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Case Study of an SEL Coach and Instructional Specialist: Understanding a New Role

by Dr. Rachelle S. Savitz and Dr. Jacy Ippolito

At the outset of the third decade of the 21st century, elementary schools in the United States are increasingly emphasizing the need to support students' social and emotional learning (SEL). In addition to focusing on young students' academic needs, many U.S. elementary schools now focus on providing safe and positive learning experiences that promote positive student development. While educators and school leaders have been aware of the importance of children's SEL needs for some time (Edutopia, 2011), the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of SEL teaching and learning for leaders, teachers, and parents. Moreover, researchers and educators have also begun to explore critical connections between students' SEL skills and literacy learning (Dawson et al., 2020; Gold et al., 2021; Lau & Shea, 2022). This relatively recent focus on SEL skills, and their connections to academic skills such as literacy, may not be surprising given that even our youngest students have grappled with cognitive and social learning challenges across and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022).

Throughout the pandemic, children of all ages endured tremendous loss and grief, interrupted schooling, and social isolation. Research shows that the pandemic heightened mental health issues for adults and students, impacting the learning and engagement of students (Zieher et al., 2021). Meanwhile, students' reading achievement declined or remained stagnant on standardized reading assessments, according to the Nation's Report Card (2022). Therefore, more schools and districts are creating daily or weekly time to address students' SEL needs to support their ability to make good decisions, build necessary social capital, and engage more fully with literacy and academic learning tasks.

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As SEL moves to the forefront of education, new roles emerge in districts nationwide: SEL coaches, instructional specialists, and directors. While all educators may support SEL work, educators taking on these new SEL-specific roles often lead SEL professional learning and guide the implementation of new SEL curricula. Districts are hiring SEL specialists into new roles at an unprecedented rate, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and children's related, ongoing SEL needs.

However, little is known about how SEL specialists describe and understand their relatively new roles. If these roles are to be influential in schools and districts, potentially supporting increased literacy learning for students (Dawson et al., 2020), then we need to learn much more about how they may support SEL as well as academic teaching and learning efforts (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Frey et al., 2019). As a starting point, this case study explores how one district-based SEL specialist describes her role and impact. To situate and contextualize our case study research, we first share a brief history of the rise of SEL as a movement in the United States.

Brief History and Importance of SEL as a Core Component of Schooling

While some might argue that the basic tenets of SEL began with character development, which has been a longtime priority in schools, more formal notions of SEL as we know it began in the 1960s. James Comer began focusing school programs on the social-emotional needs of students through the Child Study Center within the Yale School of Medicine (Edutopia, 2011). Years later, SEL came to the attention of most elementary schools, leaders, and teachers because of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) formation in 1994 and the solidification of the term "social and emotional learning."

Jones and Bouffard (2012) broadly categorized SEL into three interrelated sets of skills: cognitive processes, emotional processes, and interpersonal skills. CASEL (2020) emphasizes that SEL must support students' ability to "apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." CASEL has thus identified five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that make up what we commonly refer to as SEL: "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (CASEL, 2020).

Over the past five years, SEL has become more prominent as a necessary driver and support for various schoolwide goals: academic success, school climate, positive behavioral programming, equity and inclusion work, and trauma-informed teaching and learning practices. As a driver of academic learning (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Frey et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016), SEL benefits include building students' resilience, character, and empathy, connecting with others, and increasing students' motivation (CASEL, 2020). Notably, many of these self-regulation and executive function skills are embedded within the "active self-regulation" component of the "Active View of Reading Model" (p. S33) recently put forth as an updated model of reading comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). In other words, as a field, educational research is increasingly coming to terms with the interrelated ways in which SEL, self-regulation, and executive functioning skills bolster and sometimes subvert academic and literacy learning.

Furthermore, beyond individual students and classrooms, SEL-focused work is increasingly implemented to strengthen a positive school climate by integrating these skills into larger efforts to strengthen school culture via building relationships and social capital among students, teachers, and administration (Frey et al., 2019). Over time, "educators and students develop the language and strategies to address specific behavioral and emotional challenges related to issues such as perspective-taking, empathy, emotional regulation (including stress management), and the role of emotion in the problem-solving process" (Pawlo et al., 2019, p. 39).

Relatedly, SEL may support the advancement of educational equity when soliciting and acting on input from teachers, school leaders, and family and community members (CASEL, 2020). Jagers and colleagues (2019) use the term "transformative SEL" to emphasize how SEL can explicitly address issues "such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination" (p. 163) when all stakeholders work to build respectful relationships that critically examine issues of inequity. Without doing so, SEL initiatives may contribute to harmful and deficit narratives about students of color, conceptualized through a colorblind perspective (Jones et al., 2020; Simmons, 2021).

With so many potential benefits for teachers and students, SEL initiatives were authorized and promoted by the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011 as part of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This authorization led to funding opportunities through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and advocacy for adopting SEL work in PreK-12 schools (Ekland et al., 2018; S. Jones et al., 2019). School districts created new positions at the school and district level, such as SEL coaches or instructional specialists, taking advantage of the available funding. With SEL still being a relatively new

concept to many school stakeholders, school administrators began relying on formal curricula with the heaviest emphasis on positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) (Elias, 2019). This reliance caused many districts to haphazardly implement SEL standards (Ekland et al., 2018) or to select SEL programs without the necessary comprehensive and systemic approach to choosing the best next steps for the school community based on their needs and objectives (Dusenbury et al., 2014; Thayer et al., 2019).

Although SEL-focused research exists—on SEL implementation and sustainability in schools (Durlak, 2015; Meyers et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016), particularly to improve school climate (Voight & Nation, 2016); surfacing how teachers make sense of SEL and teacher-identified needs for successful implementation (Marsh & Kennedy, 2020); describing how SEL skills support academic improvement for historically marginalized student populations (Elias et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Rowe & Trickett, 2018); and research related to testing students' SEL skills (McKown, 2019; Zernike, 2016)—we know much less about the roles of social-emotional coaches. Currently, little research exists describing SEL coach and specialist's roles and the impact they hope to have on schools and districts. Therefore, with these roles in their infancy, this study explored the roles and responsibilities of a recently hired district SEL instructional specialist and coach to determine how she describes and understands her work.

Looking to Literacy Specialists and Coaches to Understand Evolving Roles

Sometimes, when a body of research and practice literature is nascent or does not exist, we need to look to an adjacent body of literature as a starting point for our understanding. In the case of SEL coaches and specialists, very little is written to date about these roles and the delivery of SEL professional learning (Edmond et al., 2021; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). As part of our effort to understand how newly minted SEL educators describe and understand their work, we began by investigating the body of literature representing the evolving roles of literacy specialists and coaches for potential antecedents to the SEL coach/specialist movement.

Research on the roles and responsibilities of literacy specialists and coaches has emerged slowly over the past handful of decades, stretching back to at least the 1960s and the creation of "Title I teachers" as part of the 1965 federal funding of reading education in the U.S. (Dole, 2004). Much like how ESSA has funded the widespread hiring of SEL coaches and specialists, federal funding in the middle of the 20th century greatly supported the proliferation of literacy specialists and coaches nationwide in the United States.

Since the 1960s, and the introduction of Title I teachers, the roles of reading specialists and coaches have fluctuated in schools, sometimes focusing more on direct literacy intervention work with students and sometimes tilting more towards adult professional learning support for teachers. The 1970s, 80s, and 90s saw the rise of the dedicated literacy coach in U.S. schools, a qualitatively different role from literacy specialists. Coaches explicitly worked with adults as job-embedded literacy professional developers. The International Literacy Association (ILA), previously named the International Reading Association (IRA), has supported national and international efforts to define the roles, responsibilities, and preparation standards of literacy specialists and coaches for decades. These efforts have included trying to explain the roles of elementary literacy coaches (International Reading Association, 2004a), outlining standards for elementary literacy coach preparation and professional work (International Reading Association, 2004b), as well as standards for literacy coaches at middle and high school levels (International Reading Association, 2006). Standards for the preparation of specialized literacy professionals were revised in 2010 (International Reading Association, 2010) and again in 2017 (International Literacy Association, 2018) in response to the shifting realities of literacy coach and specialist work in schools.

Across these various definitional and standards-based documents, we have witnessed several important shifts. For instance, the 2010 revision of the IRA standards merged the "Reading Specialist/Literacy Coach" roles into a single position. In contrast, the 2017 revisions to the standards once again pulled the roles apart,

emphasizing the additional training in adult learning and professional development that coaches require. The 2017 standards also went a step further in coining a new phrase, "specialized literacy professionals," which encompasses literacy specialists (interventionists working directly with students), literacy coaches (job-embedded professional developers who work in schools and districts), and literacy coordinators/supervisors (often district-based professionals who support coaches, specialists, and school leaders). This umbrella term signals the definitional and professional interconnections among these roles while preserving and highlighting the differences among roles along a continuum of working with students, adults, and systems. In this latest set of ILA standards, we can see the maturation of a set of specialist and coaching roles that have been evolving for decades. It may be the case that newly emergent SEL specialist, coach, and director roles may follow a similar definitional and evolutionary trajectory.

In looking at the standards and literature on literacy specialists and coaches for hints about how newly emerging SEL specialists and coaches might operate, what seems clear over time is that literacy specialists and coaches wear many hats (Deussen et al., 2007; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). They frequently toggle between working with students and adults (Pletcher et al., 2019). Moreover, coach and specialist work is highly influenced by local school and district context—significantly influencing how their work is framed and supported (or not) by the school and district leaders (Bean et al., 2018; Ippolito & Bean, in press; Woulfin et al., 2023).

Across the research and practice literature, much is now known about the work and impact of elementary literacy specialists and coaches (Ippolito et al., 2021), including how literacy coaches form and manage relationships with teachers (Ippolito, 2010; Robertson et al., 2020) and impact teaching and learning at scale (Kraft et al., 2018). However, though we know much about literacy specialists and coaches in 2023, we must understand that this knowledge results from decades of interconnected research, practice, and policy work. As we focus on the study of SEL specialists, coaches, and directors, we can build on the foundation of literacy coaching/specialist literature and attend to qualitative differences.

Beginning with a Case Study: Methods

For this study we employed an exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2018), which allowed for the detailed description and surfacing of questions critical to the field. Using primary data in the form of interviews and secondary data in the form of artifacts, we explored one district SEL specialist's description of her roles and responsibilities, including how she described and understood her role and responsibilities, and how she enacted each. The following overarching research question guided our study: *How does someone who holds the role of a district SEL specialist describe, understand, and enact their work, particularly balancing their many different role responsibilities?*

Context and Demographics

The context of this study was a public school district in the Northeastern part of the United States. At the time of data collection, the school district served just under 4000 students, with over 75% identifying as white and just over 10% eligible for free or reduced lunch. The district employed four district-based coaches (i.e., personalized learning and academic coaches), with Julie (pseudonym) designated as the SEL specialist of the quartet. We selected this district because of its recent creation of this new SEL role and its firm stance on embedding SEL within the school curriculum, teacher instruction, and professional learning for district faculty.

Julie identifies as a white cis-gender female. She holds a master's degree in special education and has taught in various roles for over 13 years in the district. At the time of the study, she was the district-based SEL specialist/coach, a position which she had held for two years. The district-based SEL position initially focused on K-5 and crept up across grade levels based on teacher-identified needs or requests. In addition to her primary role, she co-facilitated the new teacher induction and mentoring program for the district and the district-wide implementation of their PBIS framework.

Data Sources: Interviews and Artifacts
Julie was interviewed on May 27, June 4, and June 9, 2021. While each interview had a pre-determined guide and intent, we also used knowledge gained during preceding interviews to inform what was asked next. To better understand and contextualize Julie's job responsibilities, we collected Julie's original posted job description and sample weekly schedules from multiple times across two years of Julie's Google calendar. Her job description provided the necessary background information related to expectations, requirements, and responsibilities listed for her new position. The randomly selected calendar snapshots provided us with a more detailed sampling of the kinds of required meetings and engagements she scheduled related to her role with staff, faculty, and students.

Data Collection and Analysis
Learning about Julie's many roles as part of her position was our first step to understanding this new role in school districts. However, this led to additional questions, such as how Julie enacted these roles and integrated all her roles and responsibilities within her single professional position. For instance, we wondered: How does she continuously integrate her expertise and interests to support her colleagues? Moreover, what is essential and needed within this role from Julie's perspective? Therefore, in our second and third interviews, we probed further to understand better *how* Julie integrated and made sense of balancing her many responsibilities.

Interviews via Zoom were video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed inductively for emergent themes. We engaged in open and axial coding methods, with each researcher coding the data separately and then comparing and corroborating. Preliminary case codes were developed (e.g., history, focus, format) and subsequently refined based on analyzing all data from each interview. For instance, "focus" ultimately shifted to "SEL focus," "special education focus," "equity focus," and "blended focus." Emergent and refined codes were revised iteratively and negotiated between researchers until consensus was reached. Data across all interviews were compiled and compared to identify common patterns, leading to themes. This approach allowed for both validation and refinement of analysis (Yin, 2018).

Findings

Original Role Specification: What Might an SEL Specialist/Coach Be Responsible For?
We first tried to understand Julie's SEL specialist roles and responsibilities by reviewing her formal job posting of 56 bullet points. Of those listed, the vast majority aligned with roles typically found for an instructional coach, including:

- creating and providing professional development;
- working with and overseeing mentorship programs for school faculty, families, and communities;
- providing onsite individual coaching and demonstrating effective practices;
- gathering and using assessment data to create data-driven goals and initiatives; and
- having knowledge in gathering and sharing resources across faculty and schools.

There were 22 SEL-specific bullets in the job posting connected to initiatives at the classroom-, school-, and district levels (e.g., "act as a catalyst for building a school learning community that focuses on SEL needs of students"). Seventeen of the bullets connected explicitly with Positive Behavior Supports, behavior management, and similar elements of special education. Equity was explicitly referenced in six bullets in the list and focused on expertise and leadership in Restorative Justice practices and support of "Culturally Responsive-Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports" at specific schools. Notably, the role description highlighted that the candidate must possess cultural competence to navigate difficult conversations about race, socioeconomic status, and other equity-related factors.

Perhaps, because this job was created with Julie in mind as an internal candidate, this position called for a vast array of knowledge and expertise. However, these responsibilities read more like a recipe of qualifications and not specific descriptions of the role. This

lack of clarity made us wonder how Julie translated these descriptions into specific work with teachers, leaders, and students across the district. Ultimately, these wonderings led to the exploration of how Julie described and understood her role and how it is enacted in the district.

The Many Roles that Julie Plays: Understanding Julie's Roles as Enacted

During her interviews, Julie discussed her discomfort with how her position had so many bullet points covering a wide range of responsibilities; furthermore, each bullet was relatively vague, without clear examples of what each might entail in real life. Due to this, Julie shared the necessity of adjusting her responsibilities over two years to better support specific teacher, school, and district initiatives. Learning of this adjustment and wanting to learn more about her roles and responsibilities, we asked Julie to share several representative weeks across the two years of her Google work calendar. Based on an analysis of her calendar and our analysis of the interviews, we identified three core roles Julie played over time—that of a coach, a professional learning provider, and a connector—each of which dwarfed other smaller roles and responsibilities on her schedule (e.g., directly supporting colleagues, students, and community members). While these minor roles were common, they often occurred in small or ad-hoc ways.

The Role of Coach

Aligning with her job description, emphasizing supporting, mentoring, and modeling for others, Julie spent much of her time directly working with teachers in one-on-one, small- and large-group settings. She used a traditional coaching gradual release model that started with an initial step of problem-solving or identifying an instructional move, modeling for her colleagues, then co-planning and co-teaching before observing the teacher and debriefing. The debriefing step provided the teacher immediate feedback on the discussion, interaction, and content to support teacher-identified next steps. Julie also gathered teacher feedback to improve her coaching skills.

Focusing on depth over breadth in her coaching work (instead of relying on "one and done" discussions), Julie tried to meet and collaborate with teachers for six weeks at a minimum. A recent coaching example was when Julie supported a teacher investigating a specific action or behavior that communicated harmful beliefs to students. Another was when a teacher requested support to design SEL-centered lessons. A third example was when a teacher sought Julie's support to create and teach lessons that connect SEL to content. However, this was not always possible, and there were times when teachers sought her help for a specific discussion or with short-term needs, such as brainstorming ways to try something new related to SEL or supporting teachers' ability to analyze behavior and academic data to set goals and inform instruction. Julie negotiated with each teacher to agree to at least putting "three visits on the books" in such cases.

The Role of Professional Learning Provider

Beyond her direct coaching work with individuals and teams of teachers, Julie took what she learned in each classroom or school and created new professional learning opportunities across the district in response to requests for support, identified needs, and pre-planned professional learning initiatives. At times, whole-group sessions were synchronous, with up to roughly 100 educators in attendance. At other times, educators participated in grade bands, such as K-2 or grades 3-5, or they participated across grade levels according to their interest in a specific topic. Gatherings occurred year-round, and after each, Julie followed up with individual in-person or virtual "drop-in sessions" to continue the discussion and prompt continuous learning with individuals or small groups. Julie explained that these were also opportunities to gather teachers' thoughts as she strived for "constant feedback" to improve herself.

Julie delivered innumerable larger-group, pre-planned professional learning experiences. These gatherings were more formal as peers and community members were invited, and there was a designated intent of the meeting, such as the one where all learned about trauma-informed teaching in the classroom. At other times, opportunities were more informal and not in person,

or what she called "bite-sized" pieces of learning. For instance, she sent newsletters, shared screencasts, and provided asynchronous options for teachers to preview at their convenience to support students' SEL needs in an all-virtual or hybrid learning environment. Teachers could choose online professional learning opportunities based on their interests and needs using a choice board, ranging from understanding trauma-informed best practices to equity/SEL-centered discussions. Other bite-sized learning pieces related to when teachers sought articles to read on a topic, a link to a previously conducted professional learning opportunity, or even an exemplar lesson plan that spotlights something they wanted to try in their classroom. Ultimately, Julie emphasized wanting to provide many options to spark teacher curiosity and learning, and if she did not have a resource, she would, as she put it, "keep digging" until she found it.

Finally, Julie led teacher book study groups related to curriculum and personal growth. For instance, one book study met monthly for five months to read and discuss memoirs written by or about BIPOC life experiences, with the books donated to the high school after the book study concluded. Another book study was titled "Uniting SEL and Equity for Action." Teachers chose one book out of six possibilities to learn how to embed empathy and equity work within their SEL lessons and practices, such as classroom circles.

The span of topics Julie addressed connected her extensive SEL- and equity-related expertise just as her job position required. She provided teachers and community members multiple ways to learn with and from peers. A common theme, and seemingly essential ingredients for her professional learning, was choice and voice. Teachers were always free to determine whether and how to engage with specific topics of interest. This notion of choice and voice was a cornerstone of her work as a professional learning provider.

The Role of Connector

Julie's desire to serve her school district and community led her to engage with leaders, teachers, and community members in another broader way beyond specific coaching and professional learning work. Julie spent much of her time "connecting" with district and school leaders to build a more comprehensive shared understanding and common language related to SEL and equity-focused practices across the district. Since Julie's role was new to the district, some of her "connection" time supported building- and district-based leaders' understanding of how an SEL specialist/coach could bolster teaching efforts across classrooms and schools, including district literacy initiatives. At other times, her connector role allowed her to collaboratively chart a path forward in the district that was related to SEL and equity efforts. For instance, Julie met monthly with the Assistant Superintendent to discuss the next steps with district objectives. These meetings were also crucial for Julie to discuss and request support and resources to implement new practices and learning across the district.

Julie connected with each K-5 school's principal, school counselors, and district-based coaches to learn more about how best to support each school's SEL- and equity-related needs. Julie always offered the option to schedule additional meetings based on preferences and needs. Julie and the other district-based coaches regularly met as their positions had much crossover in coaching topics and content. This instructional support team debriefed their experiences, brainstormed potential learning opportunities, and discussed new teacher opportunities to try out and offer throughout the year. Finally, Julie intentionally created space in her calendar to encourage communication based on individual needs with everyone in the district (including all teachers and specialists), allowing them to come together as a forum to "just talk and have a connection."

Across all these various "connections," Julie focused on building a shared understanding of both SEL- and equity-focused work in classrooms and promoting all to unlearn and challenge initial perceptions of students' behaviors and actions. Julie prioritized sharing bits and pieces about how her new role could support educators at all levels. By playing the role of "connector," Julie was able to broaden and deepen the impact of her work across schools.

Minor Roles: Supporting Teachers, Students, and the Community

As the pandemic continued to disrupt peoples' lives from 2020-2022, many students, teachers, administrators, and community members reached out to Julie as an emotional support person. In this role, she hosted gatherings and weekly appointments with individuals and groups to process local and national events and reflect on personal feelings and emotions. Julie conducted webinars and meetings specifically for parents and the community, with topics based on specific requests. She intentionally planned these meetings to include all voices and perspectives so that no one felt silenced, often as a liaison between the community and the district administration.

In turn, Julie was also available to directly support a small number of students across the district. When classroom-level student behavioral concerns arose, Julie supported students, first by naming the exact emotion they were feeling and then by discussing self-management and decision-making related to potential actions and next steps, strengthening student-to-teacher relationships. When this occurred, Julie also met with the teachers involved to prompt critical reflection and assessment of their nonverbal cues to determine if their words matched their demeanor and actions. "I Can" statements, problem-solving language, and identifying outcomes and next steps for students, such as tiered interventions, helped teachers and students pinpoint targeted behaviors and reactions and acknowledge growth.

How Julie Made Sense of and Integrated Her Myriad Responsibilities

As mentioned, we wanted to explore how Julie made sense of and enacted her many responsibilities. Julie emphasized three main ways that she synthesized and integrated her many roles: 1) through building relationships and ongoing communication; 2) through adopting a "blended" mindset which allowed her to see the overlap across academic, equity, behavioral, and SEL work; and finally, 3) through continual personal/professional learning and growth to stay up-to-date with current research and best practices to share with her colleagues. We review each below.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

We know how crucial it is for leaders to build relationships with all school faculty and community members (CASEL, 2020; Patti et al., 2015). Significantly, educators cannot develop and sustain relationships with a one-size-fits-all approach. Each person, school, and society has different needs and expertise based on lived experiences, backgrounds, and interests, influencing effective collaboration with others instead of telling or evaluating.

Creating her schedule allowed her to establish strong relationships with students, teachers, and school leaders in organic ways, building a solid foundation for coaching and professional learning endeavors. Julie wanted teachers to feel safe saying things like "I don't know what I want, but I want something" or "I want to talk about this…" without fearing judgment. When Julie approached a difficult conversation with a teacher or leader, she leaned on these relationships to provide all parties comfort and ease. This relationship-based stance was significant to Julie. She said she felt the "resistance [that] comes right up when you start talking about equity work."

Julie further outlined how she made sense of her relationship-building work. According to Julie, building relationships meant building trust, which takes ample time to get to know other educators (Frey et al., 2019), and is just a first step in what has been characterized as increasing "levels of intensity" in literacy coaching work (Bean & Ippolito, 2016; Ippolito & Bean, in press). Listening was another crucial skill for her to build trust; it provided space to hear another perspective, respond to questions, clear up misunderstandings, and much more. For Julie, listening was pivotal in her position as she worked with many first- and second-year teachers, engaging them in what she called "powerful conversations" about SEL-related practice. Moreover, Julie noted that her conversations with educators about race and investigating personal biases, misconceptions, and inequitable instruction could be uncomfortable, even more so with a new colleague (Aguilar, 2020).

During her second interview, Julie shared a personal

mantra she created with others to support these kinds of conversations: “When you’re talking, do a lot of listening as well because then that’ll give you that opportunity to shift [thinking],” which then leads to shifting practice in classrooms. Therefore, Julie saw it as always necessary to acknowledge concerns, value what was shared or asked, and ask clarifying questions. This series of strategies allowed Julie to stay focused on collaborative problem-solving. She would then remind gently that the end goal is always equitable instruction that supports all students’ learning. Finally, she used prompting to keep educators moving from relying solely on her as a support and more towards self-directed inquiry and investigation. She often ended conversations by asking her colleagues how she could “move forward with this, with you,” ensuring the understanding that she was there to support them based on their needs.

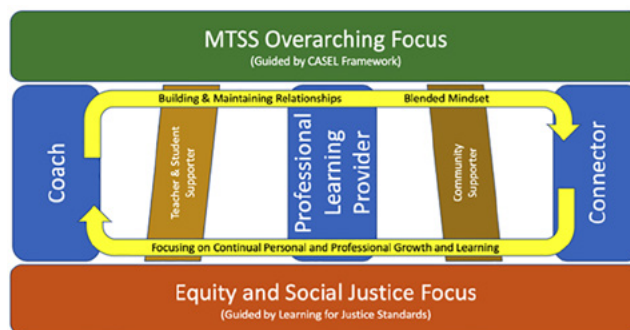
Adopting a “Blended” Mindset

Julie took on numerous roles as a district-based SEL specialist/coach from the outset. Sometimes her many responsibilities and roles pulled her in different directions and caused tension for Julie regarding how she should define her professional priorities. While some educators might find the work fragmented and disconnected, Julie was able to manage her many roles and responsibilities in part by adopting a “blended mindset.” In her first interview, Julie stated that “blending is the key to the success of the role so that you don’t see things separately.”

Julie clarified in her first interview how her many roles intersected by describing a house with a foundation of equity and social justice and a ceiling of MTSS (see Figure 1). Her perspective aligns with common MTSS and RTI perspectives, which posit that a strong foundation and necessary support embedded in the classroom and across school levels leads to less-tiered interventions with fewer students. While the foundation and ceiling are crucial elements when building a house, the house will not stand without proper supporting beams at various locations. These beams represent the roles Julie played and toggled between daily. Not surprisingly, Julie used the CASEL *and* the Social Justice standards as guiding sources to explore pedagogical practices that must be implemented in every classroom and school. She saw the integration and *blending* of SEL as schoolwide and classroom initiatives, along with positive behavior and academic interventions to drive equitable SEL instruction and curricula.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of How Julie Envisioned Her Work



Julie shared an example of how this blending occurs when working on identity development in classrooms, a common theme taught in schools at all grade levels and specifically within the elementary literacy curriculum. Julie saw the identity work occurring across schools as a prime opportunity to “blend” SEL, equity/social justice, and literacy goals in the district. Before exploring identity, one needs to develop a sense of self-awareness. Julie shared with us during her first interview that everyone in schools, especially teachers and students, must reflect on personal identity—what we are passionate about, our experiences, interests, and many other aspects of who we are—*and* learn with and from others. Determining who we are as individuals requires additional investigation into who we are as learners, friends, colleagues, and community members. Through this discovery, students and teachers determine their strengths and establish short- and long-term goals and ways to better themselves. Notice the SEL-focused reflection embedded in this work?

Next, Julie pointed out how this type of social awareness of self and others can lead, supported by her coaching of teachers and students, to the inclusion of critical literacy skills, the ability to question and

critically examine people, issues, and events occurring throughout the community and across the world and to assess how these views and learning impact how they view themselves and others (Vasquez et al., 2019). Then, through responsible decision-making and examining personal and others' decisions, teachers can lead students toward identifying and engaging in specific action steps toward social justice. Notice the equity and social justice elements now being raised under the same umbrella of "identity work." In this way, Julie held herself and all educators in the district accountable for doing their best to "blend" SEL and equity work at every turn.

Taking this one step further, Julie shared how blending equity and SEL work required curricula to be revisited and revised so that "diversity, equity, and inclusion" connected and led students to learn content in classrooms and learn about themselves. In other words, Julie believed that teachers and students could only sustain a blended mindset if the curriculum supported it! She shared how students could explore their feelings as they learned about situations and events that are challenging and complex, even asking students to identify what they want to do or what action they want to take. This connects directly to culturally sustaining pedagogical practices where students do not feel marginalized and instead are welcomed for who they are within the classroom, curricula, instruction, and materials—emphasizing that all students are academically valued and valuable (Ladson-Billings, 2021). For example, Julie described a recent example of wanting to support teachers with blending SEL and equity within their lessons when teachers showed a traditional photo shared during the holiday recognized as Thanksgiving. Students were to consider the following:

- How are the pilgrims and the indigenous people represented differently, and which is harmful?
- How does this representation make students feel when they see this picture?
- What information can be learned?
- What information can be questioned or pushed against?
- What do you need, or what strategy can support discussing this picture?

Through dialogue, students collaboratively asked crucial questions to learn necessary SEL skills, and they discovered truths within history that are often not told, learning new perspectives and becoming part of the learning process through engaged and active instruction. Note how these are also crucial skills leading to the achievement of disciplinary literacy, or higher levels of reading, writing, and thinking within each discipline, such as history (Ippolito et al., 2019).

Julie emphasized that to blend SEL and equity instruction, teachers also must know how to disrupt and confront the oft-stated stigma associated with SEL—that SEL is just a form of behavior modification to *fix* students—versus understanding SEL and its tenets as seeing, living with, and managing conflict and issues within society itself. For example, when a teacher sought Julie's support in teaching a PBIS lesson because of a disruptive student, Julie first prompted the teacher to reflect on which (if any) students might not be engaging with the lesson and materials and to determine potential reasons for the lack of engagement (including the "disruptive student," but also looking beyond that student at the entire class). Could it be possible that some students felt "left out" of the content or lesson, or some students were unintentionally marginalized? This thought experiment and framing of the conversation led the teacher to reexamine the language used during the lesson and how she was thinking about the "disruptive student." It resulted in a personal discovery for the teacher of how she may have unintentionally engaged in microaggressions. Therefore, Julie and the teacher identified ways to reduce student barriers as the teacher moved forward with her instruction.

Julie noted that, regardless of age, we all need moments to reflect on who we are and why we make certain choices, grapple with decisions made too quickly, and regulate feelings as we engage with others, especially when each of us has different lived experiences and backgrounds. She saw how inter- and intrapersonal skills used in daily life are connected,

whether conversing with friends, assessing classroom and student data, or something else. Therefore, Julie emphasized that SEL work can elegantly weave together with equity work so that neither is just another practice, reform, or initiative in classrooms taught in isolation for 15 minutes every Wednesday nor a specific SEL program that may not prompt teachers and students to engage in this work in meaningful ways. Julie noted that she was "not a fan" of scripted SEL programs as she "never encountered one that does exactly what we would want as a district." Instead, this work must be embedded and blended within and across lessons and classrooms.

Focusing on Continual Personal and Professional Growth and Learning

Finally, and importantly, as Julie maneuvered through her new role and explored ways to best support all students, teachers, and leaders throughout the district, she understood the necessity of being an ongoing learner to continually work towards becoming a more equitable educator. Julie stated during her third interview that "part of being a coach is being a professional reader" and even going down the "rabbit hole" to find new resources and information. Her thirst for continuous learning led to prolific reading; attending professional learning opportunities offered by local universities, the state Department of Education, and other nationally-recognized educational organizations; staying up-to-date with current best practices and research through organizational emails, newsletters, and revisiting previously recorded webinars on websites such as CASEL. She often interacted via social media networks such as Twitter chats with other SEL directors and coaches across her state, acknowledging that there were no other SEL-specific educators in her district to compare notes. Not only did these experiences support her growth, but she also found them essential to her rejuvenation when engaging in this, at times, difficult work.

Overall, Julie focused on how her professional learning could strengthen her expertise in service of then turning her learning back toward serving students, teachers, and leaders. She saw a strong connection between her growth and her ability to encourage SEL and equity-related learning across her district as part of a cyclical professional learning and sharing process.

Implications and Conclusion

This case study has provided several insights into the relatively new role of the SEL specialist/coach and implications for research and practice related to the creation and deployment of SEL-focused educators. First and foremost, this study offered the opportunity for a newly minted, district-based SEL specialist to describe her understanding of her many roles and responsibilities. Julie's description of her roles not only clarified (and narrowed) the focus from her original job description, but her description also surfaced several, sometimes conflicting, roles that she is currently playing in the district: from a professional learning provider to a coach of individuals and teams of teachers, to a student support specialist, to an advisor and consultant to school and district leaders.

Moreover, while Julie emphasized the immense autonomy of her role, she stressed the necessity to understand and navigate her many roles and responsibilities through a "blended" mindset. She saw how all the work was connected and interwoven. For Julie, the overarching umbrella of MTSS and bedrock foundation of equity and social justice work tied together all of her disparate activities. In addition to adopting a synthesis-focused or "blended" mindset, Julie made sense of her work by focusing on building and maintaining numerous professional relationships and approaching her work as a lifelong learner. These are powerful frames that other SEL educators might adopt, but they also point to implications for schools and districts wishing to create and support such roles.

Districts and schools wishing to hire and support SEL specialists, coaches, and directors might read Julie's case as a success story and a cautionary tale. While Julie could bring together and navigate her various roles and responsibilities effectively, other SEL educators may struggle with the large and varying number of roles. Districts might be wise to look to the literacy coaching literature (Bean & Ippolito, 2016; Ippolito et al.,

2021; Ippolito & Bean, in press; International Literacy Association, 2018; Pletcher et al., 2019) as future SEL specialists may require specialized preparation and job-embedded professional learning to support their primary focus, whether primarily supporting students in classrooms, coaching individual teachers and teams, or organizing and delivering professional learning for the entire district as a system.

Beyond implications for the preparation, hiring, and support of SEL specialists, another caution from the literacy coaching literature is the great potential for role creep and role confusion (Ippolito et al., 2021; Ippolito & Bean, in press; Pletcher et al., 2019). Educators in new positions like Julie's could easily find themselves overwhelmed with requests to support individual students whom teachers identified as needing behavioral remediation. Alternatively, principals across the district might see Julie's role as primarily supporting individual teachers or teams and requesting more time in individual schools. Suppose districts are not careful to delineate the primary focus for each SEL specialist's work (focusing on students, teachers, or systems). In that case, there is immense potential for simultaneously pulling SEL specialists in many directions. Just as has been found across the coaching literature (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017; Pletcher et al., 2019), the intended work of coaches/specialists is subverted when reassigning them to less impactful roles or tasks without warning.

Another implication of this study is that SEL awareness and support for adults and students cannot be the work of only one individual in a district (Durlak, 2015; Patti et al., 2015). While Julie was indeed the "assigned" person in the SEL leadership role, the district advocated for and shared the urgency for the dual focus on SEL and equity across all classrooms and schools. As Julie put it, she was just "one of many" doing this work in the district. That collective and joint focus on equity and SEL indicates some sense of shared leadership across the district office and within each school. Without a sense of collective urgency around these critical topics, Julie's work would have likely been less impactful (Frey et al., 2019).

In addition to these practice-related implications, there are further educator preparation and research implications. Schools of education and educator preparation programs would be wise to include SEL-focused courses and content in their curricula, not only to prepare educators to take on SEL-specific roles (such as Julie's) but also to support SEL and equity work from whichever position each educator may play in the district (from paraprofessional to teacher, to the principal, to district administrator). While some SEL-focused coursework is beginning to emerge in higher education contexts (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), much more can be done to support this work preservice. Furthermore, already robust literacy-focused courses within teacher, specialist, and coach preparation programs would be wise to highlight the ways in which SEL skill development can contribute to students' self-regulation and development of executive functioning skills, which in turn foster deeper literacy learning. By interweaving SEL work into already existing literacy preparation coursework, we will be priming educators to see SEL work as an integrated support for literacy teaching and learning (not an add-on).

Finally, several research implications emerge from this initial case study project. First, it will be essential to determine the extent to which Julie's experiences with and understandings of her roles are shared with other SEL-focused educators across the Northeast U.S. and nationwide. Survey and focus group research might help corroborate how current SEL specialists navigate their many roles. Second, future research may mirror some literacy coaching literature by investigating roles and responsibilities and determining SEL educators' impact on teachers' practice and student learning, perhaps with a particular eye towards the impact on literacy teaching and learning (Corcoran et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2020). Just as the causal chain between literacy coaches' work and improved student literacy skills has been difficult but essential to determine through longitudinal studies and meta-analyses (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Kraft et al., 2018), similar work may be needed to truly understand SEL specialists' impact on teachers and students over time.

While there is still much to be learned about how SEL specialists and coaches operate in schools and districts nationwide, this initial case study helps paint a picture of how they can play many vital roles in schools. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to fade, the newly-hired SEL specialists/coaches left in the pandemic's wake may be one of the lingering positive shifts in the world of education. The extent to which SEL specialists/coaches like Julie can navigate their numerous roles and support students, teachers, and leaders in districts will likely be a source of inquiry for years to come.

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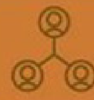

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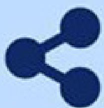

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