



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership
(Ed.D.)

Isabelle Farrington College of Education &
Human Development

2022

Put Your Own Mask On First: A Supportive Group-based Experience for Teachers Developing Competence in Employing SEL in the Classroom

Karolyn S. Dahlstrom
Sacred Heart University, rodriguez4@mail.sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/edd>



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dahlstrom, K. S. (2022). Put your own mask on first: A supportive group-based experience for teachers developing competence in employing SEL in the classroom [Doctoral dissertation, Sacred Heart University]. <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/edd/9/>

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Isabelle Farrington College of Education & Human Development at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership (Ed.D.) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.



**PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON FIRST: A SUPPORTIVE GROUP-BASED EXPERIENCE
FOR TEACHERS DEVELOPING COMPETENCE IN EMPLOYING SEL IN THE
CLASSROOM**

KAROLYN S. DAHLSTROM

A DISSERTATION

In the
Isabelle Farrington College of Education and Human Development
Presented to the Faculty of Sacred Heart University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Education

2022

Supervisor of Dissertation (Committee Chair):

David G. Title, Ed.D.

Associate Clinical Professor
Faculty Chair, Farrington College of Education and Human
Development
Director, Ed.D. Program

Dissertation Committee:

Suzanne Marmo
Assistant Professor
Sacred Heart University

Dianne Vumback, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent
Montville Public Schools

Michael A. Alfano, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Strategic Partnerships
Dean, Isabelle Farrington College of Education and
Human Development

PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON FIRST: A SUPPORTIVE GROUP-BASED EXPERIENCE FOR
TEACHERS DEVELOPING COMPETENCE IN EMPLOYING SEL IN THE CLASSROOM

COPYRIGHT

Karolyn S. Dahlstrom

© 2022

All rights reserved

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

ABSTRACT

PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON FIRST: A SUPPORTIVE GROUP-BASED EXPERIENCE FOR TEACHERS DEVELOPING COMPETENCE IN EMPLOYING SEL IN THE CLASSROOM

Karolyn S. Dahlstrom

Dr. David G. Title, Ed.D., Dissertation Chair

The demands for teachers to integrate social-emotional concepts into the classroom have never been higher, yet there is little formal or informal professional development dedicated to developing competence in this domain. This mixed-methods study examined the impact of an ongoing, professional development series on the confidence and competence of teachers to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom. Although a small sample size, participants reported increased confidence in integrating SEL concepts, noted the overall quality of their instruction improved, perceived increased support from school administration, and reported the model of professional development delivery as effective. This study suggests the merits of districtwide implementation of professional development that follows the study design and positions the original participants well to serve as facilitators for colleagues. Further, the positive results of this early stage of research support continued measurement of related outcomes for students in the classrooms of educators who have participated in this type of training, particularly in highly diverse schools.

Keywords: social emotional learning, adult learning model, ACEs, student trauma, SEL instructional strategies, middle school

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my first teachers—my parents. Your unwavering support and encouragement mean the world to me. You instilled in me a love of learning and a solid foundation to chase my dreams. This one is for you. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my husband and my children ... no one would know what it is like to live with me during this process except you. I thank you for your constant patience through the process and for tackling the chores, cooking, and carpooling that I could not. Your unending support, encouragement, and supply of snacks has allowed me to complete a personal and professional milestone. I love you!

For my cousin Stacey, aka Toad: This Frog could not have completed this dissertation without you. From our many therapy sessions, your help with brainstorming and writing, and constant cheerleading, I was able to “Do the thing!” I cannot thank you enough.

To my mentor and friend, Dr. Dianne Vumback, thank you for being a sounding board, a collaborator, a colleague, and a friend. Your support and advice mean the world to me. You have personified what it means to be a champion for *all* children and to do what is best for *everyone*.

I would also like to thank Dr. Title and Dr. Marmo-Roman for their support throughout this process. The completion of this three-year process would not have happened without your encouragement and guidance! Thank you, Dr. O’Leary, for piquing my curiosity into trauma-informed practices, answering unending questions, and rolling out an intervention that will continue to benefit an entire school. Finally, I would like to thank my tribe, without whom I would not be here. You were my peers in this program and then my friends, and the text messages, emails, and phone calls kept me sane. I cannot wait to see what the future holds in store for you all!

Finally, thank you to Sacred Heart University for creating such a wonderful program and opportunity for educators. This program will change lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
DEFINITION OF TERMS	xii
CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	1
Background of the Problem of Practice.....	1
School Focus.....	5
Enrollment.....	5
Climate Survey Data.....	8
Chronic Absenteeism	9
Ethnic and Racial Breakdown of Students.....	10
ACEs and Support.....	11
Student Behavior.....	11
Importance of Sixth Grade.....	12
Statement and Definition	14
System and Setting.....	15
Root Cause 1: Limited Resources.....	23
Root Cause 2: Leadership	25
Root Cause 3: Demographics and Student Population	26
Root Cause 4: School Climate	28
Purpose of Study	31
Methodology	32
Research Design.....	32
Research Questions and Hypothesis	34
Hypotheses.....	35
Summary:.....	37

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE	40
Student Lens.....	40
Adult Lens.....	46
The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Schools.....	47
How Teachers with SEL Skills Can Benefit Student Learning.....	50
Synthesis	52
Working Theory of Improvement	52
Summary	61
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	63
Improvement Science.....	64
Purpose of the Study	67
Methodology	67
Research Design.....	69
Target Population	70
Procedures.....	73
Research Questions and Hypotheses	76
Data Collection Instruments and Measures	77
Quantitative Research	79
Qualitative Research	82
Threats to Validity.....	84
Researcher Bias.....	84
Self-Selection Bias.....	85
Summary	85
CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS	87
Description of Sample.....	87
Data Collection	88
Quantitative Teacher Self-Reflection Results	89
Qualitative Results	95
Thematic Analysis.....	95
Theme 1: Easy to Implement and Build Relationships.....	96
Theme 2: Building Relationships with Students.....	96
Theme 3: Improving Teacher Practice	97
Theme 4: Preferred Strategies.....	97
Theme 5: Perceived Support from the School	98

Theme 6: Effectiveness of the Professional Development	99
Summary	101
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC SUMMARY	102
Summary of Study	102
Summary of Findings.....	103
Research Question 1	103
Research Question 2	105
Discussion	110
Overall Results.....	110
Construct of Intervention	113
Roles of Peers in Learning.....	114
Limitations	115
Implications.....	116
District A.....	117
Policy	117
Practice.....	117
Other Districts.....	118
Recommendations.....	119
Future Research	120
Summary	121
REFERENCES	123
APPENDIX A: LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT	134
APPENDIX B: PANORAMA TEACHER SEL SURVEY.....	136
APPENDIX C: TEACHER BI-WEEKLY SEL REFLECTION.....	139
APPENDIX D: FOCUS-GROUP QUESTIONS.....	142
APPENDIX E: STUDY INVITATION TO ONLINE SURVEYS	143
APPENDIX F: STUDY INVITATION TO FOCUS GROUP	145
APPENDIX G: END-USER CONSULTATION LETTER FOR PHASE I	147
APPENDIX H: END-USER CONSULTATIONS QUESTIONS.....	149

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Total Student Enrollment Minus Special Education Programs for the Last Three Years	5
Table 2: Number of Students in Special Education Programs vs. General Education During the 2020–2021 School Year.....	6
Table 3: Number of Special Education or English Language Learning Students Over Three Years	7
Table 4: Mean Student Climate Survey Results for Trauma-Exposed Trigger Questions 2020	9
Table 5: Ethnic Breakdown of WMS 2020–2021 School Year.....	10
Table 6: Number of Student Discipline Referrals Over Three Years.....	12
Table 7: Number of Suspensions and Number of Individual Students Suspended in the Last Three Years	12
Table 8: Staff Concerns Regarding Resources	24
Table 9: Demographics of Wildcat Middle School Staff.....	26
Table 10: Disciplinary Referrals by Racial/Ethnic Group Over the Last Three Years	27
Table 11: Mean Student Climate Survey Results Over Three Years.....	29
Table 12: Relevance Level of Students Who Find School Meaningful and Important and Suspensions for 2020	31
Table 13: Study Participants	71
Table 14: Race and Ethnicity Demographics of Participants	72
Table 15: Number of Years Teaching for Entire Staff vs Participants	72
Table 16: Intervention Cycles.....	75
Table 17: Methods and Analysis Summary.....	79
Table 18: Self-Reflection Overall Survey Results, Week 1 (pre-survey) to Week 4 (post- survey).....	90
Table 19: Teacher Perceived Increase in Confidence and Perceived Increase in Instruction.....	91
Table 20: Survey Item Responses by Question	92
Table 21: Pre- and Post-survey Overall Survey Results.....	93
Table 22: Participants’ Pre- and Post-Survey Responses by Individual Question	94

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Student Enrollment Over Three Years with Projections for 2021–2022 School Year	8
Figure 2: Sixth Grade Student Enrollment Over Three Years with Projections for Next School Year.....	14
Figure 3: Factors Affecting District and School Setting.....	16
Figure 4: Interacting Systems Diagram	19
Figure 5: Three-Year Plan for School-Wide Implementation of Social-Emotional Instructional Practices	20
Figure 6: Identified Root Causes	22
Figure 7: Driver Diagram 1.....	47
Figure 8: Driver Diagram 2.....	54
Figure 9: Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle.....	65

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Potentially traumatic events in childhood (0–17 years). These include such things as, but not limited to, experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community, or living in a household with substance abuse problems or mental health problems (www.cdc.gov, 2021).

Advisory: A period of the school day in which an adult advisor meets regularly with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support, create personalization within the school, and facilitate a small peer community of learners (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

End-User Consultations: These are practical quantitative and qualitative evaluation items woven into daily instruction for sensitivity to short-term changes and prompt reporting and analysis by educators (Bryk et al., 2015).

Focus Groups: A group of people assembled to participate in a guided discussion to provide feedback about a topic.

Restorative Practices: An emerging social science that examines how to strengthen relationships between individuals and social connections within communities (www.iirp.edu, para. 2).

Social and Emotional Learning: The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and express empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021).

Toxic Stress: A toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences intense, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support (Center on the Developing Child, 2021).

Trauma-Exposed: Children exposed to one or more adverse childhood experiences.

CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Education has undergone a seismic shift to implement social and emotional learning (SEL) into schools and classrooms, as such life skills are vital to student academic and life success. Social and emotional learning is critical to student success when a high population of students is trauma-exposed. Children exposed to trauma tend to have attention problems, lower cognitive functioning, behavioral problems, diminished school attendance, grade repeats, and achievement problems (Frieze, 2015). Therefore, training staff to adequately address the students' social and emotional needs is paramount.

This dissertation is an Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP). According to Perry et al. (2020), "Improvement science focuses on high leverage problems and the systems that surround those problems" (p. 27). As defined by Bryk et al. (2017), Improvement Science addresses the reality of the institution (school) by focusing on the specific tasks people do, the processes and tools they use, and how prevailing policies, organizational structures, and norms affect these. Bryk et al. (2017) further explain that Improvement Science directs attention toward how to better design and synthesize elements that shape the way schools work. Improvement science is cyclical in that, after careful analysis of root causes, rapid tests of change are implemented and measured for effectiveness. The ultimate purpose of Improvement Science is continuous improvement through systematic study. These rapid tests, or action steps, can be revised or redone as needed and are parallel to the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle.

Background of the Problem of Practice

Improvement Science begins with identifying a problem of practice. Through analyzing district and school-wide data and reviewing the literature, this research study identified the problem of practice as teachers' needing training on social-emotional instructional strategies.

Students in middle school face many changes in their lives, such as puberty and relationship dynamics, while simultaneously confronting new social, emotional, and academic challenges. As Kiuru et al. (2019) explain, “A youth’s ability to adapt during educational transitions has long-term, positive impacts on their academic achievement and mental health” (p. 1). For many students in middle school, sixth grade marks a transition period from smaller elementary school classrooms to a larger secondary learning environment that introduces exposure to content-specific classes and a schedule that allows more freedom and autonomy. Bagnell (2020) describes the primary-secondary school transition as a critical period that can have short-and long-term implications for a student’s adjustment if students do not receive the proper support. Bagnell further clarifies that students need the ability to cope. This newfound autonomy and responsibility can be overwhelming when added to new social, emotional, and academic challenges, especially as more children are experiencing trauma prior to attending school, which can alter their social, emotional, and cognitive functioning.

According to a National Survey of Children’s Health completed by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), one-third of all children under the age of 18 in the United States have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), and over 14% have experienced two ACEs (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2019). Trauma disproportionately affects low socio-economic urban environments; McGruder (2019) discusses the growing evidence that children who live in extreme poverty are highly vulnerable to exposure to potentially traumatizing events. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) explain that children from underprivileged backgrounds are disproportionately exposed to harmful stimuli and live in environments that do not adequately support beneficial health-related routines and behaviors. Disengaged students who feel the impact of trauma and disconnection are more likely to

communicate their feelings through changes in behavior (Minahan, 2020). Banks and Meyer (2017) posited that understanding how trauma may manifest in the lives of urban students and school settings is imperative “in changing the lens through which an untrained eye learns to see what is important” (p. 67). It is vital that urban school systems with students who have higher levels of exposure to trauma address not only the social and emotional needs of the students but also adult competencies.

The global pandemic has impacted the number of students experiencing at least one ACE. Garlinghouse (2020) contends that the pandemic has been a destabilizing event in its impact on the normalcy of households and life. The pandemic has been a traumatic experience and compounded stress in students who live with food insecurity, housing insecurity, and potentially unsafe homelives. These factors exert excessive stress on students and families. The global pandemic has significantly impacted those in urban, low-socioeconomic environments. As Crosby et al. (2020) state, “we must consider how this disruption to every aspect of our students’ lives is impacting their social and emotional wellbeing, and this social disruption is a psychologically traumatic event that could have cumulative effects with long-term consequences” (p. 1). Garlinghouse (2020) explains that crucial support systems such as schools, which provide shelter and meals, could place students at greater risk of experiencing an ACE while in quarantine if the schools are closed or unavailable to students. With the COVID-19 pandemic moving into its third year, all children in the United States have experienced one ACE, a national and global pandemic.

Furthermore, if a child operates in an overwhelming state of stress or fear, survival responses can become a regular mode of functioning (Cole et al., 2005). Children functioning

regularly in a state of stress can hinder their cognitive and academic processes. Exposure to trauma can alter the brain and change how the brain functions.

Early life stressors can inhibit a child's ability to cope with adverse experiences. When chronic stress or traumatic experiences are persistently present in a child's life, their behaviors may become maladaptive (Kalia & Knauff, 2020; Thomason & Marusak, 2017). Kalia and Knauff (2020) explain that the higher the number of ACEs a person reported, the more likely they were to report being stressed and unable to cope with challenges; everyday difficulties appraised as uncontrollable are threatening rather than challenging. Students' perception of everyday difficulties as threatening could lead to teachers and school staff misdiagnosing students' maladaptive behaviors as inappropriate rather than understanding the motives behind the behaviors. Children taught social and emotional skills and strategies could better cope with stressors. However, teachers need the training to implement social-emotional strategies in the classroom for the benefit of students.

The implementation of social-emotional instructional strategies is not a new phenomenon. Educators and communities are witnessing first-hand how vital social-emotional training is for schools. Teachers need training in working with students exposed to trauma and students who are socially and emotionally struggling. The Massachusetts Advocates for Children (Cole et al., 2005) explain that an individual's response to trauma impacts the individual, the nature of the event, and the level of support the person receives. Kim et al. (2021) assert that teachers fail to understand the underlying causes of behavior and view the student's attempts at conveying distress as disruptive or threatening without adequate training. Adequately coaching staff to address the trauma-exposed student's social and emotional needs and having time to implement and reflect on instructional strategies, allows educators to feel more confident and

competent to embed social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom. Coaching teachers to feel comfortable and competent in SEL practices will not only assist children in learning but could also impact indicators such as attendance, school climate, or disciplinary incidents (Chafouleas et al., 2021). This process establishes a positive classroom where students will find greater success.

School Focus

The setting for this study is Wildcat Middle School, an urban middle school in central Connecticut; one of two middle schools in the district. Due to the projected student enrollment and the large student enrollment currently attending schools, the district opened a third middle school for the 2021–2022 school year.

Enrollment

Wildcat Middle School includes Grades 6 through 8. Table 1 shows the enrollment numbers for the last three years for the general education population minus the special education population. Each column displays the total number of students enrolled by grade and total enrollment in the school by year.

Table 1

Total Student Enrollment Minus Special Education Programs for the Last Three Years

Year	Number of Students			
	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Total
2019	258	216	234	708
2020	275	279	233	787
2021	277	288	289	854

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

Notably, Wildcat Middle School’s enrollment increases by over 50 students each year. Special education students are not included in this table because WMS houses two distinct

district-wide special education programs. Therefore, it was important to note the WMS students and display the general education population before displaying the district programs, which pull students from across the town.

Wildcat Middle School serves two distinct special education programs. The Students of All Abilities Rise program (SOAR) is a program for multi-handicapped students who require a smaller environment. Many SOAR students spend most of their day in a resource room. The Supported Transitional Education Program, Secondary (STEPS) is for special education students in Grades 6 through 8 with behavioral needs who require a smaller therapeutic environment in which to learn. Table 2 provides details about the student population enrolled in these two programs.

Table 2

Number of Students in Special Education Programs vs. General Education During the 2020–2021 School Year

<u>Program</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
SOAR	17	1.9%
STEPS	28	3.1%
General Population	865	95.1%

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

The district-wide special education program comprises 5% of the total population. Furthermore, because these students require additional resources and more support than other students in the building, they are not counted in the population for the research. In addition, staff members working with these students were not participants in the study, given the structure and specific staff training for these already established special education programs.

Moreover, 20% of Wildcat Middle School’s students qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These students spend

most of their day in general education classrooms and add to the above percentages of students receiving special education services. Another 10% of students are English language learners who receive language support. Table 3 indicates the growth or decline of students identified as special education or English language learners (ELL) over the last three years.

Table 3

Number of Special Education or English Language Learning Students Over Three Years

Year	No. of Special Education Students	No. of English Language Learners (ELL)
2020–2021	178	92
2019–2020	294	77
2018–2019	182	68

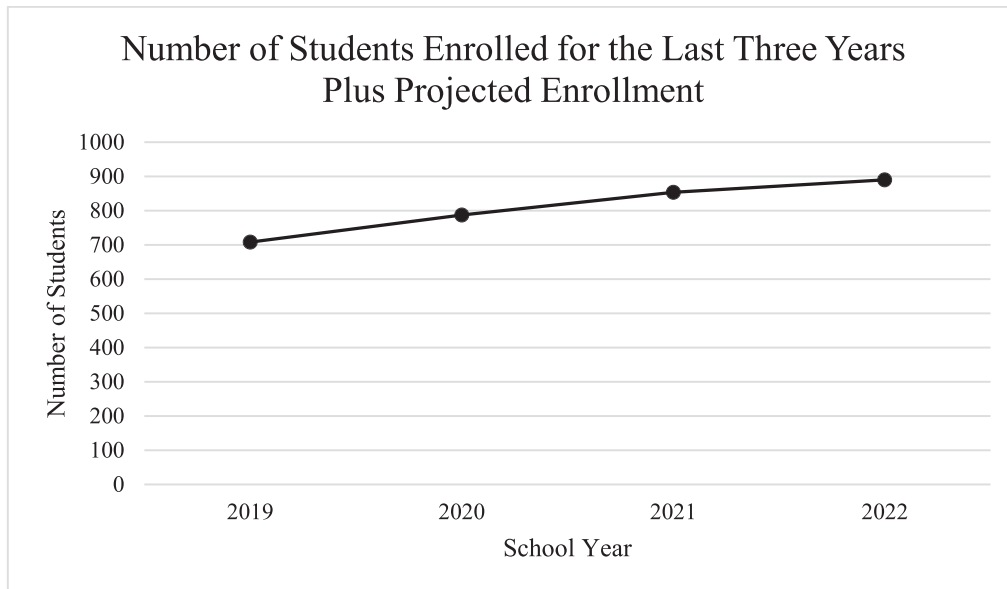
Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

It is important to notice that ELL student enrollment increases while the number of special education students fluctuates. This disparity is because the number of special education students includes the two programs mentioned in Table 2, plus students with IEPs included in the general education classes. Despite the fluctuation in students enrolled in special education, the percentage of students in special education is at or above 20%.

Wildcat Middle School’s 2021–2022 enrollment will remain relatively comparable to the 2020–2021 school year’s current numbers. However, enrollment at the school has consistently increased over the last three years, and the district projects an increase for next year. The district database provided all archival data. The graph below in Figure 1 illustrates the enrollment for the last three years, including the projection for next year.

Figure 1

Student Enrollment Over Three Years with Projections for 2021–2022 School Year



Each year, enrollment at Wildcat Middle School increases; therefore, in the 2021–2022 school year, the district is opening a third middle school. However, projected enrollment at Wildcat Middle School is increasing. The district is always curious as to how students view the school and the school climate, and each year administers a School Climate Survey to students.

Climate Survey Data

Each year, the district conducts a student climate survey to gauge the school climate from a student perspective. With over 900 students and a 95% completion rate, these data give the administration and staff reliable insight into how students feel at school. During the 2020–2021 school year, the student climate survey added statements and questions to help the district determine whether students are trauma-exposed or need mental health support. If the survey results are low, the survey program sends a trigger email to the administration and the support staff to allow school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists to immediately meet

with these students and offer the proper forms of support. In addition, some questions and statements enable the schools to gauge which students are exhibiting problematic behaviors or thoughts in school and whether these concerns stem from in-school or out-of-school issues (Table 4). These survey results can help the school staff identify students who need more support and more frequent check-ins.

Table 4

Mean Student Climate Survey Results for Trauma-Exposed Trigger Questions 2020

Survey Indicator	2020 Mean Result
How much stress do you have in school?	3.07
How much conflict do you have in school?	2.16
How much anxiety do you have in school?	2.75

Note. Each year, the survey has a 95% or higher response rate, and the mean results are an average of all students' responses. The survey uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6. Data gathered from District A Database in 2021.

A low number signifies high conflict or high anxiety and stress levels. These survey indicators are reverse-coded due to the negativity of the question. For example, students who answer, "I have a lot of stress in school" and choose a 4 rating or higher have the results reverse-coded to a lower number due to the negativity of the question. Therefore, all survey indicators in Table 4 display students expressing they have high stress, high conflict, and high anxiety in school.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is high, with over 15% of students reported as chronically absent. According to the Connecticut State Department of Education, chronic absenteeism is missing 10% or more of the total number of school days enrolled in school. Discipline referrals and suspensions have also not significantly declined over the last three years. Student absences and

student discipline can demonstrate student disengagement or lack of connectedness with the school. SEL must be paramount and implemented to allow staff to feel competent and comfortable teaching these skills and strategies to students to address their needs.

Wildcat Middle School’s chronic absenteeism rate for the 2020–2021 school year was 28.5%. However, due to the pandemic, these data are not reliable. In 2019–2020, the chronic absenteeism rate was 18.6%. The pandemic has created barriers to adequate data collection due to the district’s policy of allowing students to transition from in-person to distance learning and vice versa at any point in the school year. Due to the data systems used within the district, attendance for students in distance learning is not reliable, but it impacts overall chronic attendance numbers.

Ethnic and Racial Breakdown of Students

Many of Wildcat’s students are also students of color. Table 5 demonstrates the current ethnic breakdown of students at Wildcat Middle School.

Table 5

Ethnic Breakdown of WMS 2020–2021 School Year

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Students	Percentage
Asian	18	1.97%
Black not of Hispanic origin	152	16.7%
Hispanic	401	44.0%
Indian	1	0.1%
Multi-Racial	84	9.2%
White	273	30.0%
Total	929	100%

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

ACEs and Support

During the 2020–2021 school year, the school enrolled over 900 students, and 75% of the students received free or reduced lunch. These data demonstrate that 75% of students are at a higher risk of experiencing ACEs, and with the global pandemic, these students returned to school in the fall experiencing at least two ACEs.

A community partner also houses two clinicians who offer behavioral support for students at the school. These clinicians offer therapy sessions for students and families at the school to make it easier for families to receive needed services in a familiar, local building. These clinicians also collaborate with the school psychologist, social worker, support staff, teachers, and administrators as needed to meet the needs and ensure the safety of students.

Student Behavior

The researcher has tracked data for the past three years regarding referrals and suspensions for all students as part of a bi-annual school-wide analysis of data and equity audit. There were 140 disciplinary referrals in the 2020–2021 school year at the time of data collection.

Due to the fluctuating percentage of students physically in school, the referral data are an inadequate view of disciplinary referrals for the school. Therefore, the researcher collected data when all students were physically in school. Table 6 indicates the number of discipline referrals for the last three school years. It is important to note that after March 13, 2020, students were not physically in the school building. Additionally, during the 2020–2021 school year, all students were not physically in the building because they had an option to learn virtually. There were very few discipline referrals for virtual distance learners.

Table 6*Number of Student Discipline Referrals Over Three Years*

Year	No. of Referrals
2018–2019	314
2019–2020	390
2020–2021	140

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

The table shows the increase in referrals from 2019 to 2020. However, due to the pandemic and students educated at home in March, the number of referrals in the 2020–2021 school year is not an adequate representation of data. In addition, it is important to note the number of suspensions for the last three years, as well as the number of individual students suspended. Table 7 presents this data.

Table 7*Number of Suspensions and Number of Individual Students Suspended in the Last Three Years*

Year	No. of Suspensions	No. of Individual Students Suspended
2018–2019	141	131
2019–2020	108	108
2020–2021	56	53

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

The number of individual students suspended equals or is almost equal to the number of suspensions. These data reveal that the suspendible behaviors are not a product of a small group of students but rather an overarching school problem.

Importance of Sixth Grade

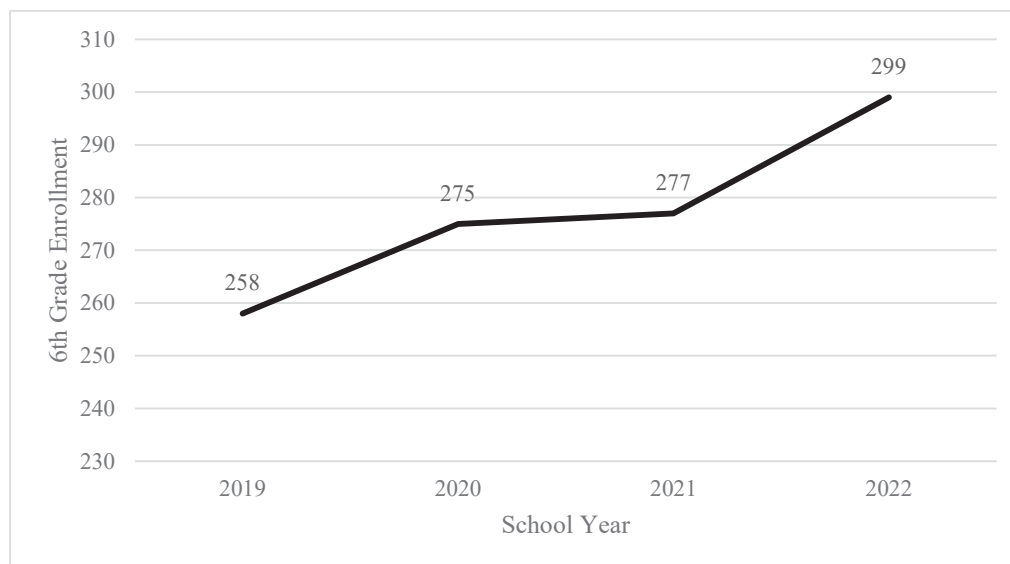
The enrollment of Wildcat Middle School sixth-grade students also increased despite the addition of a third middle school, with a projected increase of 41 as of May 2021. Figure 2

indicates the enrollment of sixth-grade students during the last three years and the projected enrollment for the next school year.

Sixth grade is a pivotal year for students as they transition from a smaller, single-classroom setting in elementary school to a setting that allows for more autonomy and responsibility. Bagnall (2020) explains that the primary-to-secondary school transition is associated with simultaneous organizational, social, environmental, and academic changes and is a significant time for adolescents and the most significant discontinuity faced in formal education. While elementary schools are predominantly neighborhood-based, middle schools encompass students from all over the district. Students entering middle school need to adjust to the changing schedule, the larger setting, and the larger population of students. Bagnall further clarifies that during this transition time, children need to adjust emotionally and socially and become accustomed to new environments and methods of learning. Kiuru et al. (2020) support Bagnall by highlighting that those successful adaptations to new educational contexts predict higher life satisfaction. Students with the social-emotional skills to navigate this new environment are often more successful in middle and high school.

Figure 2

Sixth Grade Student Enrollment Over Three Years with Projections for Next School Year



Statement and Definition

The problem addressed in this ISDiP concerns building strong instructional practices for social-emotional learning through ongoing professional development to build teacher competence and knowledge in integrating these practices into the classroom. Structuring and implementing effective professional development is integral to the success of any program. Staff members need to feel adequately coached and understand the instructional strategies to implement the necessary instruction in the classroom. As Durlak et al. (2015) posit, “[Professional Development] opportunities that are presented consistently over an extended period of time and involve active group participation and collaboration are superior to the typical ‘one shot’ workshop approach that most teachers experience” (p. 423). Durlak et al. further contend that professional development must help teachers deepen their content knowledge of SEL and theories underlying SEL; allowing for opportunities to actively apply this knowledge is helpful for the transfer of their new knowledge and classroom settings.

The research focuses on building teacher capacity by purposefully planning a series of ongoing professional development sessions to change teachers' perceptions of comfortability in integrating social and emotional instructional learning strategies into the classroom. Teachers reflect on their knowledge, growth, and ability to implement these instructional strategies for their students' improved well-being.

System and Setting

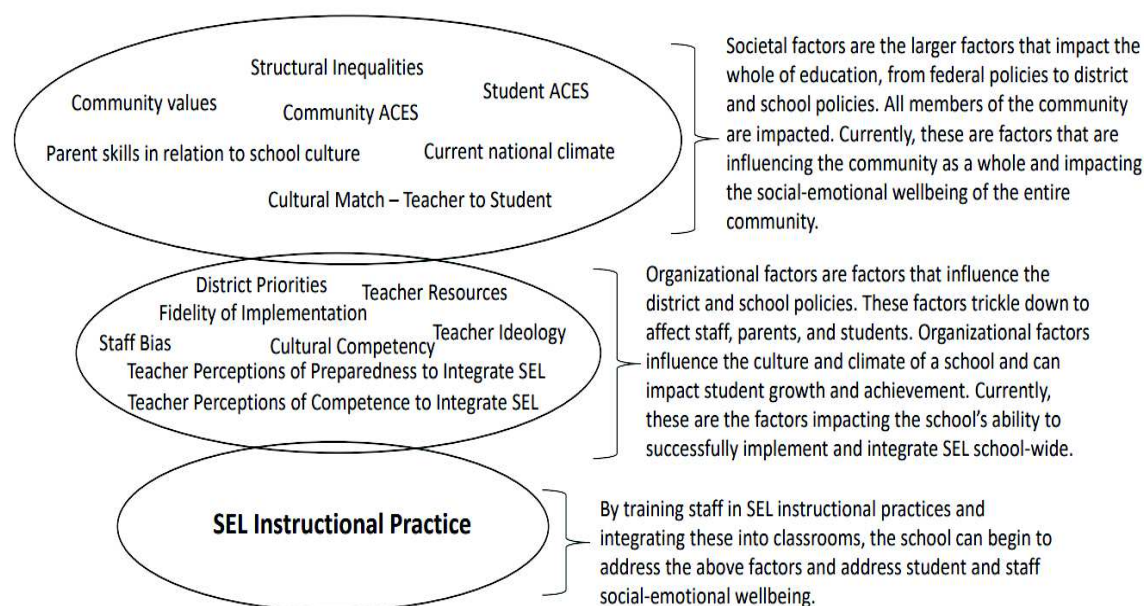
Many factors affect systems, including school systems. A school, for example, is affected by societal factors, organizational factors, and building factors. These factors support or hinder the mission and vision of a school and a district. To illustrate, societal factors impact the entirety of the system at the district level, such as laws and regulations, while organizational factors influence policies and the processes and procedures of schools. Lastly, building factors are unique to each school building and can impact scheduling, hiring, and curriculum. Figure 3 displays the role of these factors within the research study site. Systems diagrams allow the researcher to understand what needs fixing, why systems currently work the way they do, and how to reform them toward the goal (Bryk et al., 2017).

The current system impacting Wildcat Middle School contains many factors that affect the district and school's ability to successfully implement SEL into the school and classrooms. The mission of District A is to "provide all students with educational opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to lead productive and self-sustaining lives in a democratic, multicultural society" (District website, 2021). Figure 3 demonstrates the interconnected elements in the complex system that underlies this research. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) describe this complex system as "a function of the multiplicity of components, the

diversity or heterogeneity of its components, and their interdependence” (p. 96). In short, the parts depend on each other and require cooperation.

Figure 3

Factors Affecting District and School Setting



Societal factors influencing social-emotional growth include structural inequalities that include power, privilege, and oppression, directly linked to the national climate. George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, and other national events have spotlighted unaddressed racial inequalities within the United States. These events impact the community and enter the school through interactions with students and parents. According to the district database, in District A, an urban district, income inequality affects many students and families, which leads to job insecurities, housing insecurities, and food insecurities. After speaking with the School Resource Officer, the researcher found that gun violence and minor gang violence exist within the town. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma, and toxic stress impact the entire community. While

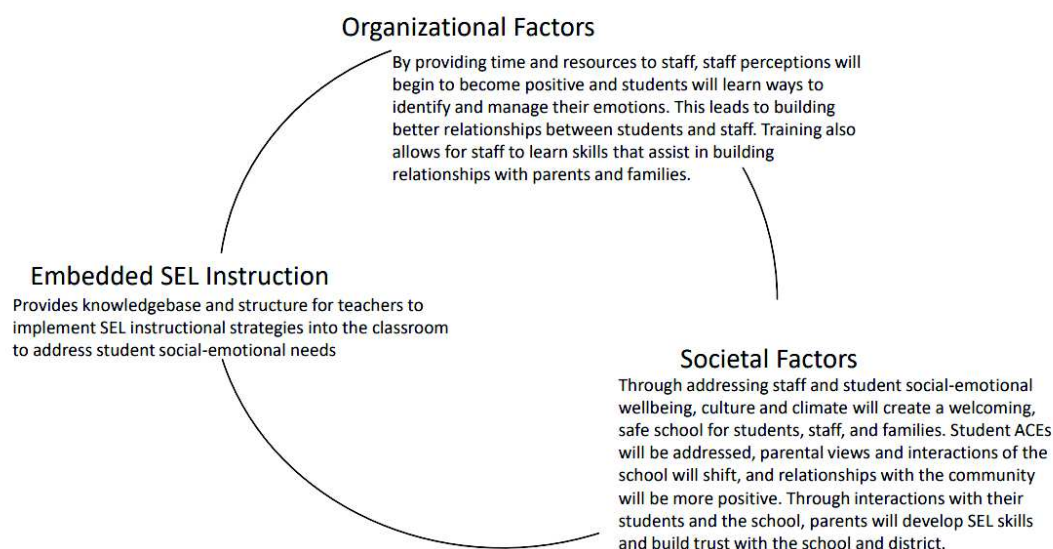
many of the district's parents value education, familial and community values differ from those taught in the school. Finally, the cultural and racial alignment of the staff does not match the student body, which further strains students' and parents' social-emotional growth when they do not interact with staff of the same race or culture. These factors influence the parents' trust in the school and the relationships between families and the school.

Organizational factors include district and school policies that directly impact staff and students. The district introduced restorative practices six years ago to address the high number of suspensions and unaddressed student behavioral concerns. Wildcat Middle School is one of three middle schools in the district, and it offers both restorative practices training to teachers and an advisory period once per week for students. According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (2021), "... restorative practices are an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities" (*What is Restorative Practices*, para. 2). Five years ago, the district introduced restorative practices, and small groups from every school attended multiple trainings with an outside consultant. These staff members learned how to run restorative circles, use restorative talk, conduct restorative mediations, and de-escalate student issues to build true classroom communities. Specifically, restorative practices focus on the social-emotional elements of relationship skills, such as communicating effectively, developing positive relationships, and resolving conflicts constructively (CASEL, 2021). These key staff members then brought their training back to their schools and trained the entire staff on these vital restorative skills and strategies. Restorative practices also aimed to build relationships within buildings, one of the core beliefs of the Superintendent of Schools. The school superintendent shared his belief with

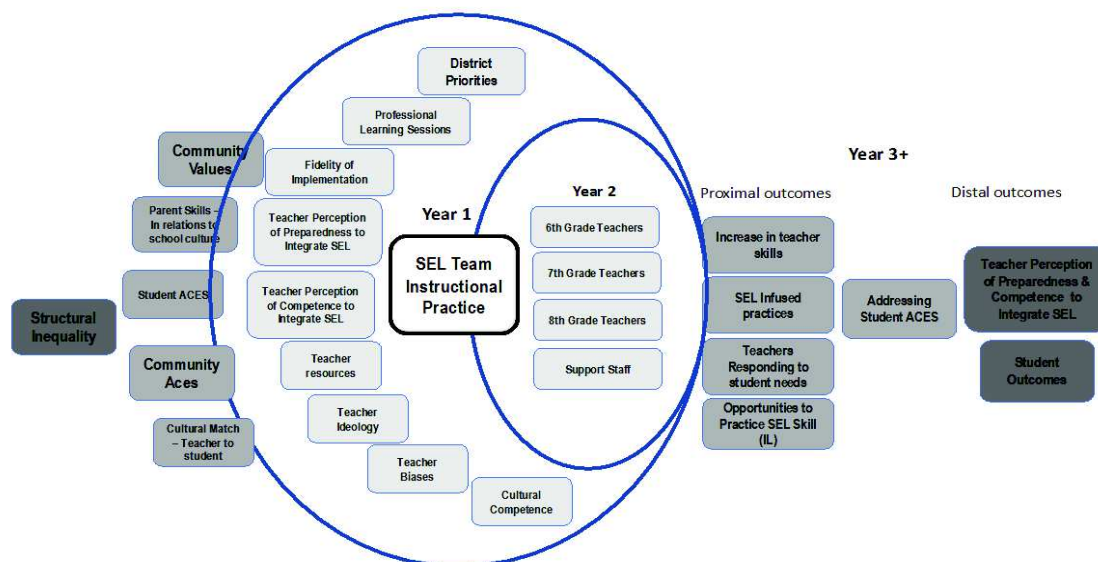
the district that relationship-building is integral to student learning and argued that relationships are the foundation of everything within a school community.

Another initiative to address this issue is Advisory. The Advisory session is 30 minutes every week to build relationships with a staff member and cultivate skills to build and maintain relationships with other students. It comprises a small group of students and one staff member who meet every week throughout their three years in middle school. The support staff creates lessons and focuses on middle school elements, such as friendship, responsible decision-making, and problem-solving. It encourages a restorative mindset and conducts these lessons in a circle format, allowing students to share and listen to others.

Despite implementing restorative practices and advisory programs, teachers have not had further opportunities to learn about and implement specific social-emotional instructional practices for the classroom setting. In 2020, there was a self-guided social-emotional hour-long workshop that taught mindfulness. The staff's cultural competence and implicit bias, all components of SEL, can affect the implementation and integration of successful SEL. A lack of professional development leads to teachers' perceptions of being unprepared and to lack competence in integrating explicit SEL strategies and skills into the classroom. Furthermore, this does not address implicit bias or reflect on one's own beliefs. To address these factors within the school setting, the researcher has identified training staff to integrate SEL instructional practices as a necessity. Figure 4 demonstrates how this action will affect the interacting systems at play.

Figure 4*Interacting Systems Diagram*

The systems diagrams, and the problem of practice addressed within this study, are smaller components of a larger-scale model of integrating social-emotional instructional practices school-wide (Figure 4). This ISDiP recognizes societal factors and their role in influencing student and staff well-being and district policies. It focuses on educational or organizational factors addressed through changes to the school's policies, procedures, and processes while acknowledging all other factors contributing to its functioning. This ISDiP is Phase I of a three-year roll-out to implement specific social-emotional instructional practices in the school building, specifically Wildcat Middle School. Phase I begins with training a small team, the school-wide Social-Emotional Learning Committee. Figure 5 displays the three-year rollout plan for Wildcat Middle School.

Figure 5*Three-Year Plan for School-Wide Implementation of Social-Emotional Instructional Practices*

This ISDiP applies to the first year of a multi-year plan developed by the researcher. This research will examine whether providing ongoing, specific professional development using social-emotional instructional strategies will impact teachers' confidence and competence to implement the social-emotional practices in the classroom. The second year would include the participants of this study, the Wildcat Middle School SEL Committee, and other staff in the building to expand the use of targeted instructional practices. By the third year, with the entire building trained in SEL practices to support trauma-exposed students, proximal outcomes such as increased teacher skills, SEL-infused practices, and teachers' ability to respond to student needs will increase. Furthermore, student outcomes such as attendance, behavior, and academics will all exhibit positive changes by addressing students' ACEs.

An integral part of the ISDiP is evaluating all data available to understand the underlying causes of the problem. Improvement Science grounds this mixed-methods study, and Phase I is to examine the root causes to plan the proper interventions.

Root Causes

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional strategies in the classroom to support trauma-exposed students. According to Bryk et al. (2017), "...improvement research entails getting down into the micro details as to how any proposed set of changes is actually supposed to improve outcomes" (p. 8). The researcher identified four root causes that greatly impact teachers' confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices and strategies. Figure 6 displays the four root causes uncovered by analyzing school-wide and district-wide data. Each root cause affects the ability of staff to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom.

Figure 6

Identified Root Causes



Problem Statement:

There is no effective intervention to build strong instructional practices for social-emotional instructional practices

Root Cause 1: Limited Resources

- No dedicated time for SEL*
- School interruptions – assemblies, field trips, etc.*
- Scheduling conflicts*
- Curricular demands*
- No funding for programs*
- Limited Staff*

Root Cause 3: Demographics & Student Population

- Lack of confidence to adequately address student needs*
- Personal Bias / Beliefs*
- Ethnicities and backgrounds differ from Students*
- Minoritized Students referred at higher rate*
- Student behavior misunderstood*

Root Cause 2: Leadership

- No training for teacher leaders or staff*
- No SEL goal in District or School Improvement Plan*
- Lack of confidence in school leaders to support SEL initiatives*
- No Vision or Definition of SEL at district or school level*

Root Cause 4: School Climate

- Students feel disconnected from school*
- Students do not have a trusted adult in the building*
- Students feel unmotivated*

Root Cause 1: Limited Resources

The first root cause relates to resources, such as materials and limited time. No Child Left Behind [NCLB] (2002) and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (2015) also place curricular demands on teachers. Connecticut administers the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) annually to identify student performance at their grade level. These data also inform the School Accountability Index to rank schools and display the data related to academic growth and achievement. When multiple accountability measures all demand that students reach certain benchmarks by certain dates, informal end-user consultations with staff have demonstrated that teachers are stressed and feel pressured to focus solely on academics for students' achievement based on state and federal achievement measures. Table 8 demonstrates staff concerns about implementing SEL into the school day through informal end-user consultations.

End-user consultations demonstrate that many staff feel overwhelmed; however, teachers indicated that social-emotional learning is critical. Many regard it as vital to student success after the pandemic but have no idea where and how to fit SEL into the current structure of the school day.

Furthermore, the district received a zero percent increase in its annual budget in the last ten years. Grants and Awards are responsible for all implemented grants. Moreover, there is no dedicated time for social-emotional training built into the professional development or professional learning communities (PLC) calendar.

Table 8*Staff Concerns Regarding Resources*

Discovered Themes	Supporting Quotes
Lack of Time	<p>We don't have time built into the day for SEL outside of our Monday morning meetings and Advisory. I don't see how we can fit in any SEL components outside of those.</p> <p>We have PLC time once a month where we can create an SEL committee to do the work, but that's the only time I can think of. Each period of our day is accounted for with teaching and content or team meetings.</p>
Academic Demands for Student Performance	<p>I just don't know how to fit in SEL specifically if it's not built into the curriculum. We're being told children are entering school an academic year behind where they should be, which for our students means two or three years behind, and I am supposed to find time to implement SEL lessons? How?</p> <p>My SBA scores are recorded for all of my students and tied directly back to me. Teachers receive SBA ribbons to hang outside of their doors when they do well...how am I supposed to take time away from students who may have had no schooling in months to focus on feelings?</p>
Lack of SEL Knowledge	<p>I know a little bit about SEL through restorative training, but that focuses on building relationships. I would need training to feel comfortable implementing SEL in my classroom.</p> <p>We haven't received any specific training on SEL. We had one self-led SEL workshop this past choice day, but it didn't explain to me what SEL is in a classroom. I wouldn't know where to start.</p>

Finally, the school schedule allows for integrating only two components into the school day that could potentially assist with social-emotional development in students, namely Monday morning meetings and Advisory. Monday morning meetings last 20 minutes, and teachers check in with students to gauge their social-emotional status for the upcoming week. Advisory is a weekly program that runs for 30 minutes and focuses on building relationships between a staff member and a small group of students. Neither program explicitly focuses on teaching or on building social-emotional skills.

Root Cause 2: Leadership

After analyzing the district and the school improvement plans, the researcher discovered no specific social-emotional goal or fidelity measure. Neither the school nor the district has goals explicitly linked to social-emotional learning, though the district began to implement brief, self-led social-emotional learning professional development among staff. During informal conversations with school administrators and teacher-leaders, school leaders at Wildcat Middle School exhibited a lack of confidence in their ability to implement explicit social-emotional instructional strategies school-wide. Furthermore, they were uncertain about how to best support teachers.

The district has not offered any specific training or a framework for social-emotional learning. At the discretion of the district leadership, elementary schools received the district's funding for specific social-emotional learning programs, curricula, and curriculum writing. There is no current SEL goal in the district or school goals and no specific planned professional development for staff. McKown (2019) explains, "A clear definition of SEL stakes a claim about what is and what is not important" (p. 3). Neither the school nor the district has a working definition of SEL. McKown further states that "... determining which skills are important to the

school involves convening a team to identify the specific skills that, if improved, would have the greatest impact on students” (p. 1). This definition will inform the vision for SEL within the district and the building and create a comprehensive and unified understanding and vision for the staff. There is no district-wide SEL team, nor is there a school-wide SEL team that works to incorporate this definition and vision into the school to support teachers and students. However, without the Central Office explicitly creating an SEL goal for the district or Wildcat Middle School establishing an SEL goal for the school, SEL is not central to the school or district’s mission, and the staff does not know how to implement these strategies into the classroom to support students.

Root Cause 3: Demographics and Student Population

The ethnic and racial breakdown of the staff at Wildcat Middle School does not mirror the ethnic and racial breakdown of the student population, as indicated in Table 9. Over 44% of the students are Hispanic, while only 10% of the staff are Hispanic. Nearly 17% of the students are Black and not of Hispanic origin, yet only 3% of the staff are the same.

Table 9

Demographics of Wildcat Middle School Staff

Staff	No. of Certified Staff	No. of Classified Staff	Total
Hispanic	4	7	11
White	65	26	91
Black Not of Hispanic Origin	1	3	4
Total	70	36	106

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

Students do not see themselves represented in the staff, which can cause a disconnection between culture and understanding. Warren et al. (2020) explain that beliefs, values, and

attitudes inform teacher dispositions, and as such, every staff member enters the building with their personal biases and sets of beliefs.

To be truly trauma-informed requires personal reflection. As Carrington et al. (2010) state, “The extent to which experienced teacher’s conceptions and beliefs are consistent with their practice depends, to a degree, on the teachers’ opportunities to critically reflect on their actions and consider new possibilities for teaching” (p. 2). Personal reflection is also extremely important when teaching students who do not have the same cultural, ethnic, or racial background.

At Wildcat Middle School, student demographics do not match staff demographics. Demographically, the school consists of predominately minoritized students. While minoritized students account for over 70% of the student population, they receive discipline referrals at a much higher rate than their white peers, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Disciplinary Referrals by Racial/Ethnic Group Over the Last Three Years

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Referrals		
	2018-2019	2019–2020	2020–2021
Multi-Racial	17	24	24
Hispanic/Latino	421	456	466
Black not of Hispanic Origin	81	99	103
White	197	186	200
Total	716	765	793

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

While it is important to note that the number of referrals between 2017 and 2020 increased for all subgroups, minoritized students accounted for over 75% of referrals. McIntosh (2019) discussed how a broad range of experiences could result in childhood trauma and a

child's response to potentially traumatizing events. Although research has revealed that many low-socioeconomic and ethnic groups face traumatic events at higher rates than their more affluent counterparts, Christian-Brandt et al. (2020) emphasized that child maltreatment disproportionately affects families living in poverty. Many Wildcat Middle School students have low-socioeconomic backgrounds and are trauma-exposed, which could factor into maladaptive behaviors in response to a potentially triggering event. Data from the school has demonstrated that over 75% of students have experienced at least two ACEs (the pandemic and poverty), which accounts for most of the student population. While there could be various factors behind the discrepancy, the researcher believes there could be a potential teacher implicit bias or lack of understanding regarding how to support trauma-exposed students.

Root Cause 4: School Climate

Every fall, the school district administers a student climate survey. This survey identifies trends among the students and measures important factors, such as growth mindset, motivation, engagement, and connectedness. This survey demonstrates two key components related to the purpose of this study: student engagement and student connectedness. Table 11 displays the mean results from the last three years of the student climate survey implementation.

Table 11*Mean Student Climate Survey Results Over Three Years*

Survey Indicator	Mean Result		
	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021
There are teachers who care about me	4.11	4.17	4.12
At my school, there is a teacher or other adult who I can trust	4.01	4.08	4.12
I’m happy to be at this school	3.71	3.82	3.67
There are teachers at my school that help me really want to learn	4.05	4.49	4.14
At my school, there is a teacher or an adult who listens to me when I have something to say	4.03	4.18	4.16
At my school, there is a teacher or an adult who tells me when I do a good job	3.97	4.06	4.00
I feel sad in school	2.18	2.21	2.04

Note. Each year, the survey has a 95% or higher response rate, and the mean results are an average of responses from all students. The survey uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6. Data gathered from District A database in 2021.

Specific questions, such as feeling connected or cared for by a staff member, being happy at school, or having an adult who listens, can potentially be underlying causes of student behavior. By gathering results based on school, grade level, classroom, and individually, the administration and support staff can understand the overall school climate and offer targeted support to struggling students. These results can also inform which teachers might have classrooms that need additional support or teachers who might need training in social-emotional strategies. These results also inform the administration regarding where to focus their energy and offer insight into what is needed to build a better school climate.

In addition to the student climate survey, the district administers a “Getting to Know You” survey to students every year. This survey allows schools to determine students’ likes,

dislikes, attitudes toward school and attitudes toward learning, and growth mindset. A statistical analysis determined the relevance between students' attitudes toward school and suspension rates. The district used the following survey indicators to determine the relevance.

- During this past school year, the classroom activities in my math class were really meaningful to me.
- During this past school year, the classroom activities in my Language Arts (ILA) reading class were really meaningful to me.
- During this past school year, the classroom activities in my science class were really meaningful to me.
- During this past school year, the classroom activities in my social studies (history) class were really meaningful to me.
- It is important that I know about social studies and history.
- For me, it is important to be able to read well.
- It is important for me to do math well.
- It is important that I know about science.

These indicators determine whether “school” is meaningful and important to students. In addition, descriptive statistics, such as the mean, assess whether a student feels that school is meaningful and important and, therefore, whether the student is less likely to display behaviors that lead to suspension. Table 12 displays the data for 2019–2020.

Table 12

Relevance Level of Students Who Find School Meaningful and Important and Suspensions for 2020

Relevance Level	<i>n</i>	Mean
Very Low	12	3.00
Low	72	1.07
Moderate	333	0.64
High	319	0.45
Total	736	0.64

Note. The scores ranged from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale. Data was gathered from the District A database in 2021.

Students who found school irrelevant or unimportant averaged three days of suspension. Students who found school meaningful and important averaged less than a day of suspension. While students who found school relevant and meaningful still displayed minor behaviors and received an occasional suspension, students who did not find school important were more likely to display behaviors that could result in suspension.

Purpose of Study

This study determined whether strong instructional practices for SEL through ongoing professional development build teacher competence and confidence in integrating these practices into the classroom. Furthermore, it addressed whether training impacts teachers' perceptions of student outcomes. Finally, this study prepared a small sub-group of staff to meet the needs of all students, including trauma-exposed students. This research was Phase I of a multi-year SEL plan for Wildcat Middle School (Figure 3).

This study helped to inform a gap in knowledge regarding how to plan appropriate training for staff to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies competently and

successfully into the classroom. In addition, its findings contributed to the limited research on teachers' perceptions of their abilities to integrate social-emotional strategies into the classroom to support trauma-exposed students. Finally, this information was important to inform pre-service and in-service training, and district professional development since over 45% of children in the United States have experienced at least one ACE (Sacks & Murphy, 2018); the global pandemic exacerbated trauma among all students (Crosby et al., 2020). These findings are particularly critical in urban areas that serve high populations of trauma-exposed students.

This study contribute also to the limited research on purposefully planning professional development and training for teachers in successfully integrating social-emotional instructional strategies into their classrooms. Finally, this study will inform districts on structuring successful professional development and will be significant to schools and districts with similar populations and concerns.

Methodology

This research was action research. Action Research is complimentary to Improvement Science (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell and Plano Clark posit that action research allows practitioners to advance their professional development while improving their practice by participating in the research. In addition, the four key elements of action research are: focusing on a real problem in practice; the researcher as practitioner within the community; includes careful research about the problem; uses multiple sources of information and fits in with the cycle of Improvement Science. Chapter III explains these four key elements.

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to collect in-depth qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. With Improvement Science, the flexibility of mixed-

methods research enabled the researcher to use all the quantitative and qualitative data tools. For example, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) posit that a mixed-methods approach allows the researcher to use all methods possible to address a research problem and solve problems using numbers and words. Finally, the researcher used a mixed-methods case study to examine teachers' perceptions of their competence and confidence to implement social-emotional instructional strategies in the classroom.

Quantitative teacher data included teacher surveys. Qualitative data included teacher focus groups, end-user consultations, and open-ended survey responses. These data determined whether ongoing professional development impacted teachers' perceptions and ability to build a strong instructional practice for SEL and their confidence and competence in integrating SEL practices into the classroom.

The researcher employed what Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) call a parallel-database variant, allowing her to gather qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, which she then analyzed independently. This design allowed the use of the two types of data to examine facets of the same phenomenon; the independent results were compared during the discussion. In addition, teachers volunteered to be part of the study by participating in a quantitative survey, an open-ended survey, end-user consultations and focus groups to discuss and gauge the effect of ongoing professional development.

Participants

This study used a non-probability convenience sampling method. Data were collected with approximately seven current staff members of Wildcat Middle School through a voluntary online anonymous survey and focus groups as part of the Improvement Science process. Limiting the data to specific staff ($n = 7$) allowed for more reliable data collection and

comparisons among the data sets and SEL integration for this case study. The research focused on a smaller population to determine efficacy before broadening to a larger scope. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), using the same sample population facilitates the merging of results because the same participants provide both forms of data. The participants in the study were the seven Wildcat teachers and administrators who provided the quantitative and qualitative survey results. Furthermore, the population was limited to the same teaching and learning environment as Wildcat Middle School for the interventions to be effective.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study examined the impact of a series of ongoing professional development on teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional strategies in the classroom. Furthermore, the results informed a gap in knowledge about implementing effective professional development for teachers to integrate social-emotional learning strategies into the classroom. Finally, the results identified a gap in the knowledge of teachers' perceptions regarding implementing SEL to support students who have experienced trauma. The study involved mixed-methods action research with a parallel-database variant design, which entailed simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The researcher also recorded focus groups during intervention sessions.

These four research questions that guided this study

1. How does implementing a series of collaborative social and emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?
2. Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report that they implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?

3. What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?
4. Did the intervention change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

Hypotheses

The hypothesized outcome for Research Question 1 is

H1₀

There is no statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

H1₁

There is a statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

The hypothesized outcome for Research Question 4 is

H4₀

There is no statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of school or district support after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

H4₁

There is a statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of school or district support after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

Understanding the quantitative research questions in further depth required qualitative data collection through focus groups and end-user consultations, and quantitative analysis of teacher surveys. The researcher believed that after specific, ongoing professional development, the teachers would exhibit enhanced perceptions of their ability to implement social and emotional instructional strategies in the classroom to support trauma-exposed students. Furthermore, the researcher contended that implementing these strategies would positively impact teachers' perception of students' abilities and classroom behavior.

Intervention

Over eight weeks, the intervention included targeted professional development sessions on specific social-emotional instructional strategies. The researcher submitted a letter to the district for approval to conduct the research (Appendix A). Responses from semi-structured focus groups (Appendix D, E, & F), open-ended survey questions (Appendix B & C), and end-user consultations (Appendix G & H) were the sources of the quantitative data for the study, in addition to archival data. The researcher submitted the research protocols to the Institutional Review Board and approved (Appendix E).

The research included two revised Panorama surveys administered to teachers during the research process. First, the researcher administered pre-and post-surveys prior to the beginning and after the spring implementation of the professional development interventions. The researcher included three open-ended questions at the end of the survey to elicit additional teacher perceptions and beliefs. After each two-week cycle of professional development, the researcher administered a second survey to gauge the impact of the training, which strategies participants chose to implement, and the ease or difficulty in which teachers implemented the

social-emotional instructional strategy. Again, open-ended questions at the end of the survey elicited additional teacher perceptions and beliefs.

The researcher conducted focus groups to evaluate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the ongoing professional development and examine their perceptions of preparedness and competence with SEL to support students exposed to trauma. The focus group for this research was part of the regular educational cycle of planning for integrating SEL in the next year through a pre-established school-wide committee. Focus groups and teacher surveys included open-ended questions.

Summary

Improvement Science contains cycles of analyzing data, implementing an intervention, and evaluating the results; this study followed these cycles in the context of one middle school. First, the researcher gathered data from the school and district to identify the root causes of an identified problem. Second, she explored possible solutions and interventions to the problem. Third, the researcher implemented an intervention and assessed its effectiveness. Finally, she gathered the data collected during the intervention to determine its effectiveness in changing teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence regarding SEL.

A large percentage of the child population of the United States has experienced adverse childhood experiences. As a result, many children have experienced trauma. Trauma can affect the brain's development and hinder cognitive functioning (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated childhood instability and trauma and has had a global impact. Now, more than ever, staff need the training to best support students socially and emotionally. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states that educators need to receive ongoing, explicit training to effectively implement SEL instructional strategies in their classrooms to address

students' social and emotional needs. It is imperative that staff feel confident and competent to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom to support trauma-exposed students optimally.

This study provided ongoing, targeted professional development to a small group of staff to build their confidence and competence to implement social and emotional strategies in the classroom. Through a mixed-methods action approach, the researcher explored the effectiveness of the ongoing professional development series in addressing teacher growth related to social-emotional strategies over eight weeks. While the sample size was small, it mirrored the other SEL Committees in the district. This research fits into an overall three-year plan to address the needs of students who have experienced trauma. In continuing with the first phase of the ISDiP, the next section of the dissertation examined the research surrounding the problem of social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom to form a working theory of improvement.

Positionality Statement

As a career educator, my views closely align with Ross Greene (2008) in that I believe all children do well when they can. Behaviors exhibited in the classroom are a way of students communicating their needs, and the relationship between students and educators is critical to their healthy development. In my current role as a school administrator, I also believe that strong interpersonal support for educators drives the quality of the classroom experience for students. I approached this research from this lens and acknowledge that this is but one way of many ways of considering effective educational design.

Apart from my two decades of experience in education, I consider that features of my identity may also have influenced the way I approached designing and interpreting this study. For example, while I have much in common with the students and the school staff where this

study took place, I realize that I was in a position of power during this research as a guest and senior leader in the Connecticut school system. In addition, I have also had the privilege of an extensive post-graduate education, which has afforded me benefits not available to all participants in the study. Finally, although as a Caucasian woman, I was born into what is currently the dominant cultural group, I have spent most of my career in diverse school settings. Also, I married a Hispanic man, and my two sons are Hispanic. This combination has afforded me a unique perspective on what I believe to be effective interventions for diverse school settings, which I included in the design of this study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Improvement Science first identifies a *problem of practice* and then examines the research to find possible solutions to address the problem. When addressing a school-wide issue, it is vital to analyze the problem from all viewpoints, including the student and adult lenses. It is also crucial to survey similar school districts and conduct environmental scans to determine if they encounter the same concerns and what they are doing to address these concerns. Environmental scans were analyzed alongside the literature to determine the next steps in the Improvement Science cycle and the methods used.

Student Lens

Growing Traumatic Conditions in Students

According to the National Conference of State Legislators (2021), more than 45% of students have suffered from at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) in their lifetime, greatly influencing them behaviorally, emotionally, and socially. According to Cavanaugh (2016), over 68% of students face post-traumatic effects that affect their daily routines. Moreover, according to Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020), around 46 million children are exposed to community violence, the death of a parent, homelessness, hunger, neglect, or abuse each year in the United States. Trauma can be an upsetting experience that can overwhelm a person physically, mentally, or emotionally. Jaycox et al. (2009) described trauma as a sudden, life-threatening incident, which leaves an individual helpless, terrified, and horrified.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) share that ACE scores disproportionately affect low-income urban communities. Children who live below the federal poverty line are five times more likely to experience four or more ACEs than those in families whose income is 400% over the federal poverty line (Halfon et al., 2016). The CDC (2021) also

found that some children are at greater risk than others for experiencing four or more types of ACEs, and this group included minoritized students and women. The CDC (2021) explains that ACEs and associated conditions, such as living in under-resourced neighborhoods and experiencing food insecurity, can cause toxic stress. Furthermore, McKelvey et al. (2010) found that students who grew up in high conflict neighborhoods or homes reported more significant depression, anxiety, risk-taking behaviors, and anti-social behaviors.

The higher the ACE score, the higher the negative impact on a child's ability to regulate emotions and can negatively impact learning. Based on a study by Voith et al. (2014), the students who faced trauma multiple times showed more symptoms of trauma and depression than the students who faced a single traumatic event. For instance, a student who has witnessed their mother being abused may be perceived as less traumatized than students who face abuse directly. Dods (2013) stated that 25%–45% of youth reported having traumatic experiences before age 16, showing that most youths have suffered from trauma that may influence their behaviors. Prolonged and repeated ACEs have more troubling effects across developmental domains, partly explained by the brain wiring to the survival mode even without a threat (Segal & Collin-Vezina, 2019). There is growing research on how profoundly negative the impact of ACEs is on student and child development.

Impact of Trauma on Social and Learning Skills of Students

Experiencing trauma can have a profound negative impact on student learning. Baez et al. (2019) explain that trauma affects student behavior, capacity to learn social-emotional skills, and the ability for resilience. Students who lack resilience struggle to work through challenges, including any academic work they view as challenging. According to Kuban and Steele (2011), students who have experienced trauma could have lower GPAs, decreased IQ, and poor school

performance, leading to overall poor performance in their studies. In addition, students who have experienced trauma can have lapses in their cognitive abilities. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) found that trauma can cause chronic stress among students, affecting their brains' physical and chemical structures, resulting in their inability to pay attention or focus on their studies. Segal and Collins (2019) state, "The experience of abuse and/or neglect profoundly influences children's developing communication skills even before school entry" (p. 318). Trauma can significantly impact older adolescent children as well.

Trauma can impact brain development, decision-making, self-regulation, and social-emotional skills. Trauma in early adolescence slows the natural brain development process down, and the disruption of this process can heighten risky behaviors and prevent adolescents from making rational decisions (Williams, 2020). In addition, trauma and lack of social-emotional skills can adversely affect students' learning. Therefore, they may develop anti-social behaviors becoming isolated or less interactive with their peers and others. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) discuss how trauma and adversity can affect a child's brain leading to increased difficulty with attention, concentration, memory, and creativity.

Furthermore, Dods (2013) describes trauma as a non-verbal experience that a child suffers and the behavior that he later depicts to communicate the pain to others. Pawlo et al. (2019) explained that students who have experienced trauma tend to show significant weaknesses in accurately recognizing emotions. Segal and Collin-Vezina (2019) found that ACEs can have a profound, negative impact on executive functioning, such as self-regulation and organization. They also found that ACE-related disruptions span numerous cognitive skills, like sensory processing and developing communication skills. Furthermore, Kuban and Steele (2011) report that exposure to trauma can greatly influence psychological, emotional, social,

behavioral, and learning functioning. For example, when students lack processing or communication skills, many emotions or feelings may reveal themselves through behavior.

Minahan (2020) discusses that disengaged students who feel the impact of trauma and disconnection are more likely to communicate their feelings through changes in behavior. Moreover, Pawlo et al. (2019) mentions that children with a traumatized past tend to show significant weaknesses in identifying different emotions accurately, as they become highly sensitive in each matter. When a student is in a heightened state, the fight or flight instinct is often activated, even when danger is not present. The Hierarchy of Needs, presented by Maslow (1943), states that children whose physical needs are unmet, such as the need for safety, struggle to achieve their full potential (Duplechain et al., 2008). Stain et al. (2014) also found that childhood trauma is likely to disturb the acquisition of interpersonal relatedness skills, including the desire to interact with people, and thus, it may lead to impaired social interactions in school life. Pawlo et al. further suggest that educators must be prepared for the higher level of emotional intensity that students bring to the classroom. Teachers and adults need to be prepared to know how to best support trauma-exposed students.

During informal interviews with surrounding districts, the researcher noted that all three districts see the impact of trauma on students. The Assistant Superintendent of District C explained that they frequently see the impact of trauma on students. The principal of another middle school in District B explained that students returning to schools had been impacted by so much over the past two years, resulting in an inability to focus, find suitable coping strategies for stressors, form appropriate and lasting relationships, and respond irrationally to normal setbacks or conflicts. The Assistant Superintendent of District C further attested to the lack of coping skills by explaining that they witnessed the impact of trauma through the increase in maladaptive

behaviors, such as fighting, bullying, and disrespect. Both the principal in District B and the assistant superintendent in District C discussed the lack of specific measures for how they know if a student experienced trauma. However, they use counselors, parent information, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), or 504s to identify students proactively. However, generally, they are reactive to the behaviors that emerge.

Changing Landscape of Education During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the education landscape and has impacted student learning and community life. Humans are naturally social. As Merrill (2020) states, working from home, or worse, from quarantine, is isolating and often depressing for both teachers and students. Garlinghouse (2020) supports the pitfalls of quarantining by explaining that crucial support systems such as schools, which provide shelter and meals, could put students more at risk of experiencing an ACE while in quarantine. In addition, she shares that the pandemic is a destabilizing event impacting the normalcy of households and life, putting unnecessary stress on students and families. For some students, Gonser (2020) describes distance learning as causing students to retreat into themselves due to factors such as anxiety, difficulties at home, or pandemic-related anxiety, making it difficult to stay connected.

Learning is naturally social, and as mentioned previously, school relationships are critical for the 46 million children in the United States that trauma impacts (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Students learn best from interacting with peers and connecting with caring, trusted adults in a school building. Immordino-Yang et al. (2018) explain, “The quality of a person’s relationships and social interactions shapes their development and health, both of the body and brain” (p. 3). Still, despite all the research and understanding of the importance of

social and emotional growth in students, quarantine and online learning create barriers that cause students to miss the crucial supports they would receive if they in school.

Review of Practice

The Assistant Superintendent of District C and the Principal of District B shared seeing an impact of the pandemic and missed schooling on students. Both explained that students are struggling with relationship-building and social awareness. The social pieces of school, such as making and maintaining friendships, are difficult and have led to more fighting in school. Both districts also noted more referrals to school psychologists and social workers for social-emotional concerns, such as anxiety or depression. Both administrators noted the importance of integrating social-emotional learning into the school and training staff members outside of the support staff. District C's Assistant Superintendent noted that support staff were feeling overwhelmed by the needs of students and that training more staff would benefit the students and benefit other colleagues.

Synthesis

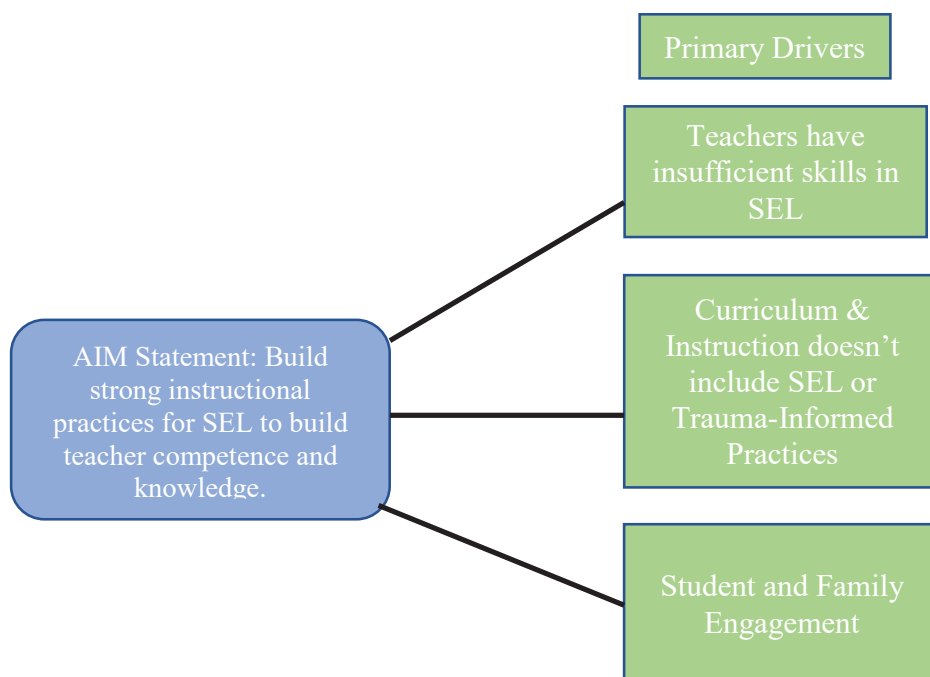
Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are prevalent in low-socioeconomic urban environments, particularly in minoritized communities. When students face multiple ACEs, there can be a severe, negative impact on their cognitive growth and brain development. As a result, students fall behind in academics and in learning crucial skills such as relationship-building, decision-making, and self-regulation. Moreover, the pandemic has had an even more destabilizing effect on students who experience ACEs, thus further altering their environments and growth. Therefore, schools must understand the needs of the students and offer the proper support for their success.

Adult Lens

Nurturing a safe learning environment in classrooms that addresses students' social-emotional needs require supporting staff as they navigate learning social-emotional instructional strategies. Along with this, schools must be trauma-informed—the entire school staff is capable and dedicated to being aware of the traumatic events that students might face. In such a new way of thinking, it is vital to encourage teachers to build strong relationships with students. According to Larson (2019), such positive thinking will provide teachers with a better understanding of students and effectively mold their behavior. It is imperative that staff have the social-emotional skills and knowledge to address student needs and that leaders offer the support and professional development needed.

To begin diving into adult actions and the impact on students and the classroom culture, the researcher continued to understand the primary drivers, or factors, affecting the problem of practice through the Improvement Science Model. Figure 7 displays the primary drivers explaining the needs of the staff and adults in Wildcat Middle School.

Due to three critical factors or drivers, strong instructional practices for social-emotional learning need building. First, teachers have insufficient skills in social-emotional learning partially due to curriculum and instruction not including SEL training or trauma-informed practices. The school does not embed these skills into the day. Finally, family engagement with SEL is minimal. With a lack of training for staff and SEL strategies not embedded into the curriculum or the school day, the school cannot share these practices with families and strengthen the school-to-home relationship.

Figure 7*Driver Diagram 1*

The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Schools

Students must develop social-emotional skills to broaden their chances of becoming successful later in life. According to CASEL (2021), the primary SEL skills taught and learned are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Research has shown that introducing SEL skills at an early age further enhances social development *and* academic achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). In addition, students are accepting a more active role in their academic success and higher participation levels and goal setting (Cohen, 2001). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shined a spotlight on the need to address student mental health through social and emotional learning.

Prior to the pandemic, educators noted the importance of SEL. However, the pandemic has altered access to mental health services, closed schools, restricted access to school-provided services, and harmed family and interpersonal relationships (Henderson et al., 2020). Schools need to be aware of the isolating and mental-health effects the pandemic has had on the students who are now returning to school. Students have had more than a year of disrupted learning and have not had the chance to socialize, learn the norms, navigate schools, and access some of their services restricted by school closures. Now, more than ever, students need support.

The benefits of social and emotional learning are at the forefront of education, and there are numerous benefits to training teachers in these practices. “Teachers are often on the frontline when it comes to seeing the impact of trauma and the needs of children...[they] enter school with a range of needs such as education, health, physical, and social/emotional” (Banks & Meyer, 2017, p. 65). Educating staff to address the needs of all students adequately will lead to a safe and more productive learning environment for students and promote student success. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) further explain that building this environment can significantly improve academic performance and reduce the negative impacts on students’ lives. Greenberg et al. (2021) explain that teachers would jump at the chance to offer SEL programming but need administrators’ and policymakers’ help. Undoubtedly, a caring and stable relationship between students and staff and between staff and administration are critical in building a positive climate for the students.

Teacher competence with SEL skills and strategies is paramount to student learning. Oberle et al. (2016) explain that competence in SEL skills is critical for positive outcomes in the school context as the relationship between social-emotional and academic domains is not surprising. Oberle et al. further state that learning in the school context is an inherently social

process. In addition, teacher proficiency in applying SEL skills and strategies to their own lives is paramount. Research shows from a trauma-informed perspective, the adults' emotional stability in the school takes on special importance (Pawlo et al., 2019). Therefore, the staff must understand SEL and how to integrate it into the classroom to enhance student learning and achievement.

Review of Practice

The Assistant Superintendent of District C shared that, unfortunately, there has been no actual social-emotional professional development for staff. Furthermore, while some Devereux Student Strengths Assessment [DESSA] (LeBuffe et al., 2012) training can help measure SEL competencies, the staff only trained on the system and did not implement any interventions or support. The DESSA System is part of Aperture Education (www.apertuseed.com/ct), which provides a statewide SEL assessment for K–12 schools, partnering with the Connecticut State Department of Education beginning in 2021 (CDSE, 2021).

District C is implementing RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating) (Nathanson et al., 2016) training for all staff for the first time. However, the district uses a train-the-trainer model in which the district trains a small group who then return to the district to train the remaining staff; therefore, due to the pandemic, there has been no full-scale professional development.

The Principal in District B shared that they are in the second year of the RULER roll-out. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence trained teachers last year; they are learning to channel RULER to students this year. Teachers and staff needed the training to effectively address students' trauma and social-emotional needs.

Both Districts B and C expressed that building and district leaders need to be included in the training to best support staff. Aside from the RULER training that both leaders attended with their staff, they have not had any other training from their district. Both leaders trained formally and informally in restorative practices from their last district because they asked to be included in the training. While it is vital to include building and district leaders in social-emotional training to support all staff members, neither leader has received training to support staff and students in developing SEL skills outside of RULER.

How Teachers with SEL Skills Can Benefit Student Learning

Students and teachers can benefit from learning and using SEL skills in their lives; teachers can utilize SEL to provide modeling for their classroom. Children acquire much of their knowledge by observation. As Huang et al. (2019) also highlighted, students who perceive that their teachers provide them with social and emotional support tend to build positive relationships with teachers, and thus, teachers may be able to understand the student's behavior more effectively. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) suggest that educators practice empathy that can help them view student behavior from the eyes of child development. This approach greatly supports teachers in identifying disruptive behavior among students as a symptom of negative experiences or unmet needs.

Some of the first relationships students will establish in life are with their teachers. Pawlo et al. (2019) explain that the emotional stability of adults in the school takes on importance from a trauma-informed perspective. If the educator can model relationship building and positive rapport through SEL competently with the students, students will quickly learn to adapt and cultivate these skills themselves. There are multiple programs to improve SEL competence that educators implemented in various schools, such as Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in

Education (CARE) and Stress Management and Resiliency Training (SMART-in-Education).

Through programs aimed at educators such as these, the hope is to increase their job satisfaction, compassion towards students, and the ability to regulate emotions better (Jennings et al., 2011).

Currently, schools closely monitor academic learning and test scores, especially since the introduction of the Accountability Index in Connecticut (CSDE, 2021). The Accountability Index rates schools on student achievement and growth on state tests and other indicators such as physical fitness and graduation rates. Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021) found that schools seem to focus more directly on responding to students' social and emotional needs by offering discussions or school counseling services instead of teaching students how to develop their own social and emotional skills. Schiepe-Tiska et al. continued by explaining that secondary schools do not provide resources to promote SEL instruction, such as instructional materials or activities, or create conditions for training teachers.

Exacerbating the issue, especially in urban, high-poverty areas where trauma is prevalent and students struggle to succeed, is when district and state leaders mandate schools to implement new improvement plans and initiatives, which fail due to the challenges that schools face (Pawlo et al., 2019). Therefore, in high poverty areas with prevalent trauma, the educational leaders must play a critical role, as they can reimagine how their systems would serve their students and community by fulfilling their psychological, emotional, and social needs post-pandemic (Mercado, 2021). Mercado also explains that the community compelled education leaders to reimagine how their systems would serve them and students even when the full effects and needs are unknown post-COVID-19. However, Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021) explained that revising current systems to include SEL is due to the prioritization of academic outcomes leaving little room for explicit SEL instruction.

Data shows that teachers often feel uncertain and lack the professional skills and knowledge to implement SEL in classrooms (Schiepe-Tiska, 2021). According to Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020), educators must build a positive school atmosphere where students feel comfortable and safe sharing their experiences or feelings, which will help to build trust between students and educators. Moreover, Cressey (2019) suggested that teachers respond with different intervention strategies, such as individualized and targeted support for students who display any social, emotional, or behavioral needs. Furthermore, teachers need training and knowledge on integrating SEL into the classroom to build trusting relationships and impact student learning.

Synthesis

While fostering SEL skills in the classroom is directed towards the student to promote better well-being and a brighter future, the whole community is ultimately better for it. SEL does not end as soon as students leave school. It is something the students will carry through their relationships with parents and others. As they become adults and branch out into the world, these abilities also positively influence everyone else they meet—beginning with teacher training to teach and model these skills to students.

Working Theory of Improvement

Wildcat Middle School serves over 900 students in Grades 6–8 in an urban district in Connecticut. Seventy percent of students are minoritized, and chronic absenteeism remains around 15% or higher. According to the district data, over 80% of students have experienced at least one ACE, which is higher after the COVID-19 pandemic. Student referrals and suspensions remain steady and high given the student population. In addition, a large group of students accounts for the suspensions pointing to a widespread problem of student behavior.

Unfortunately, there is no effective intervention currently to build strong instructional practices for social-emotional learning.

There are varying underlying causes of this problem, the first of which is limited resources. There is no dedicated time for social and emotional learning. There are interruptions to learning throughout the day, such as assemblies and field trips and scheduling conflicts based on students' academic courses. Unfortunately, students have little time to receive services outside their class schedule. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated curricular demands, and with over a year of interrupted schooling, teachers must adapt to engage students in learning and reinforcing skills they have missed while being out of school. Finally, there is limited staff and funding due to budgetary constraints.

The demographics and student population also impact the ability to apply effective interventions in the school. For example, teachers lack the confidence to address student needs and carry their personal biases and beliefs into the classroom; the ethnic makeup of the teachers does not represent the ethnic makeup of the student body. Finally, minoritized students referred for behavior issues are at a higher rate due to misunderstood student behavior.

School climate can impact the school's ability to integrate social and emotional learning into the building. According to a district student survey, students report feeling disconnected from school. They also report feelings of having limited access to trusted adults and feeling unmotivated by staff and the curriculum. This feeling could be because of a curriculum that does not represent the student body and the adults' ethnic and racial makeup in the building.

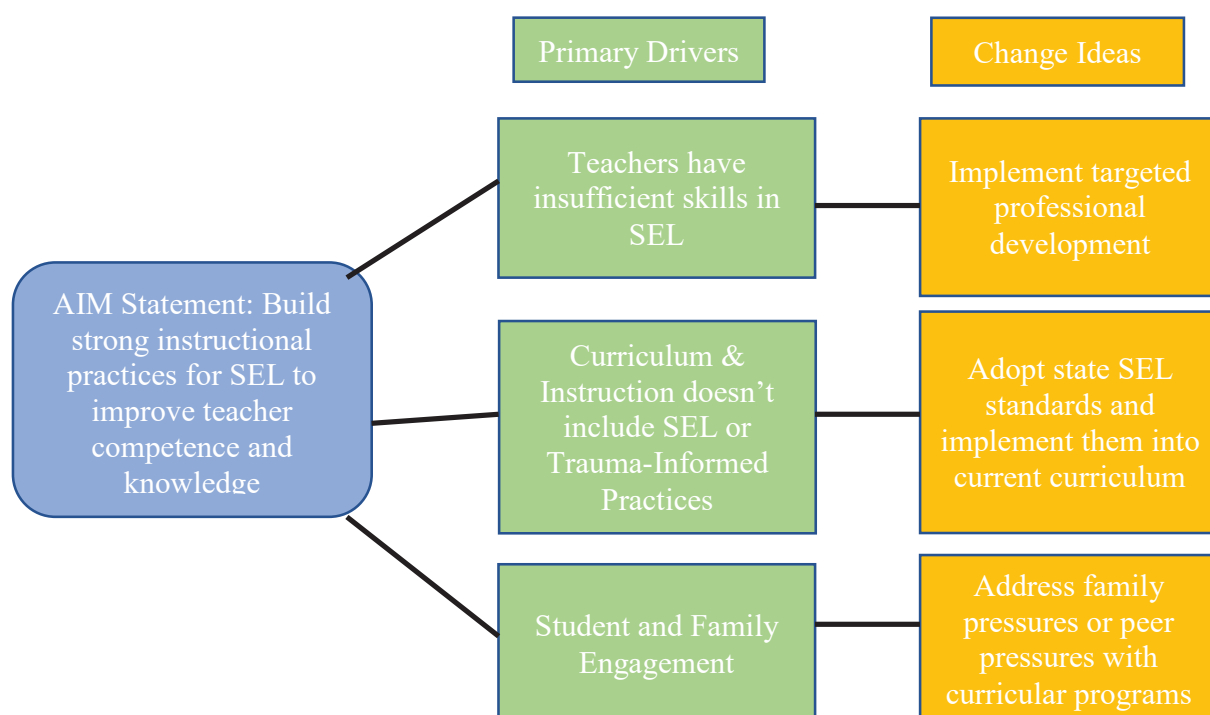
Finally, leadership plays a critical role in instruction within the school building. The district or school improvement plan has no social and emotional goal, signaling to staff that SEL is not a core concept or immediate need. There is no vision or definition of social and emotional

learning. Without the district taking the lead to show that SEL is a crucial need for students and staff, it will be challenging to engage teachers when they focus on academics and student achievement. In addition, there is limited training for administrators and teachers at the secondary level regarding social and emotional learning. Much of the training has focused on the elementary level.

Continuing with the Improvement Science cycle and the working theory of improvement, after identifying the primary factors, or drivers that could affect the objective, the researcher examined change ideas that would have the most impact on these drivers (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Driver Diagram 2



Teachers asked for training and believed that their students' social and emotional needs are paramount to student success. Many staff believed that by addressing the students' mental wellbeing, they would see an improvement in many of the indicators the school measures, such as attendance, behavior, and assessment scores. The researcher analyzed three core concepts to enact change: adopting a specific curriculum, integrating state standards into the existing curriculum, and educating staff on social and emotional skills and strategies. Feedback from staff indicated they lacked the knowledge and training to integrate the necessary skills and strategies to support their students. Research also highlights the need to train staff to effectively implement any program or standards into the school day.

Adopting a Curriculum

There are benefits to presenting a specific SEL curriculum to the students, and there are also positive, long-lasting improvements that endure throughout the students' lives. While instant benefits such as increased confidence, engagement, and higher scores exist, such benefits as reduced conduct issues, improved positive relationships, and favorable mental health implications can last for a lifetime (Greenberg et al., 2017). One such program is Caprara et al.'s (2014) Positive Youth Development program. This program promotes the importance of cultivating the skills needed to understand the value of pro-social attitudes and behaviors in a safe space, such as a school community. Their research, aimed at middle-school adolescents, has shown that the pilot program reported some promising effects on fostering helping behaviors, reducing physical and verbal aggression, and increasing academic achievement. However, to fully integrate a curriculum into the school, many factors must first be addressed.

For example, where would this curriculum fit in the school day? Is it appropriate for the school and the needs of the student body? Are there any budgetary restrictions? Perhaps most

importantly, it would require staff training to implement and integrate the curriculum into classrooms. Domitrovich et al. (2017) explain that high-quality implementation requires schools to secure professional development services from program developers who have expertise in the chosen program, requiring budgetary, time, and resource commitments from schools.

Adopting SEL Standards

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB] (2002) emphasized literacy, character education, and school safety and encompassed more than just IQ, according to Kress et al. (2004). Kress et al. found that many educators and schools readily embraced social and emotional skills as a critical component in the goals of the educational experience. However, there is hesitancy on how these new standards and skills will fit with current academic standards and the existing curriculum. They argue, “SEL facilitates the achievement of state standards by strengthening students’ preparedness for learning and promoting the development of pro-social attitudes and behavior that mediate school performance” (p. 72). In addition, they contend that SEL is compatible with teacher preparation and performance standards, and the overlap with state teaching standards demonstrates the expectation that educators be well-versed in SEL-related competencies.

According to Eklund et al. (2018), the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has recommended establishing and adopting SEL standards at the district and state levels. The authors share that the “standards and implementation guidelines provide a framework that sets expectations and guides decisions about what students should learn, and thus about what should be taught and assessed” (pp. 317–318). However, they found that “gaps within SEL literature might limit the practicability of such standards, reducing the rate at which

they are adopted” (p. 318), and there is little research regarding normative SEL development and assessment.

Advisory Programs

Shulkind and Foote (2009) broadly define an advisory program as a configuration in which an adult advisor meets regularly with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional support, create personalization within the school, and facilitate a small peer community of learners. Advisory programs integrated into the day offer students ongoing support and build a small, trusted community of learners within the larger school building. Shulkind and Foote explain that advisory programs facilitate relationships and create ‘connectedness’ in a middle school. As schools become more isolating and impersonal, “advisory programs offer structure to meet the students’ developmental needs, because it is the one place where students are intimately known as a ‘whole-child’ ” (p. 7).

Shulkind and Foote (2009) state that “Broadly defined, advisory programs are configurations in which an adult advisor meets regularly during the school day with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support, to create personalization within the school, and to facilitate a small peer community of learners” (p. 2). This relationship can guide students in future decisions, such as peer relations, decision-making, and academic decisions like course selections. Blad (2019) agrees that well-designed advisories around the students’ needs give them the freedom to express fears, hopes, and needs. However, Blad found that this model takes planning, resources, and ongoing professional development for teachers.

While articles and research share how to structure advisory classes and offer the positive impact it could have, few rigorous studies can determine the impact of advisory on student

outcomes (Education Northwest, 2011). Education Northwest further found there is difficulty distinguishing advisory from other school-based strategies, lack of formalized curricula, and lack of pre-and post-survey data or control groups. There is a need for more research to confirm advisory programs' impact on student outcomes quantitatively.

High Impact Strategy: Staff Professional Development

When designing staff professional development, it is imperative to keep the goal in mind and to understand that staff needs specific and targeted training. Gaikhorst et al. (2017) found that teachers and administrators underlined the importance of opportunities to practice the newly gained expertise and share this expertise with colleagues. To build worthwhile and effective professional development, staff feedback from various studies stated that professional development must include a collaborative component for colleagues and include time to implement newly learned skills and strategies (Borko et al., 2010; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020).

Furthermore, professional development must be ongoing and include time for teachers to implement and analyze newly acquired knowledge. Tournaki et al. (2011) found a pressing need for professional development activities to be sustained and ongoing. Smith et al. (2020) found that extending the duration of the experience allowed for the evolution of participants from cautious bystanders to confident implementers and ensured the participation of teachers. Borko et al. (2010) further found that opportunities for teachers to participate actively and collaboratively in professional communities are essential components of high-quality professional development. This ongoing cycle also allows schools to develop a thoughtful action plan to establish a sustainable system to introduce in the future (Cressey, 2019).

Despite all the choices, educators must determine how best to integrate social and emotional learning into their schools; there is one constant theme, professional development. Whether integrating a fully packaged program, such as Positive Youth Development or RULER, adopting state SEL standards to integrate social and emotional learning into existing curricula, or implementing an advisory program focused on SEL, staff training is critical. Training and developing staff knowledge are vital to implementing a well-rounded and robust SEL program in the school (Borko et al., 2010; Cressey, 2019; Opfer & Pedder, 2010; Tournaki et al., 2011).

Past models of professional development have focused on a one-day training in which all teachers receive the same message and then must apply it to their content area and classrooms. However, as Opfer and Pedder (2010) note, professional development needs to emphasize continuous, long-term professional learning. Consistent with continuous long-term professional learning are the opportunities for teachers to collaborate and work in professional learning communities to engage with the material. Findings from multiple researchers in various studies have consistently emphasized the value of opportunities to share newly learned material, and that extended learning in an authentic environment will allow for collaborative learning and reflection (Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). In addition, the data overwhelmingly revealed positive responses from teachers who were able to work collaboratively, and ongoing learning opportunities allowed confidence to grow within the staff (Smith et al., 2020).

Ongoing targeted professional learning also allows the school to gather data and determine the best pathway and resources for implementing a program school-wide. Taking the time to plan and develop an action plan allows for introducing a sustainable system within due time (Cressey, 2019). A high-quality program typically involves pre-program training and ongoing assistance through coaching strategies and training (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Greenberg

et al., 2017). Furthermore, Domitrovich et al. explain that developing and implementing school-wide SEL strategies and programs and offering professional development for staff is the basis for ensuring high-quality, sustainable SEL programming.

Implementing new programs requires a level of commitment from staff. According to Pawlo et al. (2019), it is critically important for a few key individuals to lead implementation efforts and commit to pushing through initial obstacles, recognizing that the overworked and possibly traumatized teachers and staff may be reluctant to sign on to something new. This key team should believe in the mission of the training and the vision of integrating social-emotional learning into the school to benefit both adults and students. Schonert-Reichl (2017) explains that teachers are the engine that drives SEL programs and practices in schools and classrooms.

This key group of staff members will be able to assist in rolling out the program to the entire school by first working through the barriers and implementing training through a reflective process. A cyclical process where teachers will receive new learning, integrate it into the classroom, reflect on the practices, and come together to collaborate and share their experiences. Pawlo et al. (2019) discuss that every SEL program or activity should anticipate the need to provide intensive support to learners and address particularly acute and chronic challenges. This key group will be able to address the challenges as they move through the training to seamlessly integrate the training and expertise into the school in the future. Zieher et al. (2021) further support this theory by explaining that their research showed that educators who perceived greater school/district support for their social and emotional needs also perceived fewer challenges in implementing SEL. Therefore, training key staff is critical to assist with whole-school roll-out.

Review of Practice

Interviews with other districts determined that surrounding districts use the same model as District A. They offer three full professional development days that focus on different aspects of schooling, such as curriculum, school-based needs, or social-emotional curriculum. District C's Assistant Superintendent explained that, while this model could be effective, COVID-19 protocols have rendered it ineffective. It is difficult to offer effective professional development over Zoom, and given staff absences, the professional development days can feel disjointed. Both leaders agree that ongoing, scaffolded professional development would be beneficial since it would be an extension of the learning from the previous session and not fragmented like it is now.

Summary

A comprehensive solution would include all these components to address all social and emotional needs of staff and students. As noted, each strategy has one key concept in common: training of staff. Training staff to have the background knowledge of social and emotional learning and a fundamental understanding of strategies and skills to integrate it into the classroom is critical to implementing a program, adopting standards, or enhancing existing programs. Therefore, educating staff is paramount to the success of any SEL program.

Students do not leave their current or historical stressors at the door when they enter the school building each day. Research has supported the concept that underdeveloped social-emotional coping skills detract from academic performance, with far-reaching consequences (Halfon et al., 2016; McKelvey et al., 2010; Segal & Collin-Vezina, 2019; Williams, 2020). The critical role of effective coping skills for student achievement forces teachers to incorporate social-emotional development concepts into their daily teaching tasks no matter the main subject

material of the class. Therefore, it is of central importance that teachers develop proficiency in the critical concepts of SEL and the means of effective classroom delivery. Due to the complexity of this topic, it is unlikely that traditional means of professional education, such as a single seminar or workshop for the faculty at large, will result in proficiency.

Research demonstrates that small group training providing ongoing, targeted skills training focused on specific SEL topics offers opportunities to practice the implementation of strategies in classrooms; engaging in guided group reflection on the outcomes will have a greater impact than traditional, large-group, single occurrence professional development methods (Borko et al., 2010, Cressey, 2019). This model also integrates the Improvement Science Model by engaging with the material and reflecting on successes and barriers to implementation prior to whole-staff roll-out. Following participation, teachers will have developed a deeper understanding of the foundational concepts, improved ability to apply tangible skills effectively, and greater confidence in seamlessly incorporating SEL into a typical classroom curriculum. The next chapter explores the methodology for this research.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used to investigate the effectiveness of ongoing, social-emotional specific professional development on increasing teacher competence and comfortability in employing SEL in the classroom. This study also focused on teacher reflective feedback on their specific learning and SEL instruction and the impact of a collaborative learning environment on teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement SEL into the classroom.

District A is an urban low-socioeconomic district with students identified as having diverse social-emotional needs and previous exposure to traumatic experiences. Over 80% of students have experienced one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and over one-third have experienced two or more ACEs. However, as suggested by the root cause analysis (see Figure 6), teachers may not always feel adequately prepared to integrate social-emotional instructional practices into their classrooms.

The framework of Improvement Science is the foundation of this ISDiP and informs the research methodology. The researcher determined the underlying root causes of the school and student concerns, and the literature review assisted in determining the best course of action. The most effective response to the problem was a specific and targeted social-emotional training for teachers, with the aim of better assisting the students in a trauma-informed SEL classroom. This study also sought to promote change in an urban school district with a large population of underserved and minoritized students by increasing their teachers' skills and understanding of SEL.

For this study, Phase I of the data collection uncovered root causes and used archival, longitudinal data of student behaviors and school-wide concerns. A centralized database and district-developed school climate surveys provided the data points annually through school

reporting. The researcher created these surveys in response to state requirements and the interest in student perceptions of school climate. The 38-item student version of the school-climate survey is valid and reliable based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, test-retest reliability, and comprehensive assessment of internal consistency (Larson, 2014).

The first part of the ISDiP analyzed and evaluated existing data and used a convenience sampling of approximately 75 present teachers and administrators of Wildcat Middle School through voluntary, online, and anonymous climate and planning surveys administered by the district. In addition, the researcher analyzed existing data from over 900 students, including past climate surveys and archival data for trends to discover root causes. This chapter focuses on the research and design methods, including research purpose, target population, data collection, instruments and measures, data analysis, limitations, and validity and reliability of the study. The next sections will describe Phase II of the Improvement Science and research process, the intervention.

Improvement Science

This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) examined the extent of ongoing, targeted professional development in building strong social and emotional instructional practices to improve teacher confidence and knowledge to implement these practices in the classroom. A core principle of Improvement Science is that a system's performance results from the design and operation of its improvement plan, not simply a result of individuals' efforts within a system (Perry et al., 2020). First, the researcher identified the problem of practice and the root causes. Next, according to the Improvement Science model, the researcher applied a problem-solving approach centered on continuous inquiry and learning in educational practices. Finally, as Perry et al. explain, change ideas are tested in rapid cycles within the Improvement

Science framework, resulting in efficient and useful feedback within a community of practice to inform system improvements during implementation. This model is a Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle



**Bryk et al., 2010*

This research examined the root causes to determine potential interventions to address the needs of teachers to feel confident and competent in working with students who have experienced trauma by implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom. The district had two programs, advisory and restorative practices, to address social and emotional needs. However, data demonstrated that neither was making a meaningful impact on

student behavior or learning. Data also showed teachers' desire and need for more training to address students' social and emotional needs. As part of the Improvement Science approach, the researcher examined the practices and processes in place to determine a solution that would address the school's needs.

Improvement Science requires practitioners to examine the systems in place. According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), a system is interconnected parts bound by a shared aim. Therefore, Improvement Science requires that researchers examine the system producing the current results to determine the best intervention. Furthermore, the identified problem of practice is embedded within the community. Therefore, impacts on the educational system are societal factors, such as community values, community exposure to ACEs, the current national climate; and organizational factors, such as district priorities, teacher resources, and teacher knowledge of integrating social-emotional instructional practices.

The district and school had three important needs to address: 1) teachers lack sufficient skills in social-emotional instructional strategies; 2) curriculum and instruction not including social-emotional learning or trauma-informed practices, and 3) student and family low to non-existent availability to access and engage with social-emotional learning content. Multiple change efforts could address the needs of the staff and students within the system. An in-depth literature review revealed possible solutions, such as adopting and implementing a social-emotional curriculum, offering targeted professional development, and implementing or creating a social-emotional program that includes a community component. To enact the most change and target the staff's desire and need to learn about and implement social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom, the chosen intervention with the most direct impact was ongoing, targeted, social-emotional learning professional development.

Assisting teachers in developing social-emotional instructional practices could positively impact both structural and organizational outcomes through the Improvement Science model. If this research were successful, it could inform future professional development for this district and others. The research may also help educators more clearly understand what outcomes they may experience should they commit the time, energy, and resources to provide this type of training and learning experiences for teachers. Finally, this research offered a suggested outcome on the utility of structured, collaborative, ongoing learning environments for professional development in SEL for staff.

Purpose of the Study

This study determined whether implementing professional development, specifically targeted, ongoing, collaborative professional development focused on social-emotional learning instructional practices, impacted teacher competence and confidence to implement these instructional practices in the classroom with students who have experienced trauma. By examining the effectiveness of the intervention, the research informs future studies and school districts in scheduling and implementing effective professional development for social-emotional learning. This study specifically targeted a small group of staff as a pilot study to prepare for potential school-wide implementation based on the pilot study findings. Part of improvement science begins with a small focus group to work through barriers and implementation practices before scaling up (Bryk et al., 2015).

Methodology

Improvement Science is designed to better understand a problem's history and root causes, clarify inquiry questions, find potential solutions, and discover the best way to address the problem (Perry et al., 2020). Parts of the Improvement Science process include developing

effective interventions to address the problem of practice and test the theory of change. The methodology for the study was participatory action research. Plano Clark and Creswell (2013) explain that action research engages in a cyclical process involving iterations of activities, and as such, action research is a complementary fit to Improvement Science as a methodology. In addition, this research addressed a practical problem; the need for growth of teacher competence and confidence in integrating social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom, utilizing teachers as participants in the study.

According to Ferrance (2000), action research refers to a disciplined inquiry intended to inform and change practices in the future. Plano Clark & Creswell (2013) explain that action research provides practitioners with a means to further their own professional development yet also work on improving their practice by participating in research. Ferrance further explains that school-wide action research focuses on a common issue where teamwork and individual contributions are very important. Bennett (2019) states that one of the goals of action research is to improve the lives of the people involved, and participatory action research involves the full and active participation of the community members. This research involved ongoing and active participation from the participants in determining the effectiveness of the intervention.

As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) discussed, there are four key elements to action research. First, the research focuses on a real problem in practice or the local community. For example, data collection from Phase I of the ISDiP displayed high social-emotional student needs due to the prevalence of trauma exposure in the district and teacher training needs for implementing SEL practices in a trauma-informed classroom. Therefore, this research focused on improving teacher confidence and competence in integrating SEL instructional strategies into the classroom.

Second, the researcher was also a practitioner, albeit in another district, and collaborated with the community through the entire research process. The researcher was an administrator in District A the year prior to the research and intimately invested in teacher and student wellbeing. The researcher was not only familiar with District A, but the school as well, and as a practitioner, she collaborated with the participants and community regularly.

Third, the research process included a careful reflection on the problem. Examining current practices, speaking with current staff members, and examining district and school data informed the focus area. Phase I of the ISDiP included multiple end-user consultations and a deep dive into the district and school data to identify the problem of practice and reflect on the root causes. The intervention phase included the same quantitative and qualitative data collection from various staff.

Finally, the researcher used multiple sources of good information. The researcher gathered quantitative data from the district database, closed-ended survey questions, and qualitative data through open-ended survey questions, reflection questions, and focus groups. The data provided several sources of information and useful evidence about the problem and the intervention.

Research Design

The study had a QUAN+QUAL convergent mixed-methods design in which both the quantitative and qualitative strands were implemented simultaneously, had equal emphasis, and the results of the separate strands converged (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A researcher uses a convergent design to compare quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings to completely understand the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This mixed-methods study gained a better understanding of the impact of ongoing, collaborative professional

development on building teacher competence and confidence in integrating SEL practices into the classroom through both quantitative and qualitative data. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) explain mixed-methods research as an intuitive way of conducting research continuously displayed throughout our everyday lives. Furthermore, Creswell and Plano Clark describe how mixed-methods research harnesses the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research, offsets the weaknesses of each, and therefore provides a more complete methodology for uncovering evidence than one method alone.

A convergent design occurs when a researcher brings quantitative and qualitative data results together to compare or combine, thus—allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the research and the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Creswell and Plano Clark explain, “A convergent mixed-methods design is an efficient design in which both types of data are collected during one phase of the research at roughly the same time” (p.71).

In this action research, the mixed-methods convergent design provided both quantitative and qualitative answers to the research questions.

Target Population

Participants & Sampling

For the research portion of the ISDiP, the sample size was seven staff members. These staff members comprised the Wildcat Middle School Social-Emotional Committee and volunteered to participate in the research. Table 13 shows the breakdown of the seven study participants.

Table 13*Study Participants*

Participant	Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Gender
1	White	5–9 years	M
2	White	5–9 years	F
3	White	20+ years	F
4	White	10–19 years	F
5	Hispanic	5–9 years	F
6	White	5–9 years	F
7	White	5–9 years	F

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

The participants represented all grade levels from sixth through eighth grade and included diverse content area teachers, such as math, science, and English, and support staff, including school counselors and one administrator. Gender representation of participants was somewhat similar to overall staff; Wildcat Middle School employed 18 male staff members (25% of all staff) and 54 female staff members (75% of all staff). The participants in the study include one male, or 13% of the committee, and six females, or 85% of the committee. Participant staff members were critical members of the SEL team and volunteered to work on the school-wide Social and Emotional Learning Committee to plan for increasing staff knowledge on SEL through training aimed at implementing and supporting staff for SEL classroom integration school-wide.

Table 14 shows the race and ethnicity of the participants and staff. It is important to note that the race and ethnicity of the staff do not mirror that of the students.

Table 14*Race and Ethnicity Demographics of Participants*

Race/Ethnicity	Certified Staff <i>n</i> (%)	Participants <i>n</i> (%)
Hispanic/Latino	4 (6%)	1 (13%)
Black not of Hispanic origin	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
White	65 (93%)	6 (87%)

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

While the majority of the staff are white, the majority of students are minoritized students. Finally, comparing the number of years teaching between the full staff and the participants is displayed in Table 15.

Table 15*Number of Years Teaching for Entire Staff vs Participants*

Number of Years Teaching	Whole Staff	Participants
0–4	32%	0%
5–9	22%	57%
10–19	28%	28%
20+	18%	14%

Note. Data gathered from District A database 2021

The participants did not include any new, non-tenured teachers. Therefore, the participants did not adequately represent the entire staff population on the number of years teaching and could have skewed the data, as newer teachers might have differing points of view or different knowledge than those on the committee.

The researcher submitted information and received approval from the University's IRB to conduct the study.

Procedures

The research portion of the ISDiP began with a pre-survey using the 2021 Panorama Professional Learning about SEL (2021) survey (Appendix B). The pre-survey assesses teacher perception of current SEL professional development opportunities and school and leadership support. The results of the Panorama survey and the end-user consultations informed the cycles of intervention. The analysis of the pre-survey data indicated four cycles of interventions planned over eight weeks from December 2021 through February 2022. Each cycle consisted of a topic, such as grief, maladaptive reactions, and engaging a disengaged student. At the end of each cycle, the participants completed another survey, the Panorama Self-Reflection survey (Appendix C), to gauge the impact and effectiveness of the learning.

The participants were asked to take the 2021 Panorama Professional Learning about SEL post-survey, identical to the pre-survey. They also participated in a focus group to determine the overall effectiveness of the intervention, their perceptions of support from the school, and their perceptions of their personal confidence and competence to implement SEL instructional strategies.

The researcher collected quantitative data through closed-ended questions on the Panorama surveys. The researcher collected qualitative data through the open-ended questions on the Panorama surveys, the open-ended questions on the reflection surveys, and the focus group questions. Data included both quantitative and qualitative components.

Explanation of Intervention

Research has shown that ongoing, collaborative professional development is more effective than the traditional method of professional development that schools usually employ (Borko et al., 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2010; Smith et al., 2020; Tournaki et al., 2011). After

conducting end-user consultations, informal interviews with surrounding districts, and examining district school calendars, the traditional professional development methods consisted of 3–5 days throughout the year, and each day has a different topic. For example, August’s professional development could focus on content areas, November’s professional development could emphasize a school-based need, and January’s could concentrate on a district initiative. Therefore, this intervention is a series of an ongoing, single topic, collaborative, and reflective professional development opportunities for Wildcat Middle School’s Social and Emotional Learning Committee to allow scaffolded learning about a singular topic; social-emotional instructional strategies. The intervention began with a pre-survey, the 2021 Panorama Professional Learning about SEL survey, to gauge how staff felt about the district and school support, professional development opportunities offered, and quality of learning opportunities.

After the pre-survey, the SEL committee participated in four professional development sessions on social and emotional learning with a facilitator who had expertise in trauma-informed classrooms and schools. Each session focused on a specific theme, such as de-escalation, engagement strategies, and teacher-talk. Table 16 displays the professional development opportunities and topics discussed during the intervention.

Table 16*Intervention Cycles*

Date	Interventions Discussed
November 22, 2021	Pre-Survey Administration
December 2, 2021	Responsive Classroom Language 7 Components of Care
December 16, 2021	Iceberg of Emotion Academic Optimism Trust Building Strategies
January 13, 2022	Trust Building Activities Mindfulness Review Responsive Classroom Language
January 20, 2022	Iceberg of Emotion Constructive Language
January 25, 2022	Post-Survey Administration

Note. Sessions were two-week intervals; however, due to the school's winter vacation and snow days, there is a gap between the Dec 16th and Jan 13th sessions and a shortened period between Jan 13th and Jan 20th sessions.

Following each intervention session, teachers returned to the classroom to implement one or more of the strategies they learned during their professional development session. At the end of a week and prior to the following learning session, the researcher administered a revised 2021 Panorama Teacher Self-Reflection survey to see if their SEL knowledge increased, which strategies they implemented, and if the strategies implemented had an impact.

Participants completed a post-survey at the end of the professional development learning cycles, identical to the pre-survey. Participants also took part in a focus group conducted by the researcher to discuss the intervention's effectiveness and the potential growth in the teachers' social-emotional knowledge. The focus group questions included specific interventions used and the effectiveness of the intervention and elicited feedback on teacher perception of confidence and competence to implement social-emotional instructional strategies. Additionally, the focus

group and post-survey explored any changes in teacher perception of receiving support for learning and implementing social-emotional instructional strategies from their school and district.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research focuses on four research questions.

1. How does implementing a series of collaborative social and emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?
2. Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report that they implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?
3. What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?
4. Did the intervention change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

The hypothesized outcome for Research Question 1 is

H1₀

There is no statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

H1₁

There is a statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

The hypothesized outcome for Research Question 4 is

H4₀

There is no statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of school or district support after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

H4₁

There is a statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of school or district support after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

Data Collection Instruments and Measures

This research includes both qualitative and quantitative data. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) state that mixed methods use multiple data sources to provide more evidence for studying a problem than a single method, and new insights may be gained because of the combination of qualitative and quantitative research.

The ISDiP included data collection through end-user consultations, focus groups, and voluntary online anonymous surveys as part of the Improvement Science process. End-user consultations are practical quantitative and qualitative evaluation items woven into daily instruction for sensitivity to short-term changes and prompt reporting and analysis by educators (Bryk et al., 2015). For example, the process implemented from November 2021 to February

2022 determined whether ongoing professional development impacted teacher perceptions of their competence and confidence to implement social-emotional instruction in the classroom and assessed them using the pre-and post-survey administered at the start of the professional development cycle in November and the end of the cycle in February.

Professional development occurred twice a month for an hour during scheduled district time for training. Staff reflected on the workshops and their abilities to integrate social-emotional instruction into the classroom at the end of each two-week cycle through an anonymous survey. The Panorama Self Reflection Survey (2021) is a simple reflection on what participants liked and disliked about the professional development and any specific questions or take-aways (Appendix C). Table 17 displays the research methods and data analysis for the data collected during this research process.

Table 17*Methods and Analysis Summary*

Research Question	Data Used	Data Collection Instrument	Data Analysis
1	Closed-Ended Survey Questions Open-Ended questions, semi-structured Focus Group	Panorama Survey Focus Group Interview Questions	Quantitative Analysis Coding/Themes Triangulation: Interview, survey, Peer review
2	Closed-Ended Questions Open-Ended questions, semi-structured	Panorama Survey Reflection Survey	Coding/Themes Member-Checking
3	Open-Ended questions, semi-structured Focus Group	Panorama Survey Reflection Survey Focus Group Interview Questions	Coding/Themes Triangulation: Interview, Survey, Peer review Member-Checking
4	Close-ended questions Focus Group	Panorama Survey Focus Group Interview Questions	Paired <i>t</i> -test Coding/Themes Member-Checking

1. How does implementing a series of collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?
2. Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report were implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?
3. What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?
4. Did the intervention change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research examines objective theories by scrutinizing the relationship among variables to analyze numerical data using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009). Quantitative research measures included a revised Panorama Professional Learning about SEL survey

(Appendix B). This survey gauged participants' ratings on how the district and school addressed the SEL needs of staff and whether the participants felt the district and school were adequately supporting SEL needs. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not supportive at all" to "extremely supportive" measured statements and questions on the survey. Questions included:

1. In terms of social-emotional learning (SEL), how supportive has the school been of your growth as a teacher?
2. At your school, how valuable are the SEL professional development opportunities?
3. Thinking of SEL, how much input did you have into individualizing your own professional development opportunities?

The full survey instrument is in Appendix B. This study also determined the degree of the impact of the social-emotional training thus far in the school and district on the confidence and competence of staff to implement social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom.

Administration of a second quantitative survey, the Panorama Survey for Teacher Self-Reflection (Appendix C), for the teachers implementing SEL instructional strategies in the classroom, occurred every two weeks to match their bi-weekly professional development cycle. This survey measured their perceived comfort, confidence, and ability to integrate specific social-emotional instructional practices into the classroom using the 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not confident at all" to "extremely confident." Questions and statements included:

1. How confident do you feel that you can easily integrate SEL into your classroom?
2. How confident are you that you can engage students who are not typically motivated?
3. Thinking about self-management, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

4. After learning about and implementing these SEL skills/strategies, I saw an improvement in my own instruction.

The full survey instrument is in Appendix C. This survey allowed the researcher to see longitudinal data on the change in teacher perceptions of their competence and confidence over the intervention timeframe.

Various districts and students use the Panorama surveys since the inception of the Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Survey in 2014 (Panorama, 2021). Districts that support the use of the Panorama surveys include DC Public Schools, Miami-Dade Public Schools, and Washoe County School District in Nevada (Panorama, 2021). The Panorama surveys, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are used for both students and adults. Panorama states reliability and validity are ensured by using a six-step design process by Gehlbach and Brinkworth, which uses two approaches to ensure a valid, reliable survey.

According to Panorama (2021), the process first builds content and substantive validity through a six-step process which includes "...a literature review, interviews, and focus groups, synthesis of indicators, item (question) creation, expert review, and cognitive pre-testing and interviewing" (Panorama Validity Report, 2021, p. 4). Panorama further explains that upon completing the six steps and revisions to the items, there is a large-scale pilot test to ensure each survey item will adhere to the science of the survey design's best practices. Reliability assessed through coefficient alpha revealed that the reliability of every scale is .70 or greater, thus determining the measurements as reliable (Panorama, 2015).

Panorama surveys ensure reliability and validity through the rigorous process used to develop surveys that are shared globally with schools and districts and, as such, were chosen as measurement tools for this research. Research Questions 1 and 4 used quantitative data to

determine growth in confidence and competence to integrate SEL practices into the classroom and perceived support of the district and school pre-and post-intervention.

Qualitative Research

Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as “The process of research involving emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p. 4). This study’s multiple data collection forms included open-ended research questions, end-user consultations, and a focus group interview. In addition, the researcher applied a questionnaire variant of the convergent mixed-methods design using both open- and closed-ended questions, and the results from the open-ended questions confirmed or validated the results from the closed-ended questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Focus group questions were semi-structured to understand participants’ overall intervention experience and the implementation of social-emotional instructional strategies. The researcher administered the focus group questions in a pilot focus group to ensure the questions were appropriate and well-defined. This provided feedback and insight into the process and procedure. The researcher used open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to extract participant views and opinions. The researcher took hand-written notes as well as recording the focus group session.

Qualitative data addressed Research Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 in determining growth in confidence and competence to integrate SEL practices into the classroom, the strategies implemented, the effectiveness of the intervention, and perceived support of the district and school pre-and post-intervention.

Data Analysis Methods

The qualitative data analysis process included de-identified focus group responses from the seven participants. Focus group questions and discussions were semi-structured, and the researcher encouraged the participants to be open and honest about their experiences, perceptions, and opinions of the intervention and strategies implemented. Additional qualitative analyses included open-ended responses to the Panorama surveys collected during the research. The responses were submitted to content analysis of the first- and second-level coding for themes using an inductive approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Furthermore, the study used relevant and specific quotes. Finally, member-checking was used by sharing responses with the participants before publishing to ensure the validity of their statements. This process allowed the researcher to ensure the validity of the participants' statements and increase the reliability of the data analysis and reporting.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive analysis by examining the measures of central tendency, including the arithmetic mean of the data sets, which accounts for all scores in the data set (Martella et al., 2013). The analysis comprised inferential statistics, including a non-directional hypothesis, using paired, two-tailed *t*-tests. Martella et al. explained that the *t*-test is a parametric test of statistical significance comparing the means of two sets of scores, or in this case, the scores on the pre- and post-surveys and the scores on the bi-weekly reflective surveys. Martella et al. further state that this test looks at whether the difference in the means is unlikely to have occurred by chance. If there is a statistical difference, then it is unlikely the difference between the means happened by chance alone or the intervention played a cause in the difference in the means. Statistical significance indicated that the researcher can reject the null hypothesis.

Threats to Validity

With every study, there are threats to the internal and external validity of the research. External validity refers to the generalizability of a study or how easily it can apply to other settings and people. Internal validity is how you can ascertain that the intervention led to the outcomes, not that other factors can explain the outcomes. The researcher found three potential threats to the validity of this research.

Researcher Bias

The researcher is known to the district and familiar with the staff and the policies. Therefore, the researcher might have potentially interpreted the data to match the hypotheses. The researcher accounted for minimizing bias by limiting contact between the researcher and the participants by collecting qualitative data through open-ended survey questions and focus groups. In addition, the researcher reviewed all data with a peer trained in data analysis and allowed for member-checking, a process where participants review the data before publication. These steps increase the reliability and validity by allowing participants to ensure an accurate reporting of their voices and beliefs.

Hawthorne Effect

Another threat to the research is the Hawthorne Effect, the inclination of the subjects of any experimental study to change or improve the evaluated behavior only because it is being studied (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2013). This threat to validity could distort the research findings. The participants knew they were part of a research project assessed through surveys. However, the researcher ensured participants that participation was voluntary and safeguarded their anonymity through surveys in the hopes that the participants would answer honestly and truthfully. Participants also knew that they could skip any questions or opt out of the research at

any time. The participants worked in a district that uses Google tools, and, as such, they were aware of noting that the surveys administered through Google Forms were indeed anonymous and did not collect their emails or names.

Self-Selection Bias

The staff participating in the study were limited to those who volunteered to be on the school-wide SEL team and therefore have a personal interest in SEL. It does not reflect other teachers' perceptions of the research questions. The researcher accounted for self-selection bias by including multiple self-reflection surveys at key points in the intervention to gauge the participants' true perceptions. A pre- and post-survey also accounted for participants' feedback and growth. Finally, open-ended questions and a focus group allowed qualitative data to be compared to the quantitative data to ensure accuracy and distinguish any discrepancies. The sample size, $n = 7$, was also small, allowing for less bias; however, given the nature of the intervention and the convenience sampling used, self-selection bias could affect the data.

Summary

This action research ISDiP determined how ongoing professional development focused on SEL instructional practices would impact teacher competence, confidence, and implementation of SEL strategies. The research was a convergent mixed-methods study including a small pilot group of certified teachers. It took place over 8 weeks using pre- and post-surveys, reflective surveys after each professional development session, and a focus group. The study demonstrated that increased access to explicit social-emotional instructional practices coupled with ongoing, supportive, and collaborative professional development would increase teacher competence, confidence, and implementation of social-emotional instructional support in

the classroom. Data integration occurred when merging the quantitative results with the qualitative results at the end of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This mixed-methods study determined whether targeted, ongoing, and collaborative professional development impacted teachers' confidence and competence to implement social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom. The results offer insights and information to this district and other districts, administrators, and practitioners regarding implementing effective professional development to improve teacher social-emotional instructional skills. The findings in this chapter are in response to the following research questions:

1. How does implementing a series of collaborative social and emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?
2. Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report that they implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?
3. What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?
4. Did the intervention change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

While this chapter discusses the participants, data collection, and data analysis, the implications of the findings and future recommendations will follow in Chapter V.

Description of Participants

The study's participants comprised the school-wide Social-Emotional Learning Committee at Wildcat Middle School. In addition, the sample consisted of an administrator, support staff such as school counselors, and teachers spanning Grades 6–8 who represented all

academic content areas. There were seven study participants. For further information on the participants, please refer to Tables 13–15 in Chapter III.

Intervention

The intervention occurred from December 2021 through February 2022. Participants engaged in ongoing, specific, and collaborative professional development cycles over that period. Each cycle consisted of approximately two weeks, with participants joining in an hour-long session on social-emotional and trauma-informed practices. The training focused on specific strategies they could then implement in the classroom during each session. In addition, participants completed a reflective survey prior to the next session on their experience implementing the strategies.

The intervention sessions occurred every other week from December through early January. However, due to snow days and the impact of COVID-19 on student and staff health, the researcher and school adjusted the intervention dates, which affected the timeline of the original sessions. In addition, only three committee members attended the second week of the intervention because of contracting COVID.

Data Collection

Open- and closed-ended online surveys provided data at key points during the professional development cycle. Participants completed a pre-survey in November prior to the start of the intervention, and the same survey as a post-survey in February at the conclusion of the intervention (Appendix B). During the intervention, participants completed four reflective surveys (Appendix C) between the four professional development cycles.

A semi-structured focus group held at the end of the intervention provided qualitative data. The semi-structured interview questions are in Appendix D, and the researcher developed

the questions to elicit participants' awareness and attitudes about their learning, the professional development cycle, and what was most effective. The researcher conducted the 45-minute focus group over Zoom and recorded and transcribed the session. The responses were also coded in Levels 1 and 2 before identifying themes. Qualitative data, which included responses from open-ended online survey items, were initially coded to identify key phrases and then organized into group phrases for key ideas before identifying themes.

The researcher employed member-checking of participant quotes before publishing the results. Following data collection, the researcher conducted the member-checking process over the phone and through email sharing the responses with the participants for accuracy. During these sessions, she asked participants if there was anything they wished to add to their statements and responses. The researcher recorded any additions from the participants. The result of members checking the findings was a consensus with the data analysis that the researcher presented without any major disagreement.

Quantitative Teacher Self-Reflection Results

The researcher measured teachers' perceptions of how participating in specific, collaborative, ongoing professional development impacted their confidence and competence to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom through a revised Panorama Teacher Self-Reflection Survey (2021) using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating a low score or "not at all" and 5 indicating a high score or "always." Reviewing the initial survey revealed a mean of 3.59, with a range of 3.00 to 4.14, and a median of 3.57, indicating that most participants rated themselves as slightly above average in terms of their knowledge and confidence with trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning.

Research Question 1

Tables 18–20 provide the results for the first research question: How does implementing a series of collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?

Table 18 displays the overall results from the Self-Reflection Survey for Week 1 to the Self-Reflection Survey for Week 4. The researcher combined all 10 questions from the pre-survey (Week 1) and post-survey (Week 4) in a paired *t*-test.

Table 18

Self-Reflection Overall Survey Results, Week 1 (pre-survey) to Week 4 (post-survey)

	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Self-Reflection Survey	35.00	9.45	42.43	5.99	−4.596	.004

The scores from Week 1 and Week 4 showed a statistically significant increase in the Self-Reflection survey, $t(6) = -4.596$, $p = .004$, suggesting an increase in teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence to implement social-emotional instructional strategies in the classroom.

The researcher determined which elements were most effective by examining each survey item further. For example, Table 19 displays the results from Questions 1 and 2 of the Panorama Teacher Self-Reflection Survey (Appendix C) based on paired-samples *t*-tests conducted to evaluate the professional development intervention's impact on teachers' perception of their confidence and competence throughout the intervention.

Table 19*Teacher Perceived Increase in Confidence and Perceived Increase in Instruction*

	Week 1		Week 4		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Your confidence to integrate SEL	3.14	0.34	4.43	0.79	-2.83	.02
Improvement in Instruction	4.14	0.43	4.43	0.29	-3.29	.02

There were statistically significant increases in the scores for confidence, $t(6) = -2.83$, $p < .02$, and perceived improvement in instruction, $t(6) = -3.29$, $p < .02$ from Week 1 to Week 4 based on a comparison of the responses to Item 1, the survey item linked to confidence, and Item 9, the survey item linked to improvement in instruction.

Further comparison of the quantitative survey items across three of the four weeks of the intervention determined whether participants perceived a strengthening in their implementation of specific skills or strategies. Paired-samples *t*-tests evaluated the impact of the professional development intervention on teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence in implementing skills and strategies on specific social-emotional competencies. Table 20 presents these findings.

A statistically significant increase was found for the scores for Question 2, engaging unmotivated students, $t(6) = -2.82$, $p < .05$; Question 3, helping challenging students, $t(6) = -2.50$, $p < .05$; Question 5, supporting student self-awareness, $t(6) = -2.50$, $p < .05$; Question 6, supporting student self-management, $t(6) = -2.83$, $p < .05$; and Question 7, supporting student responsible decision-making, $t(6) = -6.00$, $p < .001$, from Week 1 to Week 4.

Table 20*Survey Item Responses by Question*

	Week 1		Week 4		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Engaging Unmotivated Students	3.57	0.20	4.14	0.69	-2.82	.03
Helping Challenging Students	3.42	1.27	4.14	0.69	-2.50	.047
Support Student Self-Awareness	3.43	0.43	4.14	0.69	-2.50	.05
Supporting Student Self-Management	3.14	0.59	4.29	0.76	-2.83	.03
Supporting Student Responsible Decision Making	3.57	0.79	4.43	0.53	-6.00	< .001

The Self-Reflection survey consisted of ten questions, of which seven were statistically significant and reported in Tables 19 and 20. After the intervention, teachers perceived an increase in their confidence levels and knowledge of social-emotional instruction. Specifically, teachers perceived growth in helping unmotivated students, helping challenging students, and addressing three CASEL core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making. The three other questions showed perceived improvement but were not statistically significant.

Research Question 4***Quantitative Pre- and Post-Survey Results***

When examining teacher perceptions about support from their school and district, the researcher employed data analysis of the closed-ended questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale, using the Panorama Professional Learning about SEL Survey (Appendix B). To evaluate the impact of the professional development intervention on teacher perception of support from the school and the district, the researcher conducted paired-samples *t*-tests. Table 21 displays the

results answering the research question: *Did the intervention change the teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?*

Table 21

Pre- and Post- Overall Survey Results

	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Overall Survey Results	3.57	0.12	4.18	0.02	4.395	.003

A statistically significant increase in overall pre- to post-survey scores ($p < .003$) demonstrated the effectiveness of the intervention. Further analyses were conducted of the individual survey questions (Appendix B). The pre-and post-survey focused on the teachers' perception of support from the school or district. Questions ranged from the perceived value of professional development opportunities to the perceived value of colleagues' input and the perceived relevance of professional development to the teachers' content area. Table 22 displays the results of the individual pre-and post-survey questions related to perceived changes in support from the school and district.

The researcher employed paired-samples *t*-tests to evaluate the impact of the professional development intervention on teacher perception of support from the school, colleagues, and the district. There was statistical significance at the 95th percentile for the five survey questions.

Table 22*Participants' Pre- and Post-Overall Survey Responses by Individual Question*

	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
How valuable are SEL PD opportunities	3.57	1.67	4.24	1.53	2.83	.03
How helpful are colleagues' ideas around SEL	3.71	1.38	4.71	1.33	4.58	.004
How often SEL PD explored new ideas	3.43	2.06	4.29	1.60	6.00	< .001
How relevant SEL PD is to your content area	3.29	1.30	4.00	1.29	2.50	.05
How much have you learned in supporting student SEL for school leaders	3.43	1.29	4.29	1.57	3.29	.017

Participants' perceived value of social-emotional learning opportunities, contributions from colleagues, exploring new ideas through professional development, the relevance of professional development, and school leaders supporting the teachers' increase in knowledge about supporting student SEL all significantly increased from the pre- to the post-survey, indicating the professional development sessions were statistically significant.

There were two areas where no statistically significant increase was found: teacher perception of how supportive the school has been in their growth as a teacher, and teacher perception of having input into individualizing their professional development opportunities. However, participant data displayed increased perceived support and input into professional development. Again, the sample size could affect the data.

Quantitative Summary

The researcher rejected the null hypothesis for Research Question 1 based on the results. There is a statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of their confidence and competence in implementing social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training. Furthermore, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis for Research Question 4, based on the statistically significant difference between teachers' perceptions of school or district support after participation in ongoing, specific, and collaborative training.

Qualitative Results

Thematic Analysis

These findings help respond to Research Questions 2–4.

2. Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report that they implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?
3. What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?
4. Did the intervention change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

Analysis of the participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions and semi-structured focus group questions generated the following themes: 1) easy to implement and build classroom culture, 2) building relationships with students (students feeling heard/validated), 3) improving teacher practice, 4) specific strategies, 5) perceived increase in support by the school, and 6) effectiveness of the professional development.

The next section presents each theme, followed by a discussion of the essential features of the professional development experience that impacted their confidence and competence to integrate social-emotional instructional practices into the classroom. The researcher assigned each participant a random number designation to safeguard their anonymity.

Theme 1: Easy to Implement and Build Relationships

All seven participants reported that the classroom interventions were easy to embed into their daily routine though they gave differing reasons why. Participant #2 explained, “It was easy to implement by just shifting my language. It allowed participants to open up about what’s bothering them without being so defensive.” Similarly, Participant #7 expanded,

All I had to do was change my words when I approached a student. I noticed an immediate shift where instead of preparing to defend themselves and fight with me, they had to take a minute to reframe their thinking about what happened.

Participant #4 explained, “Language can be a de-escalator and help kids remain in control of their emotions, and all it took was just changing my questions.” while Participant #1 responded, “It was a quick and simple question to start the day.” Finally, Participant #6 stated, “I found it easy to incorporate these conversations into our learning and make it meaningful to students.”

Theme 2: Building Relationships with Students

All participants noted that building relationships with students was vital to the success of implementing the social-emotional instructional practices covered during the training. For example, Participant #1 stated, “This continues to be successful because my ultimate goal is to provide an environment where all students feel loved and safe. They know they are not judged, and every day is a new day.” Similarly, Participant #3 responded, “Students need to feel valued to learn. Learning needs to be meaningful.” Participant #6 stated, “Building relationships is important to me. The more they trust you and know you care, the better the school experience is for everyone.” Finally, Participant #7 explained: “It gave opportunities for a deep connection and

have meaningful and honest conversations. I feel I can understand and know my students better, and they are more comfortable opening up and talking to me.”

Theme 3: Improving Teacher Practice

All participants noted some way that the training series improved their practices as an educator. For instance, Participant #3 responded:

Yes, I definitely did increase my learning ... one of the ones that spoke to me was the lesson on trauma. So that one you know, what causes trauma and then what to do and how to deal with students with trauma.

Participant #5 stated:

I had more of a goal in mind of picking the students and actually trying to talk to them and see if they shared anything with me. Rather than saying, ‘you know, pick your head up; it’s time to work.’ I took the time to use some of the strategies with them. There was definitely a reason, so that worked for me.

Participant #7 responded:

There were days I was more aware, and I would think about what might work that we heard in this group. If I needed something or took a minute to reflect and get my thoughts together, then something from this group pop in my mind.

Participant #1 explained:

There were probably a few times a week where again, I was more aware of this because of some of the things that we talked about. You know, I think a lot of us are trying to implement this into our classroom daily, but just like, after our lessons, I would be more aware of how I could specifically reach out to some of the students or specifically show that I care in a way.

Finally, Participant #2 responded:

I’m really just thinking of some of the language shifts that were shared and some of the strategies that were given the whole, like iceberg moment, really helped to kind of de-escalate some of the students and keep them a bit calmer until they left.

Theme 4: Preferred Strategies

All participants shared that some strategies were easier to embed than others, and many participants identified the same strategies when asked which strategy was the most effective that

they used in the two-week implementation cycle. For example, four participants (57%) expressed that the “I notice” and “Help me understand” language shift was the most effective strategy they used throughout the four-week cycle. Moreover, Participant #2 shared, “The iceberg moment was the most effective.” Similarly, Participant #5 responded, “Using the iceberg approach when working with students who have experienced trauma.”

Also, three participants (43%) shared that morning check-ins were effective. Participant #3 responded, “Morning check-in with those who were absent. It’s personal attention.”

Participants #1 and #7 also stated that morning check-in was effective. Finally, two participants also responded that using constructive language, such as, “Do you need my help, or can you try this on your own?” when addressing students is effective.

Theme 5: Perceived Support from the School

Participants shared their perceptions of support from the school both by open-ended questions on the pre-and post-surveys and through the semi-structured focus group questions. Three of the five participants responded negatively to the pre-survey and focus group questions regarding perceived support of the school and district prior to the intervention. For example, Participant #3 stated, “No [I don’t feel supported]. But this year they’re offering character strong training for this specific curriculum,” while Participant #1 said, “No. Not really.” However, Participant #2 shared, “Yes and No. Last year they offered a self-paced PD, but it was an hour and not on anything life-changing.” and Participant #4 said, “Yes, because they are offering curriculum now, and we can choose our own PD outside of the district.”

Four of the six participants who responded to the post-survey and focus group questions about perceived support at the end of the intervention shared a positive view of school support. Participant #2 responded, “Yes. Between the training with Kelly and the character strong

[curriculum], I have a better idea.” and Participant #3 stated, “No [to the district]. [The principal] is supporting us by allowing us to have this training, but the district is just giving us curriculum.” Participant #4 stated, “Yes, by the school.” and similarly, Participant #5 responded, “Yes, by the school and [The principal] having [the presenter] come in.” Finally, when asked about perceived school support in the focus group, Participant #7 responded:

Well, I think we already have at least school support. We have our group and our SEL team who have tried to get some feedback from teachers in the school and share that out. And administrations been really great to kind of, like, leave that choice open for us because it’s not going to look the same everywhere in the district. We know that every school is very, very unique, so I’m happy that we’re given the opportunity to kind of make it our own. I think a lot of the teachers appreciate that too.

Overall, participants were happy with the intervention and perceived increased support from the school.

Theme 6: Effectiveness of the Professional Development

All participants noted that the design of the ongoing, specific, and collaborative nature of the professional development was effective during the focus group. Participant #1 responded:

I think anything that’s ongoing is better because it lasts in the mind, and it’s always on the forefront of what you’re doing, where when you do something static, like memorization for a vocabulary test, do you do it? And it’s put, you know, behind you. Ongoing and working with colleagues means we are constantly implementing it. I think something that is ongoing is better in general, not just SEL, but in anything that you’re learning or trying to do.

While Participant #2 stated,

Ongoing and the same topic really allowed us to go in-depth. It’s like the classroom. We don’t do one lesson and then another that’s disconnected. It’s scaffolded learning, and I think districts forget what they preach about learning.

Moreover, Participant #4 stated, “I agree. When it’s collaboration and ongoing, it’s like student-centered learning which is huge in this district.”

Two sub-themes also emerged when asked about the intervention being an ongoing, specific, and collaborative professional development experience. First, six of the seven, or 86% of the participants, stated that they appreciated the professional learning community (PLC) style of the sessions. For example, Participant #3 shared, “Yes, I felt like we had an actual PLC where we were all willing to share by the second session and were able to learn from each other.” And Participant #4 stated, “I liked this format and want to continue this in our SEL PLC.” Similarly, Participant #5 said, “I like the PLC format.” Finally, Participant #6 elaborated, “This gave great ideas on how to structure our SEL PLC moving forward.”

The second sub-theme to emerge was the timing of the intervention sessions. Five of the seven participants (71%) shared that every other week was too much, and they would rather have these sessions once a month. Participant #4 responded, “With how this year is going, every other week was a lot. Maybe once a month.” Participant #5 stated, “I felt we have a lot going on with COVID and all the new rules. Maybe once a month.” Finally, Participant #6 shared, “I would say once a month, or it will begin to feel like too much.”

Qualitative Summary

Qualitative data answered Research Question 2 by demonstrating that participants reported applying the strategies and perceived them as effective and easy to implement. The participants shared specific strategies that were easier to implement and that they reported as effective in Themes 1, 2, and 4. Overwhelmingly, participants shared those strategies that were easy to implement and built relationships. Furthermore, Theme 6 reflected participants’ perceptions of what part of the intervention was most effective and how they would change the intervention moving forward. Participants found the PLC model and the ongoing, collaborative sessions most effective. Finally, Theme 5 answered Research Question 4: Did the intervention

change teachers' perception of support they are receiving from the school and/or district? At the end of the intervention, participants perceived increased support from the school.

Summary

With the convergent mixed-methods approach, the researcher integrated qualitative and quantitative methodology to answer the research questions. Quantitative data demonstrated statistically significant changes with 70% of the Panorama Teacher Reflection about SEL Survey questions. In addition, there was a statistically significant increase in teachers' perceived confidence and competence to integrate social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom and a perceived increase in SEL instruction. Qualitative results supported the quantitative results with data from Theme 1, Easy to Implement and Build Relationships, and Theme 3, Improving Teacher Practice. Participants stated that they found the strategies easy to implement, built relationships with students, and the intervention sessions improved teacher practice.

Quantitative responses from the pre-and post-survey yielded a statistically significant change in the participants' views of the support they received from the school. Qualitative responses in Theme 5 indicated that participants felt more supported by the school by the end of the intervention. By analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher also reported which strategies teachers found most effective in Theme 4 and the overall effectiveness of the professional development workshops in Theme 6.

Chapter V discusses the research questions and findings, limitations, and implications for practice.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC SUMMARY

This study explored the changes in teacher perceptions of their confidence and competence to implement social-emotional instructional practices in the classroom after attending an ongoing and collaborative professional development series. The researcher gained insight into educators' perceptions of their growth in social-emotional instructional practices, effective strategies, and effective professional development. Chapter V concludes this study by summarizing findings, limitations, implications, and recommendations for future studies.

Summary of Study

Schools across the United States see students arriving in classrooms with exposure to trauma, and educators need to adjust teaching strategies to respond to student needs in the classroom. Studies have shown that teachers trained in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices can positively impact trauma-exposed students (Dorado et al., 2016). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic globally affected families and students and led to a rise in mental health concerns for children and young adults (Crosby et al., 2020; Garlinghouse, 2020). However, there is little research on the social-emotional training that is most effective for students, and there are various curricula that all claim to be effective. However, all curricula and SEL programs require training.

Moreover, research has found that traditional professional development methods may often be ineffective (Borko et al., 2010; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). This study sought to fill gaps in the research by ascertaining educators' perceived competency in social-emotional instructional strategies and their confidence to implement these strategies in the classroom after a series of purposeful, ongoing, and collaborative professional development

sessions. It also addressed the educators' perceived effectiveness of the professional development model.

A root cause analysis conducted in Chapter I exposed the underlying causes of the problem; Chapter II investigated possible solutions to address the problem, including the literature review and the review of practice. Finally, using data and evidence from Chapter I and Chapter II, the researcher determined the intervention and research methods for the study described in Chapter III. This current chapter builds on the results and findings from Chapter IV and merges the quantitative and qualitative results to examine the implications of the answers to the research questions.

Summary of Findings

The study used quantitative and qualitative data to address the four research questions. The results and discussions are summarized below and organized by each research question. However, it is essential to interpret all results with caution due to the study's small sample size. The results are presented in full to inform future research.

Research Question 1: How does implementing a series of collaborative social and emotional learning (SEL) professional development interventions impact teachers' perception of their confidence and competence to implement SEL practices in the classroom?

Teachers' perception of their confidence and competence increased significantly from the start of the intervention until the end, rejecting the null hypothesis. In addition, participants perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable and able to implement specific social-emotional strategies at the end of the professional development sessions.

Qualitative data indicated that educators felt that the intervention also improved teacher practice. When equipped with specific strategies and the time to not only implement them but to

discuss implementation with their peers, their knowledge and understanding grew. Themes 3 and 4 indicate that teachers reported being more aware of what might work with specific students after the professional development. Teachers also acknowledged they were more aware after the intervention of the strategies and skills they learned and how these helped students to achieve emotional regulation. Qualitative data in Theme 6 also supported the effectiveness of the intervention design, with all participants agreeing that the ongoing, collaborative professional development design allowed them time to practice and build competence with these instructional strategies.

There were statistically significant changes from pre- to post-intervention in self-reported confidence in using SEL concepts. The participants felt more confident than prior to the professional development sessions to engage students who are not typically motivated and more confident in being able to support some of the most challenging student behaviors. Participants also noted they felt more confident in supporting students' self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making growth and development. These three CASEL (2021) skills are critical to social-emotional learning, and through the intervention, teachers reported they felt increased confidence in their ability to integrate strategies into the classroom to address these competencies.

While not statistically significant, teachers rated themselves higher from Week 1 to Week 4 to support students' growth and development in both social awareness and relationship skills. The quantitative *t*-tests were not significant, although the average of the participants' ratings increased each week. The intervention still impacted teacher learning, but perhaps staff needed more time to learn strategies explicitly related to these two competencies. With more participants, the researcher might have found statistical significance. Finally, while teachers

reported a statistically significant change in their own instructional practices, there was no significant change in student outcomes. However, participants' perception of improving students' SEL skills did increase over the intervention period. While there are no significant changes, the ratings on the survey do demonstrate growth in these three areas and the practicality of ongoing sessions to engage the participants and scaffold their learning around specific strategies for targeted competencies.

Research Question 2: Following instruction on SEL strategies, which strategies did participants report that they implemented and found to be effective in classrooms?

Theme 4 of the qualitative data analysis found specific strategies that teachers preferred and chose to use in the classroom. These strategies were easy to implement because of a simple shift in language use, or the strategies did not take away from instructional time. Teachers also reported that the strategies helped build relationships with students and de-escalate negative behaviors.

The strategy that four of the seven participants (57%) found most effective was a language shift to "I notice" and "Help me understand" when a student was dysregulated. Examples given during the professional development sessions were a student with their head down or being defiant and refusing to work. Instead of immediately reprimanding the student with, "Pick your head up," the participants were instead told to shift their language to "I notice your head is down. Help me understand what you're feeling." Participants found that this strategy immediately changed the dynamic between teacher and student. Instead of being defensive with a teacher reprimanding their behavior, students had to pause and think about how to reply. The language shift also signaled that the teacher cared about the student and what is happening rather than only focusing on the work and task at hand.

The second strategy most widely chosen by three participants (43%) was the morning check-ins with students. Participants found checking-in with students led to building relationships with students, leading them to be more open and honest with the staff. This strategy also allowed for meaningful conversations with students. One participant commented that checking in with absent students made them feel a part of the community.

Finally, three participants (43%) found the iceberg approach effective. The Iceberg of Emotion strategy asks that a person recognize that the anger they may be facing is only the surface; however, other emotions are at play underneath. Therefore, the anger may be communicating something else, and it is up to the observer to determine what other emotions or factors could be influencing the anger. For example, dealing with the loss of a loved one causes grief, guilt, or pain that could bubble up and cause one to lash out (Regan & Beurkens, 2021). This strategy is important when dealing with angry students and learning to understand what is behind their anger.

Two participants also mentioned using constructive language when addressing students, such as asking, “Can you solve this, or do you need my help? I think you can do it, and I will check back later.” In addition, two participants each tried including discussions on the seven components of care in their lessons during the first week. One participant also mentioned implementing a mindfulness activity at the beginning of classes during Week 3. Overall, participants tried multiple strategies but found three that were most effective.

Overwhelmingly, the responses displayed the ease of implementation as the basis for the participants’ chosen strategy. The qualitative responses indicated that teachers felt there was already enough on their plates, especially trying to navigate Year 2 of a pandemic, and these specific strategies were simple and easy to implement. For example, participants said that a

simple language shift or a quick check-in led to building authentic relationships with students and did not take much practice. By purposefully designing the professional development to focus on quick, authentic changes easily implemented into classroom structures, the participants successfully integrated these social-emotional instructional strategies.

Kiuru et al. (2020) stated that conflict with teachers hinders student school well-being and high-quality interpersonal relationships promote higher academic achievement. Integrating specific social-emotional instructional strategies for relationship building and student reflection can decrease students' school stress. Kiuru et al. found that greater conflict with teachers is particularly detrimental to school well-being, and equipping teachers with the tools necessary to avoid conflict will only positively impact student well-being and achievement.

Research Question 3: What elements of the collaborative social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development did participants find most and least effective?

Theme 6 describes the qualitative findings for participants' perceptions of the intervention. All seven participants found the professional development sessions to be valuable. Two main themes emerged. First, participants found the ongoing nature of the professional development effective. Participants felt that when the professional development focused on one topic, social-emotional learning with a trauma focus, the group could study the topic and strategies in depth. The learning felt scaffolded and presented in a way that allowed them to build upon prior concepts.

Second, six of the seven participants (86%) said that when the sessions were ongoing, they had time to implement different strategies in the classroom and reflect on the effectiveness of each strategy. It also allowed for collaboration with colleagues and learning from each other. In addition, six participants (86%) reported that the PLC format effectively allowed them to

share what worked and what did not, learn from each other, and try again the following week. Finally, participants felt that the small group and ongoing sessions allowed them to get to know each other, feel comfortable sharing what they tried in the classroom, and exchange ideas with their colleagues.

It is important to note that the participants' viewpoints coincided with the research (Gaikhorst et al, 2017; Opfer & Pedder, 2010; Smith et al, 2020; Tournaki et al., 2011). Through the researcher's conversations with other districts and her personal knowledge, professional development days are often planned a year or two in advance, planned by various school staff, and often disjointed and disconnected. One key implication of this study is that districts and schools should determine areas of focus and plan ongoing, scaffolded professional development to allow for continuity and in-depth learning of the concepts and skills. Participants' felt that this model allowed them time to fully learn the strategies and embed them into instruction, which is the ultimate goal of professional development.

Five participants (72%) also voiced that the component they would change was the timing of the sessions. Participants felt that every other week was too often. All participants shared the impact of COVID-19. The constantly changing school guidelines increased the stress on teachers and students, and adding twice-monthly meetings could lead to teacher burnout. Participants shared that staff would feel like it is "one more thing to do" if it were every other week; however, once a month would be manageable and fit within their already established monthly meeting times. Participants felt that allowing staff to have the PLC format monthly would still allow for implementing strategies, informal data collection, reflection, and discussion when they all returned the following month.

These data demonstrated the stress that many educators feel in Year 2 of the pandemic. In March 2020, teaching shifted dramatically and had not returned to pre-COVID or 2019 practices at the beginning of this study. With constantly evolving quarantine guidelines, masking policies, and district guidelines, staff found themselves teaching with uncertainty. Staff and student absences also impacted instruction and often added to the stress levels of the teachers trying to catch the students up and the students trying to make up the work. In addition, schools are often judged on test scores, and these added layers of stress only compounding teacher well-being. However, the participants found true value in the intervention and understood the need for social-emotional instructional strategies to help students in this milieu. Therefore, they suggested monthly sessions and not eliminating the intervention altogether. This research implies that SEL is needed now, more than ever, given the pandemic and ongoing stress for schools.

Research Question 4: Did the intervention change teachers' perception of the support they are receiving from the school and/or district?

When comparing overall data from the pre- to post-survey, there was statistical significance in participants' self-reported confidence and competence in working with SEL in the classroom. However, when looking further into the survey questions individually, a significant change occurred in five of the seven areas. Participants perceived the social-emotional learning professional development opportunities as valuable. This mindset was positive from the beginning; however, their perceived value increased significantly at the end of the intervention, demonstrating that they found these professional development sessions worthwhile and valuable. Data also demonstrated that participants found increased relevance in the professional development, particularly in exploring new ideas and relevance to the content they teach. Furthermore, participants perceived their colleagues' ideas for improving teaching as more

significant and valuable at the end of the sessions. Finally, participants also found they learned more about supporting students' SEL growth from the leaders at their school.

Qualitative data supports the quantitative findings. While three of the five participants who responded to the pre-survey open-ended question responded negatively to feeling supported, six of the seven participants responded positively on the post-survey. Theme 5 indicated that there was overwhelming support for the school principal and two participants specifically acknowledged her assistance in securing this professional development. Participants also acknowledged that the school has an SEL Committee that meets regularly and tries to address the social-emotional needs of both students and staff. The principal also acknowledged the SEL committee's work in assisting her to see the bigger picture of the school, thus securing the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the administration and the core group of teachers who strongly believe in SEL.

Discussion

Overall Results

This study overwhelmingly presented positive results. The quantitative results showed statistical significance for most of the survey items, demonstrating a positive impact on the relationship between teacher perceptions of growth and the professional development sessions. The researcher expected to see a change in teachers' perception but was skeptical of finding statistical significance with such a small sample size or having all participants report the professional development sessions as valuable and worthwhile. However, it was clear the participants were invested in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices, and to hear them all report that the intervention was meaningful and impacted their instruction was favorable.

There was no statistical significance in participants' self-reported ratings of being able to assist students with their social awareness and relationship skills increased each week. However, participants consistently rated themselves higher each week on these survey questions, demonstrating teachers' perceptions of growth in these areas. The intervention might not have explicitly discussed these skills, but teachers found enough value in understanding ways to address students' social awareness and relationship skills.

Moreover, participants did not find statistical significance in student improvement. Again, participants rated themselves higher each week, demonstrating that student behavior changed positively and student SEL skills increased. However, given the intervention period, it could be that there was not enough time to address student improvement, or the sample was too small to find statistical significance. The three-year model in Chapter I (Figure 5) displays the impact on students in Year 3 only after all school staff have been trained and had ample time to implement and reflect on SEL strategies in the classroom and school. Initial changes occurred with teachers' perceptions of their own learning and instruction and reached statistical significance despite the condensed intervention period.

There was no statistical significance in the pre-and post-survey regarding the participants' perception of how supportive the school had been of their growth as a teacher with SEL. The participants' initial mean score was 4.14, which is relatively high. The mean increased to 4.24, showing growth but not nearly as much as the researcher expected. However, when analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher found that the participants felt that the school administrators, particularly the principal, were already very supportive of SEL and implementing SEL in the school. All the participants were part of the newly formed school-wide Social

Emotional Learning Committee and attributed their formation and work to the administration's vision.

When asked how much input participants had into individualizing their own SEL professional development opportunities, there was no statistical change. However, the pre-survey mean was 3.71 and rose to 4.29 on the post-survey, indicating the intervention allowed for some flexibility and individualization. This change was apparent in the qualitative data as participants shared that the facilitator offered them a choice of strategies to implement in their classrooms each week. The participants also shared how the facilitator asked for feedback at the end of each session to help revise the upcoming session based on teacher needs. The process was cyclical, allowing teachers to choose their strategy based on comfort level, employ the strategy in the classroom, and then work together to reflect on and discuss what happened. This structure allowed the facilitator to better plan each session and allowed for autonomy, or individualization, for the participants.

One explanation for why the findings were not as statistically significant as the researcher expected was because the school, staff, and students were working through the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020–2021 school year, students and families chose to be fully virtual or fully in-school, thus skewing the data and impacting staff. In addition, the 2021–2022 school year was the first when every student was required to be present in the building; however, the Omicron variant impacted staff and students. The apprehension surrounding the impact of the virus impacted the participants and the school system itself, and in January 2021, the variant of the virus led to many absences and impacted Week 2 of the study. The importance of SEL was at the forefront of the participants' minds, especially as they witnessed the impact of the pandemic and the virus on the student population and their colleagues.

The United States was also in the middle of a significant surge of political unrest during the active research phase of this dissertation, with much focus on issues of inequity based on race and ethnicity. Many students in the school setting were directly affected by and acutely aware of these societal tensions, which coupled with the pandemic, potentiated stressors in addition to the routine challenges of adolescence and academia.

Finally, during this study, the United States entered a period of uncertainty with rising prices on gas, homes, and food, as well as a decrease in access to these goods. There were delays in shipping products to stores and supply chain concerns. This district has not seen any increase in budget from the town and relies heavily on grants and funds from outside sources. Despite the need for social-emotional learning and training, there will likely not be guidance or further funding due to the current national environment.

Construct of Intervention

The intervention design was the most important element of the participants' skill development and competence. Teachers reported that their social-emotional instructional practices increased throughout the study. In addition, participants revealed that the ongoing nature of the intervention allowed for more reflection and collaboration on key topics. Smith et al. (2020) shared that an extended duration of the experience also allowed for the evolution of participants from cautious bystanders to confident implementers. In this way, the participation of certain teachers at a school can help create experts who can further enhance the implementation of the new learning in the school.

Participants also stated that having time to implement strategies, assess their effectiveness in the classroom, and reflect on the teachers' own instruction, increased their learning. Opfer and

Pedder (2010) found that teachers report many benefits from participation, including the ability to work with colleagues, gain new information, and follow up on previous learning

Revising the current model of professional development that many schools currently use would lead to increased teacher learning and benefit instructional practices. Adults learn best when learning is sequential in fashion over multiple presentations. Learning also takes repetition. Teaching social-emotional learning in the classroom takes repetition and practice. Like any skill, students can learn social-emotional strategies to use in life to become successful adults and citizens. Tournaki et al. (2011) explained a pressing need for professional development activities to be sustained and ongoing. A cyclical learning model that allows for repetition and practice over time is a good fit for teaching and learning social-emotional instructional strategies and skills.

Roles of Peers in Learning

This study's participants emphasized the roles of their peers in working collaboratively in a PLC group. The participants did not emphasize the role of the instructor but rather the role of working collaboratively during the intervention sessions. An intervention aiming to allow for deeper learning and an increase in teacher instruction cannot be done asynchronously. There would be no deeper understanding, collaboration, or reflection from watching a video or completing modules at different times than peers. Smith et al. (2020) found that having extended time not only to teach but also to plan collaboratively, learn, and reflect on the process, seemed to create an integrated experience that builds knowledge over time.

Were this intervention repeated, the emphasis would be on the role of peers and the PLC model throughout the sessions. More time for staff to collaborate on their chosen strategies, what worked, and reflect on best practices within the classroom would be built into the sessions.

Teachers were more apt to try those strategies that are easy and quick to implement and integrate into daily routines because they can repeat them and reflect on their effectiveness. Therefore, these strategies should be a priority placing less emphasis on planning out each module prior to the beginning of the sessions.

As the participants shared thoughts and knowledge and collaborated, the facilitator could better grasp the group's needs. Originally, the intervention had a specific topic for each week; however, the topics shifted based on teacher discussions and uncovered needs. Therefore, when implementing this intervention again, the facilitators should know how to best structure the sessions around teacher and student needs to allow for maximum learning and efficiency.

While participants rated themselves high on SEL knowledge prior to the intervention, the quantitative data displayed a statistically significant increase in teacher confidence and their use of new instructional practices. Along with qualitative data supporting these concepts discussed above, participants found the intervention effective.

Limitations

This study offers important findings to the literature concerning the planning of effective professional development to implement social-emotional instructional practices to support trauma-exposed students. However, limitations should be noted.

The staff participating in the study is limited to those who volunteered to be on the school-wide SEL team and have a personal interest in SEL. Therefore, it does not reflect other teachers' perceptions of the research questions. In addition, the sample size was small ($n = 7$), and the research occurred in one middle school. It is less likely to find statistical significance with such a small sample population and, therefore, provides a minimal basis for generalization beyond urban districts.

Another limitation of the study is self-selection bias. Participants were all part of the school-wide Social-Emotional Learning Committee and were enthusiastic about the topic. As a result, they were more likely to participate fully in the sessions and to implement the strategies learned in the classroom. These participants also had a high rating pre-intervention with attitudes and perceptions related to their own SEL knowledge and how supportive the school has been in their SEL growth as a teacher, thus demonstrating they already had a high interest in pursuing this topic.

There could also be bias in the responses from the staff as a result of the Hawthorne Effect—when participants know they were part of a study and change their behavior accordingly (Martella et al., 2013). Therefore, the researcher has no way of knowing if their responses to the questions accurately represent their true feelings. The researcher used a triangulation method for the results and member-checking to minimize this risk and ensure that she accurately captured the participants' voices. In addition, the researcher examined data from multiple sources and methods to increase the strength of the themes (Martella et al., 2013). Finally, the researcher shared participants' responses with them through member-checking to ensure correctness and confirm that she has represented their voices accurately prior to publishing.

Implications

School

First, the original seven participants need a refresher training or their own ongoing PLC where they explore more strategies that they can implement in the classroom. Allowing for further training will increase the likelihood that these staff members effectively train other staff members. The second phase of the three-year plan includes the original team training other staff members in all grade levels. This model allows more staff to implement social-emotional

instructional strategies in their classroom and positively affect the confidence and competence of more teachers, as well as benefiting students.

Moreover, the researcher proposes to work with the trainers, or core group from this research study, to examine the intervention and revise it as needed. For example, the intervention would be monthly, not bi-weekly, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning. The researcher and the trainers would package the intervention once it is rolled out to the Wildcat Middle School staff and further train other SEL committees in the district.

District A

Policy

Phase I data collection revealed no SEL goal in the district or school improvement plans. Participants also noted they felt there was no collaboration between schools and SEL committees. The district should create a social and emotional learning goal in their District Goals or District Improvement Plan—the school should do the same. In addition, these goals should include the vision of SEL to guide the staff, students, and parents. This vision would also tie directly into the beliefs of the district and school and assist them in planning professional development for staff. Without a goal or a vision of SEL, the district and schools are inadvertently stating it is not a priority when in fact, the staff has insisted SEL is crucial to the well-being of staff and students. The goal should include K–12 and be tailored to each school level's needs in the school's own School Improvement Plan.

Practice

This research was limited to one middle school and seven participants. The participants were comparable to the other SEL committees within the district, and as such, the training and study should be shared and implemented with the other SEL school-wide committees. For

example, the Wildcat Middle School SEL Committee could train other SEL teams and run the ongoing professional development so the other teams could experience the same targeted, ongoing workshops. This model would ensure the district creates fidelity measures to guarantee all secondary schools have the same training and strategies to use with their students since many middle school students stay in-district for high school. This process would also allow for more collaboration among the SEL committees, which was a need voiced by the participants.

This research also highlights the meaningful impact of targeted changes in classroom practices on student SEL. The implemented changes largely relied on simple word-choice adjustments and other readily applied interventions and yet the associated outcome on the classroom environment and on student-teacher relationships was sizable. Professional development does not need to be complicated and lengthy to have an impact on students and does not need to impact curriculum or instruction.

The district should also examine its current professional development practices and adjust the calendar accordingly. Currently, the district offers professional development for three days: October, November, and January. Each day is dedicated to a different topic or topics and not scaffolded to allow for a deeper understanding or learning of a singular topic. Furthermore, the researcher revised the current PLC model on Thursday afternoons to allow ongoing professional development. The district should examine this model and determine how to continue providing effective, collaborative professional development for staff. Current structures would allow for revising the current model, but the district would need to implement this practice universally.

Other Districts

Implications for other districts include restructuring how they design current professional development opportunities. Participant data shared two main strengths of the study. First, a major

benefit was adjusting the current schedule to allow ongoing professional development over the eight weeks. Participants shared that monthly professional development would work just as well but stressed that the sessions needed to be ongoing and focused on one initiative or one topic. Focusing the topic over numerous sessions allowed the participants to study the issue in-depth, implement the practices, and reflect with colleagues—the cyclical process allowed for greater learning.

Second, districts should model the professional development after the PLC model instead of whole school meetings or assemblies. While the research group was small, with only seven participants, six participants specifically stated that smaller groups and the PLC model allowed them comfort in sharing their thoughts and ideas and built a true professional learning community. Again, the PLC allowed for the cyclical learning process, implementing, assessing, and reflecting with each other and led to greater, in-depth learning with and from each other.

Recommendations

First, the researcher encourages other schools to pilot a study like this as proof of content. Instead of conceptualizing teacher professional development as a certain number of discreet times, they should distribute sessions across the year. This structure allows teachers to have peer experiences weekly and support learning the target skill or strategy. Participant feedback focused more on the role of the PLC and collaboration time with peers than on the role of the facilitator, suggesting the learning came from the group and each other over time.

Because the role of peers is a predominant feature in the qualitative feedback, it suggested that districts and schools look at a ‘Train-the-Trainer’ model. This model is fiscally friendly for districts that do not have extensive funding, but it also uses current expertise in the

school and district to help train other teachers and continues with the PLC model. Learning from peers and colleagues is important.

Future Research

Future researchers could improve the quantitative and qualitative research by having a larger sample size and more diverse participants. For example, this study consisted of seven participants who worked in the same building and did not represent a variety of ethnicities or number of years teaching. Data findings would be strengthened by increasing the number and diversity of the participants.

Longitudinal research should be conducted to study the impact of social-emotional instructional strategies on student outcomes. While this short study influenced teacher practice, longer-term research would uncover implications for student discipline, attendance, and learning.

Another change idea is to integrate social-emotional learning standards into the current curriculum. Future research could examine the impact of teacher training on implementing social-emotional instructional practices and on implementing and assessing SEL standards. Once teachers are trained with strategies, implementing standards and assessments would be a logical next step. Research could measure the impact of standards on instruction and student outcomes.

Finally, the study should also be expanded to other school districts looking to integrate SEL into their daily school routine and into classrooms but do not have the funds to purchase curricular programs. By expanding the research to more participants, the data will strengthen the argument to revise the current, traditional model of professional development and offer meaningful and effective training for teachers.

Summary

This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) began with analyzing data from Wildcat Middle School and determining the need for staff training on integrating social-emotional instructional strategies. The researcher discovered three change ideas through a root cause analysis and a literature review that examined both literature and the surrounding school districts. The chosen change idea and the study aimed to provide ongoing, collaborative professional development to improve teacher confidence and competence to implement social-emotional instructional strategies in the classroom.

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data from a school-wide social-emotional committee who were the participants in the study ($n = 7$). It is a participatory Action Research study. The participants actively took part in the research and provided the data; the researcher collaborated with the facilitator and participants throughout the process. Over 10 weeks, participants attended four professional development sessions to learn about various social-emotional instructional strategies. Participants then had a week to implement a chosen strategy, reflect on the implementation, and return to the group to collaborate and share what they found.

Statistically significant results found in both the pre- and post-survey measuring participants' perceived support from the school and the self-reflection surveys that measured perceived personal growth in confidence and competence to integrate strategies—70% of the self-reflection survey items and 57% of the pre- and post-survey items were statistically significant. Specifically, teachers perceived growth in their confidence on this topic and their instruction. Qualitative data supported the quantitative data and gave insight into the participants' perceptions and feelings. During Phase 1 of the ISDiP, participants voiced concern

about the time and training needed to implement SEL. They also voiced concern about its impact on their instruction and time away from teaching. At the conclusion of the research intervention, all seven participants felt the intervention was worthwhile and effectively helped them navigate student behaviors. One participant shared, “[the strategy] gave opportunities for a deep connection and having meaningful and honest conversations. I feel I can understand and know my students better, and they are more comfortable opening up and talking to me.” Another participant shared,

I think anything that is ongoing is better because it lasts in the mind and it's always at the forefront of what you are doing, where when you do something static, like memorization for a vocabulary test, do you do it? And it's put, you know, behind you. Ongoing and working with colleagues means we are constantly implementing it. I think something that is ongoing is better in general, not just SEL, but anything that you're learning or trying to do.

Overall, participants shared that the professional development model was more effective than the current district model. They also perceived growth in their own confidence to implement strategies and improvement in their instruction through having the ability to collaborate and share with colleagues. Participants expressed the importance of learning from their peers, a cornerstone of how the facilitator crafted the professional development sessions. Schools and districts should look to revise current professional development models to encompass more of a PLC format to be effective.

REFERENCES

- Ashdown, D. M., & Bernard, M. E. (2012). Can explicit instruction in social and emotional learning skills benefit the social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement of young children? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *39*, 397–405.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-011-0481-x>
- Baez, J. C., Renshaw, K., Bachman, L. E., Kim, D., Smith, V. D., & Stafford, R. E. (2019). Understanding the necessity of trauma informed care in community schools: A mixed-methods program evaluation. *Children & Schools*, *41*(2), 101–110.
- Bagnell, C. L. (2020). Talking about school transition (TaST): An emotional centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *38*(2), 116–137.
- Banks, Y., & Meyer, J. (2017). Childhood trauma in today's urban classroom: Moving beyond the therapist's office. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, *30*(1–4), 64–75.
- Blad, E. (2019). How schools can make advisories meaningful for students and teachers. *Edweek.org*
- Bennett, M. (2019). A review of the literature on the benefits and drawbacks of participatory action research. *First Peoples Child and Family Review*, *14*(1), 109–122.
- Borko, H., Jacobs, J., & Koellner, K. (2010). Contemporary approaches to teacher professional development. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, *7*, 548–556.
- Bryk A. S., Gomez L. M., & Grunow A. (2010), Getting ideas into action: Building networked improvement communities in education, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Stanford, CA. <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/spotlight/webinar-bryk-gomez-building-networked-improvement-communities-in-education>

- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press. ISBN 978-1-61250-791-0
- Caprara, G. V., Kanacri, B. P. L., Gerbino, M., Zuffiano, A., Alessandri, G., Vecchio, G., Caprara, E., Pastorelli, C., & Bridglall, B. (2014). Positive effects of promoting prosocial behavior in early adolescence: Evidence from a school-based intervention. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 38*(4), 386–396.
- Carrington, S. Deppeler, J., & Moss, J. (2010) Cultivating teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and skills for leading change in schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 35*(1), 1–13.
- Cavanaugh, B. (2016). Trauma-informed classrooms and schools. *Beyond Behavior, 25*(2). 41–46.
- Center on the Developing Child. (2021). www.developingchild.harvard.edu
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Preventing adverse childhood experiences*.
https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Facestudy%2Ffastfact.html
- Chafouleas, S., Pickens, I., & Gherardi, S. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): Translation in K12 education settings. *School Mental Health, 13*, 213–224.
- Christian-Brandt, A. S., Santacrose, D. E., & Barnett, M. L. (2020). In the trauma-informed care trenches: Teacher compassion, satisfaction, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and intent to leave education with underserved elementary schools. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 110*(Pt3), 104437. Retrieved from www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg
- Cohen, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Caring classrooms/intelligent schools: The social emotional education of young children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Cole, S. F., O'Brien, J. G., Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn: A report and policy agenda*. Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Helping-Traumatized-Children-Learn.pdf>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Website. (2021). www.casel.org
- Connecticut State Department of Education. (2021). portal.ct.gov/SDE
- Cressey, J. (2019). Developing culturally responsive social, emotional, and behavioral supports. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 12(1), 53–67.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd edition). Sage Publications Inc.
- Crosby, S., Howell, P., & Thomas, S. (2020). Teaching through collective trauma in the era of COVID-19: Trauma informed practices for middle level learners. *Middle Grades Review*, 6, 1–6.
- Crouch, E., Radcliff, E., Huy, P., & Bennett, K. (2019). Challenges to school success and the role of adverse childhood experiences. *American Pediatrics*, 19(8), 899–907.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & DePaoli, J. (2020). Why school climate matters and what can be done to improve it. *National Association of State Boards of Education*, 7–11.
- Dods, J. (2013). Enhancing understanding of the nature of supportive school-based relationships for youth who have experienced trauma. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 71–95.

- Dorado, J. S., Martinez, M., McArthur, L. E., Leibovitz, T. (2016). Healthy environments and response to trauma in schools (HEARTS): A whole-school, multi-level, prevention and intervention program for creating trauma-informed, safe and supportive schools. *School Mental Health, 8*. 163–176.
- Domitrovich, C.E., Durlak, J.A., Staley, K.C., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017). Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school children. *Child Development, 88*(2), 408–416.
- Duplechain, R., Reigner, R., & Packard, A. (2008). Striking differences: The impact of moderate and high trauma on reading achievement. *Reading Psychology, 117–136*.
- Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice*. The Guilford Press.
- Education Northwest. (2011). What research says or doesn't say: Advisory Programs. *educationnorthwest.org*.
- Eklund, K., Kilpatrick, K. D., Kilgus, S. P., & Haider, A. (2018). A systematic review of state-level social-emotional learning standards: Implications for practice and research. *School Psychology Review, 47*(3), 316–326.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- Ferrance, E. 2000. *Themes in education: Action research*. Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University.
- Frieze, S. (2015). How Trauma Affects Student Learning and Behaviour. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education, 27–34*.

- Gaikhorst, L., Beishuizen, J., Zijlstra, B., & Volman, M. (2017). The sustainability of a teacher professional development programme for beginning urban teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47(1), 135–154.
- Garlinghouse, R. (2020). Quarantine may be causing ACE in some children. *Scary Mommy*. ACEs Connection.
- Gonser, S. (2020). How to help middle school students develop crucial skills this year. *Edutopia*, 1–4.
- Greene, R. W. (2008). *Lost at school: Why our kids with behavioral challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them*. New York: Scribner.
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 13–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219019>
- Halfon, N., Larson, K., Son, J., Lu, M., & Bethell, C. (2016) Income inequality and the differential effect of adverse childhood experiences in US children. *Academic Pediatrics*, 17(7S), S70–S78,
- Health Resources and Services Administration. (2019). *A national survey of children's health*. United States Department of Health and Human Services.
- Henderson, M. D., Schmus, C. J., McDonald, C. C., & Irving, S. Y. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on child mental health: A socio-ecological perspective. *Continuing Nursing Education*, 46(6), 267–290.
- Hinnant-Crawford, B. N. (2020) Improvement science in education: A Primer. *Myers Education Press*.

- Hunag, F., Bergin, D., & Prewett, S. (2019). Student and teacher perceptions on student-teacher relationship quality: A middle school perspective. *School Psychology International*, 66–87.
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., Darling-Hammond, L., & Krone, C. R. (2019). Nurturing nature: How brain development is inherently social and emotional, and what this means for education. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 185–204.
- International Institute for Restorative Practices (2021). www.iirp.com
- Jaycox, L., Langlely, A., Stein, B., Wong, M., Sharma, P., Scott, M., & Schonlau, M. (2009). Support for students exposed to trauma: A pilot study. *School Mental Health: A Multidisciplinary Research and Practice Journal*, 49–60.
- Jennings, P.A., Snowberg, K. E., Coccia, M. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2011). Improving classroom learning environments by Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE): Results of two pilot studies. *Journal of Classroom Interactions*, 46(1), 37–48.
- Kalia, V., & Knauff, K. (2020). Emotion regulation strategies modulate the effect of adverse childhood experiences on perceived chronic stress with implications for cognitive flexibility. *PLOS ONE*, 15(6), 1–18.
- Kim, S., Crooks, C. V., Bax, K., & Shokoohi, M. (2021). Impact of trauma-informed teaching and mindfulness-based social-emotional learning program on teacher attitudes and burnout: A mixed method study. *School Mental Health*, 13, 55–68.
- Kiuru, N., Wang, M-T., Salmela-Aro, K., Kannas, L., Ahonen, T., Hirvonen, R. (2019). Associations between adolescents' interpersonal relationships, school well-being, and academic achievement during educational transitions. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49, 1057–1072.

- Kress, J. S., Norris, J. A., Schoenholz, D. A., Elias, M. J., & Seigle, P. (2004). Bringing together educational standards and social and emotional learning: Making the case for educators. *American Journal of Education, 111*, 68–89.
- Kuban, C., & Steele, W. (2011). Restoring safety and hope: From victim to survivor. *Reclaiming Children & Youth, 41*–44.
- Larson, A. (2014, April 3–7). Confidential school climate survey: Identify and assist counselors with treating social-emotional at-risk students. [Conference presentation paper]. 2014 annual meeting of the *American Educational Research Association*, Philadelphia, PA.
- Larson, E. (2019). The trauma informed school: Effects on student success. [Master's thesis Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa]. Digital Commons.
https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/152/
- LeBuffe, P.A., Shapiro, V.B., & Naglieri, J.A. (2012). *The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA): Assessment, technical manual, and user's guide*. Aperture Education.
- Martella, R. C., Nelson, J. R., Morgan, R. L., & Marchand-Martella, N. E. (2013). *Understanding and interpreting educational research*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- McGruder, K. (2019). Children learn what they live: Addressing early childhood trauma resulting in toxic stress in schools. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher, 31*(1), 117–137.
- McIntosh, M. (2019). Compound fractures: Healing the intersectionality of racism, classism, and trauma in schools with a trauma-informed approach as part of a social justice framework. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Special Issue #1 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice, 3*(1).

- McKelvey, L., Whiteside-Mansell, L., Bradley, R., Casey, P., Conners-Burrow, N., & Barrett, K. (2010). Growing up in violent communities: Do family conflict and gender moderate impacts on adolescents' psychosocial development? *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *39*, 95–107.
- McKown, C. (2019). *Assessing students' social and emotional learning: A guide to meaningful measurement (SEL Solutions Series)*. W. W. Norton.
- Mercado, F. (2021). Wise-compassionate framework: A leadership guide to educational equity. *Journal of Leadership, Equity, and Research*, *7*(1), 1–16.
- Merrill, S. (2020, March 19). Teaching through the pandemic: A mindset for this moment. *Edutopia*. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-through-pandemic-mindset-moment>
- Minahan, J. (2020, October). Maintaining relationships reducing anxiety during remote learning. *Educational Leadership*, *78*(2), 20–27.
- National Conferences of State Legislators (2021). Adverse Childhood Experiences: Facts. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/health/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces.aspx>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).
- Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C, Meyers, C., & Weissberg, R. (2016). Establish systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: A framework for schoolwide implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *46*(3). 277–297.
- Opfer, V., & Pedder, D. (2010). Benefits, status, and effectiveness of continuous professional development for teachers in England. *The Curriculum Journal*, *21*(4), 413–431
- Panorama Education. (2015). Validity brief: Panorama Student Survey. *Panorama Education*. <https://panorama-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/panorama-student-survey/validity-brief.pdf>

- Pawlo, R., Lorenzo, A., Eichert, B., & Elias, M. (2019). All SEL should be trauma-informed. *Kappaonline.org*, 37–41.
- Perry, A., Zambo, D. & Crow, R. (2020). *The improvement science dissertation in practice: A guide for faculty, committee members, and their students*. Myers Education Press.
- Plano Clark, V., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide* (1st edition). Pearson.
- Regan, S., & Beurkens, N. (2021). How to use the anger iceberg to work through conflict and emotion. *Personal Growth*. <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/the-anger-iceberg-and-how-to-work-with-it-effectively/>
- Sacks, V., & Murphey, D. (2018, February). The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, nationally, by state, race, or ethnicity. *Child Trends*. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACESBriefUpdatedFinal_ChildTrends_February2018.pdf
- Schiepe-Tiska, A., Dzhaparkulova, A., & Ziernwald, L. (2021). A mixed-methods approach to investigating social and emotional learning at schools: Teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training, and perceived school culture. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.518634>
- Schonert-Reichl, K. (2017) Social emotional learning and teachers. *The Future of Children* 27(1) 137–155. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/720677>
- Segal, A., & Collin-Vezina, D. (2019). Impact of adverse childhood experiences on language skills and promising school interventions. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 34(4), 317–322.
- Shulkind, S. B., & Brody, Foote, J. (2009). Creating a culture of connectedness through middle school advisory programs. *Middle School Journal*, 41(1), 20–27.

- Smith, R., Ralston, N. C., Naegele, Z., & Waggoner, J. (2020). Team teaching and learning: A model of effective professional development for teachers. *The Professional Educator*, 43(1), 80–90.
- Stain, H. J., Bronnick, K., Hegelstad, W. T. V., Joa, I., Johannessen, J. O., Langeveld, J., Mawn, L., & Larsen, T. K. (2014). Impact of interpersonal trauma on the social functioning of adults with first-episode psychosis. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 40(6), 1491–1498.
- Thomason, M., & Marusak, H. (2017). Toward understanding the impact of trauma on the early developing human brain. *Neuroscience*, 342, 55–67.
- Tournaki, E., Lyublinskaya, I., & Carolan, B. (2011). An ongoing professional development program and its impact on teacher effectiveness. *The Teacher Educator*, 42, 299–315.
DOI: [10.1080/08878730.2011.604711](https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2011.604711)
- Voith, L., Gromoske, A., & Holmes, M. (2014). Effects of cumulative violence exposure on children's trauma and depression symptoms: A social ecological examination using fixed effects regression. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 207–216.
- Warren, C. A., Presberry, C. & Louis, L. (2020). Examining teacher dispositions for evidence of (Transformative) social and emotional competencies with Black boys: The case of three urban high school teachers. *Urban Education*, 57, 251–277.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920933326>
- Williams, A. (2020). Early childhood trauma impact on adolescent brain development, decision making abilities, and delinquent behaviors: Policy implications for juveniles tried in adult court systems. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 7(1), 5–17.

Zieher, A., Cipriano, C., Meyer, J., & Strambler, M. (2021). Educators' implementation and use of social and emotional learning early in the COVID-19 pandemic. *School Psychology, 36*(5), 388–397.

APPENDIX A: LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Dr. _____,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at Wildcat Middle School. I am currently a doctoral student at Sacred Heart University (SHU) in the Department of Educational Leadership. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation, tentatively titled *Educator Perceptions of Competency and Preparation in Social Emotional Learning to Support Trauma Exposed Students in an Urban School Setting*. The purpose of this study is to determine if educator perceptions of preparedness and competence in implementing social emotional learning impact the success of trauma exposed students in a school setting. To conduct this research, I am currently awaiting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at SHU and a letter of support would be greatly appreciated for this process.

I am hoping you will allow me to conduct end-user consultations, empathy interviews, focus groups, and an online survey with the WMS SEL team, teachers, and administrators regarding implementation of SEL and trauma-informed practices at the school level. Interested participants will be provided with a consent form to be signed and returned to me before the research commences, ensuring they understand the process and to answer any questions they may have. All names will be deleted from the research and dissertation.

If you grant me approval, I will arrange a time to meet with the administrators and teachers during a remote conference time after school or during their school approved time to meet. The focus group process should not take more than a half hour two times during the year. The teachers will complete a survey of approximately 10 questions to complete on their own time during September, December, and March. Additionally, I will conduct a review of archival student data, such as, but not limited to, climate survey results, attendance, and discipline to

support the qualitative research. All names and identifiers will be deleted from the data prior to my receiving it through Office of Research and Evaluation.

The information gathered will be analyzed for the research project. All information gathered from this study will be confidential, and no participants will be identified in any way due to participating in this study. All documentation for this study will be password protected in a file on my computer to which I am the only one with access. There is no cost or compensation for participation. The data collected may ultimately be used as part of publications and papers related to publishing a dissertation, journal article, or presenting at a conference. The results of this study may be used to influence future academic policy decisions.

Your approval for this study will be greatly appreciated and I would be happy to discuss my research with you further should you have any questions or concerns. You may contact me at my email _____ or by phone _____. If you agree, please sign below, and return the signed form via scanned email or through mail.

Sincerely,

Karolyn Rodriguez

Approved by:

Superintendent 6/14/2001

4. How often did your social-emotional learning (SEL), professional development opportunities help you explore new ideas?

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not supportive at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely Supportive

5. How relevant have our social-emotional learning (SEL) professional development opportunities been to the content that you teach?

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not supportive at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely Supportive

6. Thinking of social-emotional learning (SEL) in particular, how much input did you have into individualizing your own professional development opportunities?

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not supportive at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely Supportive

7. Overall, how much did you learn about supporting your students' social-emotional learning (SEL) from the leaders at your school?

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not supportive at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely Supportive

8. What professional development topics should your school focus on to better support staff and students' social-emotional growth?

9. Do you feel the district and school are supporting your social-emotional growth through meaningful professional development workshops and/or training?

APPENDIX C: TEACHER BI-WEEKLY SEL REFLECTION

1. How confident do you feel that you can easily integrate SEL into your classroom?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident Extremely confident

2. How confident are you that you can engage students who are not typically motivated?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident Extremely confident

3. How confident are you that you can help your school's most challenging students to learn?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident Extremely confident

4. Thinking about social awareness, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident / I'm not sure what is meant by social awareness Extremely confident

5. Thinking about self-awareness, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident / I'm not sure what is meant by self-awareness Extremely confident

6. Thinking about self-management, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident / I'm not sure what is meant by self-management Extremely confident

7. Thinking about responsible decision making, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident / I'm not sure what is meant by responsible decision making Extremely confident

8. Thinking about relationship skills, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all confident / I'm not sure what is meant by relationship skills Extremely confident

9. After learning about and implementing these SEL skills/strategies, I saw an improvement in my own instruction.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly Agree

10. After learning about and implementing these SEL skills/strategies, I saw an improvement with my students.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

11. What is the most effective thing you did in these last two weeks to meet the social-emotional learning of your students?

12. Why was this so effective?

13. What made this strategy or skill easy to embed into your classroom?

14. What professional development topics should your school focus on to better support you and/or your students' social-emotional growth?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS-GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of SEL and how it fits into the school?
2. Do you feel the training you have received has increased your SEL knowledge?
3. Do you believe SEL is vital to student success? Why/why not? (And what has changed your view if it has changed at all)
4. What do you feel is still needed?
5. What do you believe are the biggest obstacles to implementing SEL across the grade level and across the whole building?
6. How can administration support you better? (What do you need from school leadership to be successful?)
7. What do you believe are the next steps for this team?
8. Which skills taught have been implemented more than others? Why do you believe this is?
9. How often do you find yourself implementing skills and strategies learned in these workshops?

APPENDIX E: STUDY INVITATION TO ONLINE SURVEYS

Dear _____:

I am Karolyn Rodriguez, and I am an Educational Doctoral Student with Sacred Heart University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study about teacher perceptions of preparedness and comfort in implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. The specific purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of preparedness and competence to support trauma-exposed students in an urban environment.

Why are you receiving this invitation? You are receiving this invitation because you are a member of the WMS staff who will part of the SEL school-wide team. Neither your name nor your email address has been provided to anyone other than me. Should you choose to participate in this study, your participation will be anonymous, and neither I, nor anyone else will be able to know if you participated in this study.

Are you eligible? You are eligible to participate in this study if you were a member of the WMS staff for the 2021–2022 school year.

What will you be asked to do? If you choose to participate in this study, you will fill out an online questionnaire at two times different points this year. The survey takes about 10–15 minutes to complete. The questions are about your sense of preparedness and comfort in implementing SEL into the classroom to support students. In addition, you will be asked to fill out reflection survey at the end of each two-week cycle of integrating SEL skills into the classroom. This should only take approximately 5–10 minutes.

Is participation voluntary? Of course, it is. I understand that you may be very busy. I appreciate that you are taking the time to read this invitation. If you feel that this study would help us better understand how to serve you and your school, please consider participating.

How will I be protected if I choose to participate? You will be anonymous, and no one will know whether you participated in this study. You will not be asked for any uniquely identifying information. The IP address of your computer or phone will not be included in the data from participants. Therefore, it will not be possible to link your answers to you. We are expecting approximately 15 teachers from WMS to participate in this study and all data will be reported in

the aggregate. All data will be kept on a password-protected computer in the researcher's locked office.

What are the risks and benefits of participating? There are no risks to participating in this study. If you do participate, you may skip any questions you don't want to answer or answer and may stop filling out the questionnaire at any time. The anticipated benefit is the evidence that will be used to support better professional development and support for teachers relating to integrating SEL into the classroom.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact me at _____. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, you may contact the Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board at alpfl@sacredheart.edu or 203-396-8241.

If you are interested in participating clicking on the link below will take you to a google form where you may click "Yes, I will participate in the study." The information necessary to give informed consent will be on the first page that you see after you click this link.

LINK INSERTED HERE

Sincerely,

Karolyn Rodriguez

APPENDIX F: STUDY INVITATION TO THE FOCUS GROUP

Dear _____,

I am Karolyn Rodriguez, and I would like to thank you for participating in the online survey about your participation in integrating SEL into the classroom to support trauma-exposed students. You are receiving this follow up invitation to phase 2 of our study because you expressed interest in potentially participating in a focus group related to this same topic.

What you will be asked to do if you participate: If you choose to participate in this part of the study, we will conduct a focus group two to three times during the year through the web-conference service zoom.com or Google hangout, on a password protected platform and you may choose to participate with audio only or video and audio. The focus group will include open-ended questions about your experiences before, during, and after professional development and support related to integrating SEL into the classroom. The questions will be about your perception of different factors that impacted your ability feel supported and prepared. The focus group is expected to take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete and approximately 15 other teachers will participate in two different focus groups. With your permission, the focus group will be audio recorded only to ensure accuracy.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in the study is voluntary. If you prefer not to participate, that is understandable and will have no impact on your relationship with WMS staff. I understand that you are busy, and this may not be a convenient time for you to participate in the focus group. You may stop your participation at any time and withdraw from the study. You may choose to skip any questions you prefer not to answer. There would be no negative feelings if you choose to do so.

What are the potential risks to me of participating? Participation in this study is not expected to present any risk. Should you experience any feelings of distress during the interview or after, I will be available for debriefing and help you find resources for further support.

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be protected to the full extent of the law. You will be assigned a study code number. The digital file with the recording of the interview will be labeled only with the study code number and deleted after transcription. No names or other information that you could identify you or anyone else will be included in the transcribed interview.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact me, Karolyn Rodriguez, at ___ or _____.

If you are interested in participating: If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email. If you prefer not to participate at this time, you need do nothing. Thank you for considering participation in this study. Please retain a copy of this email for your records.

Sincerely,
Karolyn Rodriguez

APPENDIX G: END-USER CONSULTATION LETTER FOR PHASE I

Dear _____,

I am Karolyn Rodriguez, and I am an Educational Doctoral Student with Sacred Heart University. I am inviting you to participate in brief interviews for a research study about teacher perceptions of preparedness and comfort in implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. The specific purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of preparedness and competence to support trauma-exposed students in an urban environment.

These interviews will involve approximately 15 staff members of WMS and due to your proximity with the students and voluntary participation in the school-wide SEL team, your insight will be invaluable to understand barriers to integrating social-emotional instruction into the classroom and the impact of ongoing professional development and support.

Are you eligible? You are eligible to participate in this study if you were a member of the WMS staff for the 2021–2022 school year.

What will you be asked to do? If you choose to participate in the interview, I will ask you a few questions regarding your perceptions of integrating social-emotional instructional strategies into the classroom and the benefits or concerns regarding ongoing professional development to help you do so.

Is participation voluntary? Of course, it is. I understand that you may be very busy. If you feel that this study would help us better understand how to serve you and your school, please consider participating.

How will I be protected if I choose to participate? You will be anonymous, and no one will know whether you participated in this study. I will record your answers to the questions but not your name nor any identifying information.

What are the risks and benefits of participating? There are no risks to participating in this study. If you do participate, you may skip any questions you don't want to answer or answer and may stop filling out the questionnaire at any time. The anticipated benefit is the evidence that will be used to support better professional development and support for teachers relating to integrating SEL into the classroom.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact me at _____. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, you may contact the Sacred Heart University Institutional Review Board at alpfl@sacredheart.edu or 203-396-8241.

If you are interested in participating, you may circle “Yes, I will participate in the study” and we can begin the interview.

Sincerely,

Karolyn Rodriguez

APPENDIX H: END-USER CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. How do you perceive Wildcat Middle School is addressing social-emotional learning for students?
2. How do you perceive Wildcat Middle School is addressing social-emotional learning for staff?
3. What training or professional development has been offered that has been helpful to you in learning about and integrating SEL into your classroom?
4. What training do you believe is still needed?
5. Do you believe SEL is a school wide initiative and being implemented with fidelity across all classrooms?
6. What do you believe is needed from leadership to help staff implement social-emotional instructional strategies?
7. Do you perceive the ongoing professional development you are receiving to be beneficial to your own learning and to helping you integrate SEL into your classroom? Why/Why not?
8. Based up on your specific responsibilities, what has helped you the most in learning about and implementing SEL? What support do you still need?
9. How can the professional development sessions better support your needs?

Goals: Gauge and compare perspectives of teachers of whether current SEL practices are working and being implemented with fidelity / Gauge whether ongoing professional development is beneficial to all members of staff / perceptive-taking, determine validity/urgency of problem