Role of the Researcher**

Phenomenology requires the researcher to take a self-reflective role and is inter-subjective (Van Manen, 1990). As both the classroom teacher and the lead researcher, I had the opportunity to provide a unique lens of inter-connectedness and necessary commentary on the phenomenon of student-teacher relationships. The relationships I have with the teachers and students truly made the interviews feel genuine and insightful, since these are colleagues and friends who walk the same halls of the school building with me every day. Together we are perceiving and living Conscious Discipline in the school with our students. This made the research more collaborative in nature (Creswell, 2013).

The idea of phenomenology states that one cannot reflect and live through an experience simultaneously (Van Manen, 1990). My reflective journal was not only to capture snapshots of my thinking and analysis of the data, but my journal was also an important piece of data collected. While including my own experience can be considered a potential limitation, it can also provide essential analysis. And for this study, including my own lived experiences along with the lived experiences of my participants allowed for deeper analysis (Creswell, 2013).

## **Data Analysis**

It is imperative when interpreting data to keep an open mind throughout the analysis process. The research analysis began by the researcher creating a journal to write down fluid thoughts throughout the experience. The next step was transcribing the interviews of both the teachers and students. The third step was analyzing the data from the student and teacher interviews. The students and teachers were given a number for identification. Each teacher and student were interviewed once. Questions were asked in an open-ended format, so children and teachers could explain and reflect on their personal experiences. When analyzing the data, as the

researcher I listened to the audio recordings, as well as read over the transcripts and used data coding: highlighting similar themes and circling reoccurring words and phrases to assist in finding patterns and similarities in the teachers and students' stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another important aspect of the research design is the dwelling analysis. Dwelling is a period where the researcher experiences empathetic immersion and reflection (Duncan & Rowe, 1993). Dwelling is the process by which phenomenology creates opportunities for the "essence" to reveal itself and speak its narrative into our understanding (Von Eckartsberg, 1998). This period is important as it gives time for authentic analysis of all experiences and perspectives, including the role of the researcher.

The last component of the data analysis is the researcher's reflective journal. Reflective thinking suggest that one can look at past experiences to understand insights to a deeper understanding or meaning (Dewey, 1933). Analysis was collected to add narrative to the study. This reflective journal also helped establish the difference between my thoughts and interpretations and the thoughts and actions of the participants.

To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being. Even minor phenomenological research projects require that we not simply raise a question and possibly soon drop it again, but rather that we "live" this question," that we "become" this question. Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature (Van Manen, 1990, p. 43).

After going through transcriptions and notes the researcher went back again and again until the theme emerged and then utilized quotes and images from the interview to describe the essence of the lived experiences of teachers and students utilizing the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline to help create teacher and student relationships.



## **Ethical Considerations**

Considering the study was working with young children there were two factors that must be considered for ethical practices. The first factor is voluntariness and the second factor is confidentiality (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Parents and guardians were asked if their student could participate and then the children also gave their own consent to participate in the study. Parents and children had the right to withdraw from the research study at any-point during the study. Accommodations were made for families who are non-native English speakers and translation would be provided. Student's information was kept confidential. Students received a random number which will be used when interviewing and observing, so no identifiable information was collected. If names were mentioned in the interviews, the transcription used a pseudonym for protection.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the phenomenon of relationships between students and teachers utilizing the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline in early childhood classrooms in a trauma sensitive school. The research study looked to find the essence of the lived experiences of teacher and student experiences with Conscious Discipline and also how Conscious Discipline impacts student-teacher relationships. Furthermore, the study compared the lived experiences of both the teachers and students with Conscious Discipline exposure. The study looked to answer three research questions:

1. How are teachers using Conscious Discipline to cultivate student-teacher relationships in early childhood classrooms?
2. How are students experiencing Conscious Discipline to develop student-teacher relationships in early childhood classrooms?
3. How are students experiencing the essence Conscious Discipline compared to teachers?

The student interviews and drawings, teacher interviews and focus groups, images and my research journal were the data of the study. The analysis of this data discovered four themes: The Purpose of Teaching, Teacher Perceptions and Conscious Discipline, Student Perceptions and Conscious Discipline, and the School Family. The analysis also discovered the overall essence of the lived experience of using Conscious Discipline is *Taming the Wild Things*.

### **The Purpose of Teaching**

Perhaps Mister Fred Rogers said it best, “Love is at the root of everything; all parenting, all learning, all relationships... love, or the lack of it.” After interviewing the teachers, every

teacher understood that the foundation of learning is fostering a positive relationship with each of their students. Working in a trauma sensitive school, this adds more of a challenge because it can be difficult for the children to trust adults and also express their emotions in a safe and helpful way. When I asked teachers what a positive student-teacher relationship looked like during the interview or focus group their responses were similar. This kindergarten teacher response highlights the responses:

I think it's full respect, I think, especially in the younger grades, it can be really hard to do. Like the adult feels like they should always be in charge. And I think it's kind of amusing what kids can do. And I would hope my kids, and I've had them do this, feel comfortable correcting me. And I always tell my kids, I'm listening to you, as long as you're being respectful. Um, and so I think kids who are invested in their learning and they feel safe making mistakes, and then are willing to respectfully disagree with. I mean, they're learning those skills to be able to advocate for themselves. I think, at this age is what I want. I'm trying to think. Just the kids feel safe.

A third grade teacher said, "I think telling each of them that you love. You know, tell him that you love them because they don't necessarily get that at home." And I commented that, "I think that ensuring the kids feel unconditionally loved is so important. And I think there are many ways to show and share that you love someone. We talk about that in my class all the time. We write notes, we do sign language for I love you... just the other day my students were building with blocks and they write out 'I love you' blocks," as shown in Figure 1.

I continued to ask what the teachers thought the purpose of teaching was for them. The art teacher replied:

My philosophy is, you know, the kids come first and art comes second. So, maybe we don't get to the projects we are supposed to get to, you know, the issue of someone having a meltdown or someone upset or mad, I feel like it's really important to take that time and,

help them figure out how to get out of it, you know, and how to processes. Yeah because that's my job to show them how to process emotions.

A kindergarten teacher stated, “I’ll say, my goal is to inspire kids to love learning and be contributing members of their community, wherever that is, whatever they decide to do, just make a positive contribution. When they’re little, I think teaching them about their emotions and teaching them how to work through emotions is important. I think teaching that is so important.”

My comment was:

I always say I learn more from the kids than I could ever teach them. Looking at the world through their eyes is so amazing. Especially our kids that have been through so much and are yet so resilient. There’s an ongoing joke about Kindergarten/ First Grade looping teachers as being the ones that “tame the wild things”, but when I truly think about it, they are the ones that tamed me. In one of my favorite children’s books, *The Little Prince*, the fox talks to the Little Prince about what it means to tame something. He says, if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.

This quote perfectly describes the purpose of teaching and the purpose of those relationships from the data.



Figure 1. I love you blocks.

## Teacher Perceptions and Conscious Discipline

Overall, teachers found Conscious Discipline to be helpful in fostering positive student teacher relationships. The first step in being successful with the curriculum and program is understanding the process of social and emotional regulation starts with the adults. One of the pre-kindergarten teachers stated:

I think the big thing is understanding your own relationship with yourself, how you how you experience your own highs and lows and your own emotions so that you are prepared for whatever the children are going to give you so that you can meet them where they are not kind of where you are. And of course, you want to build those relationships with their interests and, and, you know, liking them but then also making sure that you're regulated enough that you can help them regulate through their feelings and experiences. But ultimately, they have to know that you're there to keep them safe and, and teach them and that you are invested and not in temporary investment, but it's a whole investment that is going to carry with them.

Another important aspect was understanding the brain states and also understanding how trauma impacts the brain. "The Conscious Discipline Brain State Model recognizes the brain has three basic mind/body/mind states. The purpose in identifying these states is to help internalize what state the child is most likely experiencing and then assist them in achieving the ultimate state of learning" (Bailey, 2015, p.34). All the teachers interviewed or that participated in the focus group mentioned the brain states and how learning cannot happen in the survival (brain stem), and emotion (limbic system) states. The Brain State Model suggests first addressing the safety needs, then the emotional needs, before being able to access the learning state. A kindergarten teacher stated:

For me, like, Conscious Discipline has made me conscious of how I view kids and their behaviors. I think has really put an emphasis on meeting their needs and filling in the gaps, like, they have to have to have social emotional awareness, or else, they're not

going to be successful in school. And so for me, it feels like, as much of my job is to teach them those skills. And I think Conscious Discipline gives me some good tools to use. I think incorporating the socio-emotional learning into the day, just, you know, all day and teaching kids to be helpers and look for opportunities. That's not necessarily the approach I had in my first couple of years.

The teachers were also asked what they had learned from Conscious Discipline and how it impacted their relationships with their students. This is what was shared by a pre-kindergarten teacher:

The positive behavioral interventions and support methods like that I already I already felt like, giving rewards for kids having positive behaviors wasn't the best practice. There is always a part of you, there's always a part of you that thinks if everyone in the entire country is doing this, or if at home, every family is saying, you know, 'just do this and then you can have a cookie at the end' or whatever it is, we are so reward driven. But I felt like the biggest thing for me is going through and, and noticing. Not only is it not helping our kids, but it's putting them at a deficit.

And the art teacher stated, "I just feel like whatever problem, it can be fixed. You know, like, we all make mistakes, I make mistakes."

A second grade teacher elaborated on this thinking by discussing the importance of seeing children as human beings- that they are worthy and deserving of respect, regardless of their young age.

Just treating them more like equals or not equals but like, like people. Like, if I'm not sure about how to do something with them. I'm like, 'Would I want to be talked to like this?' 'If I'm having a problem, do I want this as a consequence, or will it make me more mad', just seeing them more as a whole person. And they are really little, they don't know. Nothing's personal, you know, you just don't know. They are just missing skills.

When teachers understood that the process starts with them, how the brain states work, and learned to see behavior as a form of communication, then next step was to create a positive

classroom environment with the Conscious Discipline tools to help students be successful. Every teacher interviewed or participated in a focus group did a daily morning meeting, used some form of greeting, had classroom jobs for every student, and had a safe place in their classrooms that students could go to and use various tools to calm down. I asked teachers to give examples of when they used Conscious Discipline techniques to help a child when they were exhibiting behaviors of distress. One of the second grade teachers said,

One of my students, he got really upset because he felt like he didn't get enough time on his Chromebook. And so he like pulled himself up in a little ball and got into his cubby, and I just wanted to go over there and hold him but I couldn't so I got down on his level and asked him what was wrong he told me that he didn't get enough time, I just explained how we would have more time and talked through with them and I offered him to go to them peace corner that is what I call my safe place and, you know, he was like, I don't need that. And I said, well, what do you need to do to be okay? Like it just, he's like, he took a deep breath and he was like, I think I'm ready to try to be okay. He just like, went and sat down and that was like a huge win for me today.

A kindergarten teacher said:

I think for me, it seems like, what I have picked up on from Conscious Discipline is that it's about understanding kids and helping them understand their feelings, and like giving them what they need. I'll never forget, we were on the playground, and my student she was upset, and she was sitting on the ground, rocking and crying. And I call it my mom heart, my mom heart said, she just needs a hug. And so that was where that whole thing started was I just sat down, and put her into my lap and hugged her, and then I swear, you could see the switch flip for her. Like, you put her in her lap, and it's like a glazed over look and then after 30 seconds like she's back and right and is okay.

This particular teacher also uses Conscious Discipline with her daughter at home. So, she also shared how she has been able to use the knowledge and skills she's gained from the program and curriculum Conscious Discipline at home with her daughter. She said,

I was actually frustrated with my daughter and I just stopped what I was doing and took a moment to breathe. And I don't remember which one I was, I think I was doing was the pretzel and she saw me doing it. She was like, "I know that" because they were using Conscious Discipline at school and she started doing it with me, and whatever the conflict was, it just went away and you're like, breathing together. And it just felt a lot better to solve the problem that way.

I added on that,

I think Conscious Discipline has just really shown me how important repetition and patience is during the process. So, I keep my kids for two years, so I had them the summer before Kindergarten, I had them in kindergarten, and now I have them in first grade. I had one student who when she came to summer school before kindergarten started, I remember she was being CPSI restrained in the hallway on our way to breakfast. This child had been so clearly neglected. She could not speak, she was not potty trained, and she was riddled with lice and fleas. During summer school, I literally carried her around like a baby or she would cling onto my body as I was teaching. During kindergarten she slowly started making progress, first by potty training her and changing her clothes when she got to school. Then I taught her basic sign language so we could communicate. She slowly started speaking in a whisper voice to me, but she primarily spoke in vowels so it was hard to understand. She had developed extreme separation anxiety clinging onto my body at the end of the day saying she didn't want to go home. I used the tools that I learned from Conscious Discipline and slowly started to scaffold her social-emotional skills. Now she speaks so much more clearly, she plays with other students, she shares out loud, and she does her schoolwork. When she gets upset she asks for a hug or to sit on my lap, or go to the safe place. And I do not think I could have been that teacher without the skills, tools, and knowledge of Conscious Discipline.

Conscious Discipline taught teachers to see behavior of "the wild" as a form of communication- as a need not being met. By making this shift in perception, teachers were able to see what needs their students were missing and were able to use the Conscious Discipline tools to help students learn to better regulate their emotions. When students become more regulated with their emotion, then an optimal learning environment is created. The "wild" is just a form of communication and the way to tame that "wild" is through empathetic, loving, and intentional relationships. Taking the time to notice, co-regulate, and creating a feeling of safety create a foundation for purposeful meaningful relationships.



## **Students and Conscious Discipline**

As a Kindergarten/First Grade looping teacher I am, along with my team often the student's first teachers and first experiences at school. Only a handful of our students have prior preschool or school setting experiences. In addition to this reality, from my experiences working with children that have experienced trauma the students do not often have the knowledge or skills from social-emotional learning like self-regulation

**Students' View of Teachers.** I started off each student interview giving students a blank sheet of paper and some crayons and asked them to draw a picture of their teacher. I then asked them what they like about their teacher. A third grade student said, "She's kind and helpful, and amazing, nice and kind and careful. And when we give her gifts and she doesn't expect it she loves it. And something funny about her is, um, for our spelling, one of my spelling words, this week. We have coffee because she loves coffee." When asked how they knew their teachers cared for them one student said: "She's like, she helps us whenever we like need help. She even helps us and helps us grow. And she like tells you to do your best. And it doesn't matter what other people say. It matters what you think. And a lot of stuff. I love her." Another third grade student said, "I told my mom last night well, last weekend that when she was making her finishing touches on her like stuffed animal buddy that she made and I told her that you can do this and it's okay to mess up. You can mess up and it will be okay."

In my classroom during the very first week of Kindergarten, we do a lesson on persevering that correlates with the book *The Little Engine That Could*. This lesson comes from Tara West from Little Minds at Work (West, 2017). We read the book and we talk about the word persevere and what that means. We even have a little chant we say every day where we say, "We do our best and persevere!" I ask them what that means and they say, "We keep trying,

keep trying and never give up.” So, at parent-teacher conferences I am talking with a student’s mother and she tells me that her brother had been shot the week before and when she started crying about this situation that her five-year-old son came up to her, placed his hand on her and said, “It’s okay, mom. You just have to try your best and persevere. Keep trying, keep trying, and never give up.” After hearing this mother share her story, I could not help but think about how these kids are truly are capable of anything. We just have to make give time to teach and support them in their development.

Each of the students interviewed could describe their classroom safe place, the Conscious Discipline tools they had available to them, as well as how and when the tools were used. A kindergarten student told me when they use the calm down area, shown in Figure 2, and how it helped them regulate their emotions, along with other students interviewed.

Student: When you feel mad or sad.

Me: Then, I asked. Yeah. So, have you ever been to the calm down area?

Student: Yeah.

Me: How did you feel when you went to the calm down corner?

Student: Super-duper, super-duper mad.

Me: And what happened in the calm down the center that helped you calm down

Student: Thinking putty. Yeah. And taking deep breaths like \*makes breathing sound\*.

Me: How do you help your body feel better?

Student: My teacher taught us to rub our hands together like this and then take a dee breath like this. I do it like that.

Me: So whenever you feel upset at school, how do you handle your feelings?

First Grade Student 2: Actually, actually sometimes I feel nervous.

Me: You did get nervous and what did you do? Did you go over to the safe place?

First Grade Student 2: Yes.

Me: Yeah. Can you talk to me about our safe place? What does our safe place look like?

First Grade Student: Okay. There's some fidgets and timers.

Me: Uh huh. Yes. What about the animals over there?

First Grade Student 2: Gus Gus and Lulu!

Me: How do they help you?

First Grade Student 2: You can snuggle them and take care of them

Me: What does the yellow mat do? Yeah, that helps you do what do you remember?

First Grade Student 2: It helps us solve problems.



Figure 2. Students using the Conflict Resolution Time Machine with a peer mediator and a child observing.

All students repeatedly brought up the theme of safety. A first grade student said, “Number one thing is for you to keep us safe and it’s our job to keep it that way.” A kindergarten student said, “The first rule is be safe. And we have to safe in PE too.” Another first grade student shared that, “My teacher she helps me be safe by learning to be nice to other people.”

Students also felt they could trust their teacher. When I asked all of them who they could go to when they were upset they all answered with their teacher’s name. Two of the students had mothers who work in the building and they mentioned their teacher first when I asked the question. My analysis of this is that when students think of school and their teacher, they think of them as someone safe and someone they can trust. Through the picture analysis it can be inferred that the students think highly and even love their teacher. While the students themselves may

not see themselves as “wild things” they could differentiate between safe and unsafe (“wild”) behaviors and knew of people and tools they could use when feeling “wild”.

### **The School Family**

In her book *Conscious Discipline: Building Resilient Classrooms* (2015), Dr. Bailey says, “The School Family models what a healthy family should look like, feels like, and sounds like. Regardless of the matter of dysfunction previously experienced, every child (and adult) in the School Family will experience a blueprint for healthy communication and a healthy family structure (p. 82). After talking to both the students and the teachers there three themes that came up in every single interview: safety, trust, and love.

**Safety.** Dr. Bailey writes, “Safety meets the developmental needs of the survival state. It is the foundation on which all else is built” (p. 20). Without safety, it’s nearly impossible to develop trust and love in a relationship. One teacher shared “I feel like my purpose is to make sure my students feel safe, welcomed, loved, cared for them, all their needs met. And like this is, you know, this is eight hours of the day where they can come and be safe.” By teachers starting to become brain-state aware and making the conscious effort to find safety in themselves and safety in their environment, teachers set the tone for building a relationship.

**Trust.** Creating intentional moments for connection help bridge connections to trust. By doing greetings, I Love You Rituals, making eye contact, touch or playful scenarios “produce oxytocin, the hormone associated with social bonding and love, every time we have these moments with our children. Our chemistry literally sends the message that we are connected throughout our body and our brain” (Angulo, 2017). A second grade teacher said,

So once they get it and once that trust is there, like our kids can truly do anything that they put their minds to. I feel like a lot of teachers come in here and they're like, Oh, they can't do it. Like, they can't do this, they can't do that, like, I hate when people put our kids down and say kids can't do, they can do just as much as any other child, once you build that relationship with them and have that trust. It just takes a little bit more effort than say the normal classroom.

**Love.** While both teachers and students shared about loving each other. One of the most interesting findings is how that love and the idea of the School Family translated into student to student relations. When speaking with a third grade student, she shared with me about her relationship with another student in the class.

Student: Corey\* and I are cousins. Well, Corey and I aren't really cousins, but at school it like reunites us and makes us feel like cousins. So we like, tell each other your aunt's my aunt and my aunt your aunt and my uncle's your uncle or your uncle's my and other stuff. Cause we play together a lot.

Me: I bet that helps Corey a lot too, doesn't it?

3rd Grade Student: It makes him happy. He told me that makes him feel like he has someone to talk to.

Me: That makes my heart so happy to hear that. As I remember whenever Corey used to really struggle to make safe choices at school, and now he has someone that cares about him and that's so wonderful that that person can be you.

In the School Family everyone is loved and accepted as they are. Students and teachers have a mutual reciprocal relationship that strengthened by connection and commitment. Using the Skills of Empathy (emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and mature empathy) (Bailey, 2015), relationships are formed that create feelings, of safety, unconditional love, and acceptance. These relationships are not limited to teacher to student but include student to student relationships as well. In the School Family everyone belongs and is embraced as the “wild things” they are.

## Conclusion

“The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence- in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36). This phenomenological study sought out to understand teacher and student perceptions of relationships through the lens of Conscious Discipline and how their perceptions correlated with each other.

By essence we do not mean some kind of mysterious entity or discovery, nor some ultimate core or residue of meaning. Rather, the term “essence” may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon. A good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way. When a phenomenologist asks for the essence of phenomenon- a lived experience- then the phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavor, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive. So, an appropriate topic for phenomenological inquiry is determined by the questioning of the essential nature of a lived experience: a certain way of being in the world. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39)

These are the lived experience of being in the world of a Conscious Discipline classroom in a Title I trauma sensitive school. In this way of being in the world, as a classroom early childhood teacher is different than other lived experiences of teachers. And the essence that was discovered of this lived experience is taming the wild things. The essence of taming the wild things is both “holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39). Taming the wild things is the lived experience or the feeling that is experienced by the early childhood teachers at a trauma informed school that uses the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline. “But why do we need to collect the data of

other people's experiences? We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62). Through the lived experience of taming the wild things, a light has been shown on the process and development of creating teacher and student relationships and how the relationships impact not only the teacher and child, but the school, as well.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### **Conscious Discipline, the School Family, and Beyond**

**Administration and Beyond.** In order for Conscious Discipline to be the most effective program there needs to be support at the top or with school leadership. Conscious Discipline believes that change starts with the adult, so it only makes sense that this vital transformation starts at the top in school districts. In fact, one teacher even mentioned,

I think not only does it (Conscious Discipline) need to be touched upon, not only do we need to be trained, but we need to be bombarded with it. We need to be bombarded with it at professional development and we need it in the aesthetics of our building, I think it needs to engulf everything that we do. But I would like to see especially in light of recent events (reference to Black Lives Matter Movement in Summer of 2020), I think that it is something that could go as high as police academy training. Especially when according to the research in the book, some of these kids get to these certain [brain] states, almost like a personality, where their trauma completely dictates their personality. And they don't age out of that. And if our police officers and other people in these service industries would be able to have the tools and things to help, I mean, even if they're working with adults, they're working with that broken child.

From this perspective, having school administrators and even leaders in the community (e.g. police chief, church leaders, emergency responders) understand and using Conscious Discipline beliefs could create changes in communities that would better support families and children.

Teachers have the most direct impact with Conscious Discipline when working with students. Education with the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline helps teachers see behavior as a form of communication on an unmet need. A Kindergarten teacher stated, "I saw something I think it was like, last year that said, instead of calling it an attention, seeking behavior, call it a relationship seeking behavior." Giving teachers proper hands-on training and



the tools to for students to be successful in the self-regulation of their emotions which allows them to think in their pre-frontal cortex, the optimal learning state. For teachers to be best supported in order to be successful in implementing the program and curriculum Conscious Discipline, there needs to be complete buy-in from administration, teachers, and support staff. Teachers would need professional on-going hands-on training. Resources such as visuals and items for the classroom safe places should be provided. Having these things helps teachers teach children how to self-regulate. When students know how to self-regulate there are better opportunities for deeper learning experiences and decrease behavior issues.

**Students.** The heart and soul of Conscious Discipline is helping children learn and recognize emotions and tools to be able to self-regulate for optimal learning experiences. When students learn self-regulation skills and other social-emotional techniques, not only does this help create opportunities for success in the classroom but creates infinite opportunities for the future. Today's employers are looking for twenty-first century skills such as, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. When students have a strong foundation in social-emotional learning, they are more prepared to achieve these skills. Having children be aware of their feelings and being able to express them in a healthy way creates adults that are less likely to suppress emotions that could potentially reappear in the future in a negative impact. Through empathy and confidence building (components of the Conscious Discipline program and curriculum) children teach each other and this showcases the true essence of comprehension. For example, one pre-kindergarten teacher shared,

The students would always say to a struggling friend, we're counting on you. You can do this, you can do hard things. And so once I started to kind of give my kids those mantras, they would say you look sad. Maybe you need something, you know, maybe you want to blow on the pinwheel, we can ask our teacher if you can get the pinwheel. Or maybe someone saw it looks like they might need like a squishy ball. Let's get it. Or if they

noticed, even if it wasn't a job that that student had the hand sanitizer job that day, but another student was having a rough time, my kids would say I was going to do this, but you look like you might want to help and giving that sense way, with how selfish they are just at that age. Yeah that's it was incredible.

The students were using the skills they were learning to not only regulate their own emotions, but they were using them to support their peers with regulating their emotions. They were teaching and supporting each other.

### **Theory Versus Practice Challenges**

The ideas of safety, trust, and love mentioned in the School Family connect to the idea of “Maslow before Bloom”. While it seems that "Maslow before Bloom" is a common thread in the teacher interviews and teacher focus group being able to implement this belief is not always easy for teachers. The idea behind the use of this phrase is to ensure that the student’s Maslow hierarchy of needs (first physiological needs, then safety needs, and so on with love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs) are met before teachers attempt to have students meeting Bloom’s Taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) or their ability to process and learn (Maslow, 1943; Bloom, 1956). While Dr. Bailey’s Conscious Discipline program and curriculum adheres to this belief, there are many challenges that come with putting this theory into action.

For starters, the pressure for academic testing has never been higher. Rather than returning from the pandemic school closings and focusing on triaging with our students from the pandemic, we were asked to administer district assessments. One teacher shared, “It’s challenging you know, you have the principal, you have your instructional coach, you have everyone saying, “Get this test, get this data, do that, you should be here academically because

they are constantly like “data, data, data, but you didn't get me enough data for this!” Especially this early in the year, but I just want to be here for them (the students).”

Another obstacle for teachers is class sizes. While the pandemic has capped our classes at no more than 16 students to allow for social distancing in the classroom, typically our class size was at 27 or 28 students in a single classroom with only one teacher. One teacher shared, “It can be very challenging to be able to help assist a child de-escalate or co-regulate with when you have twenty other students that you are trying to teach.”

Another implication of large classes that was discussed during the teacher interviews and focus groups is the challenge of the amount of time it can take to build relationships. A teacher shared, “Sometimes the trauma creeps up, and they want to shut down, they're having big feelings, but we don't have that rapport yet, where they can talk to me about what's really at the root of it. Part of the problem is that takes time.” Another teacher added on, “Also we only have so long with them every day. And we only have five days a week. And just it takes the timing set to build the relationships. And I feel like by the time like, we're really at a solid relationship, it's time for summer, or it's time for another break.”

To add to the challenges, schools are struggling to have the needed professional support. The state of Missouri has recommendation guidelines for staffing. For example, the staffing recommendations for a school counselor is 250 students for each school counselor (Missouri Dept of Elementary and Secondary Education). The reality is these recommendations often look much different in practice. For example, school counselors and psychologists are often split between multiple school buildings, so they are many times when a school counselor is not even present if a student or family needs the support of the school counselor or it may take some time before they can get on the school counselor's schedule. This leaves most of the responsibility to

support students' social and emotional wellbeing to teachers, who are also in-charge of student learning and academic success. Not to mention teachers are often also struggling with their own secondary trauma from working with students that have experienced trauma.

### **Future Studies**

Recommendations for future studies suggest constructing the same research in multiple Title I trauma sensitive buildings that use Conscious Discipline to further understand the lived experiences of teachers and students utilizing Conscious Discipline to support student and teacher relationships. Furthermore, reproducing the study in another demographic may or may not produce similar results. Another recommendation for future studies is examining the lens of administrative perspectives after receiving training. There is fundamentally no education in administration training on human development or social-emotional learning leading to a deficit on how understanding the basics of SEL (New America, 2015). Some principals have said they learned some of this information while on the job rather than prior (New America, 2015). The final recommendation for future studies is by preparing educators to be culturally responsive social-emotional classrooms. "Before they ever step into a classroom, teachers need to work in urban school communities to understand the beauty and the difficulty of teaching in that environment and to examine how racism functions to allow schools to be under resourced and students labeled at-risk" (Love, 2020, para. 9). While there is no magic wand to fix these problems, the first step is to educate and expose educators at all levels to different experiences to broaden their perspectives in order to take action to make an imperative impact not only in the education system, but in the communities and the education system (Love, 2020).

One limitation in the research was the impact of COVID-19. Producing a study that is not being implemented under the situations of the pandemic may also create a difference in data collection and analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The lived experiences of early childhood educators and students that used Conscious Discipline highlights the important work of social-emotional learning in schools. Most importantly the program and curriculum of Conscious Discipline allowed teachers to understand their students' behaviors more comprehensively, which in turn allowed students to feel positively about their teachers. While more research is still needed to understand students' perceptions of Conscious Discipline, this research study has provided a foundation of knowledge for teachers and school leaders. There should be no greater task in our communities than to make certain all students feel safe, loved, and trust with the adults in their school building, and feel like they belong to a community, or School Family; and most of all, that our most precious "Wild Things" tame us just as much as we tame them.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: IRB Approval

Date: 11-5-2020

IRB #: IRB-FY2020-120  
Title: Effects of Social-Emotional Interventions in Kindergarten Classrooms  
Creation Date: 9-10-2019  
End Date:  
Status: **Approved**  
Principal Investigator: Sarah Baker  
Review Board: MSU  
Sponsor:

### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	<b>Approved</b>
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### Key Study Contacts

Member	Sarah Baker	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	sarahjeanbaker@missouristate.edu
Member	Sierra Smith	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	srs17@live.missouristate.edu

## **Appendix B: Teacher Questions**

Describe the relationships you have with your current students?

What is a struggle you have when building relationships with students?

How do you define- positive student-teacher relationship?

What do you think about Conscious Discipline?

How have you used Conscious Discipline when a student was expressing a disruptive behavior (such as: verbal or physical aggression) or was upset (such as: crying or withdrawn)?

What have you learned from Conscious Discipline that has changed your perception of teaching or your idea of student-teacher relationships?

How do you implement Conscious Discipline routines and rituals in your classroom?

What is the purpose of teaching?

How has the use of Conscious Discipline influenced the relationship you have with your students?

## **Appendix C: Student Questions**

What do you like best about your school? Teacher?

Who helps you at school during the school day when you need help?

Do teachers care about you? Why do you think yes? Why do you think no?

*While this may be a yes/no question by asking why, I was able to hear the thinking and reasoning of the student/child.*

When you feel upset at school how do you deal with/manage your feelings? Describe what this looks like or tell me more about what this would look like at school.