

**A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THE SAFE ENVIRONMENT  
CURRICULUM AND IMPLEMENTATION**

by

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## Abstract

In 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in response to the staggering amount of sexual abuse allegations against clergypersons in the Catholic Church. The adoption of this Charter led to the creation and country-wide mandate of The Safe Environment Program and curriculum in 2003. This evaluation report uses qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to assess the effectiveness and overall worth of the Safe Environment curriculum. Stakeholders who engage and are impacted by the curriculum participated in the study and helped guide the inquiry in answering the evaluation questions. Data findings indicate a strong desire for improvement in the curriculum's relevance and implementation. Instructional and communication gaps were also identified. Further exploration of the findings and recommendations are discussed in-depth.

*Keywords:* safe environment curriculum, learning theory, behaviorism, constructivism, social learning theory, Catholic church, archdiocese

## Dedication

I wholeheartedly dedicate this evaluation study to my husband, Angel, our children Sophia, Emma, Lucas, parents, Luis and Melida, sisters Lucy and Mely, and my great friend, Hillary.

Angel, my husband and best friend, you have been my biggest cheerleader and source of my inspiration. Thank you for your unwavering belief in me, unyielding love, and incredible support. I could not imagine this adventure without you.

To my children, my reasons for being Sophia, Emma, and Lucas. Thank you for having patience and understanding when Mom needed to work but also showering me with hugs and love when Mom turned off the computer. What I do, I do for you.

Mom and Dad me has mostrado lo que significa ser una trabajadora dura y dedicada. Gracias por ser mi fundación y criar a mis hermanas y a mí para caminar siempre con confianza, compasión y humildad.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Like many Archdioceses worldwide, the Archdiocese of focus for this evaluation study has been plagued by years of sexual abuse scandals and the clergyman's unethical behavior. The research site's beloved parish priest was accused of sexual abuse by a prior parishioner from over 20 years ago. The community was shaken, and a distinct line was drawn; the believers of the accuser and the non-believers. In the end, the Vatican relieved the parish priest of his duties, and the parish now has a permanent scar shared by the community. This case is just one example of the many sexual abuse cases reported against Catholic church clergy members. In response to these highly immoral actions, in 2002, the United Conference of Catholic Bishops created the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People by the United States' Bishops and the Safe Environment program.

### **Background and Context**

A vital component of the Safe Environment program is the Safe Environment curriculum, whose implementation meets the mandates identified in Articles 12 and 13 of the Charter. The Safe Environment curriculum's goal is to teach students the importance of respecting their bodies and ensuring others do so while maintaining the element of religious instruction. The Archdiocese provides the principals of their schools with a binder of age-appropriate lesson plans that are then distributed to each teacher responsible for instructing religious education; however, the implementation of these lessons is often not observed by the principal. The Safe Environment curriculum components, available on the Archdiocese's website, consist of a parent letter introducing each lesson, a lesson plan for teachers who instruct students, PowerPoint slides to support each lesson, and a parent overview letter to bridge the lessons into the home. Data

regarding long-term outcomes of the program's effectiveness, regarding students' development of a deep understanding of the content, is not currently available.

### **Organizational Context**

The Safe Environment curriculum has been instructed to students at School ABC since 2003, when the curriculum was launched. School ABC is a Catholic elementary school located in the United States' Northeast region, with approximately 250 students, and serves students in grades Pre-K to 8<sup>th</sup> in a low to the mid-socio-economic community. The faculty includes less than 20 non-ordained teachers, including specials (art, music, technology, and physical education) and one teacher aide for Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. As School ABC is an elementary school, data collection focused on gaining clarity on stakeholders' perspectives regarding the Safe Environment curriculum and its instructional implementation for grades from one to eight. Stakeholders are identified as educators who instruct students in the Safe Environment lessons, the principal, parents, and students in grades six to eight. Due to the pandemic, School ABC offers in-person and remote asynchronous instruction, which has proved to weigh heavily on the planning and teaching of content that may not be considered a priority, such as Safe Environment.

### **Rationale for the Evaluation**

There is a need to determine the level of effectiveness regarding implementing the Safe Environment curriculum. Teachers implement these lessons once a year, which may or may not be sufficient for students to develop a deep and meaningful understanding of the program's objectives. This study aims to present a comprehensive evaluation report regarding the Safe Environment curriculum's effectiveness and the extent that the curriculum meets its objectives. The content within this plan includes an extensive review of the program's goals, the role of

participants and stakeholders within the Safe Environment curriculum, and literature which aided in acquiring knowledge to identify areas needed for development and ongoing improvement. No previous evaluations have been conducted on the Safe Environment Program's curriculum component at the research site or within this state's archdiocese.

### **Review of the Literature**

The Safe Environment curriculum has not been the subject of past program evaluations; however, general child abuse prevention programs and evaluations of specific types or models of prevention programs have been highlighted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Findings demonstrated that programs deemed effective include teacher training that enhanced the teachers' knowledge of identifying abuse, reporting procedures, and treatment alternatives, which led to the children's enhanced knowledge of sexual abuse. For any curriculum to be effective, best practices in education must be researched and utilized when implementing instruction. The Safe Environment curriculum should not be the exception, as the content being taught is vital to a child's mental health and physical safety. The curriculum was created and instructed to students using a teacher-centered approach, which coincides with behaviorism learning theory; student engagement and interaction with the content are minimal, impeding deep understanding. In contrast, constructivism and social learning theories provide ample opportunities for discussion, reflection, and student-centered learning.

### **Evaluation Plan**

The evaluation plan used to assess the Safe Environment curriculum was the Program Evaluation Model 9 Steps Process, developed by Janet Wall. Wall's process allowed the researcher to take a systemic approach in acquiring data on the curriculum and determined how it influences students and other stakeholders. This approach is beneficial as each step allowed for a

thorough, in-depth look at the curriculum and its purpose, resulting in identified improvement areas. Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used to gain perspectives from all stakeholders who guided the inquiry on identifying the curriculum's strengths, possible areas of improvement, and any modifications that should be applied.

### **Stakeholders, Participants, and Target Audience**

The evaluation study's key stakeholders are identified as the educators responsible for teaching students the Safe Environment lessons, principal, parents, and students. Participants who engaged in data collection guiding the program evaluation were nine educators, grades one to eight, the school principal, 37 parents of children in varying grades, and 29 students in grades six to eight. The target audience is those stakeholders within the educational setting who often engage with the program being evaluated; therefore, the evaluation's target audience is the educators of grades first to eight who teach students the Safe Environment lessons and School ABC's principal.

### **Evaluation Questions**

The following evaluation questions guided this study:

1. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?
2. To what extent are students in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided?
3. How successful is the Safe Environment curriculum in keeping students safe?
4. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
5. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

Following Wall's nine-step evaluation process, sufficient qualitative and quantitative data was collected from participants. Educators and the principal were invited via email to participate in one-to-one semi-formal interviews via Zoom. Interviews were scheduled via email at the day and time of the teachers' and principal's choosing. Parents and students participated in the completion of anonymous electronic surveys via Google Forms links. The researcher shared the link with the religious education teacher of grades six to eight, who posted the survey as a Google Classroom assignment. Completed surveys were sent to the researcher's private Google drive. As educator observations were not feasible, the researcher shared their narrative as a prior educator at School ABC.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Following all virtual semi-formal interviews recorded using Zoom, the researcher used the software Otter.ai to transcribe. The interviews were printed, carefully read, annotated, and analyzed using a color-coding system to identify emerging themes. Responses were then cut into strips and grouped by themes. Open-ended questions on surveys and educator questionnaires were analyzed using the same color-coded format. Quantitative data collected from surveys were analyzed using the Google Forms software, which translated data into percentages.

### **Limitations**

As School ABC is a functioning elementary school during the public health crisis of Covid-19, communication between the researcher and the principal was challenging. School ABC was confronted with many instructional interruptions due to the rise in Covid-19 cases and quarantine protocols. The principal and teachers needed to adjust to remote learning, impeding email responses regarding the evaluation study. Limited responses to student and parent surveys

posed a limitation during the data collection process. The researcher planned for virtual observations to help gather information about the execution of Safe Environment lessons; however, the principal expressed that due to the current challenges the school is facing, virtual observations were not feasible.

### **Ethical Considerations**

People's participation within a study entails protections necessary to ensure voluntary informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy. All data collected via Google Forms was anonymous and required no identifiable information; pseudonyms were given to participants, and all research site information was de-identified. As a prior Catholic school educator, familiarity with the Safe Environment Program may be seen as bias or interest conflict. The participants were made aware of the researcher's connection to School ABC and the Safe Environment Program to mitigate the risk of bias and the possible conflict of interest. Transparency was essential for the participants and the researcher to develop a trusting relationship.

### **Data Analysis**

Students and parents completed surveys, multiple-choice format-styled questions for students, and Likert scale format-styled questions parents. Google Forms software used percentages to analyze survey data. The narrative data analysis procedure, used for principal and educator audio-recorded semi-formal interviews and open-ended questions on questionnaires and surveys, focused on preserving the participants' stories and experiences with integrity. The researcher annotated the printed interviews and refined categories, tracing linkages between concepts, discovering emerging themes, which were color-coded using highlighters, cut into strips, and grouped by themes. The researcher's descriptive observational narrative was used in place of educator observations.

### **Key Findings and Conclusions**

The Safe Environment curriculum evaluation study demonstrated the necessity and appreciation of the curriculum shared by all stakeholders who participated in the evaluation study. However, program evaluation results demonstrated deficiencies in instruction, parental engagement, accountability, theoretical framework, and relevance:

- These lessons' annual instruction has shown to produce a lack of students' sufficiency to develop a deep and meaningful understanding of the curriculum's objectives.
- The majority of parents have minimal knowledge of the Safe Environment curriculum, highlighting a communication gap and collaboration.
- All stakeholders expressed a need for an increase in relevance, as the lesson plans were characterized as outdated and culturally irrelevant.
- Lack of accountability ranging from the Archdiocese to the principal gives reason for the Safe Environment curriculum to be overlooked.

### **Recommendations**

Data collected and analyzed from stakeholders characterized the Safe Environment Curriculum as an essential part of the students' education; however, gaps in instructional supports, parental awareness and engagement, and lessons' frequency demonstrate a need for improvement. The researcher identified several recommendations for the Archdiocese and the individual school to increase the curriculum's effectiveness in meeting its goals. The Archdiocese should conduct a needs or interest analysis to ensure all stakeholders' perspectives are included in the curriculum, which is the first step essential to the improvement process. The Archdiocese must identify stakeholders' perspectives and experiences to ensure that the Safe Environment curriculum remains relevant and continuously evolving. The researcher

recommends the individual school invite parents to attend workshops on the Safe Environment curriculum topics to extend learning into the home.

### **Conclusion**

The evaluation study has demonstrated the Safe Environment curriculum is essential to Catholic school students and teachers, as it aids in educating them on providing a safe environment for the children and enhancing crucial knowledge for all stakeholders. The Safe Environment curriculum's program evaluation has discovered the Safe Environment curriculum's potential to aid students' academic, spiritual, social, and mental growth. However, change is necessary to shift the curriculum from stagnant to evolving. With this said, representatives of stakeholders such as district leaders, educators, mental health professionals, parents, religious leaders, and students must be invited to participate in the change process.



## **SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The Safe Environment Program was created to combat the sexual abuse allegations plaguing the Catholic Church. Mandated by the United States of Catholic Bishops, every Catholic Parish is to educate children and their families about the dangers of sexual abuse. This project's purpose is to present an evaluation of the Safe Environment Curriculum (SEC), which is a vital piece of the Safe Environment Program. This section's contents will include an extensive description of the program's objectives, the curriculum's intended value, the resources provided to educators needed to implement the curriculum, and the type of evaluation conducted.

### **Program Description**

The program evaluated is the Safe Environment curriculum component of the Safe Environment Program. In 2003, Catholic school educators within the United States, grades Kindergarten to high school, became mandated to instruct students one Safe Environment lesson yearly. The Safe Environment Curriculum's goal is to teach students the importance of respecting their bodies and ensuring that others do so as well. As part of their child protection effort, the Safe Environment Program is geared towards ensuring children are kept safe. The curriculum, infused into religious instruction, is used to instruct children on the importance of morality and their bodies. Each lesson implemented is grade and age-appropriate and designed to promote respect for human dignity and virtuous living (as stated in the state-specific Archdiocese's website). The Safe Environment curriculum components consist of a parent letter that introduces and explains each lesson, a lesson plan for teachers who instruct students in Kindergarten through high school, PowerPoint slides to support each lesson, and a parent overview letter to bridge the lessons into the home.

The Safe Environment program aims to respond, prevent, and educate children and their families about the dangers of sexual abuse. For instance, a Kindergarten class lesson focuses on identifying five adults they can trust and turn to in times of need, demonstrating good touches, and reciting *NO, GO, and TELL* as an action plan for staying safe. Each section on the lesson plan is timed from five to fifteen minutes, with most of the instruction being teacher lecture. In the end, the students draw a picture of five adults whom they trust and complete a matching column. As the grades increase, so does the number of lectures given by the teacher. All lesson plans from first to eighth grade share the same framework as the Kindergarten lesson; trust, touches, *NO, GO, and TELL*, with the addition of bullying and internet safety. The exact amount of time of 5-15 minutes is allotted to each section. The program description can be found on the Archdiocese's website; however, the application is undocumented. Data regarding long-term outcomes of the program's effectiveness, regarding 'students' development of a deep understanding of the content, is not currently available. Principals are provided with the lesson plan and material, which is then given to the teachers. However, the implementation of these lessons is not observed by the principal.

The stated goal of the program is displayed on the state's Archdiocese website. The goal is to focus on equipping teachers, families, and students with knowledge that can help keep children and young people safe. In providing this instruction, the formation of Christ's virtues is fostered. The program goal states that all lessons were developed by the Archdiocese's SE office in consultation with professional educators and child safety experts (as stated on the state-specific Archdiocese's website).

The Archdiocese's website does not specify how often the Safe Environment lesson plans are revised and updated. This evaluation included finding missing data such as the date of the

last lesson plan revision, the school's level of engagement with the parental community, and forms of lesson differentiation. A Social Learning Theory framework will also be used to examine the effectiveness of the curriculum. The level of student understanding acquired from the lessons was measured using qualitative and quantitative data collected in student surveys, teacher interviews, and parent questionnaires. A summative evaluation was an ideal program evaluation purpose, as it identifies specific goals for the Program and to what degree the goals are met (Wall, n.d.). With a summative evaluation, the findings can be utilized to measure the program's level of sustainability.

### **Organizational Context**

The Safe Environment Curriculum (SEC) has been used at School ABC since 2003 when the curriculum was launched. The Archdiocese's lesson plans, the parent letter, and PowerPoint slides that accompany the lesson plan have remained unchanged. As a prior Catholic school teacher for grades one and four, the researcher instructed students on the curriculum and the critical information meaningful for students to learn. However, there is a difference between exposure to knowledge and developing a deep understanding of knowledge. The students enjoyed the topics taught and always requested additional time to engage in discussions, rather than a few days out of the year. Since the researcher departed from the Catholic school, a few other teachers have left to become public school teachers. A topic of conversation, several times, has been the significant difference between the Board of Education's Safe Environment curriculum and the curriculum provided by the Archdiocese. Differences ranging from training, professional development to resources provided by the Board of Education public schools only amplified the question surrounding the Archdiocese's Safe Environment curriculum's effectiveness

School ABC serves students in grades Pre-K to eight in a low to mid-socio-economic community. The faculty includes less than 20 non-ordained teachers, including specials (art, music, technology, and physical education) and one teacher aide for Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. All grades can be described as inclusive with departmental subjects of religion, English Language Arts, science, math, and social studies, for sixth to eighth grades. Staff includes one administrator (who is a Pastor), one principal, and one administrative assistant. As part of the school experience, enrichment programs, such as computer technology, band, scouts, chess club, and volleyball (girls, grades 7 & 8), are available. The school also has a newly renovated computer lab and 150 Chromebooks to aid teachers enhance instruction. Deeply rooted in Christ and His works, School's ABC's mission and purpose are focused on educating the child utilizing a holistic approach. Its self-described rigorous academic program and the Catholic values of faith, hope, and love create an inclusive learning environment.

The community surrounding this parish was shaken, as a beloved local priest of over twenty years was accused several years ago-of the sexual abuse of two young boys, who are now in their 50s. The cardinal removed the priest from his post after the investigation demonstrated some discrepancies in his account of events. As of a year ago, a new parish priest was assigned to School ABC. Although the school community was faced with this harsh reality, teachers remain diligent in implementing these lessons once a month, which may or may not be sufficient for students to develop a deep and meaningful understanding of the program's objectives. Currently, there are no previous evaluations that have been conducted on the curriculum component of the program.

Gaining perspectives from all stakeholders guided the inquiry on identifying possible improvement areas and any modifications that should be applied. Perspectives from teachers,

parents, students, and the principal supported the evaluation study, as all participants could digitally engage in data collection without the interruption of instruction. Given the current public health crisis affecting the school systems worldwide, School ABC offers in-person and remote synchronous instruction. This factor posed a challenge in the evaluation study as the school was faced with a rise in Covid-19 cases; therefore, it had to quarantine various grades for two weeks. The School ABC's principal expressed that the school as a whole has not been entirely in-person since September. Planning and providing education for both distance and in-person students weigh heavily on the planning and teaching of content that may not be considered a priority, such as Safe Environment. Teachers are faced with the stress and immense responsibility of managing the health and safety of themselves and their in-person students while ensuring the inclusivity of distance learners. The flexibility of engaging in informal discussions with teachers and the administrator, in-class observations to acquire field notes, and conducting a parent focus group are unattainable as the school continues to navigate the realities of providing education during a global pandemic.

Qualitative data was collected from several teachers who teach grades 6-8 in a Catholic school that is not the research site for this evaluation. As the curriculum is the same across all Archdiocesan schools in the United States, the data collected was valuable. The questionnaire provided teachers an opportunity to express their thoughts and experiences regarding the Safe Environment curriculum. The analyzed data demonstrated a strong desire to improve the effectiveness of the Archdiocese's Safe Environment curriculum. As suggested by several educators, the improvement would integrate with religious instruction while aiding students' character and a well-formed conscience.

The researcher understands the importance of providing an efficacious program evaluation; therefore, stakeholders' participation played a significant role in completing the evaluation. Upon initial communication with School ABC's principal, the evaluation's overall purpose was made clear. The purpose is not whether a school is deemed incompetent; instead, it is whether the schools are provided with sufficient resources to implement the program effectively. The principal granted permission to collect data at School ABC under the impression that participants are made aware that their opinions, experiences, and ideas are deemed highly essential, are kept confidential and anonymous, and contribute immensely to the Safe Environment curriculum evaluation. Their knowledge contribution to the program can potentially be very beneficial, with little to no risk. Gaining site permission was reliant on collecting data remotely due to the country's current public health climate. According to the principal, no other protocol needs to be followed for site permission.

### ***History***

The Safe Environment Program was created in response to the sexual abuse cases regarding clergymen and women and school-aged children. The scandal ignited the United Conference for Catholic Bishops to create The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002. The creation of The Charter led to establishing the Office of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board's nationwide adoption. These two offices are tasked with addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020). Before 2002, there was little research available for both offices to acquire and utilize in their understanding of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. The offices launched a study that would help obtain data necessary to find an effective solution to this behavior. Research has identified several factors that are used to characterize

offenders within the Catholic Church. Static risk factors, such as young victim age, young cleric age at the first offense, more male victims, and a history of victimization, are constant variables dating back to the 1950s (Böhm, Zollner, Fegert, & Liebhardt, 2014). In 2015, the Catholic Church in the United States and Ireland focused on the need for a culture of accountability that does not succumb to complacency (Senander, 2017). Following best business practice, the Catholic Church developed codes of conduct, which were absent before creating The Charter. These conduct codes focused on the standards of behavior and boundaries for clergy and other church personnel, who are in daily contact with children and young people. Another adopted best business practice highlighted "a communications policy that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness" (Senander, 2017, p. 860). This commitment and adoption of best business practices lead to creating and implementing the Safe Environment Program and diocesan audits. The Catholic Church understood its failure to uphold the mission in which the Church was founded. It promised to restore both the mission to share the Gospel with the world while increasing attentiveness to the signs of the times and regain trust with their believers in faith (Senander, 2017). Restoring trust was critical in the ability of the Church to make amends with its believers.

### ***Safe Environment Program***

Child sexual abuse can be defined as a "range of contact or non-contact, unwanted, exploitative or unlawful sexual experiences involving actual or potential harm to a child's health, development or dignity, perpetrated by an adult or an older peer in a position of responsibility or power" (Collier-Harris & Goldman, 2017, pp. 195-196). The Catholic Church leaders were challenged with the realities of the scandal of child sexual abuse by clergymen and the failure to prevent the abuse from occurring. A quick fix was unacceptable, as the long-term consequence

may further harm the Church and its believers' relationship, similar to a leader and their company. The Church understood the importance and need for a leader who possessed the knowledge, experience, and values in Christ needed to give the victims a voice and oversee the scandal's correction and prevention. Pope Francis acknowledged the injustice and announced a tribunal's establishment that would hold bishops accountable for their actions (Senander, 2017). In aiding with the prevention, The Safe Environment Program was mandated by the Vatican to be implemented by Catholic Churches. The Charter describes the necessary elements all Safe Environment Programs must include, such as the following:

- Code of conduct for adults who work daily with children
- Child-abuse training programs for all adults involved with minors
- Personal safety training for youths, which is the curriculum provided by each Archdiocese
- Code of conduct for children (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020)

According to various studies, Safe Environment programs play a vital role in educating children and adults on child abuse detection and reporting; however, prevention has been overlooked. Although those who work with children must adhere to mandated child-abuse training programs within Safe Environment, prevention must also be included within the program by extending guardianship. Educating parents, children, parishioners, and priests about the realities of sexual abuse and an abuser's characteristics within the Church must also be included within the Safe Environment Program context.

Currently, all Safe Environment Programs are outlined on each Archdiocese's website within the country. The Codes of Conduct created by The Charter are available for all to read and provide links to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Child and Youth



Protection, screening procedures. Vatican Guidelines, which includes a letter from Pope Francis, ways to report abuse, and other resources needed to comprehend the role of Catholic education programs fully, are also included. Various archdioceses also provide the contents of the Safe Environment Program in Spanish. Along with the resources mentioned, the Safe Environment Curriculum, consisting of lesson plans and an overview of the lessons taught, are also made readily available to review by all parents, guardians, and children. The Archdiocese's Safe Environment Program's mission is "to prevent and respond to any incidents of child sexual abuse." As stated on the Archdiocese's website, the organization expresses the dedication to ensuring the safety of children and young people who have been entrusted to our care in our parishes, schools, religious education classes, and other programs.

#### ***Safe Environment Curriculum – Research Site's Archdiocese***

The Archdiocese provides an outline of the Safe Environment curriculum instructed by Catholic school teachers from Kindergarten to high school, responsible for teaching Religious education. Each lesson is age-appropriate and is taught once a year. Along with the lesson plan, the Archdiocese provides several PowerPoint slides to use as a resource and supplement for each lesson. The Archdiocese's mission for the SEC identifies the Archdiocese's goal to revise the curriculum was to equip teachers, parents/guardians, and students with knowledge that can help keep children and young people safe. The instruction is to be provided in a way that fosters the formation of Christian virtues (as stated on the state-specific Archdiocese's website).

The Archdiocese has made a parent letter readily available on their website, which should also be printed out and given to each student. The letter introduces the Safe Environment curriculum and explains where all resources can be found online. A parent review sheet is also available online, which allows the parent to read the lesson's contents. Although the letter and the

lesson review aid in increasing parental awareness of the program, it does not fully engage the parent. Parental awareness does not equal parental involvement. If the Safe Environment curriculum's goal is to foster the formation of Christian virtues, parents' opportunity to engage in the lessons must be provided. Parents must be made part of the program with sensitive topics ranging from *Good and Bad Touches* for first grade to pornography and dating violence for high school students. Educating parents as well as children can increase the effectiveness of the Safe Environment curriculum.

The Archdiocese may provide their educators with the tools necessary to implement the lesson; however, the individual schools under the Archdiocese umbrella must take the essential steps needed for the effective implementation of the Safe Environment lessons; therefore, ensuring the development of students' in-depth understanding. Principals must oversee the curriculum's effective implementation by confirming that Safe Environment instruction is being planned with various forms of presentation. Like math and reading lessons, differentiation is essential to ensure that every student can acquire content. Collaboration with special education teachers should occur before instructing students in the Safe Environment lessons. This collaboration will provide an opportunity to identify student pedagogy and ensure that instruction demonstrates a focus on diverse students' learning (Laird, 2014). Accountability, quality assurance, and planning must be essential elements when implementing Safe Environment lesson plans as part of the school curriculum.

Along with the lack of principal and parental involvement, the number of lessons given to the students may not be sufficient to acquire the content needed to develop a deep and meaningful understanding. Research shows that early and normalized school-based sexuality education programs deliver lasting knowledge and competencies that help children protect

themselves against abuse, build resilience and self-respect, and increase their disclosure rates (Collier-Harris & Goldman, 2017). Although the SEC is not listed as a sexuality-education program due to religious influence, it does share the same goal as a school-based sexuality education program – to educate and ensure students' safety. It is assumed that a student cannot grasp the extent of the content being instructed if it is only taught once a month, with no opportunity to engage with the content thoroughly.

Although the Archdiocese has planned for in-person instruction following a hybrid learning model, visitors to the school must be minimal. Along with this understanding, the principal expressed that any research and data collection must be done without instructional time disruption. Participants were reassured that no biases exist, and engaging in a collaborative and trusting relationship was imperative to the process. The evaluation included full transparency to ensure that it was conducted fairly, ethically, efficiently, and effectively.

My connection to School ABC and parish is profound. I attended School ABC from Kindergarten to eighth grade and later became an educator at the school. One of my responsibilities within my 13-year experience at this school was instructing students in the first and fourth grades, the yearly Safe Environment lessons. I am currently not employed at School ABC but instead teach graduate courses at a private college.

### **Rationale for the Evaluation**

The project carried out a program evaluation on the Safe Environment curriculum at an urban Catholic elementary school to determine student learning implementation and impact. The project's product will be a report consisting of analyzing data collected, identifying possible areas of improvement, and any evidence-based modifications that should be applied. Various evaluations and published analyses of the child protection policies within the 32 Catholic

archdioceses in the United States can be located in the white paper developed by Hamilton, Dallam, and Glocker (2020). However, no previous evaluations have been conducted on the program's curriculum component at the research site or within this state's archdiocese. Gaining perspectives from all stakeholders guided the inquiry on identifying possible improvement areas and any modifications that should be applied.

As a result of the evaluation, the target audience's perspectives were expected to highlight what areas are identified as strengths and what areas are identified as weaknesses. It was hypothesized that the School ABC participants would share the need to improve the Safe Environment curriculum's effectiveness as the data from teachers at another Catholic school demonstrated. The students' perceptions, which have not been taken into account before this evaluation, will identify their needs within the curriculum. The impact of the students' perception is critical to the evaluation, as they are the ones the most impacted by the curriculum.

The evaluation plan chosen for this specific program will be the Program Evaluation Model 9 Steps Process, developed by Janet Wall (n.d.). Wall's 9 step evaluation process takes a systemic approach to effectively acquire data on the program and how it influences students and the community (Wall, n.d.). This approach is beneficial as each step allows for a thorough, in-depth look at the program and its purpose. As the evaluator moves through the 9-step process, the program's impact is demonstrated and areas where findings can aid with improvement. Program evaluators often develop logic models to help determine if a program is effective. A logic model demonstrates connections, acting as a blueprint that serves as the foundation for developing meaningful activities. In this study, the logic model used is represented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Logic Model*

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short- & Long-Term Outcomes	Impact
To accomplish our set of activities, we will need the following:	To address our problem or asset, we will accomplish the following activities:	We expect that once accomplished, these activities will produce the following evidence or service delivery:	We expect that if accomplished, these activities will lead to the following changes in 1–3 then 4–6 years:	We expect that, if accomplished, these activities will lead to the following changes in 7–10 years:
Scheduled teacher training workshops before the start of the school year, during, and after. Workshops will be given by professionals such as counselors, mental health experts, and a SE	Professional development for teachers before planning and instructing students the lessons; ideas can be shared to increase effectiveness.	An increase in resources provided to teachers, needed to implement lessons effectively; collaboration time provided to teachers; parental workshops throughout the year	ST: Principal’s review and observance of Safe Environment lesson, increased student engagement, and community involvement  LT: The use of at least three	Increase the lessons from once a year to daily instruction  Build on lessons to include character education, and include Pre-K. Increase lesson relevance by incorporating

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short- & Long-Term Outcomes	Impact
representative from the Archdiocese.	Create in-depth, interactive, and engaging presentations to accompany each lesson. Gain parent and student perspectives on lessons through surveys or questionnaires.		additional resources when planning and instructing students on the lessons. Expand content taught in lessons to include character education using evidence learning theory.	culturally responsive instruction. Daily parental involvement.

### **Review of the Literature**

The Archdiocese is well aware of the shadow that has been cast over the organization regarding sexual assault and clergymen. As part of their Child Protection Effort, the Safe Environment Program is geared towards ensuring that the children are kept safe. Within this program, infused into Religious instruction, children are instructed on the importance of morality and their bodies. Each lesson implemented is grade and age-appropriate and created to promote respect for human dignity and virtuous living (as indicated in the Archdiocese's online profile). An effective curriculum must be inclusive and provide ample opportunities to practice what is

being instructed. This literature review will focus on the program's current theoretical framework, an extensive review of the curriculum's history of its conception, and how the shift in applying a new learning theory is needed to ensure a deeper understanding of the content.

### **Program's Theoretical Framework**

The Safe Environment curriculum must include best practices stemming from a student-centered learning theory, as the content being taught is vital to a child's mental health and physical safety. As a previous Catholic school educator, experience with teaching students the SEC is extensive. The lesson plans include introducing the topic, the lesson's content, a brief activity, a conclusion to the lesson, and a prayer. Most of the lesson plan is in bold print, which signifies the teacher's role in the lesson. Students are asked several questions after the teacher's lecture, and that is followed by more lecturing. The format of each lesson plan within the SEC is the same, where the teacher lectures and the students repeat and answer. Students are given minimal time to engage in hands-on and meaningful activities. Teacher-centered instruction can be defined as learning situations in which the teacher asserts control over the material the students study and how they study it (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014). Characteristics of a teacher-centered approach include lecturing and issuing instructions by the most active person, the teacher, whereas listening, sitting at their desks, and completing assignments are completed by the students. It can be concluded the SEC uses the learning theory of behaviorism, considering the format of the lesson plans as well as instructional experience.

### **History of Behaviorism**

By the first half of the twentieth century, John B. Watson led behaviorism to become the most prevalent psychological discipline. He believed that theories and research focused on the mind were unscientific and needed to construct themselves concerning the physical sciences,

which examined observable and measurable phenomena (Shun, 2019). Behavior was the chosen study of many psychologists, albeit other forms of phenomena such as introspection and conscious experiences could not be trusted to be honestly reported. Impressed by Pavlov's conditioning model, Watson used it as a foundation to construct human behavior science. The possibility of studying diverse forms of learning and personality characteristics was at the forefront of Watson's behaviorism theory. Watson paved the way for the addition of other theories that also focused on humans' behavior and learning. Thorndike's (1874-1949) connectionism theory of learning focused on education and the transfer of learning through repetition and trial-and-error learning. Pavlov's (1849-1936) classical conditioning learning theory correlates an involuntary behavior that occurs as a response to a particular stimulus. Through the dog and meat powder demonstration, Pavlov identified the multi-step procedure that occurs during classical conditioning. Guthrie's theory (1886-1959) postulated that learning occurs through associations, leaning back on the relationship between stimulus and responsive behavior; and Skinner's (1904-1990), well-known behavior theory, operant conditioning, a process of reinforcing a voluntary behavior by rewarding it (Pritchard, 2017). Using a device called the Skinner box, he studied rats and pigeons' behavior and connected his findings to human behavior. The premise of Skinner's work explains that rewards and punishments control the majority of human behaviors.

### **Behaviorism in the Classroom: Safe Environment Curriculum**

Behaviorism, the most dominant learning theory in the early twentieth century, is defined as learning achieved through trial and error and measured by the observable relationship between a stimulus and a response (Buchheister, 2018). As a result, learning could be explained as lacking student focus and how student thinking and feeling are connected to the content. When



applied to the classroom, behaviorism takes a teacher-centered approach as the teacher controls the environment, design of the lesson, and the cues associated with desired or undesired behaviors or responses. Following the teacher's lecture, the students' primary task is to respond to the teacher's cues, to do what they are supposed to do when they are supposed to do it (Kay & Kibble, 2016). A key element of behaviorism in the classroom is having students complete their assignments rather than group engagement and interaction. From reviewing the lesson plans of the SEC, all lessons include minimal peer discussion. No opportunities for cooperative learning are provided. When using this theory, learning is defined by the teacher's observance of students' maintenance of the content through the stimulus-response relationship. As the students are instructed, there is little to no consideration of a cognitive component. The premise of conditioning theories, such as behaviorism, is not focused on behavior. However, instead, they explain learning as environmental events (Shunk, 2019), which may be less relevant in today's learning environments.

### **Constructivism and Social-Learning (Cognitive) Theories**

For any curriculum to be effective, best practices in education must be researched and utilized when implementing instruction. The Safe Environment curriculum should not be the exception, as the content being taught is vital to a child's mental health and physical safety. As the content has already been designed, the Archdiocese must use research-based learning theories when creating or amending lesson plans, ensuring implementation helps students learn. The planning and instruction to students of Safe Environment lessons must focus on the knowledge and learning capabilities relevant to students' situations, life changes, and life-long well-being (Collier-Harris & Goldman, 2017). They must provide ample opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion and the chance to interact with the content.

Using constructivism as a lens to examine the SEC, it is evident that applying this theory would increase the acquisition of meaningful knowledge. On the contrary, in the case of the SEC, behaviorism is centered on acquiring empty knowledge gained from a teacher-centered approach. Constructivism assumes that learning is the transmission of knowledge through the medium of speech (Fernando & Marikar, 2017). The learner's cultural, social, and contextual circumstances are considered while constructing learning through their experiences. Using materials based on this theory, teachers would utilize prior knowledge, which includes experiences, and use the connection to help students construct new learning. This learning theory makes the student an active participant rather than a passive one. When instructing the students, constructivism can influence the learning environment by allowing multiple opportunities for social interaction in the form of peer and whole-class discussions and cooperative learning-based assignments. Constructivist teachers design instruction to encourage student ownership of the learning process (Kay & Kibble, 2016), focusing on interaction, the identification, and correction of misconceptions. Constructivism can be identified as the basis of the Safe Environment curriculum. It engages students in inquiry-based learning, discovery, and experiential learning and challenges them to find solutions to complex real-world problems.

Another learning theory used to examine the SEC is Bandura's social learning theory. Characterized as the bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories, Bandura's social learning theory (1977) posits that people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling (David, 2020). The social learning theory framework emphasizes the role of observation and participation as a means of learning (Pritchard, 2017). Bandura uses constructivism as a foundation to his work but elevates it by stressing the importance of learning's social nature. Using social learning theory as a framework for planning and instruction

can increase the Safe Environment curriculum's effectiveness. When used to instruct students in SE lessons, the teacher can include opportunities for reflective responses, various teaching activities such as small-group scenarios and role-play, leading students to observe and learn behavior necessary to maintain safety and trust in any environment. Modeling behavior, which is considered ethical and safe, can help students develop a deep understanding of the lessons rather than empty knowledge. To ensure that educators demonstrate effective modeling, several conditions are necessary (David, 2020):

- **Attention:** Students obtain several characteristics that may affect concentration, enabling them to acquire content. Such characteristics are sensory capacities, arousal level, perceptual set, and past reinforcement.
- **Retention:** The ability to remember what was paid attention to. Educators may utilize symbolic coding, mental images, cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, and motor rehearsal to aid in retention.
- **Reproduction:** The ability to reproduce an image. This component includes physical capabilities and self-observation of reproduction.
- **Motivation:** Having a good reason to imitate.

The SEC's premise is to educate Catholic school students and their parents on the importance of keeping safe while fostering Christian virtues. Similar to instructing students in a puberty/sexuality education course, Safe Environment instruction would benefit from enhancing teacher preparation and practices on human rights and the acceptance of diversity, willingness for self-reflection and role-modeling for students, openness for the subject combined with appropriate neutrality and high motivation (Collier-Harris & Goldman, 2017). These

characteristics are used by evidence-based learning theories, where students are engaged in the learning process.

### **Evaluation Methods**

The Safe Environment curriculum has not been the subject of past program evaluations; however, general child abuse prevention programs and evaluations of specific types or models of prevention programs have been highlighted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In connection with the US Department of Health and Human Services, the Promising Practices Network (PPN) reviewed hundreds of programs' evaluations. According to the PPN, reviewers were trained to evaluate programs using the PPN program review Reference Guide. This guide, created by PPN, provided detailed instructions for reviewers on the three-phase program review process using 19 quality criteria. It assessed whether the evidence of effectiveness met the pre-established criteria (Kilburn, Cannon, Mattox, & Shaw, 2014). The programs were assigned either a Proven or Promising rating based on meeting the project evidence criteria. To be proven, a program must:

- *Types of Outcome Affected:* Program must directly impact one of the indicators used on the site.
- *Substantial Effects Size:* At least one outcome is changed by 20%, 0.25 standard deviations, or more.
- *Statistical Significance:* At least one outcome with a substantial effect size is statistically significant at the 5% level.
- *Comparison Groups:* Study design uses a convincing comparison group to identify program impacts, including randomized control trial (experimental design) or some quasi-experimental designs

- *Sample Size:* The sample size of evaluation exceeds 30 in both the treatment and comparison groups

A similar program evaluated was the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Teacher Training Workshop (Kilburn et al., 2014). The program evidence level was assessed as Promising. The setting was elementary to high school, and the outcome area was healthy and safe children. The program overview is as follows:

The six-hour program presents classroom teachers from kindergarten through twelfth grade with general knowledge on child sexual abuse and attempts to increase their awareness of the problem. The training provides an opportunity for teachers to (1) explore their own sexual and abuse-related issues and opinions; (2) determine and build upon their knowledge of the symptoms of abuse; and (3) understand their legal and ethical responsibilities as teachers (Kilburn et al., 2014).

Educational tools such as lectures, videotapes, role-playing, pencil and paper activities, question-and-answer sessions, and group discussions were used to train the teachers in understanding sexual abuse and how to respond to it. Three evaluations have been conducted, with the first two evaluating teacher perceptions and the previous study evaluated the children's outcomes. Key findings from the initial assessment conducted in 1990 and repeated in 1998 were:

- Trained teachers' knowledge of the scope of abuse, dynamics of abuse, indicators of abuse, reporting procedures, treatment alternatives, and prevention increased dramatically compared with control teachers.
- As compared with those children in the control groups, children whom the trained teachers taught showed significant increases in knowledge about sexual abuse, and

these gains were still present at six-week and one-year follow-ups. Pretest averages of third graders increased from 17.3 on a 25-item scale to having a post-test average of 21.7. Pretest averages of fourth-graders increased from a pre-test average of 18.8 to having a post-test average of 22.4.

The study concluded teachers who participated in the training were more capable of responding to child sexual abuse cases. Students increased knowledge of understanding and identifying appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The teacher-training workshop helped increase discovery; however, further research is needed to gauge the extent of the correct identification of abuse and further measures conducted by teachers following the discovery of sexual abuse of children.

### **Evaluation Model/Type of Evaluation**

This program's evaluation plan followed the Program Evaluation Model 9 Steps Process, developed by Janet Wall. Wall's process takes a systemic approach to effectively acquire data on the program and determine how it influences students and the community (Wall, n.d.). This approach is beneficial as each step allows for a thorough, in-depth look at the program and its purpose, resulting in identified improvement areas.

A summative evaluation would be an ideal program evaluation purpose, as it identifies specific goals for the program and to what degree the goals are met (Wall, n.d.). With a summative evaluation, the findings can be utilized to measure the program's level of sustainability. Overall, the worth and value of the program must be evaluated to prove its effectiveness and necessity.

### **Specialization-related Theory**

In the specialization of curriculum and instruction, it is understood that they are not one-size-fits-all. An unbiased researcher must not assume an evaluation plan automatically deems the program and its institution ineffective and doomed. As Appreciative Inquiry (Frey, 2018) suggests, an organization's strengths, and in this case, the Safe Environment program must first be understood before they are developed and evolved. As a prior Catholic school teacher, the researcher is familiar with the program's mission and its goal to keep children safe. Instructing students on the Safe Environment Curriculum was a responsibility throughout 13 years of Catholic school teaching experience. However, the researcher's story is not every story. As the text states, there are multiple realities, and the researcher must ensure all realities are heard and validated (Frey, 2018). As Appreciative Inquiry principles are infused within every phase of the evaluation, the power of stories, inquiry, and change and how they can be vital to gaining perspective are understood. The key to building on strengths, as well as discovery, is discussion.

### **Systems and Change Theories**

A system can be defined as any group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent parts that form a complex and unified whole that has a specific purpose (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Similar to a marriage, a system is more of a team or partnership than a collection. In a collection, items can stand alone, and if one piece is sold or given away, the collection can still be a collection due to the other elements. However, since all parts are interrelated in a system, the whole system suffers if one piece loses functionality. Living systems always strive for improvement and growth, intending to obtain continuous improvement for all parts. As part of a living system, educators must provide quality instruction and ensure that all students succeed. Teachers must evolve to make learning more meaningful and relevant, which will improve

relationships with students and parents. The goal must be that everyone learns; administration, teachers, students, and parents, albeit a learning community. The Archdiocese must adopt systems thinking by gaining perspectives of teachers, parents, principals, and students regarding the SEC and ways to amend lessons to be more effective and relevant. The top-down approach does not provide opportunities for experiences and opinions to be heard; therefore, not leading to changes that can occur when a shared vision is identified. The Archdiocese must involve the school systems in the Safe Environment's curriculum building, evolution, and sustainment, reinforcing processes to ensure the 'school's success is steady and going in the right direction. Small changes can lead to significant outcomes. If small changes are implemented within the Safe Environment curriculum, the collective impact on student learning and community will be substantial as a system. The evaluation project can help initiate and guide potential implications for change and impact at the organizational level.

Teachers in grades Kindergarten to high school are given a lesson plan to implement, which may take one day or several days out of the year, depending on the teacher's class schedule. However, this leads to the question of sufficiency. It is essential to develop a deep and meaningful understanding of the issues that may stem from bullying, school, and home responsibilities, intolerance, or a lack of self-respect. At some point, a gap between students' religious beliefs and their actions will emerge, particularly as they mature. This gap is the reason for action, where a shared vision can manifest from the current reality. The impact hoped to obtain by the evaluation is to enhance students' character development, which can then aid in strengthening virtuous living towards oneself and one another but developing a deep and meaningful understanding and opportunity to practice.



The Safe Environment program must evolve, and to begin this process, the necessity of change must be a shared vision between all stakeholders. As expressed in Stroh (2015), the first step in the four-stage change process is building a change foundation. This foundation is essential to develop a collective readiness for change. This change's priority is to ensure students develop character traits that will aid them throughout their academic and professional lives. With this said, representatives of stakeholders such as district leaders, educators, mental health professionals, parents, religious leaders, and students must be involved. Qualitative research and analysis, such as interviews and questionnaires, can demonstrate what stakeholders feel about the current program and its effectiveness. The collaboration of stakeholders between each stage is essential, as it is the only way creative tension can ensure the students' safety.

The review and analysis of literature helped the researcher develop a deep understanding of the program's theoretical framework and further enhanced knowledge of educational learning theories. The basic principles of behaviorism were utilized when creating the SEC, although not explicitly identified by the curriculum's creators. However, adopting constructivism and social learning theories can allow educators and students to gain meaningful knowledge while achieving the SEC's learning goals. The SEC's premise is to ensure student safety while embracing the religious aspect of values and virtues; students and teachers must be part of the change process. They are both critical components of the educational ecosystem.

## **SECTION 2: EVALUATION METHODS**

This section's contents provide an extensive description of the evaluation plan, using Janet Wall's Nine-Step Process, stakeholders who participated in the data collection process, and the evaluation questions guiding the study. COVID-19 acted as a barrier for in-person discussions with the school principal and all participants; however, through video conferencing, each step of the evaluation plan and most data collection components were scheduled and completed.

### **Evaluation Plan**

Step one of the evaluation plan was to define the purpose and scope of the evaluation. After further review of Wall's evaluation methods, the researcher characterized the evaluation study as a summative evaluation. The purpose of a summative evaluation is to document the results of a program and whether or not its goals and objectives were accomplished. The researcher identified a clear purpose of the SEC's assessment, and the principal and educators provided a clear road map towards the destination of answering the evaluation questions. The duration of communicating with the principal and educators participating in the evaluation to conclude these activities was two weeks.

The second step of the evaluation plan was to specify the evaluation questions. The evaluation questions were inspired by several sources, such as program goals and objectives. When the researcher developed the evaluation questions, the researcher shared the questions with their mentor to ensure that each question was clear, concise, understandable, and specific. Questions were shared with the school principal and educators to ensure that they were worthwhile (Wall, n.d.). After the evaluation questions were written and shared, the researcher defined the evidence criteria to answer the questions. The criteria were interconnected within the

teachers' questionnaires, teachers' and principal's interviews, and student and parent survey questions. The duration of concluding these activities was one week.

Step three was to specify the evaluation design. Once the evaluation questions were developed, the design aligned appropriately. Since the SEC's instruction takes place at the teacher's discretion throughout the year, it was determined that data collection would occur during the school year as the curriculum is implemented. Teachers use the SE lessons to instruct students yearly at different times and are familiar with the lessons they teach. The evaluation and status design helped determine the Safe Environment curriculum's impact on the students. As defined by Wall (n.d.), status designs help determine what is occurring at the current moment. A current time observation such as a survey or an interview is required to locate the data. Status design helped to identify if the curriculum met its goals and objectives and explored if students have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided. The duration of concluding these activities was one week.

The fourth step in the evaluation process was to create the data collection action plan. The evaluation questions determined the data sources needed to conduct the study. In collaboration with the school principal and the researcher's mentor, data sources who can provide the best information to answer the evaluation questions were identified in this step. The data collection plan included identifying the sources and the methods utilized to gather data. In this step, the researcher determined that qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were needed to conduct an extensive program evaluation. As part of this step, interviews, questionnaires, and survey questions were created and reviewed by the principal and the researcher's mentor. Privacy and ethics protocols for collecting data were also determined. The duration of concluding these activities was one week.

Step five consisted of data collection. Given the challenges faced by School ABC during this time of COVID-19, the sample of participants was carefully selected, ensuring data collection would not interfere with instructional time. Qualitative data such as semi-formal interviews and questionnaires (see Appendix A) were collected from the administrator and educators. School ABC also offered synchronous learning, with some students being in-person and others remote learning. Teachers were faced with the difficulty of managing asynchronous instruction and many interruptions due to quarantine protocols following several occurrences of COVID-19 exposure. Due to those challenges, classroom observations were not feasible. The principal expressed that more pressing issues had priority over the examination of SE lessons, and their teachers would not be asked to teach the lessons at this time. Due to this development, the researcher's narrative as a prior teacher at School ABC, with the same principal and SEC, replaced current observations' data collection. Quantitative data, such as parent (Appendix B) and student surveys (Appendix C), were collected.

It was important for the researcher to practice transparency with the principal and share data collection tools before conducting any data collection. The principal's response was prolonged and posed a challenge to the researcher's scheduled time to collect data. After several weeks, the principal granted the researcher permission to commence data collection from teachers, parents, and students. The principal's interview was the last data collection activity scheduled. Convenience sampling was used for parent surveys, as their participation was voluntary and no selection process occurred. Systematic sampling was used to collect student surveys, as specific grades were chosen to participate. The researcher chose these grades because of their age and a better chance of understanding the survey questions when compared to other grades. All participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and completely

anonymous. Initially, the researcher assumed that concluding these activities would take four to six weeks; however, the communication and quarantine challenges impeded the timeline. The duration of concluding these activities was eight weeks.

The sixth step of the evaluation process was analyzing the data. Following all virtual semi-formal interviews that were recorded using Zoom, they were transcribed using the software Otter.ai. The interviews were printed, carefully read once, and then annotated. The researcher read the interviews various times while carefully analyzing and color-coding responses that demonstrated the emergence of themes. Responses were then printed, cut into strips, and grouped by themes. Teacher questionnaires were read, reviewed, and analyzed carefully. As the researcher read and reviewed the questionnaires, annotation was utilized to discover categories identified as themes. Each theme was color-coded using different colored highlighters, cut into strips, and grouped.

Parent and student surveys were shared via a Google Form linked to the researcher's Google drive. The form asked for no identifiable information, so responses were completely anonymous. The Google drive was set to a private setting so no other person could access the information linked to the drive. Parent surveys included six Likert-scale questions for the first half of the surveys and one open-ended question for the last portion. Student surveys included four multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions. Thirty-seven parents and 29 students participated in providing survey data. Google forms analyzed the data as the responses were submitted. The program collected and tallied responses in real-time, which totaled percentages for each Likert-scale and multiple-choice question. Percentages were used to put frequencies in perspective. Open-ended questions were analyzed using the same color-coded

system utilized for semi-formal interviews and questionnaires. The duration of concluding these activities was four weeks.

Step seven of the evaluation process included the essential task of developing conclusions based on the data collected. Activities within the task were to document the findings, examine the results carefully and determine the data's conclusions while managing researcher bias. As Wall (n.d.) states, "It is your professional responsibility to document objectively and fairly the results, findings and conclusions of the evaluation study" (Evaluation Process Document Findings section, para. 2). After the data was analyzed and the results examined, the report was written. The researcher was aware of their professional responsibility to document and report the evaluation study's findings and conclusions objectively. The report addressed the following (Wall, n.d.):

- A clear and precise description of what is evaluated
- Goals and purpose of the evaluation
- Evaluation questions
- Data collection procedures
- Data collection instruments description
- Description of data providers
- Response rate
- Analysis methods
- Conclusions listed by evaluation question
- Findings about the program
- Recommendations for program improvement and change

The duration for completing these activities was eight weeks.

The eighth step was to disseminate findings. Since the evaluation questions were specific and very focused, the target audience was presented with the study results. However, the SEC is a shared curriculum, which all Catholic schools under the Archdiocese are mandated to use. In this case, it is beneficial to provide the Archdiocese's SE office a comprehensive and detailed report. The duration for completing the activity for step eight was one day.

Step nine, the final step of the evaluation process, provided feedback critical to program improvement. After the results and findings were reviewed, the researcher identified the SEC's strengths and how they can elevate the curriculum's efficacy to ensure students benefit from the lessons and teachers are provided with sufficient resources. As Wall (n.d.) states, "A good evaluation is one that you and others use to make necessary changes and improvements in the quality of service you provide your students" (Evaluation Process Feedback to Program Improvement section, para. 3). The evaluation's information pointed the school and the Archdiocese towards potential improvement areas and issues around sustainability.

### **Data Collection Plan**

The SEC and the evaluation plan have three objectives. Multiple sources collected qualitative and quantitative data to measure the extent to which the objectives were met. Participants involved in the data collection process helped the researcher gain valuable perspective and knowledge on their experiences and opinions regarding the SEC. Participants' knowledge and experiences guided the researcher in answering the evaluation questions. The following section will identify the data collected, the data source, and the timeframe of data collection:

***Objective one*** - The lessons are designed to promote respect for the human person's dignity and virtuous living. Data collected included digital questionnaires and virtual semi-formal interviews

via Zoom with educators (teachers and the school principal). Educators were interviewed in the last week of January and the beginning of February and March 2021, and the principal's interview occurred in the second week of February 2021. Some teachers chose a later date than others due to scheduling conflicts, so not all teachers were interviewed around the same time frame. The teacher questionnaires were created and digitally available from the last week in January until the second week in March 2021. Parent and student surveys were created and made available from the last week in January until mid-March 2021. Due to the current public health crisis, teacher observations were not feasible.

**Objective two** - According to the Archdiocese, the second objective of the SEC is to equip teachers, parents/guardians, and students with knowledge that can help keep children and young people safe while providing this instruction in a way that fosters the formation of Christian virtues. Data collection instruments that helped the researcher gain clarity on this objective's effectiveness were a digital teacher questionnaire, teacher and principal semi-formal interviews via Zoom, and a digital student survey. The data collection timeline for objective two was the same as with objective one. Educators were interviewed at the beginning of January, February, and March 2021. The principal's interview occurred in the second week of February 2021. The teacher questionnaires were created and made digitally available from the end of January until mid-March 2021. Student surveys were created and made digitally available from the last week in January until the last weeks of March 2021.

**Objective three** - The social learning theory framework was utilized as a guide to examine the Safe Environment curriculum. Using social learning theory as a framework for planning and instruction can increase the Safe Environment curriculum's effectiveness. The researcher used



teacher and principal semi-formal interviews as data collection instruments. The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and followed the same time frame as objectives one and two.

### **Stakeholders, Participants, and Target Audience**

Key stakeholders whom the program evaluation would impact are the school principal, educators, parents, and, most notably, the students. The students are the key stakeholders, as they are the only stakeholder that can best reflect on the system. The target audience is those stakeholders within the educational setting who often engage with the program being evaluated; therefore, this capstone's target audience is the educators of grades first to eighth and the school principal. The data collected and analyzed produced an evaluation that will significantly impact the target audience, as they will benefit from the project in various ways. The program evaluation identified instructional gaps and new ways to effectively utilize resources to implement meaningful lessons and not merely produce empty knowledge. The students are the key stakeholders, as they are the only stakeholder who can best reflect on the system. The Safe Environment curriculum's evaluation will directly impact the students as they experience the whole picture. Students experience the challenges of understanding the content, the values gained from meaningful instruction, and their knowledge to protect themselves against sexual abuse. Gaining perspective is vital, as it can lead to obtaining a deep understanding of the issue from every viewpoint, leading to sufficient data gathering. Stringer (2014) identifies establishing contact with stakeholders as a vital part of the research process and deciding which people to include. Perspectives from each group of participants would help develop a deep understanding and unbiased evaluation of the Safe Environment curriculum.

## **Sample of Participants**

The population of interest for this program evaluation are educators, grades first to eighth, the school principal, parents representing each grade, and the students in grades one to eight. As the entire population was invited to participate in the data collection process, there was no sampling selection. All teachers grade Kindergarten to eight, the principal, parents, and students were asked to contribute to the Safe Environment curriculum evaluation data.

Participants who contributed to the data collection process included nine elementary school teachers who instruct students the SEC, 37 parents (all with children in grades K-8th), the principal of School ABC, and 29 students in grades 6-8. Each participant contributed their time and perspective voluntarily. It was critical to the evaluation process to include parents in the sample of participants. Their perspective and experiences with the Safe Environment curriculum provided an opportunity to identify the extent of awareness and knowledge of the curriculum being instructed to their children. Teachers are responsible for planning and instructing students in the lessons provided by the Archdiocese. The researcher gained teachers' perspectives through qualitative data collection that aligned with the evaluation study's purpose. Strengths and potential areas for improvements regarding the lessons and resources provided were identified from including teachers in the sample of participants. It was essential to the evaluation study to include the school's principal within the participants' selection. The principal of School ABC provides teachers with the materials needed to implement the Safe Environment lessons. Their knowledge of the procedures involved is essential to understand the extent of accountability school administration gives to their teachers and the degree of accountability given by the Archdiocese.

## **Evaluation Questions**

The following evaluation questions guided this study:

1. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?
2. To what extent are students in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided?
3. How successful is the Safe Environment curriculum in keeping students safe?
4. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
5. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?

The study's evaluation questions were created to focus on the curriculum's effectiveness concerning its target audience. As the evaluation's nucleus, these questions guided data collection to ensure that a robust evaluation is completed. The data collected and analyzed produced an evaluation report that can significantly impact the target audience, as they will benefit from the project in various ways. The program evaluation identifies possible instructional gaps and new ways to utilize resources effectively, so lessons implemented are meaningful and not merely produce empty knowledge.

## **Data Sources and Collection Procedures**

To ensure that the evaluation of the SEC is conducted successfully, sufficient data was collected. Qualitative and quantitative data helped to study the curriculum closely and provided in-depth answers to the evaluation questions. The following section lists each data source, explains when and how each data source was collected and describes each source's purpose in relation to the evaluation questions.

## **Semi-Formal Interviews**

During the last week of February and the first weeks of March 2021, educators and the school principal were interviewed to gain perspective on their experiences and opinions regarding the SEC. Questions written on the interview guide ranged in focus, beginning with their knowledge of the curriculum's goals, experiences navigating the curriculum, and personal impressions. Each interview was scheduled via email request and at the date and time of the participant's choosing and conducted virtually via Zoom. The researcher allowed the participant to speak without interruption. With no sense of favorable or unfavorable facial emotion, the researcher ensured the participant that the researcher remained unbiased and expressed no personal opinion. Gaining an in-depth perspective from the teachers and the principal provided significant clarity. This clarity is needed to answer the research questions guiding this study effectively. The interviews' purpose was to apply fairness and depth to identify data from participants to assess assumptions that may exist within the research. The following evaluation questions align with this data source:

1. To what extent are students in 6th-8th grade acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided?
2. How successful is the Safe Environment curriculum in keeping students safe?
3. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?
4. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
5. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?

## **Teacher Questionnaires**

Nine teachers completed an anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire was created using the Google Forms platform. The researcher shared the questionnaire with the principal before sending the questionnaires to teachers via email. The email requested their participation in completing and submitting the form. However, it also reminded teachers that the completion and submission were not obligatory. The researcher also stated all forms would be completed anonymously, with no identifiable information asked on the form. At the bottom of the email request, the researcher provided the questionnaire link. The link was directly connected to the researcher's private Google drive. Each questionnaire asked four identical open-ended questions. The purpose of the questionnaire was for the researcher to gain clarity on the teachers' experience and opinions regarding the SEC's strengths and weaknesses. The questionnaires were distributed within the last week of January and left open for submission until the first week in March. The following evaluation questions align with this data source:

1. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
2. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?

## **Parent Surveys**

Thirty-seven parents completed a digital survey created with and shared via Google Forms. Forms were completed and submitted anonymously, and all completed surveys were submitted directly to the researcher's private Google drive. The survey consisted of six questions using the Likert-scale format and one open-ended question. The purpose of the parent survey was to gain clarity on the parents' awareness of the SEC's goals and lesson plan topics. It was vital for the researcher to understand the level of involvement parents have regarding the SEC and their perspectives on their children's learning level. The parent surveys were distributed

within the last week of January and left open for submission until the first week in March. The following evaluation questions align with this data source:

1. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?
2. How successful is the Safe Environment curriculum in keeping students safe?

### **Student Surveys**

Twenty-nine students in upper elementary grades in School ABC completed a student survey. The researcher created the survey, consisting of four multiple-choice formatted questions and three open-ended questions, using Google Forms and linked it to their private Google drive. The survey was shared with the principal before sharing it with the students' teacher. Upon the principal's approval, the students' teacher suggested sharing the survey as a Google Classroom assignment to complete and submit it to the researcher without any issue. The researcher reminded the teacher that all surveys were anonymous and students were not obligated to complete and submit. The student survey's purpose was to gain students' point of view of the SEC, as they are the key stakeholders impacted the most by the SEC's instruction. The researcher needed to understand their thoughts regarding the curriculum's connection to their culture, the resources used during instruction, and what they thought is needed to evolve the curriculum. The knowledge gained by the surveys helped to answer the evaluation questions focused on the program's effectiveness. The survey link was made available during the last week in January and left open for submission until the first week in March. The majority of responses were received within the first week in March, following a reminder from their classroom teacher. The following evaluation questions align with this data source:

1. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?

2. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
3. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?

### **Observations**

The researcher could not visit School ABC due to the pandemic; therefore, in-person observations were not feasible. The researcher proposed virtual observations; however, the principal expressed the teachers would not be instructing students on the SE lessons in the near future, as they had other instructional priorities. Since the researcher was a past elementary school teacher in School ABC, the researcher's narrative was described. The purpose of the observations was to understand the curriculum's breadth and depth as it pertains to the students. Observations also demonstrated the teacher's instructional method and how resources were used. The following evaluation questions align with this data source:

1. To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?
2. To what extent are the resources provided by the Archdiocese helpful to teachers and students?
3. To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Data collection included the following sources and analysis procedures:

**Semi-formal interviews and educator questionnaires:** The principal and educators engaged in semi-formal individual interviews. Each interview was virtual via Zoom and recorded with the permission of the participant. Data acquired from the interviews were analyzed as narratives focusing on the participants' stories while ethically maintaining the participants' personal experiences. After the computer program Otter.ai transcribed the interviews, the qualitative data

were analyzed by creating, applying, and refining categories, grouping codes into themes representing a common idea and linkages between concepts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A color-coding system was used to discover and identify emerging themes. Educator questionnaires focused on their experiences with the Safe Environment curriculum, and the data were analyzed as narratives and color-coded identifying themes similar to the interview analysis.

**Surveys:** Students and parents completed surveys using a 1-4 Likert Scale and multiple-choice formatted questions. The parent survey included one open-ended question, whereas the student survey included three open-ended questions. Both surveys were created using Google Forms and provided via a Google drive link. Google Forms analyzed the quantitative survey data using descriptive statistics. The researcher analyzed the open-ended questions by reading and annotating each response carefully. As the responses were reviewed, categories emerged, were color-coded, cut into strips, and grouped by themes.

**Observations:** The researcher proposed virtual observations; however, the principal expressed the teachers would not be instructing students on the SE lessons in the near future, as they had other instructional priorities. Since the researcher was a past elementary school teacher in School ABC, the researcher's narrative was described. The purpose of the observations was to understand the curriculum's breadth and depth as it pertains to the students. Observations also demonstrated the teacher's instructional method and how resources were used.

### **Limitations**

Collecting data within the evaluation plan of Wall's 9 Step Model posed various limitations. As the functioning elementary school experienced the public health crisis of Covid-19, schedules were challenging to navigate. Collaborating with the principal to review the evaluation plan and data collection plan posed a challenge. The principal was challenged with



maintaining an infection-free learning environment, making communication significant to Wall's 9 Step Model, a potential weakness. The evaluation plan was not redesigned, but instead, communicating with patience and understanding to all participants was increased. Qualitative data collection relies on participants' availability and ensures that the evaluation process does not interfere with instructional time. School ABC experienced several weeks of quarantining grades and teachers; therefore, several scheduled interviews were shifted. A weakness demonstrated within the questionnaires and surveys has been identified as a participant misunderstanding the question or no answer (N/A) due to time constraints. The wording in both instruments can initiate bias on participants' responses; therefore, the surveys' feedback may not provide an in-depth narrative needed to provide thick descriptions. Interviews provided vital stakeholders' perspectives; however, it can take much time to schedule and conduct them. Semi-formal interviews have the possibility of veering away from the interview guide, increasing the possibility of the participant presenting bias or providing responses that they think would want to be heard, rather than honest and personal answers. Another limitation that may occur is documentation review. As the Safe Environment curriculum has not been evaluated, existing data to review and refer to is unavailable. The researcher planned to conduct observations to gather information about the execution of Safe Environment lessons. However, challenges connected to the pandemic deemed observation no longer feasible. The researcher has considered their prior Catholic school teaching experience at School ABC as an observational narrative. The researcher's narrative provided vital information, such as how the curriculum is being implemented. As the researcher included their narrative within data collection, biases had to be managed to ensure the fair reporting of a teacher's planning and instructional processes.

Nevertheless, there are ways to aid in mitigating weaknesses. By providing ample interview times to choose from, interviews were scheduled upon the stakeholders' schedule discretion. Another researcher reviewed surveys and questionnaires to ensure the wording is clear, concise, and free of bias. It was challenging to collect data that could provide thick descriptions from surveys, albeit interview notes will help explain participants' narratives. Teachers were not required to provide identifiable data, such as what grade they instruct, which increased their comfort and trust when giving honest responses.

### **Credibility**

Credibility links the research findings to the real-world issues guiding the inquiry: to demonstrate the findings' truth. Several techniques were used to ensure the truth was demonstrated; triangulation and member checks were used in this project. Triangulation uses multiple methods, sources for data, or theories to gain a complete and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The types of triangulation identified in the evaluation study were the following (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Roulston, 2018):

- **Investigator triangulation:** involved multiple researchers in this investigation;
- **Theory triangulation:** involved using more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon;
- **Methodological triangulation:** involved using more than one option to gather data, such as interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and documents.

Multiple methods were utilized to gather data and assured participants they can trust the findings' credibility. Qualitative data collection included interviews and questionnaires. Quantitative data collection consisted of surveys given to parents and students. Participants will

be allowed to review any data, interpretations, and conclusions to ensure that their intentions, opinions, and experiences are correctly presented.

### **Dependability**

Establishing dependability was possible with the development and sharing of in-depth records of the data collection process with the doctoral mentor provided by Capella University. Collaborating with a mentor ensured that developing the evaluation, collecting the data, interpreting the facts, and reporting the findings were done without carelessness. Complete transparency was given to all participants within the program evaluation regarding the advisor's role. The mentor served as a dependability auditor. He reviewed the activities within the evaluation process (data collection tools, communication sent to participants, reports, and archival data) to measure the level of credibility and transferability standards. Maintaining an audit trail was vital, as the dependability cannot be assessed without it; therefore, weakening the evaluation's trustworthiness. It was crucial to remain consistent during the evaluation process, proving the results to be dependable.

### **Transferability**

The third strategy to ensure trustworthiness within the program evaluation is transferability. Transferability is defined as the degree to which qualitative research results can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To facilitate transferability, the strategy of thick description is essential. Using thick description highlights the participants' behaviors and experiences in an in-depth context and allowed the data to become meaningful to an outsider of the evaluation. Along with describing the participants, the activities within the evaluation process must also have a thick description. The outsider, any reader of the program evaluation, must assess whether the outcomes are

transferable to their environment. This assessment implied if the reader of the evaluation can make the transferability judgment. An example of a thick description would be to provide a rich account of data. As Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated, data can be characterized as the description and context in which the research was carried out. The setting, sample, sample size, sample strategy, demographic, socio-economic, interview procedure and topics, changes in interview questions based on the iterative research process, and excerpts from the interview guide are examples of thick descriptions.

### **Ethical Issues**

Gaining perspectives of all stakeholders was vital to the evaluation process. Clarity, depth, and relevance of the Safe Environment curriculum were acquired when participants engaged in qualitative and quantitative data collection. However, research must also be conducted ethically and legally. “Program evaluations involve people, and human subjects’ protections are necessary to ensure voluntary informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy” (Royse et al. 2016, p. 41). As a prior Catholic school educator, familiarity with the Safe Environment Program may be seen as bias or interest conflict. Confronting those biases and separating the researcher's experience from the research helped understand different perspectives and provided the stakeholders with a fair evaluation. The participants were made aware of the researcher's connection and experience with the Safe Environment Program as a prior teacher in School ABC to mitigate the risk of bias and possible conflict of interest. Providing this information to participants was necessary to establish transparency and develop a trusting relationship.

Developing a deep understanding of the participants most impacted by the Safe Environment Program was the main priority of the evaluation. Students are often not provided

with the opportunity to voice their opinions, experiences, and concerns when, in reality, they can be considered the real experts. For this reason, students in 6th-8th grades were asked to participate in completing an anonymous survey voluntarily. Surveys were directly linked to a Google drive in my possession with no shared access. No identifying information was asked in the surveys and questionnaires. When questionnaires or surveys are used with adults who are not part of a vulnerable population, the principle of implied consent may be used. The acts of participation are seen as giving informed consent (Royse et al., 2016). Regardless of the participant's age, their choice to participate was met with respect, beneficence, and justice, with a clear and concise explanation of the evaluation plan's purpose. The following ethical guidelines regarding privacy were adhered to ensure the safety of all participants (Royse et al., 2016):

- The allowance of anonymous responses, if at all possible.
- If the research design cannot accommodate anonymity, protection is provided by separating any personally identifying information from the research data through the use of numeric or other special codes. Suppose complete anonymity is not possible, a common occurrence in program evaluation; in that case, it is preferable to use code numbers or pseudonyms to help guard against unauthorized persons accidentally recognizing or identifying program participants.

The measure of effectiveness in which the program evaluation is reliant on the participation of stakeholders. It was communicated to all participants that their opinions, experiences, and ideas are deemed highly essential and contribute immensely to the Safe Environment Program evaluation. Before observations, all teachers will be aware of the time and purpose of observing instruction. Educators' knowledge contribution to the program can

potentially be very beneficial, with little to no risk. Although the principal was aware of the data collection plan and timeframe, no specific teacher-identifying information was provided.

### **SECTION 3: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Safe Environment Program, mandated by every Archdiocesan school in the state, includes a curriculum instructed to children in Kindergarten to high school. The purpose of the evaluation study was to assess the curriculum's level of effectiveness regarding the program's goals and student understanding. From the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the curriculum has been demonstrated to be necessary and an essential component of the program; however, gaps in the curriculum's depth, exposure, and relevance to the stakeholders have emerged. Stakeholders impacted by the curriculum; students, teachers, parents, and the principal have expressed a clear need to improve the provided lesson plans, curriculum awareness, and accountability.

#### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The researcher used quantitative and qualitative collection methods to ensure sufficient data was gathered to answer the evaluation questions guiding this study. It was essential to gain varying stakeholders' perspectives; therefore, the researcher used surveys, questionnaires, and semi-formal interviews to dissect experiences and personal impressions regarding the SEC. The principal of School ABC shared concerns with the researcher regarding the virtual observations of SE lessons. In place of observations, the researcher will share their narrative as a prior Catholic school teacher at School ABC and their connection to the SEC. Rather than having discrete sections for data analysis and findings, this section integrates the two: offering themes unique to each data collection source, then a cross-source analysis.

#### **Principal's Interview**

After following the initial request for an interview and numerous unanswered emails to School ABC's principal for several weeks, it was clear that scheduling the interview would be

difficult. As stated, School ABC has been faced with the challenge of navigating instruction during the pandemic, with positive cases on the rise in the surrounding community. Following a week of no response, a phone call to the principal prompted the interview to be scheduled. The interview took place via Zoom after the school had dismissed the students. The principal was seated at their desk in the school office. Flustered, the principal expressed that the day had been “challenging, and with every week that passes, a new grade finds itself in quarantine.” After a few minutes of explaining the study's purpose and asking for permission to record, the interview began. The interview was transcribed in full using Otter.ai transcription software. It was analyzed using the narrative process, ensuring that their story and experiences were preserved respectfully and adequately. After the interview analysis, the themes that emerged were identified as responsibility versus job, necessary education, accountability, and improvement needs. The following demonstrates how the major themes relate to the general analytic scheme and contributes to the evaluation's conclusions:

### ***Responsibility Versus Job***

This theme encapsulates the principal's role regarding the Safe Environment curriculum and the noted struggle to be more involved. When asked to walk the researcher through responsibilities as the school principal regarding the SEC, the principal immediately began to shift positions in their chair as they looked up to think about their response. Throwing his hands up in the air, he replied, “My number one job is to keep everyone safe. Are we in an environment that promotes respect and an environment that promotes peer mediation, and you know, is proactive when it comes to bullying?”

After identifying their priority as a principal, their facial expression shifted from eagerness to explain their most important role to disappointment. They further explained how



they genuinely consider their role to be regarding the SEC, “I think part of my job is to just be that kind of record keeper but promoting Catholic values, putting the children first, specifically to the curriculum.”

The principal described keeping children safe as “paramount” while using their hands to demonstrate the word paramount, but their eager voice tone quickly lowered once again when they shared the reality by stating:

As far as the curriculum, for me, making sure that the teachers are keeping up on it. I don’t necessarily roll up my sleeves and get in there with the teachers. A lot of times, it just comes up in conversation. So, a lot of it was just, you know, making sure that certain things were in their lesson plans. I sometimes feel like my job is just checking that box.

One of the principal's jobs is to ensure teachers include SE lessons within their lesson plan books and that the lessons are instructed. However, the principal does not view his job as measuring the quality of the lessons being taught. The phrase “my job” was repeated often in the interview, which signified the responsibility of spot-checking lesson plan books rather than providing an in-depth review of the written lesson plan and instruction. The principal’s primary responsibility is identified as safety in the overall school environment but not necessarily linked to the curriculum’s implementation.

### ***Necessary Education***

The theme of necessary education was prominent throughout the interview. The principal’s eyes grew large when asked about the SEC's goals. The principal explained two goals, with one goal showing to be an uncomfortable topic. As the principal verbally stumbled during their explanation, they stated, “We all need to know, not just how to keep our children safe, but we need to know how to recognize certain behaviors that might be indications of

children not being safe.” The principal further explained the “real” goal of the curriculum and its reason for being incredibly necessary. Their eyes looked down, and their speech sped up as they said:

Now the other reason why [incomprehensible due to rapid speech] obviously, being in a Catholic school, I don’t think we can ignore, nor should we ignore, that the Church is in crisis when it comes to the sexual abuse scandal. But there have been priests and other adults who are in positions of power with, engaged in criminal behavior, psychological, mental, sexual, physical abuse.

Following that statement, using their fist to demonstrate two reasons why the SEC is necessary, they shared that every adult in the building must remember the most significant part of their Virtus training: “PAN- public, appropriate, non-sexual, that’s a great guideline.”

The principal often confused the SEC for the Virtus, which is Child Abuse training that every adult in a Catholic school and church setting must complete. They demonstrated more knowledge and familiarity with the Virtus training rather than the SEC. However, the principal concluded his thoughts of the necessity of the curriculum as:

It just reminds us to be on the lookout.... that’s another good thing that I didn’t think of till just now; a lot of it is for our own education; let’s not put ourselves in a vulnerable position where something could be misconstrued (sic).

Students and teachers benefit from the Safe Environment curriculum, as it provides necessary education to all. The principal is well-aware that promoting safety is the curriculum’s initial goal and must be a continued part of the Catholic school learning experience. The principal understands the causal relationship between sexual abuse allegations and the conception of the SEC. Teachers and principals must be mindful of this causal relationship and

always maintain it at the forefront of their minds to avoid any unfortunate situation. The curriculum provides teacher education as well as student education.

### ***Accountability***

As the interview proceeded, the principal relaxed their body, demonstrating less shifting in their chair and stumbling of words. The principal moved their chair closer to the camera when responding to the remaining questions. The theme of accountability emerged, comparing what it is and what it should be. There was no sense of shame but rather ownership because more needs to be done stemming from the Archdiocese into their role as the principal. They stated:

They have state tests throughout the year, and it's not like that. So, it's really easy for it to slip out of your head. And even having this conversation now that reminds me, I am like, oh, I better mention this to my teachers at Friday's faculty meeting.

Repeating the phrase "as an administrator" often in the interview, they shifted several times from understanding that accountability is needed from those in leadership positions to characterizing a passive leader. This thought-process was demonstrated when they stated:

But again, if I'm not thinking of it, when I'm spot-checking their lesson plans, it can fall through the cracks. Reminders from the Archdiocese help, but there is no paperwork involved; no proof to the Archdiocese. There's no real mandate. There's no accountability at the end of it.

The principal is solely focused on accountability for his work from the Archdiocese rather than internal accountability.

### ***Improvements Needed***

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the education system. As a principal, they made an immediate connection between the current issues plaguing education to the SEC. The theme

of improvements needed was demonstrated throughout the interview and encapsulated the principal's overall impressions of the Safe Environment curriculum and what is required to evolve. The principal threw their hands in the air to emphasize the most crucial improvement needed as:

I mentioned bullying behavior, that's a huge part of having a safe environment, but I mean, now with COVID, maybe we need to beef up our cyberbullying piece to it. We're just so used to Zoom, so I feel like that stuff's not going away.

Furthermore, he quickly reverted to teacher education by when they stated, "Maybe it should be a throughout the year thing. Even if we're a broken record, that's fine. Let us be a broken record because I think the important thing isn't just to check that box." The principal took a deep breath and continued their thoughts, "A benefit is keeping that awareness, front of mind; I think it could have happened more often. Not that it should be taught once a month. I mean, it should be, once a week, intertwined with lessons."

As stated before, planning and instructing the SE lessons can slip through the cracks; however, the principal expressed appreciation for reminder emails sent by the Archdiocese. They raised their finger and traced a checkmark in the air, signifying that the reminder email helps them remind the teachers to include the SEC in their lesson plans. The principal then expressed, "If it happens at orientation, then maybe it stays top of mind because I think that's what it is. It's not like Math, where I'm testing my kids on this." From the discussion, the principal demonstrated how simple it could be for the SEC to be overlooked but also suggested how this can be prevented, demonstrating the importance of the SEC's contents.

Shifting the conversation, the principal began to focus on the teachers' ability to effectively instruct students in the lessons. They started to nod their head, signaling no, and stated:

There is no professional development [PD] provided by the Archdiocese to teachers. It's not like teachers need to become masters of that content, it's not physics, but maybe if there were, it would at least put more attention on it. So maybe if there was some sort of PD, just something about different strategies for, you know, approaching certain topics with Kindergarten versus how to talk to your middle school students about it.

The principal expressed the disconnect students have regarding the SEC. Students do not consider the SEC as a separate component, aside from religious instruction. The principal believes that students would better understand its goals and objectives if the SEC is taught separately from religious instruction.

Relevance must play an essential role in improving the lessons in the Safe Environment curriculum. Although deemed necessary and beneficial, the curriculum must connect to the students to develop a deep understanding of the topics taught. A review and revision of lessons should occur to ensure that they continue to be relevant and current.

Additional resources, such as professional development or workshops, can help teachers develop and implement meaningful lessons aligned with an evidence-based learning theory. Increased exposure to the curriculum can benefit both teachers and students, as once a month is not enough to ensure students understand the importance of safety in their environment. In doing so, the curriculum will no longer be seen as an afterthought by students and teachers but a critical part of the school's learning environment.

## **Teacher Interviews**

Seven teachers who instruct students on the Safe Environment curriculum in School ABC were interviewed individually. All interviews with educators were scheduled at the day and time of their choosing and executed via Zoom. Since School ABC provides in-person instruction five days of the week, all teachers chose to meet after school or on the weekend. Scheduling the interview posed a challenge; however, the researcher was willing to be available at the teacher's discretion. The educator interviews followed the same format as the administrator's interview, with the difference being the interview questions. After the interviews' analysis, themes that emerged were identified as necessary education, curriculum goals, collaboration opportunity versus resources provided, improvements needed, cultural relevance, parental involvement, and accountability. The following demonstrates how the major themes relate to the general analytic scheme and contributes to the evaluation's conclusions:

### ***Necessary Education***

The theme of necessary education summarizes the teachers' experiences teaching students the SEC. Teachers highlighted the importance of making their students, at any age, aware of their surroundings and empowering them to speak up if necessary. Participant B expressed the influence the teacher-student relationship has on the students' ability to express themselves:

It is necessary for the students because a lot of them have things that they're going through with bullying and things like that, but I think it's good for them to have a forum, if that's the right word, where they can express their thoughts. It brings the whole religion aspect to it on how we should be treating others.

Participant C expressed the same notion, demonstrating the importance this curriculum is to their students. Their eye contact and facial expression showed concern when expressing the curriculum's necessity:

It brings awareness to students of what might be right or wrong and how they can resolve most or certain issues. It gives a break from textbooks, and at that moment, they are doing something that actually reflects the child's home life or on the playground, being able to help students resolve a matter that can make them a better citizen.

Participants A and F focused on the level of comfort their students experience during the SE lessons. Although they both describe different perspectives, they both demonstrate the importance of creating a comfortable classroom environment. As Participant A was sharing their experience with the curriculum, their voice tone slightly increased in pitch as they discussed safety and their students:

It's a safety zone. There's appropriate touching, and there's inappropriate touching, and kids really aren't aware of those things. But aside from that, I feel like they've given us a good pathway to kind of open that up to where students feel comfortable talking about. So we're able to really observe what's going on in the room, which is a good idea. We can assess the children's reactions and their faces and really take note of their questions.

Differing in tone, Participant F spoke in a soft voice, often nodding their head. As they spoke, their eyes shifted upward as if thinking back to the last time they instructed students a SE lesson and articulated:

They allow us an opportunity to approach the subject with our students in a positive and comforting way. I think it's a kind of personal thing for a teacher and putting their spin on it in the delivery. But it is definitely appropriate and necessary.

Although each of the teachers expressed the SEC's necessity, three teachers identified anxiety when teaching the lessons. While all the teachers interviewed have over five years of teaching these lessons, their statements and worried facial expressions demonstrated a personal challenge. Participant D expressed, "There is a level of discomfort because they haven't modified it for teaching on Zoom, and they can be too long." Similarly, Participant H shared:

This is my second year in second grade, and I did not like the whole, no touching thing at that level. They had coloring pictures with angels in bikinis, and I was like, oh, my gosh, no, I can not go there. It's uncomfortable at this young level, but I like the novelty of the whole curriculum. It's a pretty good program.

Both Participants H and A established a distinct sense of awkwardness in connection to teaching students the SEC's content. Similar to Participant H, Participant A was very honest in sharing their thoughts:

I'm uncomfortable teaching those things with certain grades because you're not sure if a child will take it to another level and think it's something different. I am out of my comfort zone, but I do it because I have to.

Honesty was a characteristic that every teacher had as they discussed their students and the curriculum's importance in their education. Similar to the principal's interview, Participant E understood the reality of the topics the lessons focused on when they stated, "The lessons can lack some relevance, but it is absolutely necessary, especially with the abuse scandal hitting so close to home." The Safe Environment curriculum is an essential part of the overall learning occurring in School ABC. Educators appreciate the awareness the lessons can bring to the students regarding safety and character development; however, there is a sense of anxiety and discomfort when teaching some lessons. There appears to be no balance in comfort when



addressing sensitive topics to children, as any age puts the teacher in an awkward position. Although uncomfortable at times, teachers understand that they provide a safe space where students can engage in discussions, even if these meaningful discussion opportunities are added by the teachers, rather than following the lessons' question-and-answer guidelines.

### ***Curriculum Goals***

The teachers collectively expressed the necessity of the curriculum. Stemming from the theme of necessity, curriculum goals captured what they believed the SEC is focused on achieving. Participant B expressed the connection the lessons make with God, as they stated:

It's more for them to develop habits daily habits in a way that they see God in themselves and in others. I think it's also through their actions. So, I would say the goal is recognizing that they're made in the image and likeness of God, and so are other people. That should also play a huge role in how they treat others and how they expect to be treated.

It was clear that the religious connection to the curriculum plays a vital role in how Participant B instructs their students, as they were the only teacher who made the connection between God and the SEC. Awareness was the focus of the other teachers. Participant F mentioned the awareness of proper behavior between adults and children. This awareness helps students protect themselves from situations that may make them feel uncomfortable. With this awareness comes the ability to identify trusted adults. Similar to the principal and another educator, Participant H also expressed disappointment and slight shame in their tone as they looked down towards the floor:

I believe they want children to be able to identify situations where they might not be comfortable with what's going on. That they need to be able to find a trusted adult if that

happens, need to know who those adults are to turn to in those situations. And I kind of imagined it is kind of an extension of that Stranger Danger. We have to go further now because we unfortunately just do.

Several participants shared the importance of the curriculum's ability to keep students safe and their role in ensuring a comfortable learning environment. Participant C characterized the curriculum as empowerment; student empowerment in identifying safety in school, home, and other environments. Providing this knowledge is an essential piece of students' education, as it aids in identifying whom to trust and how to report abuse. Similarly, Participant E demonstrated an understanding of the significance of a teacher's voice; the empowerment it plays in student advocacy when they stated, "The teachers' goals would be to demonstrate that they are a trusted individual where students can feel comfortable to share with them." It is apparent that the student-teacher relationship holds great significance to all teachers interviewed.

### ***Collaboration Opportunity versus Resources Provided***

The theme of collaboration opportunity versus resources provided emerged as the teachers expressed how they plan their SE lessons. An overarching feeling of being unguided engulfed the teachers, knowing that what they need dramatically differs from what they are provided. Before beginning discussing planning and resources, Participant F took a few sips of their self-identified coffee and let out a slow and long breath while raising their eyebrows. They stated:

There is no collaboration time allotted for this specific curriculum. We do have collaboration for RtI [Response to Intervention]. Probably if we need it or we wanted to, we could, but not, in particular, put aside or set aside for these lessons. I think you could never get enough of that as a teacher because you're able to bounce ideas off. And a lot

of time in Catholic school, you only have one grade level per class. So, we don't get that time as a team, per se. So anytime you can collaborate or just discuss, well, how did you bring that up? And how what did you do here? Just hearing different ideas makes it a bit more comfortable and easier to deliver. Collaboration is key. As far as the slides, I glance at them. But that's not the driving force. I just kind of feel out the kids and have a discussion. So, I'm not following them to the tee now, but I do use them as a guide.

Identifying the PowerPoint slides as a resource provided by the Archdiocese and sharing in need of collaboration, Participant B indicated that the slides do not play a significant role when teaching the SE lessons. They are more used as a reference rather than a student resource. Participant H characterized the PowerPoint slides as "just part of the lesson" and felt lukewarm regarding the value they add to the lesson when they stated, "Of course, it's not as engaging as a video. They're so tech-savvy now. But I don't think they're more effective or less effective." As a Catholic school teacher for over five years, Participant B is familiar with the framework of having one teacher per grade:

No real collaboration, because it's just there aren't any other teachers to plan with; everyone just does their own thing. It would be helpful because the lessons have the potential to build on each other. It's good to just have that collaboration where you can get a sounding board from other teachers as to what might be going on with their students or things their students might be sharing.

Sharing in this knowledge, Participant H expressed the need to create self-made collaboration opportunities:

Well, there's no other teacher of the same grade in the building because that's the nature of Catholic education most of the time, but we do talk to each other. We look for

suggestions or experiences. I can talk to other teachers; they're my resource in the building.

Similarly, Participant E articulated their wish to see an increase in engagement as they described the PowerPoint slides as “just that...slides.” The discussion shows that the slides offer no more engagement than writing definitions on the chalkboard.

Adding to the notion of lack of collaboration opportunity, Participant D chuckled and rolled their eyes upwards, demonstrating that the mere thought of collaboration is amusing.

Teachers report they are not provided with collaboration time to discuss the safe environment lessons' planning or instruction. Small Catholic schools rarely have a team of same-grade teachers, but this does not decrease the need and desire for collaboration. Confering with each other can positively impact the lessons' instruction, as ideas can be exchanged.

Collaboration can also ease some anxiety or discomfort teachers may have when there is uncertainty on instructing a sensitive topic. The Archdiocese provides PowerPoint slides for each lesson; however, educators are unenthusiastic regarding how effective the slides are as a quality resource. Although the slides provide visuals to accompany the lesson, the slides would be more beneficial if they were engaging and interactive.

### ***Improvements Needed: Lesson Plans, Exposure, and Resources***

Teachers understand that curricula do not, or should not, be one-size-fits-all. They must be flexible and ensure opportunities are provided for all students to learn. The theme of the improvements needed helped condense how teachers identified what is needed to benefit their students. Participant E, one of the youngest teachers interviewed, had no delay in their suggestions, as they stated:

Lesson topics should be revamped to include social media and how to navigate it safely and make smart decisions. I know there is a lesson on computer safety and IM (instant messaging), but that seems to be a bit outdated. Nowadays, children are on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat and make silly decisions solely due to friends' pressures or low confidence; wanting to be popular. There should also be a lesson on depression and mental health. I feel the two, social media and mental health, go hand in hand.

Professional speakers, literature relevant to the lesson, honestly, anything that would make the lessons relevant to the students is definitely needed.

In connection with Participant E, Participant A, who previously expressed a sense of discomfort when explaining the SE lessons to their students, expressed their interest in having the option of a guest speaker or a representative from the Archdiocese that can provide training. From the interview, Participant A seemed to feel the most uncomfortable when teaching her students the SE lessons. Having a sense of guidance and training can increase a teacher's knowledge and approach, increasing a teacher's self-efficacy. Participant A postulated the idea of incorporating anonymous questionnaires for the students to "keep the conversation going even after the lesson is done, pamphlets, and any kind of visual or video that can be displayed on the SmartBoard." Participant A also highlighted the importance of increasing instruction with age-appropriate resources. Having another professional collaborate in educating students would provide sufficient opportunity to evaluate the students' expressions and emotions.

With Zoom being a vital resource in education, Participant D shared their thoughts on online learning and the lasting effects on education. They expressed the need for more online resources: "targeted now at this hybrid learning that we are going through now, because that may

never go away.” In saying this, Participant D expressed the importance of equity, ensuring that they “could reach all the students and not just the ones in class but the ones at home.”

Teachers had a shared concern for students that may need more resources to ensure meaningful learning. Although teachers expressed their ability to find resources independently, that did not prevent them from honing in areas that need improvement. Participant B expressed the need for multiple ways of representation:

There should be a literacy connection, a visual connection; you know, music, different types of presentation when it comes to planning the lesson, and then instructing it to make sure every student understands. Differentiation doesn't come in the framework of the lesson; that's something that the teacher needs to do themselves.

The lack of assessment opportunity was a shared concern for two teachers. Participant F expressed the benefit a written assessment such as a quiz or exit ticket can have when measuring the students' level of understanding. Participant F characterized the resources provided as “not enough to sustain awareness of appropriate behavior.” Similarly, Participant H expressed the need for a more engaging activity, such as role-play may be a better assessment rather than a written one. Both teachers suggested an increase in student engagement with the lesson's contents, encapsulated the need to adopt evidence-based learning theories such as constructivism and Social Learning. Participant F suggested professional development to enhance instructional approaches, focusing on evidence-based best practices.

Student mental health was a common topic among two teachers. Participant C held eye contact while sharing their opinions and often opened their eyes wide to match their enthused voice tone. It was evident that they were concerned over the necessity of including social-emotional learning into this curriculum:

It should be once a week to ensure that students understand the lessons' goals to understand what is appropriate and inappropriate. There should be counselors to come in and help the teachers because we wear a lot of hats, but we're not mental health professionals. We have the best relationship with the students but also need guidance on best practices to instruct sensitive topics like this. Perhaps giving the students themselves a voice and knowing what's affecting them the most besides testing and school work; a poll should be available, so they can have some sort of buy-in. Professional development, and not like any other subject, but really honing in on what activities and materials would be most effective, most beneficial.

The passionate voice tone was noted in Participant C's voice as they explained why social-emotional learning must be a component of the SEC. They began by suggesting an increase in instruction from yearly to two to three times a week but also providing teachers and principals with a voice in the expansion of the curriculum, "Teachers' and principal's perspectives and experiences should be considered and asked for. Let's see what major thing happened this year that we need to address and then make addendums to it." Participant C demonstrated a deep connection and insight to their students, as they expressed the differences in cultural norms comparing their current class to students taught over five years ago. The rise in bullying seemed especially troubling, as they stated, "Students are dealing with different things during different times of the year. They could be dealing with bullying, and they need to know how to be physically and mentally safe. The stress of that would affect them mentally." Sharing in Participant C's suggestion to increase instruction, Participant F explained the need to reinforce the curriculum throughout the year. There is always an opportunity for teachers to connect the

SEC to other aspects of learning. After a pause, they stated in a low tone, “But it’s certainly not enough.”

Students face many challenges that many did not experience in 2003 when the SEC was introduced. Cultural norms shift, and the curriculum must adapt to those shifts to ensure that every student is provided with an opportunity to develop a deep understanding. That being said, Participant B expressed the usefulness of the lessons, but the lack of beneficial learning as it is only taught once a year when they expressed, “You do have students who leave; you do have students who come in, and they completely miss it. So, I think revisiting it again at another point in the school year would be beneficial for them.”

Participant B described themselves as “an outlet” for their students to express themselves to as their life dynamics change throughout the school year, solidifying the reason for increasing SE instruction. Teachers have expressed a need to improve the curriculum, as there appear to be instructional gaps, lack of resources, and limited exposure. The SEC has been characterized as necessary but lacks the ability to engage students in meaningful learning. Teacher-student relationships play an essential role in providing a safe learning environment; however, more guidance is wanted.

### ***Cultural Relevance***

A curriculum is only as effective and meaningful as its connection to the students. Teachers have demonstrated knowledge of their students' demographics and have expressed the need for modifications regarding the SEC. The theme of cultural relevance emerged from the teachers' interviews and the commonality of reflecting on students' experiences. Participant C moved closer to the camera as they spoke the word *try* while they raised their hands, shrugged, and stated:



I think that they tried to make it as culturally sensitive to them as possible. I think that's the intent to make it culturally sensitive, but I think it's geared more towards dealing with stressors or problems in the homes that manifest in schools. I don't see how they bring culture into it. We have a mix of students in front of us, but it's not an element of the curriculum, and it should be.

Participant E also expressed that more needs to be done to sustain the curriculum's relevance. They referred to the lesson as providing "little opportunity for engagement or discussion unless the teacher adds it." The teacher described their instruction as providing a teacher-centered learning environment, albeit understanding that a change is needed to facilitate student connection.

In keeping with the significance of culturally responsive teaching, Participant A demonstrated pride in the rich diversity identified in the community. Using adjectives such as "mixed, not rich, and immigrant population," Participant A expressed the need for the curriculum to connect with diverse family dynamics "in a way that every community, every culture in our classroom would understand what is happening and relate to it." The teacher suggested PowerPoint slides to include characters of different skin tones.

Participant H also expressed knowledge of the gaps in relevance some lessons may have, such as different family dynamics and how best to approach and include all families when they expressed:

The lessons, for some more than others, can be culturally relevant to the kids.

Somebody's who's a single mom, raising her child on their own, that child is going to need to be more aware of his or her surroundings, which they can trust because that can prevent getting into positions where they need help. I would say it can be relevant, but

maybe some cultures, like parents from other countries that weren't born in the United States, where there's more of a village mentality, may struggle with the idea of that. The kids may have a hard time grasping that, just because they're used to having a group of people around them because that's what they do.

Recalling the lessons taught, by slightly lifting their head towards the sky along with their eyes, Participant D stated, "I think the lessons touch upon things that they're familiar with. I don't think that there's anything they can't relate to, so if anything, I could always modify to connect with them a bit more." Participant B expressed the same notion by describing how they plan the SE lessons to be culturally relevant:

I try to connect it to something, some sort of current event or something that's going around them at that time. So, we kind of go from there, but tying it into something that they're already connected to, I think, is key. But I also think they're desensitized to some of it, like language or music that they're exposed to in their environment. For their demographic, they're able to understand it.

Teachers must holistically know their students, not just as learners but as individuals. Participant B showed pride in understanding what interests their students have and often uses their interest to engage in meaningful conversations outside of the classroom. They use the conversations had to adjust lessons in any subject to increase relevance. Through the discussion had with the researcher, it was evident that Participant B is significantly invested in being a culturally responsive teacher.

Culturally responsive teaching has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on student learning. Research shows that teachers who embrace this type of instruction go beyond foregrounding students' culture in the classroom; these teachers build students' awareness of

social justice issues encountered in their daily lives and communities through rigorous, project-based activities (Muniz, 2019). Participant F identified the lessons as “just geared toward age appropriateness” and suggested that “they would have to research and see connections between demographics and issues... that would be helpful because you can address the children based on their own circumstances.” Every teacher interviewed demonstrated an interest in establishing a connection between students and the curriculum. Since the SEC is not culturally relevant to their students, several teachers have modified lessons to increase relevance and establish a student connection. They have witnessed the benefits culturally responsive teaching provides to their students with other subjects.

### ***Parental Involvement***

The topic of parental involvement was expressed passionately by every teacher interviewed. As each interview was analyzed, it was evident that this theme may be the most impactful for all stakeholders. Participant B identified themselves as a parent and connected emotionally with their words:

I know parents do get a letter that's sent out to them. But I think making them aware of some of the apps that their kids use is needed. They can better monitor some of the things that their child might be going on. I think that would be pretty useful to include. Even just a list, with a description of what or how it can be used, can help them look for certain keywords that might raise a red flag. Even the pros and cons of some social media apps, because they don't generally start off that way, but they do have the potential to go left. Parents should be aware of this technology. A lot of parents aren't tech-savvy, so they really won't have a clue of what's going on or even try to help the situation. Parents need to be part of the planning, where they can come in for training, or it could be something

virtual, just to help them along, because sometimes you don't know if it's happening to your child, you won't know how to approach it.

As they placed their hand on their chest accompanied with a slight head tilt towards the left, Participant F demonstrated the same concern over the lack of parental involvement. Their concern stems from the discomfort felt when instructing students in the SE lessons. Participant F explained it as, "You don't ever want to ruffle that relationship with parents, so they should be more informed of the curriculum, which they are, but maybe a bit more." The relationship between teachers and parents should be a key component within the SEC and a collaborative effort, which Participant F described as "a village."

Participants D, E, and H also expressed a need for an increase in parental involvement. As they each shared their thoughts, their pitch range often changed, and each had concerned expressions on each of their faces. Participant D had previously communicated the unfortunate conversations students were having via the Zoom chat and connected that with the need for parental involvement within the SEC, identifying parent education as a "need." The relationship between parents and the teacher is vital to the holistic success of the student. As with any subject, parental involvement bridges the school to the home, an extension of learning. However, parental involvement must evolve into a parental engagement. Participant E expressed their experience with parental engagement and provided a suggestion when they expressed, "Parental involvement is slim to none. I think there should be training for both teachers and parents, a workshop of some kind."

Teachers understand that their students may have different stressors in their lives, unbeknownst to their parents; no awareness due to communication gaps. Participant H explained that they believe the majority of the students comprehend the curriculum well. However, those

that may struggle to understand may be missing that communication component with their parents: “Some kids have these conversations with their parents, but some don’t.”

By including parents in the curriculum's planning and instruction, students’ safety and mental health can be at the forefront of the SE curriculum. Building and sustaining the parent-teacher relationship is key to improving the part parents play within this curriculum.

### ***Accountability***

A deficiency in the importance of instructing students the SEC has emerged as the theme of accountability. Teachers expressed the principal's absence of guidance, which can lead to the insignificance of the curriculum. This lack of guidance was evident when Participant D nervously chuckled and stated, “They haven’t really made us teach them the last couple of years, and they actually just gave me all the sixth, seventh, and eighth, but for the fifth grade, I know it wasn’t that often.” The teachers’ reluctance as they shared their perspectives on accountability was the shared denominator. Participant C described the timeframe they are given by the principal to complete the SE lesson, which is usually a specific time of year (it varies, upon the principal’s discretion), about a month to include in their lesson plan books, and about a week to instruct students the lesson. As Participant C was sharing their thoughts, they began to nod their head in a *no*-motion when expressing, “But we don’t get any walkthroughs to make sure it actually has been done. There is no actual evidence besides our lesson plan books that we taught it. Some schools need to create bulletin boards, but we don’t.”

There is a lack of accountability when it comes to educating students on the SE lessons. Teachers have indicated the curriculum's importance and invite a deeper involvement regarding the principal’s role and ensuring that lessons are taught correctly. In connection with the principal’s interview, Participant E shared mention of the SEC coming in passing at faculty

meetings. There is an absence of evidence of completion or, in the current case of the pandemic straining the school system, a lack of attention and action. This notion was expressed when they stated, “I don’t know, but you would think that such an important curriculum would have more weight. And now, during the pandemic, it's definitely on the back burner.”

As with any lesson plan, feedback is crucial in a teacher’s growth moving beyond compliance to meaningful cycles of observation, feedback, and improvement. (Leggett & Smith, 2019). Considering Bandura’s social learning theory, teachers will begin to model that behavior if teachers are shown an indifferent attitude about the curriculum. Unfortunately, in the end, the student is the one who is impacted.

Every teacher interviewed shared an appreciation for the SE curriculum. It is necessary, essential, and has the potential to impact students, parents, and teachers' lives significantly. However, there is a need to evolve the curriculum to remain relevant and develop students’ deep understanding of safety and trust, and not just empty knowledge. There are several positive aspects regarding the curriculum, and those aspects can be used as building blocks to a more engaging, meaningful, and daily type of instruction.

### **Researcher’s Narrative (Observations)**

The researcher was employed as a Catholic school teacher by School ABC for 13 years. During these years of employment, the researcher taught first and fourth grades. During the course of employment, the researcher was under the leadership of three principals. Although each principal had different leadership styles, their approach to the SEC was similar. As a Catholic school educator, who instructed students on religious education, the researcher was responsible for instructing the Archdiocese's SE lessons. Each principal took a few minutes out of the monthly faculty meeting to mention the curriculum and when the teachers would find the

lesson plan template in their mailboxes. The principals gave a time frame in which the lesson had to be included within the lesson plan books, instructed, and have the lesson guide template returned to the principal. The extent of the principal's involvement in the implementation activities was non-existent, as there was no check-in aside from lesson plan book checks.

***Descriptive Information: Planning and Instruction***

The researcher's time to instruct Religion to their students was in the morning following language arts, which was the same instructional block allotted to teach SE. The students' desks were always arranged in a group of four to five students, depending on the class size. When planning the lesson, the researcher would read and annotate the lesson plan template with a highlighter, highlighting the talking points allocated to the teacher and clip the lesson plan template into the lesson plan book. No further planning was conducted.

During instruction, the researcher followed the lesson plan template's bullets and did not deviate from the plan. When the template suggested writing terms on the board, the researcher did so; when the template suggested a pause for student responses, the researcher complied. Students often demonstrated interest in the SE lessons, as they were a break from the usual classroom schedule. The researcher did not feel any sense of discomfort or anxiety but instead paused often to ensure the words used to answer questions posed by students were age-appropriate and used carefully. Student participation during SE lessons was always welcomed and encouraged by the researcher. Students enjoyed learning about the topics such as *NO*, *GO*, *TELL* and trust for first grade and what it means to have good judgment and behavior for fourth grade. Resources provided include a summative assessment such as a true or false quiz, a word find, and several coloring book pages telling a story focused on the lesson's objectives. Instructing the students on the SE lesson usually took one 45-minute subject slot, allotted for

religious instruction, without scheduling interruptions, or two 45-minute subject slots over a span of two days, if there were scheduling interruptions. The researcher repeated the same lesson every school year to fourth graders for nine years and groups of first graders for four years.

The topics explained within the SEC are an essential component to educating young children in Catholic schools. Although the students may not understand the reason behind the curriculum's conception, they understood the importance of ensuring their safety. Students never demonstrated a sense of discomfort or anxiety but instead were interested during instruction and disappointed when the lesson was completed.

### **Safe Environment Educator Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were completed by nine teachers who have instructed students in SE lessons. The questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions centralized on the principal's feedback, the curriculum's strengths and weaknesses, and opinions on future changes needed. The questionnaire's purpose was to gain teachers' insight and further extend the researcher's clarity on the curriculum from the current educators in School ABC needed to answer the evaluation questions guiding the study effectively. The questionnaires were collected anonymously via a Google Forms link.

### ***Feedback Provided***

The evaluation questions were posed to measure the overall effectiveness of the SEC. Implementing the curriculum is a critical component in making sure that quality education is provided to the students. Feedback provided to the teachers is essential in assuring lessons instructed to the students have the curriculum's goals and objectives in mind. Data collected from the educator questionnaires demonstrated three ways principal feedback played a role in the SE lessons' instruction: positive, negative, and no feedback provided. One out of nine teachers



stated, “The plans are reviewed as other lesson plans, and the review is appropriate.” However, most questionnaires exposed the lack of feedback provided by the principal, exhibiting gaps in guidance. One out of nine teachers expressed a negative experience regarding feedback, “Feedback I received was not constructive. It felt more of a personal attack...I was told activities were not for Grade 5 students even though I followed the grade 5 SE lesson.” Six out of nine responses expressed that there is an absence of feedback provided by the principal, but analysis suggests that feedback is welcomed by all teachers and is necessary. Several responses include words and phrases such as “open to whatever my admin would want,” “not provided with feedback,” “appreciate constructive feedback,” “I may have missed the opportunity for open discussion with my students” and, “feedback provided by other teachers.” In general, teachers understand the importance of feedback from the principal. They welcome the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions; however, the principal does not provide feedback. On the rare occasion that they do, it is not conducive to establishing a shared goal of constructive student learning and teacher confidence.

### ***Strengths***

The responses identified the curriculum's strengths and further demonstrated how successful the SEC is in keeping students safe and the extent the SEC reaches its goals and objectives. Empowering students with the knowledge needed to express themselves when in uncomfortable situations was the overarching theme that emerged across all questionnaires. Similar to interviews, teachers characterized the curriculum as necessary to ensure students are kept safe. The SEC provides a safe space for students to discuss age-appropriate topics, such as boundaries, and ask questions. One out of nine responses identified the religious connection to the curriculum as a strength. Overall, the teachers appreciate the curriculum's content as it

benefits students' safety and can aid in building and strengthening a trusting student-teacher relationship.

### ***Weaknesses***

The majority of responses were brief, limited to less than ten words. However, five out of nine responses were focused on the limited exposure the students have to the curriculum. The opportunity for meaningful learning is present, but with the limited amount of time provided to teach students the lessons, it can be "difficult for the younger students to understand." Phrases that identified weakness are, "They could have lessons once a month; I wish I had more time; not enough room for natural discussion; literally just one activity once a year, should be done twice a year...situations change." The limited time provided to instruct students one plan across a few days is insufficient for students to construct meaningful learning and engage in relevant and purposeful discussions and activities. As a teacher responded, "SEC works depending on how it is taught." Teachers have comprehensively identified the SEC's main weakness as limited time, which leads to a lack of resources and learning activities.

Teachers were asked what changes would they make to the Safe Environment curriculum, if any. The responses identified the categories of additional resources, parental involvement, relevance, and meaningful learning experiences. Deemed a necessary curriculum by all educators, evolving the curriculum was the central theme that emerged from this question. The curriculum was characterized as "one-size-fits-all, which not all lessons are." The sensitive topics instructed to students must utilize multiple ways of representation such as guest speakers, perhaps part of an "anti-bullying or morality group," resources that can yield active engagement and strengthen understanding, and age-appropriate videos that can extend learning.

Although the Archdiocese provides a parent note, teachers believe that it is not sufficient, and more involvement is needed. Two out of nine teachers propose increasing parental involvement, such as a parent-training session that would help “monitor and identify cyberbullying,” as well as frequent parent pamphlets to bridge classroom learning into the home. In connection with the parent training session, one teacher suggested creating an app or the addition of the SEC on School ABC’s website, which can provide parents with more information than is currently provided by the Archdiocese.

Two out of nine teachers expressed the importance of relevance and how the curriculum falls short in making connections with them. The lessons were described as needing “more current information; not scenarios from the past” and the necessity for “more teacher-created lessons.” As with any subject, if students do not have buy-in and cultural connections to the SEC, learning will not be feasible. Teachers acknowledge that the SE lessons must be amended to focus on the student body's current stressors and realities. In connection with relevance, three out of nine teachers described the lessons as “very basic” and “passive learning,” which equates to a teacher-centered learning environment. The transition from behaviorism to constructivism and social learning must occur. This shift can ensure that students acquire sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons to keep students safe. Instructing students “over the course of the year” can help the SEC reach its goals and objectives. One out of nine teachers did not respond to the questionnaire's final question, which was focused on identifying changes they would make to the SEC. However, all educators shared their opinions during semi-formal interviews. It is unclear if time constraints played a role in this non-response, serving as a limitation.

## **Parent Surveys**

A seven-question survey was shared with parents who have children attending School ABC. The purpose of the parent surveys was to collect parents' perspectives to answer the research questions. Six questions used a Likert scale format *1 – Never, 2 – Sometimes, 3 – Often, 4 – Always*. The first six questions helped measure parents' knowledge of the curriculum and the frequency of their involvement. In contrast, the last question on the survey was open-ended and focused on the parents' personal impressions of the SEC. The surveys had the Likert scale on the top to ensure that parents understood each number's significance when answering the questions. The survey stated that all answers would be confidential and anonymous, asking for no parents' identifiable information. Participants were asked to complete the survey voluntarily via a Google Form link shared by teachers in Kindergarten to eighth grades. Their responses were immediately sent to the researcher's private Google drive. Links for the surveys were provided in English and Spanish; 37 surveys were collected, one in Spanish and 36 in English.

### ***Communication and Knowledge***

The survey identified a lack of communication between School ABC and parents, as 37.8% have not been informed on the topics their children learn during SE instruction. This communication gap was evident as most of the responses regarding parents' knowledge of topics covered in class were answered by *never*.

Teachers stated a parent letter is provided to parents before SE lessons are instructed to their children. The letter was written and provided by the Safe Environment Office of the Archdiocese, and teachers are responsible for handing them to their students. The Archdiocese identifies the parent letter's role as stating the curriculum's goal to better address each grade level, with age-appropriate, user-friendly, and consistent lessons with the Catholic Church's

moral teachings. However, the letter's impact on parent knowledge has been demonstrated to be an ineffective tool. When asked if parents have read about the SEC's goals provided by the Archdiocese, 35.1% answered *never*.

### ***Parent-Child Communication and Involvement***

Parental involvement is essential for students to succeed academically. Having parents involved in their learning increases their academic ability and self-efficacy (Park & Holloway, 2017). Question three of the survey asked parents if they engage in discussions regarding the SE lessons with their child; 32.4% of parents answered *often*. However, data received from this question is inconsistent with data received from question one, communication. A close 27% of parents answered *never*. The honesty of responses and the parents' understanding of this survey question is disputed, as most parents expressed having no knowledge of the curriculum but engaging in discussions with their children regarding the curriculum. Further research must be conducted to identify the cause of this inconsistency.

The Archdiocese provides a parent letter which must be distributed by the school prior to SE instruction. In keeping with the evaluation question assessing the curriculum's goals in keeping students safe, parental engagement must be considered. The survey identified that 40.5% of parents are not or have not been invited to be part of the SEC's planning or instructional process. The majority frequency in which parents see themselves having an active role in the SE lessons taught to their child is "never."

### ***Frequency of Homework***

The extension of learning into the home is critical in establishing a positive parent-teacher relationship and providing students opportunities to interact with their parents while engaging with the content. Parents were asked to specify the frequency their child is given

homework reviewing the SE lesson instructed to them, and parents, 45.9%, answered *never*. This response demonstrates the gap between the resources provided by the Archdiocese and the opportunity for parents to be engaged in their children's learning. It is essential to understand that homework does not necessarily mean a written assignment to be completed at home. Effective homework can take the form of discussion or creativity, as long as the opportunity to extend the learning into the home is provided. Homework gives the opportunity for parents to engage in their child's learning while contributing to the increased awareness of the curriculum's contents.

When learning is extended into the home, parents can aid in increasing understanding using real-world experiences. Measuring parents' perception of their child's understanding of the SE lessons aligns with the evaluation question focused on students acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons. A percentage of 35.1 responded with *often*, whereas 29.7% responded with *never*, which signals a range of experiences regarding their child's understanding of the lessons. Like question three, parent-child communication, data does not align with data measured for questions one and two, demonstrating a lack of familiarity regarding the SEC.

### ***Personal Impressions***

The researcher understands the necessity to provide an open-ended question as part of a survey, where the participants can express their opinions without the constraints of a scale. The final question on the survey allowed parents to share their impressions regarding the SEC. Five out of 37 answers were null, as the responses recorded were *N/A* or *none*. Further analysis demonstrated the emergence of three themes: unfamiliarity, no instruction given, and positive impressions.

### **Unfamiliarity.**

The majority of responses indicated no knowledge of the SEC. Some responses given by parents were:

“I didn't even know they did this at the school. I honestly have no idea what this is.”

“I have no idea what the Safe Environment curriculum is.”

“I feel that the curriculum was reserved for school life, parent-teacher meetings. I don't recall hearing or being aware of the lessons taught to the children.”

“I am unsure of what exactly is safe environment curriculum and the exposure or lack thereof my children have had or not.”

“My child's school has never shared any information about the Safe Environment curriculum. I only know of the program because my child (1st grade) has shared information with me, and I have researched it on my own.”

Parents who participated in completing the survey have children who attend School ABC in varying grades. Data collected demonstrated the overarching theme of the unfamiliarity parents have with the SEC, regardless of their child's grade. The school is not providing sufficient information to the parents, clearly identifying a communication gap. This gap fails to educate parents on the SEC and extend this critical education into the home. Communicating with parents can help initiate meaningful discussions needed in the home, which may not be occurring.

Several parents expressed the absence of the curriculum in their child's education. It is unclear if these responses are due to not having knowledge or familiarity with the SEC. Further research must be conducted to investigate possible reasons for the possible failure of instruction, such as teacher or student absence. Responses given by parents focused on this theme included:

“My child has never been thought safe environment at school as yet.”

“My children haven’t had this yet for this school year. I took the course on my own as a volunteer parent.”

“I am not familiar with the safe environment curriculum. To my knowledge, it has not been taught to either of my children.”

### **Positive Impressions.**

Similar to teachers, parents understand the necessity of the curriculum. They appreciate the curriculum being instructed in school, as it provides critical information to their children.

Responses that encapsulated this positive impression were:

“Very well thought out and age-appropriate.”

“It has improved.”

“Structure is good and informative.”

“Me and my child feel safe in this environment curriculum.”

“I feel that is a necessity for this curriculum, especially in this specific moment in time that we are living in.”

“Greater awareness.”

### **Level of Involvement.**

The theme of parental involvement emerged as several parents identified their role in their child’s SE learning. Responses indicated few parents are engaged in extending SE's main ideas at home, expressing personal experiences. Several parents expressed having prior knowledge in the area serving as the cause for their engagement:



“My kids have talked about it with us. And we had an experience where one of them had a camp employee violate the safe environment. I was happy they had the education, even if parents weren’t that involved.”

I am informed because I am an involved parent. I make sure I ask questions and keep on top of what he is learning. My girls were easier. They shared much with us and always wanted to talk. My son is harder, and I have to be more proactive if I want to keep up. It is easier when he is online because I hear what’s going on, but when he is in school learning, it’s a little harder, but I ask lots of questions.

Various parents expressed a disengagement; however, it does not seem to be intentional but rather due to the lack of resources extended into the home:

I don't know what my kids got homework-wise as it relates to this curriculum or if they understood it. They're A students; I assume they did it and understood it. It is also possible we discussed stuff related without reference to the curriculum if my kids asked me questions. But maybe it was just too long ago.

This parent’s response identified a need to be part of the instructional and learning process. They understand it takes effort to stay informed, however describing their attempts to become aware must not be ignored and considered by the Archdiocese:

I am informed because I am an involved parent. I make sure I ask questions and keep on top of what he is learning. My girls were easier. They shared much with us and always wanted to talk. My son is harder, and I have to be more proactive if I want to keep up. It is easier when he is online because I hear what’s going on, but when he is in school learning, it’s a little harder, but I ask lots of questions.

The last response expressed the opportunity for parents to ask questions and provide feedback regarding the curriculum; however, it is unclear if the response refers to a general academic curriculum or specifically the SEC.

### **Student Surveys**

Twenty-nine students in upper elementary grades in School ABC completed a student survey. The researcher created the survey, consisting of four multiple-choice questions written as *1- Never, 2-Sometimes, 3- Often, 4 -Always*, and three open-ended questions, using Google Forms and linked it to their private Google drive. The researcher used multiple-choice style questions rather than Likert-scale format due to the students' familiarity with multiple-choice since they often use it for school assignments. The purpose of the student survey was to gain students' point-of-view of the SEC. Students are the key stakeholders, as they are impacted the most by the SEC's instruction. The researcher needed to understand their thoughts regarding the curriculum's connection to their culture, the resources used during the lesson's implementation, and what they thought is needed to evolve the curriculum. The knowledge gained by the surveys helped to answer the evaluation questions focused on the program's effectiveness.

### ***Lesson Relevance and Additional Resources***

The researcher needed to investigate the measure of relevance students have regarding the SE lessons. The data analyzed helped to acquire the answer to the evaluation question focused on culturally responsive instruction. When asked if the topics covered in the Safe Environment lessons connected to them, the majority of students, 51.7%, responded *sometimes*. This percentage demonstrates the topics covered in the lessons for this specific grade resonate with the students: there is relevance. However, half of the class demonstrated that lessons must

evolve to increase connection. Students must connect the topics covered in the SE lessons to their real-life experiences to develop a deep understanding of the lesson's goals.

PowerPoint slides that accompany the SE lessons are the sole resource provided to teachers to use during instruction. Resources play a critical role in ensuring that the SEC's objectives are met and how successful the curriculum is in keeping students safe. Students were asked if additional resources, such as videos and speakers, would make the Safe Environment lessons more engaging; *always* was the most significant response with 37.9%. An equal percentage of 27.6 answered closely behind in the choices of *sometimes* and *often*. Two students, 6.9%, responded *never*. The responses established that additional resources would increase interest, which can lead to meaningful learning. In connection to question one of the surveys, additional resources can also increase relevance, leading to increased student engagement and discussion opportunities.

### ***Student Learning and Culturally Responsive Instruction***

Effective curricula are not standard. They must be flexible in nature to ensure every learner is given an opportunity to gain and demonstrate knowledge. The researcher needed to obtain insight on the students' perspectives in their knowledge and skills acquired during the SE lessons. An overwhelming 41.4% responded they *always* learned something important. Students understand the necessity of this curriculum and its objective of keeping them safe. However, the curriculum does not provide sufficient opportunities to assess the students, ensuring the knowledge acquired is meaningful and not empty knowledge, with little to no substance.

Culturally responsive teaching is a research-based approach that makes meaningful connections between what students learn in school, how they learn, and the awareness of how cultural experiences can affect learning (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). The final multiple-choice

question asked students if they see and hear about people who look and sound look like them during the Safe Environment lessons. 62.1% of students responded with *never*. Although the curriculum plays a vital role in students' education, the lack of cultural relevance within the curriculum can impede the development of an optimal learning environment where all students have the opportunity to learn.

### ***Safe Environment Instruction***

To clarify what students need regarding SE instruction, they were asked to identify areas where their SE teacher could do better when instructing students. The purpose of this question was to gather data needed to answer the research question focused on instruction. It was imperative to understand the students' perspective on what instructional support may be needed, if any, to increase learning. Three themes emerged from the students' responses: resources, engagement, and in-depth instruction. Six students expressed that no change was needed or an unfamiliarity with the curriculum.

#### **Resources.**

Students identified additional resources such as discussion opportunities in small groups, videos, guest speakers, or a specific SE teacher, and visuals can help strengthen the SE lessons. Students' suggestions align with a student-centered learning environment, where multiple ways of expression, such as art and music, and representation are needed. Although PowerPoint slides are provided with the lessons, it is clear that providing the slides is not sufficient, and more resources must be used in the classroom.

#### **Engagement and In-depth Instruction.**

As mentioned in the teacher questionnaire responses, several students also expressed the need for more engagement within SE instruction. Creating a student-centered learning

environment is needed to ensure that students remain active learners. Students suggested the addition of activities and in-depth instruction would increase student interest and involvement. Learning theories such as constructivism and social learning can provide the framework needed to contribute to optimal learning.

Several students expressed the need for enhanced instruction, demonstrating the lessons and resources the Archdiocese has provided are not sufficient to ensure all students learn. Like math and reading, SE instruction must be given using evidence-based teaching strategies to increase critical thinking opportunities. Time may also play a factor in the teacher's ability to develop in-depth lessons.

The researcher wanted to give students an opportunity to voice their opinions on the changes they felt could improve the SE lessons. Students' perspective is the most crucial, as they are the stakeholders who are the most impacted by the curriculum. Two themes emerged from their responses: relevance and resources needed. The purpose of this question was to allow the researcher to cross-analyze perspectives from all students regarding improvements needed and gather sufficient data to answer the evaluation questions guiding this study. The cross-analysis section following this section will further synthesize the connections between all data.

### **Relevance and Additional Resources.**

The majority of students responded with the addition of cultural relevance within the lessons. From their responses, culture does not necessarily signify their nationality, but holistic cultures such as nationality, real-life experiences, religion, and topics that resonate with them as young men and women. Along with prior knowledge, students construct new knowledge through engagement and interaction in the classroom. The theme of additional resources emerged as various students indicated the connection between active learning and meaningful learning.

Students suggested the addition of technology and literature would increase student interaction. The most repeated responses identified discussion opportunities and visuals as the primary change needed to resources. A commonality between responses was the desire to see an increase in videos and speakers within the curriculum.

### ***Topic of Choice***

The final question asked students to share a lesson topic they would like to see added to the SEC. Students are rarely given a say regarding curriculum, and as the primary stakeholder for this evaluation, it was imperative they be given a chance. The themes of relationships/mental health, safety, and science, emerged after the responses were analyzed and coded. Six students expressed no changes were needed.

Students are presented with many stressors that, unfortunately, may negatively affect their academic and mental development. The SEC could pose as a gateway to help initiate conversations on student mental health and relationships with their peers. The most popular topic category identified was relationships/mental health. Student responses included vital terms such as confidence, depression, anxiety, bullying, friendships, and discrimination.

Several students demonstrated a need to understand how they can protect themselves if they are in a dangerous situation. The SEC must enhance its child protection information; however, the current curriculum is superficial and does not include ways students can physically protect themselves. Although the Archdiocese may not agree with the students' suggestions of self-defense, it can explore ways to factor in this component within the curriculum. Six students suggested the topic of self-defense be added to the lesson topic.

Six students communicated the potential for the SEC to include cross-curricular teaching. These students expressed the potential the SEC has to connect with several science lessons.

Connecting both subjects may provide opportunities to apply knowledge and values to both disciplines. Some examples provided by students included climate change, air pollution, STEM, and ways to be stewards of the environment.

### **Cross-Analysis**

Upon completing qualitative and quantitative data analysis, the researcher identified several similarities focused on themes across the data. This section provides an in-depth exploration into the similarities identified across all participants and data collected. Exploring these connections is critical to the researcher, as it provides concluding evidence needed to answer the evaluation questions.

### ***Necessary Education***

Interview analysis indicated most participants characterized the contents within the SEC as necessary and fundamental. Students must learn to identify situations that may put them in danger, as well as how to handle such situations. Principal and teacher interviews, teacher questionnaires, parent surveys, and student surveys collectively identified the curriculum's strengths as raised awareness.

### ***Resources Needed***

Like the use of technology, such as SmartBoards in the classroom, SE lessons also need to be engaging, interactive, and flexible. Participants expressed the need for additional resources, with guest speakers and videos identified by teachers and students. Teachers understand that learning is not one-size-fits-all, and multiple ways of representation are essential in the classroom. Data from the student surveys suggest that the students share the same ideal. Students expressed additional resources can increase interest which can develop into a deep understanding of the content.

### ***Increased Instruction and Parental Engagement***

The SEC's goal is to ensure student safety. However, a distinct similarity between all participants' data is the need for increased instruction and parental engagement. Although the curriculum has been characterized as necessary, yearly instruction is insufficient to ensure that students receive the knowledge needed to acquire a deep understanding of the content. Parents and students expressed a lack of engagement with the curriculum, albeit some parents expressed not having any familiarity regarding the SEC. The SEC's objective is to ensure student safety; however, meeting that objective relies on parental communication and instructional awareness. Increased instruction can elevate parents' and their children's opportunities to discuss the lessons' critical contents, leading to a better understanding of dangerous situations and how to respond to them. Nevertheless, there appears to be a gap in parental communication and sufficient instruction. This gap in communication and instruction can have detrimental consequences to all students.

### ***Accountability and Guidance***

Data collected from the principal, teachers, and students articulated the lack of accountability and guidance, ranging from the Archdiocese's Office of Safe Environment to the teachers. The Archdiocese provides the principal with a SE binder, which is then given to the teachers. Teachers are then given free rein as to when and how to teach their students the lessons. There is no comprehensive data collection in place by the Archdiocese or the principals regarding the SE lessons' planning and implementation. The principal expressed their job plays no role in the lessons' planning and instruction, and teachers have expressed no principal guidance. The lack of accountability and guidance has impacted student learning, demonstrated in the data collected from their surveys. Students stated lessons would be more productive if their



SE teacher improves their instructional style; however, as there is no guidance from the Archdiocese or the principal, planning and implementing efficacious lessons, including best practices, can be challenging. Although teachers are determined to teach the SE lessons to the best of their ability, guidance and accountability are welcomed and needed.

### ***Cultural Relevance***

Data collected from teachers and students identified a lack of connection between the curriculum and the students. Evolving the SEC to be culturally responsive would help teachers create learning environments that can maximize students' academic achievement by integrating their cultural experiences and identities in the classroom, creating a community of learners. Students overwhelmingly expressed that lessons do not include people or experiences that look like them or connect to their lives on the student surveys. Similarly, data collected from teacher interviews and questionnaires demonstrated that the curriculum makes an attempt to be relevant but falls short of tapping into students' lives, cultures, or experiences, characterized as a weakness.

### **Findings in Relation to the Evaluation Questions**

Evaluation Question 1 – To what extent does the Safe Environment curriculum reach its goals and objectives?

Data collected and analyzed from stakeholders characterized the SEC as an essential part of the students' education. The curriculum identifies situations that are dangerous for children; however, it falls short in substance. Students are instructed about personal space and the importance of trust; however, the lessons are outdated. The dangers identified do not connect with the stressors and risks students may face today.

Evaluation Question 2 – To what extent are students in 6th-8th grade acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided?

Data collected and analyzed from parents, teachers, and students helped to answer this evaluation question. Although these three stakeholder groups deemed the curriculum necessary, data proved that students acquire insufficient knowledge and skills from the lessons and resources provided. The curriculum's premise is to provide knowledge to students needed to keep them safe; however, teachers expressed a deficit in assessment and discussion opportunities to monitor progress and understanding efficiently. The majority of parents said they are not well-versed on the curriculum's specifics and therefore had inadequate knowledge regarding their child's understanding. Students indicated their instructional experience must be improved.

Evaluation Question 3 – How successful is the Safe Environment curriculum in keeping students safe?

The main priority of parents, teachers, and the principal is to ensure the children's safety. Exposing the students to the SEC and its lessons begins to develop an awareness of the dangers that may arise in certain situations; however, the foundation of *NO, GO, and TELL* once every few months or on some occasions, none at all, is insufficient. The data collected and analyzed suggests the SEC is minimally successful in keeping students safe, as it begins to scratch the surface. However, the lessons are not written in a manner where meaningful learning can occur.

Evaluation Question 4 – To what extent are the Archdiocese resources helpful to teachers and students?

The goal of every curriculum is to provide adequate opportunities for students to achieve proficiency. Teachers measure students' progress through formative and summative assessments during instruction; however, the Archdiocese resources, such as the PowerPoint slides and

several handouts, are not considered essential but rather expendable. Promising programs focused on child abuse prevention utilize educational tools such as lectures, videotapes, roleplaying, pencil and paper activities, question-and-answer sessions, and group discussions to train the teachers in understanding sexual abuse and how to respond to it.

Evaluation Question 5 – To what extent are the Safe Environment lessons culturally responsive?

Data collected from students and teachers overwhelmingly demonstrate a lack of relevance and cultural connections between the SEC and students. As shown in the first student survey question's response, most students have never seen or read about people that look and sound like them within the SE lessons. There is a significant need for students to feel represented within the lessons; unfortunately, the SEC's lessons fail to sustain this connection. Although teachers expressed they modify the lessons to increase the student connection, more needs to be done to ensure the curriculum's framework is continuously evolving to remain relevant for every student.

### **Recommendations**

The Safe Environment Curriculum was created with the sole purpose of ensuring that children are kept safe from sexual abuse (as indicated in the organization's online profile). The researcher's evaluation questions focused on measuring how effective the SEC is in keeping children safe by instructing them Christ-centered lessons provided by the Archdiocese. The researcher understands the Archdiocese provides the lesson plans and PowerPoint materials to the principals; however, it is the school's choice on how and when to teach students the lesson. The following section explains the extent the curriculum meets its objectives while answering the evaluation questions and states recommendations for improvement for the Archdiocese and the school.

Data collected and analyzed from stakeholders characterized the SEC as an essential part of the students' education. The curriculum identifies situations that are dangerous for children; however, it falls short in substance. Students are instructed about personal space and the importance of trust; however, the lessons are outdated. The dangers identified do not connect with the stressors and risks students may face today, such as mental health issues, social justice and injustice, and current social media dangers. The curriculum's premise is to provide knowledge to students needed to keep them safe; however, teachers expressed a deficit in assessment and discussion opportunities to monitor progress and understanding efficiently. The majority of parents said they are not well-versed on the curriculum's specifics and therefore had inadequate knowledge regarding their child's understanding. Students indicated their instructional experience must be improved. The researcher suggests the following recommendations to be considered by the Archdiocese and the individual schools:

### **Recommendations for the Archdiocese**

- Conduct a needs analysis across all Archdiocesan schools to identify stakeholders' needs regarding topics added to the curriculum.
- Collaborate with stakeholders and mental health professionals to amend and evolve lesson plans using an evidence-based learning theory such as constructivism or social learning theory, increasing the connection to modern-day stressors currently challenging students.
- Provide additional resources to teachers to ensure all students acquire meaningful knowledge and understand the curriculum's objectives.
- Create a curriculum mapping team to be responsible for check-ins. These maps are intended to inform all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, students,

parents, board members, and the community, on students' learning expectations. The check-ins will identify any instructional and resource gap within the implementation of the SEC.

- Increase the number of lessons within the curriculum to provide monthly instruction, rather than yearly, to students.

**Recommendations for individual schools:**

- Provide teachers with planning time to collaborate with the school counselor and other teachers to adequately differentiate the Archdiocese lesson plans. Collaboration can ensure that every student will be given an equitable opportunity to learn. Lesson differentiation should contain modifications and accommodations listed on Individualized Education Programs present in the classroom.
- Provide monthly workshops with a mental health professional for teachers (different from Archdiocese's recommendation above). The purpose of these sessions would be to help the teachers become familiar with the topics covered in the lessons and educate their students effectively and with minor discomfort. Evidence shown in Kilburn et al. (2014) demonstrates an increase in teacher and student knowledge and time spent in meaningful discussions when teacher training was provided. These workshops are needed for continuous improvement.
- Principals should schedule Safe Environment lesson observations with teachers and provide a written rubric and professional discussion after the observation.
- Increase parent knowledge on keeping their children safe by providing workshops aligned with the lessons taught to their children.

## Conclusion

The shadow cast over the Catholic Church regarding sexual assault and clergy members led to creating the Child Protection Effort and the Safe Environment Program. Created in 2003, the Safe Environment Program is geared towards ensuring that the children are kept safe. Under the Archdiocese's umbrella, all Catholic schools participate in the Safe Environment curriculum. Educators in Kindergarten to high school are mandated to instruct students one Safe Environment lesson yearly as part of the Safe Environment curriculum. The curriculum, which is infused into Religious instruction, teaches children the importance of morality and their bodies. Each lesson implemented is grade and age-appropriate and created to promote respect for human dignity and virtuous living (as stated on the Archdiocese's website). The program evaluation's need was to determine the level of effectiveness regarding the implementation and impact of the Safe Environment curriculum, as there are no previous evaluations conducted focused on the SEC.

The students are the key stakeholders, as they are the only stakeholders who can best reflect on the system. They are the only stakeholder who has a holistic perspective on the school as a living system. Their holistic perspective is constructed from multiple messages and influences from their environment, such as the classroom, challenges outside the classroom, and stressors at home. Gaining perspectives from all stakeholders guided the inquiry on identifying possible improvement areas and any modifications that should be applied. Overall, the program's worth and value were the evaluation premises to prove its effectiveness and necessity.

## **Key Findings Summary**

The most impactful conclusions are critical for consideration by the Archdiocese and local schools. Five recommendations stand out as the most important.

With sensitive topics ranging from “Good and Bad Touches” for first grade to pornography and dating violence for high school students, parents must be invited to play a vital role within the curriculum. Parental involvement vastly differs from parental engagement, and data demonstrates that all parents want to be part of the process. Educating parents as well as children can increase the effectiveness of Safe Environment Programs.

The lessons lack depth regarding a research-based learning theory. Similar to instructing a puberty/sexuality education course, Safe Environment instruction would benefit from enhancing teacher preparation and practices on human rights and the acceptance of diversity, willingness for self-reflection and role-modeling for students, openness for the subject combined with appropriate neutrality and high motivation (Collier-Harris & Goldman, 2017, p. 201). Although SEC is not listed as a sexuality-education program due to religious influence, it does share the same goal as a school-based sexuality education program to educate and ensure students' safety. A student cannot grasp the extent of the content being instructed only once a year without thoroughly engaging the content.

Accountability plays a significant role in the lack of in-depth instruction. The SE office and principals must oversee the program's implementation by confirming that Safe Environment instruction is being planned with various forms of representation and instructed accordingly. Accountability, quality assurance, and planning must be essential elements when implementing Safe Environment lesson plans.

Finally, the number of lessons given to the students is insufficient to acquire the content needed to develop a deep and meaningful understanding. All stakeholders have expressed the Safe Environment curriculum's fundamental role in Catholic school students' educational journey. Data collected has characterized the curriculum as indispensable, as it aids in educating teachers and principals in providing a safe environment for our children. However, it is also evident that society is undergoing a shift, placing children at the forefront of this cultural phenomenon. The Safe Environment curriculum's program evaluation was necessary to discover its effectiveness in students' academic, spiritual, social, and mental growth. The scope of the lessons, their implementation, and the curriculum as a whole must be broadened to remain relevant, culturally responsive, and beneficial for all stakeholders.

As cultural norms shift, it is evident the most basic kinds of moral knowledge, knowing what is right, caring about what is wrong, and doing what is right, seem to be disappearing from our common culture (Lickona, 2018). Schools must do what they can to contribute to the young's character and the nation's moral health. Whether social-emotional learning and morality are instructed in a Catholic school or a public school, there will always be one shared variable, a constant variable that will never change regardless of the influence of religion-free will. There is an assumption that students attending Catholic schools will develop strong and positive character traits simply due to the religious instruction included within the curriculum. However, with the gift of free will, there is always an opportunity to exhibit negative behavior towards oneself and the school community. Catholic school educators, administrators, parents and guardians, and district leaders must understand the importance of providing a safe environment that will foster academic growth and spiritual, mental, and social development.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions and Educator Questionnaire

##### Educators

1. What are your overall thoughts about the Safe Environment lessons provided by the Archdiocese?
2. What do you believe are the goals of the Safe Environment curriculum?
3. What lesson topics do you believe should be added to the curriculum?
4. Describe any collaboration you have engaged in regarding the Safe Environment lessons.
5. During your planning time, how would collaboration provide a closer alignment to the lesson goals?
6. How do you use the PowerPoint slides provided by the Archdiocese?
7. Identify two or three additional resources you would add to your Safe Environment lessons.
8. What are your feelings/opinions on the assessments provided and how they evaluate your students?
9. What are your feelings regarding your students and their understanding at the end of the lessons?
10. What have you been told or shown about high-quality instruction for these lessons?  
Who told or shown you those things?

11. Given the demographics of your students, can you speak about the cultural relevance these lessons have?
12. Would you like to add any other information or impressions about the Safe Environment curriculum?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

**School Principal**

1. Please walk me through your responsibilities given by the Archdiocese regarding the Safe Environment curriculum.
2. What do you believe are the goals of the Safe Environment curriculum?
3. Would you like to add any other information or impressions about the Safe Environment curriculum?
4. Identify the benefits of the Safe Environment curriculum.
5. Can you identify two or three topics you would add or pull back from the curriculum if you had the opportunity?
6. How do you monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Safe Environment curriculum?
7. Are professional development workshops provided to the teachers by the Archdiocese?
8. *Yes-* Describe how they have been effective in terms of planning and instruction.  
*No-* Do you think professional development is needed? Why?
9. Given the demographics of your student body, can you speak about the cultural relevance these lessons have?
10. How frequently does the Archdiocese review the curriculum?

Do you have any questions for me?

### **Educator Questionnaire**

Share your thoughts on being provided with feedback regarding your lessons, prior or after instruction.

What are the strengths of the curriculum?

What are the weaknesses of the curriculum?

What would you change?

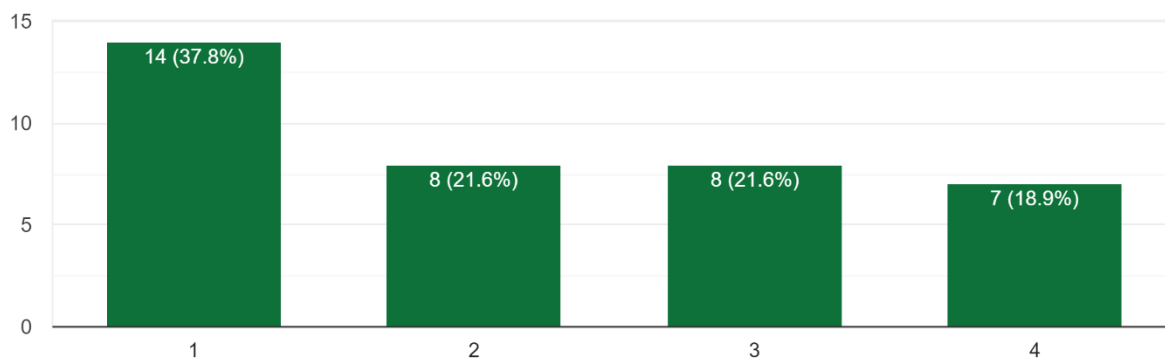
## Appendix B

### Parent Survey Responses

**Figure B1.**

1. I am informed on the topics my child/children will learn during Safe Environment instruction.

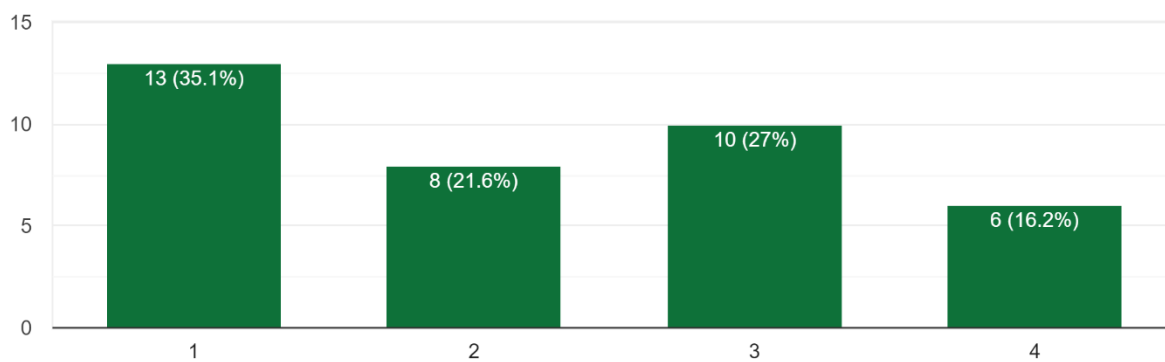
37 responses



**Figure B2.**

2. I have read about the goals of the Safe Environment Curriculum provided by the Archdiocese.

37 responses

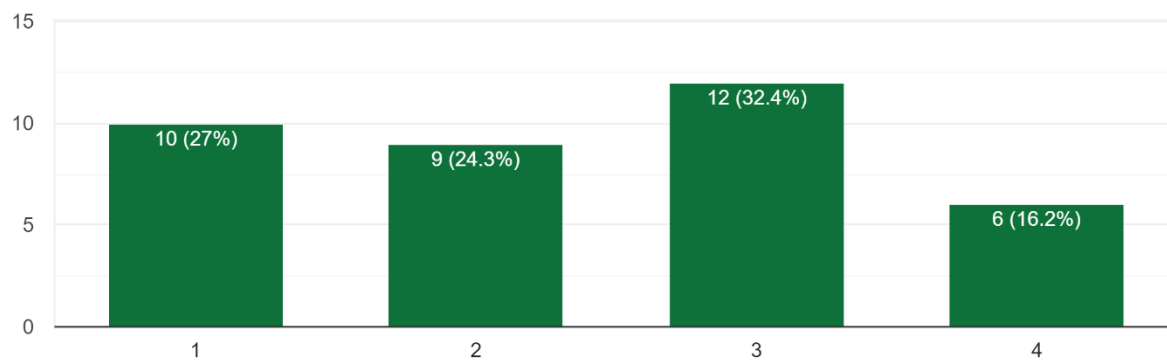




**Figure B3.**

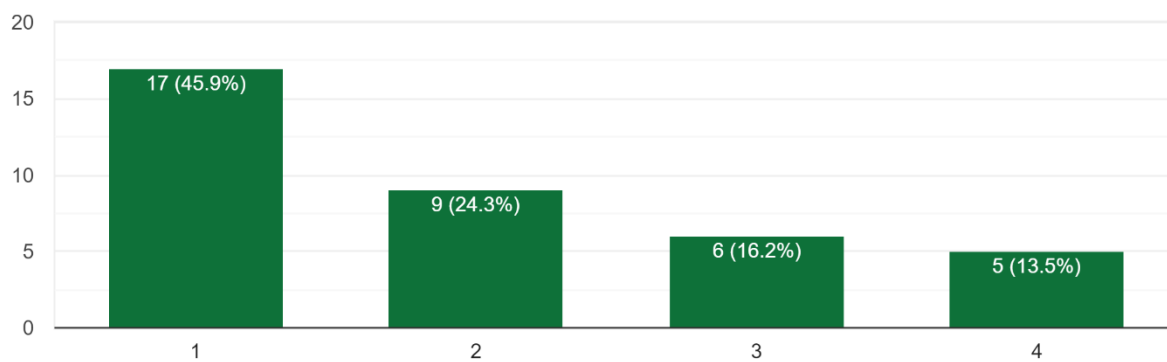
3. My child and I discuss what they learned during the Safe Environment lessons.

37 responses

**Figure B4.**

4. My child is given homework reviewing the Safe Environment lesson instructed.

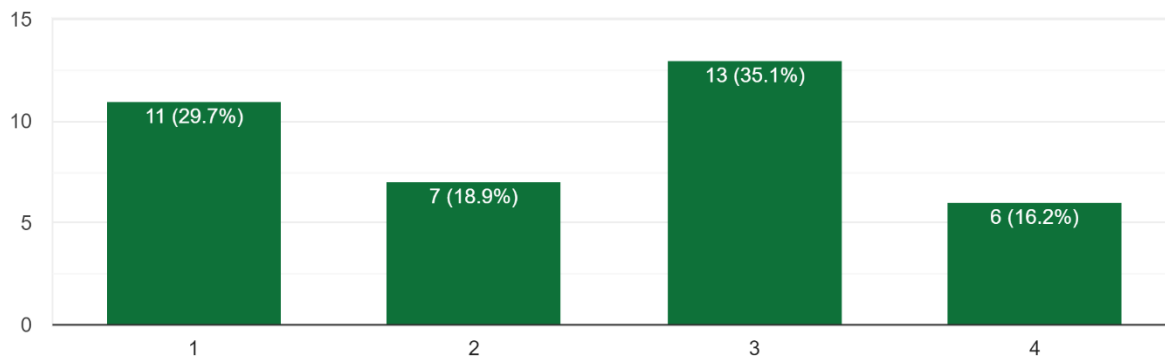
37 responses



**Figure B5.**

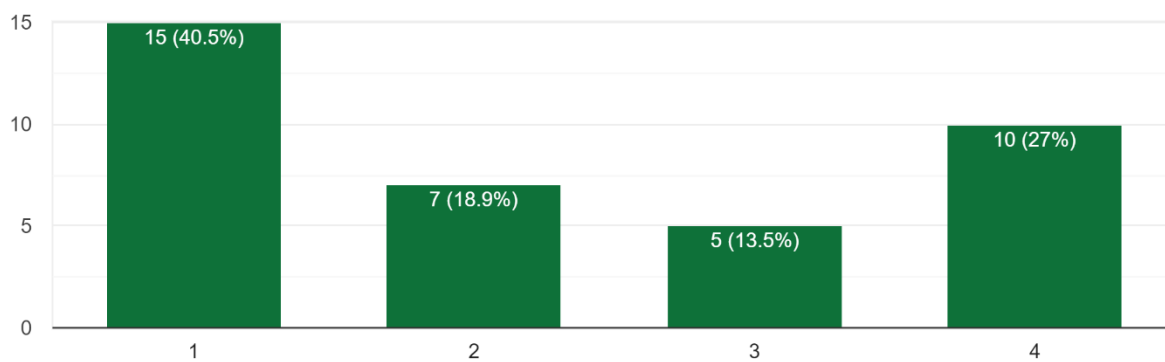
5. My child understands the main ideas of the Safe Environment lessons taught.

37 responses

**Figure B6.**

6. I have an active role in the Safe Environment lessons taught to my child.

37 responses

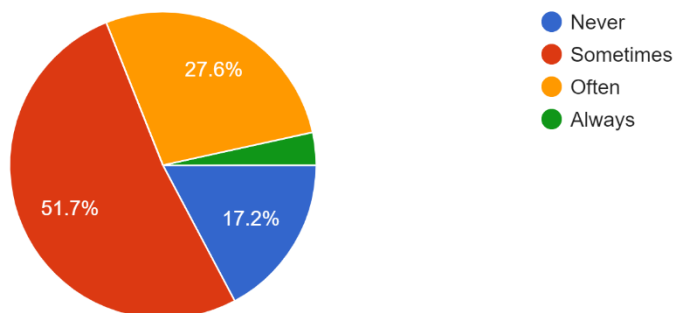


## Appendix C

### Student Survey Responses

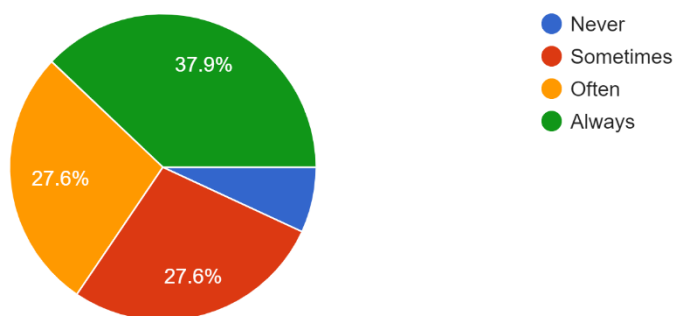
**Figure C1.**

1. The topics covered in the Safe Environment lessons connect to me.  
29 responses



**Figure C2.**

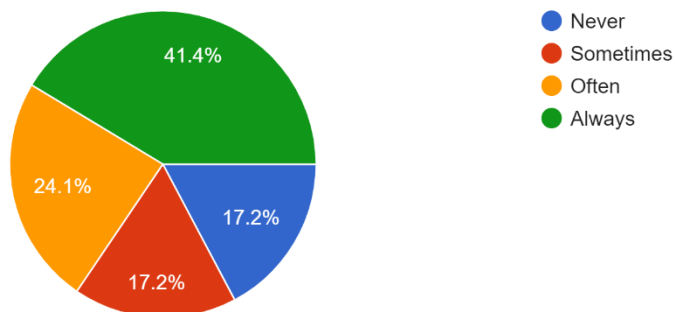
2. Additional resources, such as videos and speakers, would make the Safe Environment lessons more interesting.  
29 responses



**Figure C3.**

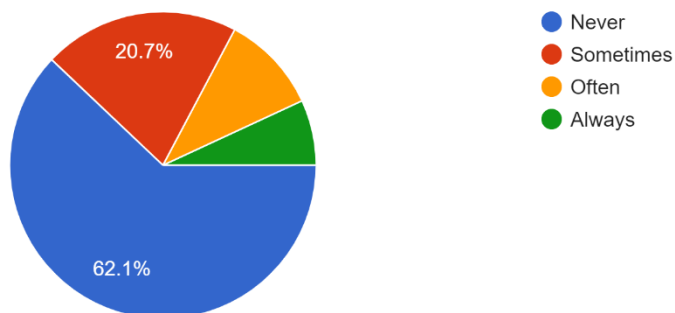
3. I learned something important during Safe Environment lessons.

29 responses

**Figure C4.**

4. I see and hear about people who look and sound look like me during the Safe Environment lessons.

29 responses



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