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A Design Thinking Mixed Method Study on Social-Emotional Learning Lessons for Early Elementary Learners

Emily Woodall

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by

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Lynda Leavitt	08/23/2024
Dr. Lynda Leavitt, Scholar Cohort Lead/Advisor	Date
Kristen, Levin	08/23/2024
Dr. Kristen Levin, SLA Evaluator	Date
Jeffrey Deckelbaum	08/23/2024
Dr. Jeffrey Deckelbaum, SLA Evaluator	Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Emily Sue Woodall

Signature: _____Emily Sue Woodall_____ Date: __08/23/2024___

Acknowledgments

This is for my parents, who valued education and always pushed me to be the be the best version of myself I could be. Mom and Dad, thank you for always encouraging me to shoot for the stars and never give up on the possibilities of what can be. A tremendous thank you to my family, who were cheerleaders throughout the endeavor. Another special thank you goes to my son Spencer, whom I hope to set a positive tone of the importance of education in your life. Go forth boldly and become educated; the future possibilities are endless.

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This brings me to Cohort 1, the five of whom became like brothers and sisters navigating new territory with me as we learned together and from one another. I have

cherished our time together as fellow students and friends. Thanks to all of you for your encouragement, feedback, and sharing these experiences. Good luck and best wishes in all the future holds for you!

Executive Summary

Social emotional learning (SEL) had largely been absent from early elementary curriculum, despite research which indicated the need for specialized SEL curricula for unique groups, especially students identified as gifted and talented, exceptional students living in geographically isolated areas, and unidentified gifted students from historically disadvantaged minority groups, including African American, Latinx, and Native American. The researcher proposed an SEL pilot in early elementary grades, including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, may create a scaffolded approach to SEL curricula throughout the students' educational experiences with a focus on scaffolding to specific subgroups, such as gifted and talented students with unique SEL needs. The proposed intervention aligned with the Lindenwood University Leadership, Ed.D. conceptual framework leading to organizational change in the domains of developing and transforming educational processes, practices, and organization through (1) human centric in that the research seeks to design creative solutions for the future; (2) sought organizational change insofar as scaffolding an SEL program to promote and evaluates educational policy and systems focused on continual improvement; and (3) deconstructed bias and misconceptions of groups, including gifted and gifted minority students, to create change and address inequities in education in the areas of Ethics, Equity and Social Justice.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, SEL, Affective Learning, Early Elementary Social Emotional, SEL in Gifted Learning, CASEL, gifted education, gifted and talented

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

Position of the Problem within Practice

Academically advanced students who were assessed as gifted learners required challenging gifted education programs which focused on both academic rigor and specialized social-emotional skill development. However, gifted and talented programs have been misunderstood and undervalued. By advocating for the doctoral candidate's school district's fledgling and young gifted program, the doctoral student's Problem of Practice involved expanding gifted services to an underserved, geographically disadvantaged population. Advocacy included educating the school staff and local community on the benefits of meeting the specific educational needs of exceptional learners. Additionally, the doctoral candidate sought to overturn misconceptions about gifted education to dispel the misunderstandings and elitist associations with gifted education. Additionally, the doctoral candidate sought to overturn misconceptions about gifted education to dispel the misunderstandings and elitist associations with gifted education. The doctoral candidate strove to provide educational equity with exceptional learners to meet the students' specific learning needs and promote social justice in education. The doctoral student hoped to promote gifted educational programs in nearby rural districts, too. The doctoral candidate strove to provide educational equity with exceptional learners to meet the student's specific learning needs and promote social justice in education. The doctoral student hoped to promote gifted educational programs in nearby rural districts, as well.

To increase equity in gifted education the researcher focused on targeted populations historically underrepresented; specifically, K-12 students from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds and/or geographically disadvantaged locations within rural areas. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to have access to gifted programs (Hodges & Gentry, 2021; Reinhardt, et al., 2020; Rose, 2001; Shi, 2019). Additionally, K-12 et al., 2022; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Lynn, & Glynn, 2019; McFarland, 1998; Rasheed, 2020; Sewell, 1963; Shi, 2019). By focusing on the missing minority student populations, an increase in student representation had the potential to open new doors for students, both figuratively and literally.

Peters et al. (2019) recognized the historical disproportionality of gifted education in the United States among Asian American and European American students perceived as overrepresented, whereas Latinx, African American, and Native American students as underrepresented per enrolled student demographics. A recent study by Hodges and Gentry (2021) found "students who are Black in the state of Florida are only identified at about a quarter the rate of students who are Asian or White" (p. 146). Research from Reinhardt et al. (2020) estimated the gap between students identified as gifted and their counterparts in Native American students who lived on rural reservations resulted in thousands of underrepresented students. Shi (2019) found in a highly competitive gifted high school, "SAT math score gains are 3–5 percentile points among minority students, lower-achievers, and those from rural neighborhoods or lower-achieving sending schools" (p. 2), which indicated the potential for gifted student identification if only a gifted program were to be offered to such students.

In a longitudinal study which followed the academic progress of 185 gifted students from varied demographic backgrounds in an inner-city setting, Rose (2001) found graduation outcomes and grades were based, in part, on income, race, and gender.

Rose (2001) further suggested “the course of academic achievement throughout the school career of a group of urban minority gifted and general education students, was the high graduation rate for those identified gifted students who remained in the gifted program until graduation” (pp. 16-17). The findings suggested the potential for much higher graduation rates in inner-city schools willing to adopt a gifted education program.

Framework Surrounding the Problem

As mentioned in the Design Based Research Brief (DBRB), the researched school district was in a rural community in northeast Missouri. With a population of almost 1,400 students, the educators in the gifted program served approximately 9.79% of the student body, as seen in Figure 27 of the district’s report card (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023). Gifted services began with push-in lessons in kindergarten classrooms during the second semester of the school year. However, no gifted services were offered to the four pre-k classes at this school district. The researcher sought to understand how existing resources could be modified to fit the needs of accelerated and advanced pre-k students who had already mastered the pre-k curriculum.

In Missouri, gifted programs fell under the special education services department. At the researched site, 200 students have individualized education plans (IEPs) out of 1,400 students, or approximately 14%, as seen in Figure 3 of the district’s report card (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023). For the 14% of the researched school district who are identified as in need of special education services, there are approximately 40 special education staff members. In fact, members of the “The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights estimates that six (6) percent of public-school students are enrolled in gifted and talented programs” (as cited in National

Association of Gifted Children, n.d., para. 4). At the researched site, approximately 100 gifted students received gifted services for the 2022-2023 school year, which comprised 7% of the total student population (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023, para. 27). While the number of identified gifted students receiving gifted services was commensurate with national averages, when compared to the special education department, inequities appeared. For 200 students with IEPs serviced by the special education department, the research site employed 40 staff members (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023, para. 10). However, for the 100 students identified as gifted, the researched school district employed two staff members to meet the needs of all gifted learners translating to a staff to student ratio of 1:5 for general special education students, but 1:50 for gifted education students.

Furthermore, special education services were offered by the researched site for ages 3-21 and began at nearby early childhood centers, but pull-out gifted services began at first grade, generally around the age of seven. The scholar practitioner believed many accelerated students' academic needs went unmet and educational equity was critical in the form of gifted education by way of proper teacher training and carefully established gifted programs to ensure all learners' needs were met.

Theory of Action

The researcher interviewed four stakeholders in relation to the problem of early childhood gifted services which did not exist at the research site –two administrators and two early elementary classroom teachers. The aim was to provide early childhood students with specialized gifted services so advanced, exceptional learners received enrichment lessons as an appropriate response to specialized education needs to the

specific population of students. While IEP special education services existed for ages 3-21 at the researched site, special education gifted services included push-in lessons for kindergarten students toward the end of the second semester which meant gifted special education services were being withheld from advanced learners until students were 6-7 years old, translating to a minimum of three years of specialized educational services being lost. Additionally, the researcher experienced many students who were screened during kindergarten were often missed due to unreliable screening measures and identified during first, second, or third grades. Without early interventions, the students may not be unidentified in future rounds of kindergarten gifted screening.

Primary drivers

During the interview, the four stakeholders shared responses as to why the researched site did not offer gifted services to early elementary students in the four pre-k classrooms. From the interviews, the researcher was able to glean two main drivers: lack of funding and difficulty in identifying gifted individuals at an early age. Both pre-k teachers noted a lack of funding put a strain on resources. Lack of funding included insufficient monies to hire another elementary gifted teacher, as well as the lack of specialized enrichment activities for accelerated learners in pre-k classrooms. Additionally, screening for gifted services comprised a substantial cost at approximately $25 per student for each of the approximately 120 kindergarteners to be assessed with the NNAT3 screener, as well as requests for re-screening from parents and teachers, which averaged 10-15 re-screenings per year (Pearson, 2024, para. 3). At the time of the study the researched site did not fund IQ tests, which averaged $125 per testing session, and would be the financial responsibility of the parent or guardian if the IQ score were

required to admit a student to the gifted program (Choiniere, 2024, para. 5), which was one of the methods of entry when NNAT3 and other screeners did not indicate sufficient scores for admission.

Gifted learners were difficult to identify at an early age due to several factors. Students aged 3-6 tended to come from a variety of educational backgrounds with discrepancies between students who were advanced readers and writers and students who had never experienced the classroom environment, reading, or writing. Research indicated early elementary children did not test well until older ages (Colorado Office of Gifted Services, 2020). Therefore, the elementary building administrator explained the need for objective, equitable grouping as a source for teacher referrals. Teacher referrals needed to be based in both qualitative and quantitative measures, such as student work samples and an observational checklist based on gifted standards, such as Missouri Learning Standards by grade or Missouri Gifted Learning Objectives. Determining readiness allowed teachers to place accelerated learners in groups based on grouping similarly-advanced students to participate in accelerated enrichment lessons based on the curricular units of the pre-k classrooms.

Secondary drivers

The two pre-k teacher interviewees stressed during the interview the developmental gaps between early childhood education students. While some pre-k students began the first day with prior practice in reading and writing, as well as prepared to some degree to be a student who sat in a chair and followed a routine, many pre-k students had little or no prior knowledge of school environments and expectations. Because of the situation, the researcher concluded pre-k students who did not understand

accelerated lessons or enrichment activities often acted out in negative behaviors, possibly due to frustration and/or boredom with an activity beyond specific ability or aptitude. Therefore, the need to group students by ability surfaced. Grouping by ability could have led to more educationally equitable lessons for advanced learners, while maintaining an unobtrusive method of providing enriching lessons for diverse learner needs.

Research Questions and/or Hypotheses

For the design-based mixed methods research study the scholar practitioner in consultation with the Scholar Cohort Lead/Advisor and Leadership, EdD faculty designed the following research question and hypothesis statements:

Draft Research Question 1: What, if any, are the advanced educational outcomes associated with advanced learning lessons in early elementary settings?

Draft Research Question 2: What, if any, are the educational outcomes do advanced learning opportunities have for early elementary students who are involved in associated lessons?

HA: The introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons will result in a difference in emotional coping skills.

H0: The introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons will have no effect on emotional coping skills.

Definitions

Asynchronicities in development:

"Gifted learners share a common characteristic: asynchrony, the disparity between cognitive, emotional, and physical development. This defining characteristic means that gifted students can develop unevenly across skill areas" (Nobbe, n.d., para. 3).

Emotional intensity:

Davidson Institute (2011) referred to gifted and talented individuals' tendency toward "emotional intensity" as "the passion gifted people feel daily. It also refers to the extreme highs and lows many gifted people experience throughout their lifetime, causing them to question their own mental stability from time to time. This type of intensity is a natural aspect of giftedness. However...also one of the most misunderstood attributes – and it is the reason gifted kids sometimes struggle" (para. 5).

Gifted and talented:

The National Association of Gifted Children (n.d.d) defined "giftedness" as "Students with gifts and talents perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential" (para. 1).

Impoverished rural areas and/or geographically isolated areas:

Nonmetropolitan areas, or rural geographic locations, were defined as "open countryside, rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)" (Cromartie, 2023, para. 1).

Multiple intelligences:

First theorized by Howard Gardner in 1983, multiple intelligences (MI) referred to "the idea that intelligence is made up of eight distinct categories: linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, spatial, naturalist, intrapersonal, and interpersonal" (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1).

Neural evidence:

Neural evidence was defined in the Journal of Neuroscience as the learning that occurs through "experience as a series of distinct and meaningful events. Information encountered within the same event shows greater temporal integration into memory as well as enhanced neural representational similarity" (Ezzyat & Davachi, 2021, para. 1).

Neurodivergent:

While not a medical term, neurodivergent is used to describe "people whose brain differences affect how their brain works. That means they have different strengths and challenges from people whose brains don't have those differences. The possible differences include medical disorders, learning disabilities and other conditions. The possible strengths include better memory, being able to mentally picture three-dimensional (3D) objects easily, the ability to solve complex mathematical calculations in their head, and many more" (Cleveland Clinic, 2022, para. 1). Gregory and Courtney (2024) described neurodivergent as "For the average individual, brain functions, behaviors and processing are expected to meet the milestones set by society for developmental growth. For those who veer either slightly, or significantly, outside of these parameters, their brain functions could be classified as neurodivergent" (para. 1).

Scaffolding:

"Scaffolding is a teaching method where adults support and guide children to learn concepts or skills faster than they would on their own. It involves providing children with the right tools and support at the right time" (Brightwheel, 2023, para. 3) and "scaffolding involves bridging the gap between what the children already know and the new knowledge they obtain. To teach effectively, educators must offer

developmentally appropriate support so that children can successfully move on to the next level of learning" (Brightwheel, 2023, para. 5). Furthermore, Hult (2023) explained "Scaffolding has been praised for its ability to engage most learners. When the learning is scaffolded students are constantly building on prior knowledge and forming associations among new information, concepts, and language acquisition" (para. 2).

Social emotional learning:

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined social emotional learning as:

> 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 show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (CASEL, 2024b, para. 1)

Furthermore, CASEL (2024b) elaborated explicit SEL instruction consisted of "consistent opportunities for students to cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive. These opportunities provide dedicated time to focus on social and emotional competencies" (para. 1). Cox (2023) defined social-emotional learning as:

> the process in which children gain and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to manage and deal with their emotions and feelings. From problem-solving to developing impulse control, SEL provides a foundation for children to be better able to cope with everyday challenges. (para. 2)

Whole-Child Development (WCD):

> The whole-child approach, or whole-child development, has been defined as a holistic development approach with the goal to educate the whole child, physically, socially, emotionally, and academically, with the active engagement and support of the community. The WCD approach recognises that all children, particularly those facing extreme adversity, require a range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and core values that will enable them to engage as productive and ethical citizens. (Tarricone et al., 2019, p. 7)

Moreover, because all students have social-emotional developmental needs and gifted students possess unique social-emotional learning needs (Nobbe, n.d.), the researcher recognized the opportunity to segue SEL-learning into the gifted program by providing SEL programming to all students as a foundation for scaffolding future SEL learning.

Limitations and or Improvement Science Researcher Bias

The scholar practitioner found numerous limitations in the study. Limitations encountered during the study included the primary researcher being employed at the school district where the research took place. Therefore, the participants in the research were colleagues and students within the same school district and building where the researcher was employed as a full-time educator. Another limitation included the initial parent surveys totaling over 100, but the follow-up surveys from parents totaled only in the 60s, which indicated a waning in participation. The study was completed in one rural public school district in the Midwest of medium size during the first weeks of the fall semester only. Consequently, results and analysis may not apply to schools which are not public, are of a different size, and/or are of a different location. Finally, the researcher believed the beginning of the year held a time when students and teachers were still

getting to know each other through a “honeymoon period at the beginning of a school year [which] lasts about two to four weeks,” (Parker, 2019, para. 3). It was possible the positive feelings from the honeymoon period combined with not knowing the students well may have led to inflated pre-test scores on the five areas of social-emotional intelligence as compared to the post-test survey which followed 12 weeks after.

Summary

Most gifted programs generally began in second or third grades due to the challenge of identifying giftedness in young children. Moreover, targeted social emotional learning programs administered by trained counselors also had been absent during early elementary grades, especially pre-kindergarten, for which no required social emotional lessons were outlined, and kindergarten, for which counselors made monthly or quarterly visits to the classrooms.

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between social emotional learning interventions for students in early elementary grades (pre-k through K) and the ability to better meet the affective needs and learning potential in early childhood grades to provide an SEL scaffold through elementary school. The research sought to identify the relationship between social-emotional intervention practices in academically accelerated early elementary students who are enrolled in preschool and kindergarten classes (ages 3-7) and social-emotional development outcomes. This group design will include students identified as advanced learners using the CASEL social-emotional scale inventory completed by the classroom teachers to assess SEL development based on classroom teacher observations.

Due to the lack of social emotional training in early elementary years, the doctoral candidate believed focused lessons would reduce the social emotional learning latency within these grades for children aged 3-7. Furthermore, the doctoral candidate held the idea for incorporating focused social emotional lessons for students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten was a means to scaffold social emotional learning during the transition from home to school years.

By advocating for the doctoral candidate's school district's fledgling and young gifted program, the doctoral student's problem of practice involved expanding gifted services to an underserved, geographically disadvantaged population. Advocacy included educating the school staff and local community on the benefits of meeting the specific educational needs of exceptional learners. After meeting with early elementary teachers and staff regarding the needs of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, the results indicated a strong need for applied social-emotional lessons and a recurring program to ensure students had opportunities for learning, practice, and review of appropriate intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions during stressful situations, as well as learning to manage strong emotions in a healthy and safe manner.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Social-emotional learning had been at the forefront of the whole child learning approach. While the diverse body of students reflect generalities, gifted and talented students possess unique SEL development needs (Davidson Institute, 2024; Ozkan & Kettler, 2022; State Government of Victoria, Australia, 2022; Tarrikone et al., 2019). Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) explained:

> Emotions and social relationships affect learning. Positive relationships, including trust in the teacher, and positive emotions, such as interest and excitement, open up the mind to learning. Negative emotions, such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt, reduce the capacity of the brain to process information and to learn. (p. 7)

However, several interrelated and integral aspects of learning were missing in public education—dedicated gifted programs to meet the needs of this population of exceptional students and early childhood social-emotional learning programs. A breadth of research indicated the absence of the two interrelated programs had led to significant deficits in student development (Byrd, 2024; National University, 2022; Nobbe, n.d.). National University (2022) explained:

> While SEL isn't a designated subject like history or math, it can be woven into the fabric of a school's curriculum. When educators make academic lessons more personal and relatable to students, students may be more inclined to participate and may be less likely to mentally check out during their subjects. (para. 12)

Student engagement was shown to be directly linked and essential to student success (Foster & Ambrose, 2023; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

(NCSSLE), 2024; Parrish, 2022; Ravaglia, 2023). Foster and Ambrose (2023) posited engagement results in students who "are not just absorbing content, they try to make meaning of what they are studying by putting in intellectual effort and working through challenging ideas...care about the subject, feel motivated or excited to learn, and take ownership" (para. 3) of their education with a focus on setting and achieving goals. Without these integral programs in public schools, students' unique learning needs were going unmet.

One reason for this wicked problem in the field of education was the result of local educational institutions in the U.S. having the authority to decide if and how gifted services would be provided, as well as what models of instruction would be included (Cash & Lin, 2021; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.b). State Government of Victoria, Australia (2022) advised high ability students may need special learning assistance and practice in the areas of peer relationships, perfectionism, asynchronous development, metacognition, and self-regulation. "Social–emotional constructs especially emphasized that learners who have been or might be identified as gifted are children and adolescents and they need to be treated as whole persons even when focusing on their academic and cognitive needs" (Oppong, 2019, p. 105). Byrd (2024) explained "Although we often define gifted students by their intelligence, their unique social and emotional needs are often a surprising challenge" (para. 1). Byrd (2024) continued "Although their intelligence is (by definition) advanced beyond their age, other traits may be slower to develop, matching grade-level peers or even lagging behind expectations. The fancy term for this is asynchrony or, simply, developing out of sync" (para. 8). Davidson Institute (2024) urged "While every gifted

child's experience is different, two of the main terms associated with the emotional development of gifted children are intensity and asynchrony" (para. 3). By understanding the notion gifted and talented students possessed unique, specialized social-emotional learning needs, educators had the potential and responsibility to craft unique programs to address the various asynchronicities which tended to accompany giftedness.

In Missouri–the state specifically within which the scholar practitioner conducted research– the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.c) promoted "Show Me SEL," an initiative designed to meet the social-emotional needs of learners in Missouri. One of the overarching five tenets of Show Me SEL included the "Gifted 'Living' Curriculum for Missouri gifted education" (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.c). Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.b) promoted the need for "appropriate social and emotional support...[and] gifted learners need services provided by well-trained teachers, who challenge and support them, in order to fully develop their gifts and talents" (paras. 2-3). "Missouri's Advisory Council on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children says about 40% of the state's K-12 public schools have a state-approved gifted education program" (Nelson, 2023, para. 2) which translates to another 60% who either do not possess a state-approved gifted program or do not offer any gifted and talented services whatsoever. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.b) promoted schools to:

> establish programs to meet the needs of students whose needs are not met in existing school programs because of their precocious capacity and learning

> potential. Gifted and talented students require a unique academic environment to meet their learning needs so they can make continuous progress. (para. 1)

Without "services provided by well-trained teachers, who challenge and support them, in order to fully develop their gifts and talents" as outlined by Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.b. para. 3), gifted and talented students were unable to actualize their potential.

Research indicated gifted and talented students whose SEL needs had long gone unmet or undermet often suffered from negative outcomes with the historically underserved gifted and talented group of students (Phelan, 2018). Phelan (2018) asserted "The absence of an affective education curriculum is a major problem facing the field of gifted education" (p. 12). "Profoundly gifted children experience their emotions and social development in a way that can significantly differ from neurotypical children" (Davidson Institute, 2024, para. 2). Historically, it had been documented "gifted kids are a unique and challenging group – for teachers and for parents. They view the world through an entirely unique lens, one that is best summed in one word. Intense" (Wirthlin, 2021, para. 2). Wirthlin (2021) continued gifted children struggled with:

> feeling troubled over ethical issues, rigid rule-following at play time, a vivid imagination, and even existential questioning at a very young age. Highly gifted children often struggle to express this intensity and may either direct this energy inwardly, presenting as moodiness or anxiety, or direct this energy outwardly as tantrums or yelling and outbursts. (para. 4)

This intensity refers to how gifted individuals approach life. At its best, intensity is the driving passion that enables some people to achieve amazing things – in any domain. Wirthline (2021) explained:

> In the emotional domain, gifted children experience the frustration of an intellect that is miles ahead of their physical self and their educational setting. Furthermore, asynchrony can mean that gifted children may lack the emotional coping skills to process their big feelings and rich inner life." (para. 5)

But at its worst, it was the turmoil that could consume these same individuals sometimes as children. Clearly, there existed an important need for schools to take on the responsibility of meeting the SEL needs of all students, and all subgroups within the student population, to learn how to manage the specialized SEL aspect of their personality.

Frazier (2023) recommended an asserted program "focused on building community, social justice, and equity...prioritizing the development of classroom communities where all students feel supported academically, socially, and emotionally" (p. 50). "A differentiated curriculum may be the most effective method of teaching them to improve the performance of talented children and support their social-emotional development" (Ozkan & Kettler, 2022, p. 159). Students whose SEL needs have been supported had shown significant educational gains (CASEL, 2023c; National University, 2022; Weissberg, 2016).

In addition to social-emotional development programs, gifted and talented programs have been misunderstood and undervalued (Grissom et al., 2019; Seward & Gentry, 2022; Weber et al., 2014; Westhuizen, 2007). The gifted education researcher

seeks to overturn misconceptions about gifted education to dispel the misunderstandings and elitist associations with gifted education within the educational researcher's doctoral problem of practice. The doctoral candidate strove to provide educational equity with exceptional learners to meet the students' specific learning needs and promote social justice in education. The doctoral student hoped to promote gifted educational programs in nearby rural districts, too. One crucial method for informing stakeholders of gifted education–including students, school staff, and community members–was to dispel the myths or misconceptions and shared data-backed information.

Case For Social-Emotional Learning In The Gifted Classroom To Address Diverse SEL Needs

The arguments regarding the whole-child approach to learning had been well researched within the field of education. "While every gifted child's experience is different, two of the main terms associated with the emotional development of gifted children are intensity and asynchrony" (Davidson Institute, 2024, para. 3). The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development explained the whole-child approach as a combination academic and SEL framework, which "transitions from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children... connect[-ing] the dots to your students' success" (ASCD, 2024, paras. 1-2). Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2017) published:

> to meet the academic and social-emotional learning needs of gifted learners, the following should be provided to those students at every stage of development: learning situated within multiple contexts; differentiated educational experiences,

> including forms of grouping; adjustment in the level, depth and pacing of curriculum; and access to information about outside-of-school programs. (para. 2)

Research had made a strong case for scaffolding SEL lessons (Brightwheel, 2023; CASEL, 2024b; CASEL, 2024c; Rivin, 2023). Scaffolding academic lessons with SEL lessons held the potential to focus on the whole child's learning. "Scaffolding in child development sets a solid foundation for building social-emotional skills, promoting positive interpersonal relationships and good mental health. Traditionally, social and emotional learning isn't considered a core element of the educational system" (Brightwheel, 2023, para. 7). Rivin (2023) urged "the importance of instructional scaffolding in educational programs cannot be overstated... in both academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, a solid foundation is essential to reaching higher levels and eliminating pitfalls" (paras. 1, 3). Explicit SEL instruction had been delineated with by Durlak et al. (2010, 2011) as falling into the four elements: "Sequenced—connected and coordinated activities to foster skills development; Active—active forms of learning to help students master new skills; Focused—containing activities that clearly emphasize developing personal and social skills; Explicit—targeting specific social and emotional skills" (as cited in CASEL, 2024b, para. 6).

Research site considerations in connection with literature

Because the school district research site had recently developed a gifted learning program which provided whole-group lessons to all kindergarten students and a pull-out gifted program for grades 1-8, as well as monthly conferences between the gifted program director and gifted students in grades 9-12, the researcher was particularly interested in how scaffolding an SEL program for all students in early childhood

programs would develop with a focus on the outcomes of gifted learners' participation in SEL lessons and SEL skill development. Papadopoulos (2021) explained "gifted children's social and emotional growth is as important as their intellectual development as such growth provides individuals with the skills needed to experience, cope with, and efficiently manage the unique challenges they face when interacting with others" (para. 2). Furthermore, Ozkan and Kettler (2022) explained, regarding the whole child approach to instructing academics combined with SEL, "the key question for educators is not whether gifted students should be differentiated, but rather, how this process will be carried out" (p. 159).

Because the midwestern school district was rural, the researcher made several connections between the research site and generalizations of rural, medium-sized school districts. For example, the Pew Research Center published in recent years rural counties have lagged in population growth for several decades (Parker et al., 2018). The National Education Association (2021) explained "More than 7 million students are enrolled in rural school districts; an additional 2.5 million attend rural schools in districts that are not designated 'rural' by the Census Bureau" (para. 1), which translated to too many underserved children in rural schools. In recent years, research indicated a link between rural school districts and mental health decline (Henderson, 2022; Hughes et al., 2023; National School Boards Association, 2023; Stanford, 2023).

The Impacts Of Differentiated Classroom Lessons Tied To SEL Skill Development

The positive effects of SEL lesson implementation had long been studied and recognized as having positive outcomes in both applied settings as well as an aspect of the whole child approach for learning to occur organically outside the classroom (Cavilla,

2020; Luke et al., 2022; Shaughnessy, 2019). “Interest in social emotional learning (SEL) is higher than ever, as parents, educators, and policymakers recognize that children need more than cognitive skills for later life success” (Luke et al., 2022, p. 229). Luke et al. (2022) continued “Research clearly shows that social and emotional skills provide a foundation for success in school, college, and careers... [and] evidence suggests that children’s SEL can improve their personal wellbeing as adults” (p. 230). A wealth of research correlated SEL lessons with student personal development in affective and academic behaviors (CASEL, 2023c; Luke et al., 2022; National University, 2022; Weissberg, 2016).

Relationship to COVID-19 disrupter

In recent years following the COVID-19 pandemic, research began indicating higher levels of mental illness (Bishop, 2022; Cox, 2022; Li, 2022; Lowe & Van Rizen, 2023). Lowe and Van Rizen (2023) urged “As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to identify strategies that can achieve the twin goals of promoting both academic achievement and social skill development and acceptance among students” (p. 8). “As schools took on the daunting task of educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing student social emotional needs was key... As in-person instruction resumed, students carried with them the social emotional scars of the experience” (Bishop, 2022, p. 9). Li (2022) explained “the pandemic adversely affected student mental health, leading to an increased prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). This may have a significant impact on their mental health issues such as frustration, stress, and sadness” (para. 1).

Cox (2022) explained “amid the pandemic, children lost the ability to socialize and interact with others. These barriers showcased an urgent need for social-emotional learning to help promote positive mental health for children whose daily lives have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic” (para. 1). The abrupt and unprecedented disrupter of COVID-10 caused unique SEL challenges for students, teachers, families, “The stress of the pandemic, the social isolation, lack of technology for some students, loss of routines, and no access to school meals increased the need for social-emotional programs to be delivered remotely” (Cox, 2022, para. 4). Moreover, unique SEL needs post-pandemic continued to be exacerbated in the slow return to in-person learning with new social norms and continued anxiety relating to physical and mental health conditions. “Post-COVID, students are still reeling from the loss of learning, socialization, and other increased stressors related to the pandemic...This made it difficult for students to progress as they should have with their development of self-control, self-awareness, behavior, and other interpersonal skills that are essential to the social-emotional learning curriculum” (Cox, 2023, para. 6). Research by Layman et al. (2023) reported “many early adolescents self-reported loneliness, sadness, boredom, stress, and anger during the COVID-19 pandemic and that those students experienced higher rates of depression, anxiety, and anger as measured by validated scientific measures (p. 11). Early post-pandemic research by Hamilton and Gross (2021) revealed “The pandemic also revealed just how many young people need mental health services to address serious concerns. School closures dramatically illustrated the extent to which students rely on their schools to access trusted relationships with adults and peers, as well as a broad array of mental health and social services. Yet for the most part, schools have not been given the resources or staff to

provide an extensive continuum of support" (p. 13). More recent research by Díez González, et al. (2024) concluded:

> Teachers can be transmitters of this line of [SEL curricular] thought and provide feedback to their peers to generate a rethought emotional identity. The implementation of the program has shown how teachers value this opportunity to be able to generate a space to attend to feelings and thus be able to accompany fear. If these scenarios are not generated, we are silencing the unconscious, and therefore, these situations become detrimental to our future students. (p. 14)

Further research reported "students generally reported a decline in well-being, individual and social learning characteristics, lower ERE [Emergency Remote Education] adequacy, and a poorer overall experience during the pandemic. They also reported feeling more negative emotions during this time" (Podlogar, et al., 2024, p. 16). Clearly, a need for SEL curricula was needed more than ever in the educational system at all levels.

Myth: Gifted Programs As Elitist And/Or Unnecessary

Elitism had been a misconception of gifted programs. Haberlin (n.d.) explained the long-standing stereotype could be avoided when steps were taken, such as ensuring all students had enrichment activities, to prevent the semblance of elitism. For students from0 rural and lower socioeconomic areas, Wahl (2019) concluded the perception was "being able to ponder academic subjects and concepts is a luxury reserved for those who have time, and whose needs are taken care of" (para. 8). Without recognizing the specialized learning requirements of gifted and talented students and implementing both academic and SEL programs, the education system was not meeting the needs of the subgroup of the student body. In fact, The Hechlinger Report announced as of 2019, there

were 3.3 million students enrolled in gifted programs and estimated another 3.6 million gifted students whose needs were not being met because the respective schools did not possess a gifted program or were not being identified for various reasons, including large numbers of black and Latinx students who would benefit from gifted services (Dreilinger, 2020, para. 1). The untapped potential results in unmet specialized needs of students and the loss of talent within all levels of society.

Survey results historically revealed higher-income families tended to support gifted programs in comparison to lower-educated counterparts, who tended not to support gifted programs within a district (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Grayson & Hall, 1992; Knight, 2019; Reeves, 2019). Indeed, in creating and monitoring advanced learning schools of choice, parent-teacher groups had long practiced intensive examination to deter any misconceptions of perceived superiority (Kaplan, 2013). Besnoy (2005) heeded the advice to ensure the longevity of gifted programs, "educators of the gifted must become advocates and employ public relations strategies within their own school buildings" (p. 32). Stereotypes existed on many levels, so careful consideration of how students would return the investment to the communities through service-based learning had long been incorporated into gifted and talented programs. Novak et al. (2020) stressed the importance of equity-driven training for gifted teachers and educational leaders involved in gifted learning. Azano and Callahan (2021) urged "Gifted education programs disproportionately serve students from more affluent families. The answer isn't to eliminate the programs but to reform them to ensure rural, low-income, and students of color get equal access" (para. 1). Gifted minority students are considered *twice-exceptional,* as being gifted was considered one exceptionality and status as minority as

another exceptionality (Bonner, 2019; Hayes-Wilson, 2014; Saavedra, 2022; Seale, 2024). SENG contributor and African American gifted writer Seale (2024) warned from his own struggles as a twice exceptional student:

> if this [fulling potential] is a true goal for Black identified gifted children, we have to be very intentional about creating the psychological safety for these children to actually be brilliant. This requires a higher standard, a bolder vision. When we explicitly equip our children with the tools to not just play the game, but to play AND slay the game, we create the conditions that will ensure we no longer leave their brilliance on the table. (para. 11)

Twice exceptional, also written as 2e, also referred to students who were gifted but also faced other learning challenges, "which means that they have exceptional ability and disability. They are gifted in some way but they also face learning or developmental challenges (Arky et al., 2023, para. 1). The Davidson Institute writer Dlugosz (2021) warned:

> Like many other gifted children, 2e kids may be more emotionally and intellectually sensitive than children of average intelligence. At the same time, due to uneven development (asynchrony) or their learning differences, twice exceptional kids struggle with what other kids do easily. Because of their unique abilities and characteristics, 2e students need a special combination of education programs and counseling support. (para. 2)

Moreover, not only were gifted programs clearly indicated by the research as necessary to meeting the unique academic needs of gifted and talented learners, but the need for SEL programming to provide SEL skills development and overcome SEL challenges had been

well documented. Unique needs possessed by gifted and talented students included categories such as “Need for mental stimulation; May have challenging behavior when unchallenged academically; May have impatience or low frustration tolerance; Not monolithic group” (Pate & Betz, 2021, slide 10). Arky et al. (2023) warned “Gifted kids can use their strengths to compensate for the special need, and in the process mask their learning problems. Or the special needs can mask the giftedness. In some cases, neither the disability nor the giftedness is recognized” (para. 2). Young (n.d.) made the case for explicit SEL instruction for gifted students by stressing “social and emotional education should be a core part of any gifted curriculum. Too often...we assume gifted children will learn social and emotional skills without direct instruction, discussion, and reflection” (para. 1). Advocacy group Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) asserted evidence strongly indicated the need for specialized SEL for gifted learners (Shaughnessy, 2019).

Myth: Classroom Teachers Should and Can Meet The Needs Of All Diverse Learners In The Classroom

VanTassel and Baska (2007) reported gifted students had such rapid thought processing abilities the gifted population tended to complete assignments and activities more quickly than nongifted peers. Without additional and enriching activities to keep gifted students’ attention, Brown (2015) explained gifted students tended to become bored, which often resulted in negative behaviors and further exacerbated gifted students’ social and emotional needs. In fact, Brown noted educators tended to make uninformed choices insofar as how to keep gifted students from becoming bored. The strategies failed to serve student learning needs and included utilizing gifted students as teacher assistants,

the expectation was students would behave and wait quietly until peers completed the learning task, giving additional but not enriching work, expecting gifted students to work without assistance or oversight from the teacher (Brown, 2015).

Hertberg-Davis (2009) reported “Lack of sustained teacher training in the specific philosophy and methods of differentiation… [indicates] we are yet at a place where differentiation within the regular classroom is a particularly effective method of challenging our most able learners” (p. 252). Instead, Brown (2015) recommended teachers use the following strategies: learn about gifted students, recognize the asynchronous abilities of gifted students to provide enriching lessons, ensure high-level content of additional activities, pair gifted students for optimal personal growth, and utilize research-based lessons. Sisk (2009) asserted classroom teachers needed assistance and resources to meet the diverse needs of gifted students and nongifted students in the typical classroom setting.

Petrilli (2011) reported results from a three-year study and noted teachers who attended extensive differentiated education professional development and training programs often did not utilize the differentiated teaching strategies in the classrooms (as cited in Delisle, 2015). Schmoker (2010) argued when educators attempted to differentiate, teachers' lessons often suffered due to insufficient planning time and improper lesson execution leading to a lesson devoid of important time-tested lesson elements. Schmoker (2010) suggested our current state of education needed to focus on more traditional, curriculum-based instruction with practice and formative assessments. Research by Prothero (2022) indicated “Forty-six percent of respondents said that helping students to catch up academically leaves limited bandwidth for SEL,

while 37 percent listed insufficient professional development as a major challenge, and 34 percent cited students' social-emotional needs being beyond the scope of their ability to handle" (para. 4). Educators simply did not have the time, training, and resources to meet the specialized SEL needs of students.

Delisle (2015) asserted classrooms were too diverse with a mixture of low-ability, high-ability, average-range, and ELL students distributed to one classroom teacher expected to diversify the lesson for every student, which left teachers to feel defeated when unrealistic goals for differentiating for each child were not met. Research by Stetson et al. (2019) found teachers who participated in a differentiation study felt the negative aspects of differentiating lessons included feeling overwhelmed and having insufficient time to commit to the task. However, Stetson et al. (2019) reported teachers nonetheless felt the benefits of student motivation, engagement, products, and teacher learning outweighed the challenges. Reis and Renzulli (2009) reminded educators gifted learners were not a homogenous group; gifted learners grew and changed over time, and therefore, had specialized learning requirements to meet academic and social-emotional needs.

Myth: No Need Existed For Gifted Education At Early Elementary Levels

Most gifted programs began for grades as early as second or third, but research indicated gifted traits were present early on in life (Cavilla, 2021; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.c; Wai & Lovett, 2021; Yaluma & Tyner, 2021). Therefore, early elementary children benefitted from gifted lessons. Finn (2014) held "gain[ing] access to the future success that such an education often makes possible — the education system would need to identify these gifted children in early elementary grades in order to counsel

them and push them onto the right path" (para. 20). In a three-year gifted pilot, prominent gifted researcher Franklin (2009) also indicated minority elementary students involved in talent development programs in grades K student's academic career than peers who were not involved in a talent development program during grades k-3. Without academically advanced lessons for gifted students in early elementary programs, years of specialized educational needs were going unmet.

National Association for Gifted Children (n.d.b) explained early elementary aged children often possess asynchronicities in skill and ability development, lack of teacher training in recognizing gifted traits, and few opportunities for gifted enrichment for early education students aged under 8 years. NAGC (n.d.d) refers to these preschool and kindergarten programs as meeting the needs of "young high-potential learner (ages 3 - 8)...because few school-based advanced programs exist for this age group, few teachers have the necessary training to notice or serve this population" (para. 1). NAGC (n.d.e) urged programs to make environments as least restrictive as possible and ensure "activities and projects are student-centered and student-driven" (para. 4).

Prominent gifted researcher Robinson (2009) had long asserted "Rather than isolated, single-shot programs offered at limited grade levels…models of service that operate across the K-12 continuum and that are clearly linked to postsecondary opportunity get the nod from most experts in the field today" (p. 260). Beginning enrichment programs for exceptional learners had shown benefits in student academic and social-emotional achievement, but research indicated teachers had long cited a lack of enrichment for students prevented further growth and enrichment for students (Hofstra University, 2021; Loveless et al., 2008; Martirena, 2022). Gifted individuals had

specialized academic and social-emotional learning needs unique in comparison to classmates (Davidson Institute, 2024; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.f; Peterson, 2009). In fact, Martirena (2022) warned “Gifted learners, like all the children in the group, have the right to have an appealing and challenging learning context in order to thrive. It’s important to bear in mind that giftedness is not a synonym for academic excellence” (para. 14). Research by Smutney et al. (2020) explained teachers who were innovative and creative were most able to meet the enrichment needs of students who were academically-accelerated, but not yet identified as gifted.

The dissemination of accurate as essential in meeting the specialized needs of the advanced, yet unique, accelerated learners. Prominent researcher in the area of gifted McCluskey (2000) had long promoted the benefits of scaffolding gifted learning programs in that students who participated in long-term studies of accelerated learners involved in talent programs held higher scores over time, and McCluskey further indicated there existed behavior issues when high ability children were not allowed to learn at an accelerated pace, which added “an oft-neglected dimension to the debate, suggesting...the social risks may actually be greater for talented students who are compelled to ‘march in place’ than for those who are fast-tracked” (p. 9). Gifted programs were needed to challenge and fully support the specialized needs of exceptional learners (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.e; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.b; Renzulli & Brandon, 2017).

Underrepresentation Of Minorities

Arguably the most important factor educators faced in gifted education was the inequity between the number of students in gifted and talented programs compared with

overall population demographics. Historically, minority students–African American, Latinx, and Native American– had been underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford et al., 2021; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Sarouphim, 2004). The gifted population minority numbers had not been representative of student population numbers, which had created an inequitable distribution of gifted students.

Sarouphim (2004) had long asserted most gifted programs determined which students attended based on standardized test scores, which did not account for cultural differences and educators "assume that students from diverse and economically disadvantaged populations are cognitively inferior because many score low on standardized tests" (p. 61). Sarouphim (2004) continued by explaining minority students often scored better on alternative methods of assessment, which had been considered a more biased-free approach to gifted screening. Usually nationally representative, longitudinal data, Grissom and Reading (2016) asserted certain predictors factored into racial disparity, including low achievement in the regular classroom; students and schools located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods; the unlikelihood schools in lower socioeconomic areas possessed a gifted program; and teacher referrals without gifted and talented training measures in place to guide identification. Furthermore, Grissom and Reading (2016) explained even when schools had gifted programs, African American students were less likely to attend the programs even when the students qualified. Naglieri and Ford (2015) concluded "in many instances gifted Hispanic and Black students are often disproportionally denied access to gifted education because of the methods and instruments used" (p. 234). In relation to SEL development of minority students, Ford (2020) warned of "increasing Black-White achievement gaps, over-

referrals to high incidence areas of special education, excessive suspensions, under-referrals to gifted education and advanced courses, and excessive policing of Black bodies from head to toe as early as preschool" (para. 1).

Naglieri and Ford (2015) also noted English language proficiency led to another underrepresented group– English language learners (ELLs). The researchers suggested "comparing test scores across groups, regardless of whether the comparison is based on age, grade, income, gender, race/ethnicity, or English-language skills, should be conducted with samples that are as similarly matched as possible" (Naglieri & Ford, 2015, p. 237). A qualitative study exploring underrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners found variables that prevented learners from participating in gifted and talented programs that would otherwise qualify due to language barriers, overemphasis on testing, the need for collaboration and professional development, and the need to raise awareness on the issue of CLD students (Allen, 2017). Renzulli and Brandon (2017) urged:

> The education landscape in public schools around the world is adapting to increasingly diverse demographics with rising numbers of low income, language-minority, and cultural-minority group populations. These changing populations include the talent pool of high potential young people who are and should be the focus of gifted education programs. One of the biggest challenges facing our field is how to develop policies and procedures that are more responsive for finding and serving these under-represented students. (p. 71)

Clearly, the lack of representation of African American, Latinx, and Native American students was detrimental to educational equity in impoverished communities and geographically disadvantaged areas.

Disadvantaged areas include not only lower socioeconomic centers but also geographically isolated areas. The National Center for Education Statistics delineated "rural" areas into three categories: fringe, distant, and remote (n.d.). The definitions of the three varied, but fringe and distant rural areas were categorized as being 2.5 to 25 miles from an urban cluster or center, whereas remote urban areas were defined as 25 miles or more from any area considered urban (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Between 15-20% of Americans resided in rural areas (America Counts Staff, 2021; Johnson, 2017) and approximately 21% of rural residents are minority populations (Johnson, 2017). Johnson (2017) continued by explaining geographically disadvantaged areas faced challenges of proximity to resources and places, lower-socioeconomic communities, and properly trained educational professionals.

Wahl (2019) warned of the epidemic of rural life by describing rural America as "often the neglected child of education. Students live in dirt floor houses, attend schools in unheated trailers, access very few job opportunities and rarely get out of the area enough to learn about people different from themselves" (para. 4).

Parks (2021) outlined major problems facing rural schools, such as lack of internet and updated technology, outdated resources, a shortage of teachers–especially teachers trained in gifted and talented education. Even online educational resources traditionally overlooked the unique needs of rural schools, as was witnessed in the 2003 Brown Center Report, which indicated 42% of school buildings were occupied by rural

students whereas the term “rural” in comparison with counterparts “suburban” and “urban” was mentioned only 25% of the time in topics on k-12 learning media outlet Education Week in previous years (Loveless, 2003, pp. 10-11).

In fact, many schools received 50% less funding than other urban counterparts due to student enrollment funding disparities coupled with the economic burden of providing transportation for students who lived in the 72% of the U.S. classified as rural (Gutierrez, n.d.). The Hechinger Report indicated areas hardest hit by teacher shortages included rural areas (Morton, 2021). Morton continued noting not only do rural schools struggle to attract nonresidents, similar rural districts also are challenged to grow their own professionals due to low pay, unreliable technology, and the high cost of post-secondary education (2021).

Rural areas were described in the literature as impoverished (Dobis et al., 2021; Farrigan, 2022; Wahl, 2019). Wahl (2019) explained “When students are constantly worried about survival, being warm in the winter, having food, and most of all, money, thinking about school becomes secondary” (para. 8). Not only did rural schools suffer from infections such as lacking updated technology, possessing outdated materials, and constant turnover of qualified teachers, but many students’ basic needs were not being met, which could have indicated another factor in the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education programs. Wahl (2019) continued describing rural areas “isolation breeds stagnation…a lack of understanding…[and] a cycle of poverty that is hardly acknowledged because it is truly far away from everyone [legislators]” (para. 6) as well as fear of the unknown in rural residents whose families had continued this cycle for generations. Furthermore, “the systematic impact of poverty or lack of poverty on rural

communities is one example of the human factor that impacts rural schools" (Lewis & Boswell, 2020, p. 185). Hudson and Doogan (2019) explained "the unique role of geographic isolation in accounting for rates of mental disability" (p. 1) and urged the further exploration of rates of mental disability related to the geographic isolation variable, especially during formative learning years.

"Brain drain" is a phenomenon explained by the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee (2019) as:

> Over the past 50 years, the United States has experienced major shifts in geographic mobility patterns among its highly-educated citizens. Some states today are keeping and receiving a greater share of these adults than they used to, while many others are both hemorrhaging their homegrown talent and failing to attract out-of-staters who are highly educated. (para. 1)

Geographically disadvantaged areas had been shown to suffer the most from "brain drain" by losing its most talented and gifted individuals due to the socio-economic inequities amongst impoverished areas lacking in resources versus affluent areas with the promise of resources. In Missouri, the state of research, the educators who were more likely to be at the top of the national education distribution were more likely to leave than stay in Missouri (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2019). The U.S. Congress report (2019):

> provides evidence that highly-educated adults flowing to dynamic states with major metropolitan areas are, to a significant extent, leaving behind more rural and post-industrial states. This geographic sorting of the nation's most-educated

> citizens may be among the factors driving economic stagnation—and declining social capital—in certain areas of the country. (para. 6)

Without taking into account the sociocultural and economic impacts of students in geographically isolated areas, unique student SEL needs were being overlooked.

Neuroscience And Gifted Education

Investigators of neuroscience unleashed learning and education developed exponentially. A seemingly endless amount of knowledge became available educators accessed from studying how the brain received, functioned, and transmitted information. “Profoundly gifted children experience their emotions and social development in a way that can significantly differ from neurotypical children” (Davidson Institute, 2024, para. 2). Shearer (2020) explored manners in which neuroscience and the understanding of Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (MI) in the 1980s altered education and learning in the last four decades. Shearer (2020) admitted even though MI may not yet be considered scientific theory, even critics conceded MI was a “guide to inform instruction” (p. 50). Shearer (2020) went on to cite Plucker and Callahan (2014) “Neuroscientific research into human cognition provides an objective perspective on models of intelligence…as a basis for the design of equitable gifted education” (p. 51). A great deal of attention had also been given to how various MI activated neural regions within the brain. Shearer’s research was replete with a wealth of data which indicated the relationship between neural connections, MI theory, and learning.

A vast number of neural studies was conducted in the last four decades, and Shearer (2020) concluded:

> the evidence from a diverse array of neuroscience experiments indicate that each of the multiple intelligences have clear and coherent neural architectures. These networks support cognitive skills associated with both general intelligence and the kinds of divergent thinking observed in daily life. (p. 56)

Educators needed to understand the manners in which learning preferences and understanding were measured through neuroscience. While an understanding of neuroscience was not necessary for the educator to recognize how the prefrontal cortex was activated in various activities, the main takeaway was scientific research was able to identify the manners in which neural processing occurred.

In the graduate student's experience, allowing students to complete MI inventories to carefully reflect on strengths and weaknesses was a helpful way of reinforcing students' learning styles. By discussing the areas of weakness as areas of limitation with potential for great growth, students were encouraged to carefully consider goals. All previously noted ideas came together to assist in student learning: growth mindset and goal setting, understanding MI and each student's individuality, and a flexible and adaptive classroom for student exploration. Marenus (2024) explained:

> The theory of multiple intelligences proposes that individuals possess a range of different types of intelligence. In contrast, learning styles refer to an individual's preferred way of processing information, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. While both theories emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing individual differences in learning and development, multiple intelligence theory proposes a broader and more diverse range of intelligences beyond traditional

> academic abilities, while learning styles are focused on preferences for processing information. (paras. 60-61)

The combined theories and science were able to guide educators on methods of teaching and learning to realize and maximize all students' learning potentials. Shearer (2020) emphasized the points the teachers needed to value related to MI theory and placed importance on the classroom culture to be a safe place to experience and express strengths and set goals to improve limitations. By understanding how every student was different, from neural connections to learning preferences, teachers better differentiated to meet the needs of the students.

Furthermore, neuroscience indicated specialized needs between gifted children and neurotypical children (Cannella, 2023; Eide & Eide, 2022; Schmitt et al., 2023). Schmitt et al. (2023) explained "Understanding brain functioning and intellectual giftedness can be challenging and give rise to various misconceptions" (para. 1). Neuroscience research by Schmitt et al. (2023) found the "sample also revealed a high presence of misconceptions on intellectual giftedness" (para. 3). These findings indicated a combination of misunderstanding what it meant neurologically for gifted individuals' brain functioning, as well as the overall conception of giftedness, which researchers referred to as "neuromyths" (Schmitt et al., 2023). Research findings by Eide and Eide (2022) reported:

> Functional brain magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brings exciting new insights into our understanding of how gifted thinkers think... The orchestration of activity is planned and complex, and it seems to require the coordination of diverse visual, spatial, verbal, and sensory areas of brain. Gifted thinkers are rarely one-mode

> thinkers. Rather, they are great organizers of diverse and multimodal information. (para. 1)

Furthermore, Cannella (2023) explained "neuroscience experts say that giftedness looks different in each child" (para. 4). Cannella (2023) continued "At its core, giftedness is a brain-based difference that contributes to our vibrant and intellectually diverse world" (para. 19). Eide and Edie (2022) continued:

> these same neurological characteristics carry a number of potential drawbacks, including sensory, emotional, and memory overload, sensory hypersensitivities, personal disorganization, sensory distractibility, delayed processing due to "analysis paralysis" (or getting "lost in thought" due to an excess of options), and mental fatigue (para. 3).

Expansion of services in targeted populations

To increase equity in gifted education the researcher believed a focus needed to be on targeted populations historically underrepresented; specifically k-12 students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or geographically disadvantaged locations within rural areas. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to have access to gifted programs (Hodges & Gentry, 2021; Reinhardt et al., 2020; Rose, 2001; Shi, 2019). Additionally, k-12 students who resided in rural or geographically disadvantaged locations were less likely to participate in gifted programs (Azano, et al., 2020; Collins & Jones-Roberson, 2020; Hodges & Gentry, 2021; Jung et al., 2022; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Lynn & Glynn, 2019; McFarland, 1998; Rasheed, 2020; Sewell, 1963; Shi, 2019). By focusing on the missing minority student populations, an increase in

student representation had the potential to open new doors for students, both figuratively and literally.

Peters et al. (2019) recognized the historical disproportionality of gifted education in the United States both Asian American and European American students were overrepresented, whereas Latinx, African American, and Native American students as underrepresented per enrolled student demographics. A recent study by Hodges and Gentry (2021) found "students who are Black in the state of Florida are only identified at about a quarter the rate of students who are Asian or White" (p. 146). Research from Reinhardt et al. (2020) estimated the gap between students identified as gifted and the counterparts in Native American students who lived on rural reservations resulted in thousands of underrepresented students. Shi (2019) found, in a North Carolina study, located in a highly competitive gifted high school, "SAT math score gains are 3–5 percentile points among minority students, lower-achievers, and those from rural neighborhoods or lower-achieving sending schools (p. 2), which indicated the potential for gifted student identification if only a gifted program were to be offered to such students.

In a longitudinal study which followed the academic progress of 185 gifted students from varied demographic backgrounds in an inner-city setting, Rose (2001) found graduation outcomes and grades were based, in part, on income, race, and gender. Rose (2001) further suggested "the course of academic achievement throughout the school career of a group of urban minority gifted and general education students, was the high graduation rate for those identified gifted students who remained in the gifted

program until graduation" (pp. 16-17). The findings suggested the potential for much higher graduation rates in inner-city schools willing to adopt a gifted education program.

Legislation In Gifted Education

While legislation existed for special education services, the educational umbrella under which gifted services fell had only recently become a limited legislation in Missouri. In recent years, the Missouri legislation and board of education passed Section 162.720, which instituted mandatory gifted education programs beginning in the 2024-2025 school year, but only for districts who identified 3% or more students as gifted; however, no requirement for screening students for gifted services was required (Harris & Atwood, 2022). Whether district leaders were in favor of the mandate or not, one means of avoiding the mandate was simply not to screen students. Without an indication of the percentage of students identified as gifted, districts were unable to accurately determine the number of students who would fall into the gifted services category.

The doctoral candidate's problem of practice involved promoting gifted education to early childhood programs. Indeed, Missouri legislation HB 2366 introduced by State Representative Brenda Shields had recently changed to require districts to provide gifted programming in schools where at least 3% of the population had been identified as gifted beginning the 2024-25 school year (Andrews, 2022, para. 2). The legislative changes translated to more gifted students being identified and served to promote educational equity for exceptional learners. For the scholar practitioner, the end users included district, local, state, and national gifted programs. Specifically, the doctoral candidate sought to first identify local stakeholders: early childhood teachers, gifted teachers and especially new gifted teachers, and local school districts who implemented newly created

gifted programs. However, in the end, the goal was to provide support to any teacher or program which may include providing open educational resources, especially for geographically disadvantaged and lower socioeconomic areas.

Budget issues

Historically, gifted and talented program budgets have been underfunded through federally subsidized amounts set aside by Every Student Succeed Acts's Title I and Title II resources to assist in gifted and talented programs identification and teacher training, respectively. But the resources were shared amongst a large population of students (Cutler, 2022; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], n.d.a; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], n.d.b). The vast array of the allotted resources went to many other student populations, as well. Simply put, the funds were spread so thin, very little was left over to assist gifted and talented programs. For example, with Title II federal funds, "Districts that receive Title II professional development funds must use the money to address the learning needs of all students. ESSA specifically says that 'all students' includes gifted and talented students" (Clarenbach, n.d., p. 2). The vague terminology lumped gifted students into the entire student population, which was a facade of assistance. District administrators decided how to allocate the funds in relation to professional development, which could include gifted training for educators though not a mandatory requirement of the legislation (ESSA, n.d.a).

However, there did exist funding specifically for gifted and talented students. The U.S. Department of Education's Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program sought to allocate funds in traditionally underrepresented and underserved areas to identify and provide gifted programming for students (Cutler, 2022; U.S. Department of

Education, 2019). Unfortunately, in 2016 the allocation equated to "$2.50 to $4 per GT student" and only four of 32 states' gifted and talented programs were fully funded (Griffith, 2016, para. 9). Griffith (2016) continued noting "some state funding formulas are designed in such a [sic] way that students can either qualify for special education funding or GT funding – but not both" (para. 10). Furthermore, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, n.d.f) explained the issue was compounded by the fact each state defined what gifted and talented meant, thereby further exacerbating misrepresentation in gifted education, and without any federal mandates that required gifted and talented education programs, many districts selected to allocate funds elsewhere.

Opposing view of social-emotional learning

While research existed to support the implementation of SEL programs, opponents argued against SEL implementation in U.S. schools (Kaspar & Massey, 2022). One argument posed by SEL opponents included an outcome of uniformity and loss of individuality from the perception that SEL curriculum manipulates students to fit a mold or set of ideas as indoctrination (Zhao, 2020). Zhao (2020) warned" It won't be easy to refute those who argue that the definition of SEL remains fuzzy" (para. 3). Nonetheless, following decades of educational policy focused on academics, research has recognized "children's social and emotional needs are just as important as their mastery of core content and skills (Zhao, 2020, para. 6). The organization Parents Defending Education (2024) refers to SEL curriculum as "liberal indoctrination" and warns against focusing too much on individuality. The group also warns of nationalization of educational politics (Parents Defending Education, 2024). But opponents may not have understood the

purposes and methods of SEL when based off CASEL's five core SEL areas and given planned and practical time for practice and reflection.

Furthermore, opposers of SEL curricula in schools argued SEL learning took time away from content area learning (Cineas, 2023). However, the potential for SEL to take placing during content learning was regarded as a powerful tool in practical learning. For example, because content instruction held the potential to produce powerful emotions in students who struggled with the material, learning to cope with the powerful emotions before negative behaviors were exhibited held great potential to increase content learning time versus time taken away from instruction while the teacher regarded negative student behaviors based on frustration. Contrary to the opposition's belief, SEL paved the way to reduce negative behaviors with fewer distractions during content instruction, which increased instructional time when educators were not called on to engage in student discipline (Durlak et al., 2023; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE), 2024). Moreover, Blad (2020) emphasized "Teachers have asked for help addressing disruptive student behaviors that may be tied to issues like traumatic experiences" (para. 19).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reported "Research suggests that approximately 25% of American children will experience at least one traumatic event by the age of 16. A child's reactions to trauma can interfere considerably with learning and/or behavior at school" (Peterson, 2018, para. 1). However, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2023) reported "More than two thirds of children reported at least 1 traumatic event by age 16" (para. 2) while the National Institute for Children's Health Quality (2021) estimated "In the United States, 34.8 million children

(ages 0-17)—nearly half of American children—are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that can severely harm their future health and well-being" (para. 1). The National Institute for Children's Health Quality (2021) continued "childhood trauma, a rampant and often unreported problem in the U.S., and include stressful or traumatic events stemming from abuse, neglect, household dysfunction and toxic stress" (para. 2). Implications of early childhood stress were often observed to:

> (1) activate the sympathetic nervous system by releasing stress hormones, resulting in an increased heart rate and breathing, constricted blood vessels, tightened muscles and dilated pupils; (2) negatively impact children's developing brains—which are especially vulnerable to the stress induced by trauma—by releasing hormones that physically alter developing brain structure and function; (3) adversely impact a child's developing immune system, hormonal systems and even the way the body reads and transcribes DNA; (4) lead children to spend most of their lives in fight-or-flight mode, making it difficult for them to build healthy relationships, thrive at school or maintain future employment. (National Institute for Children's Health Quality, 2021, para. 3)

The need for specialized SEL implementation was reflected in the research as children who experienced early trauma were in dire need of specialized SEL lessons to learn strategies to manage the long-lasting negative emotions and behaviors so often associated with trauma and childhood stress. Without behavioral SEL interventions, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network explained research indicated the consequences could be dire:

> Children who suffer from child traumatic stress are those who have been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the events have ended. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, such as intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. (Peterson, 2018, para. 1)

Need for social emotional learning at early elementary levels

Social emotional learning programs were a fundamental aspect of a whole-child centered approach to learning, but Finn (2014) held " to gain access to the future success that such an education often makes possible — the education system would need to identify these…children in early elementary grades in order to counsel them and push them onto the right path" (para. 20). Gifted children had special emotional needs that vary from similar-aged peers. Gailbraith and Delisle (2015) warned "brighter doesn't necessarily mean happier, healthier, more successful, more socially adept, or more secure" (p. 60). In fact, giftedness came with challenges both internally and externally. Gailbraith and Delisle (2015) mentioned "overexcitabilities, high involvement, super sensitivity, [and] perfectionism" (pp. 62-63). Because gifted learners held unique social-emotional needs, the authors delineated ideas to support students, such as supporting their interests, encouraging risk-taking to develop a means of overcoming failure mindset, recognizing individual talents, fostering relationships and mentorships, and more

(Gailbraith & Delisle, 2015). Furthermore, Smutney et al. (2020) held the idea students should be guided through curriculum by understanding educational legislative curriculum. “Classes have standards, curricula, and tests. Great creativity is required to keep students’ interest in education positive. There has to be something fun for them amidst the required work, or complementary to the required work” (Smutney et al., 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, results of research by Eren et al. (2018) reported:

> Compared to children of normal intelligence, gifted children described themselves as more inattentive and lively, social functionality was reported to be low and they had a worse perception of their physical health status. Gifted boys were determined to have more depressive symptoms than gifted girls. (p. 105)

Clearly, the evidence indicated a strong need for SEL curricula in the gifted classrooms. Kaspar and Massey (2020) explained one common outcome of offering a dedicated SEL program is the reduction in behavioral infractions and the increase in academic performance at all ages. By attending to the specialized SEL needs of early elementary children, educators had the potential to produce similar outcomes. CASEL (2024a) held SEL learning promoted equity in that:

> While SEL alone will not solve longstanding and deep-seated inequities in the education system, it can help schools promote understanding, examine biases, reflect on and address the impact of racism, build cross-cultural relationships, and cultivate adult and student practices that close opportunity gaps and create a more inclusive school community (para. 4).

Ethnic and cultural minorities tend to possess unique cultural differences that should be recognized and supported through family support, high expectations, open

communication, and other means to provide students with equitable education. Gailbraith and Delisle (2015) warned that gifted students' SEL needs must be met to prevent negative or harmful behaviors. CASEL (2024a) explained “SEL can be a lever for advancing educational equity and excellence” (para. 4). Research by Cohen (2022) indicated the underrepresentation of minorities in gifted education programs negatively affected the social-emotional and academic outcomes of unidentified gifted minority students.

Researchers also indicated minority elementary students involved in talent development programs in grades k-3 were more likely to be positively identified as gifted during school than peers who were not involved in a talent development program during grades k-3 (Franklin, 2009). But without any type of gifted and talented program, regardless of program design, negative outcomes were associated with unidentified gifted minorities in comparison to identified gifted minority students (American University, 2022; Dreilinger, 2020; Gentry et al., 2022; Sparks, 2022).Without social emotional learning lessons for gifted students in early elementary programs, the scholar practitioner surmised years of specialized educational needs would go unmet.

Developing social emotional learning activities for academically advanced early elementary students

The National Association for Gifted Children (n.d.a) urged programs to make environments as least restrictive as possible and ensure “activities and projects are student-centered and student-driven” (para. 4). McCluskey (2000) urged students who participated in long-term studies of accelerated learners involved in talent programs held higher scores over time, and McCluskey further indicated behavior issues occurred when

high ability children were not allowed to learn at an accelerated pace, which added "an oft-neglected dimension to the debate, suggesting...the social risks may actually be greater for talented students who are compelled to 'march in place' than for those who are fast-tracked" (p. 9).

McKenzie (2020) explained "Although the concept of social-emotional learning (SEL) has been around for decades...Districts are realizing that, in order to help students academically, educators have to meet students emotionally, culturally, and socially" (para. 2). Research indicated beginning in the earliest years of elementary held the most potential for positive SEL outcomes (CASEL, 2024a; Cavilla, 2021; McKenzie, 2020; State Government of Victoria, Australia, 2022; Kaspar & Massey, 2022).

Selecting accelerated learners in pre-k prior to gifted screening

NAGC (n.d.d) explained early elementary aged children often possessed asynchronicities in skill and ability development, teacher's lacked training in recognizing gifted traits, and few opportunities existed for gifted enrichment for early education students aged under eight years. NAGC (n.d.d) referred to preschool and kindergarten programs as meeting the needs of "young high-potential learner (ages 3 - 8) ...because few school-based advanced programs exist for this age group, few teachers have the necessary training to notice or serve this population" (para. 1). Members of NAGC (n.d.a) urged programs to make environments the least restrictive as possible and ensure "activities and projects are student-centered and student-driven" (para. 4). Quinn (2023) explained the need for early gifted and talented programs in that "Some children, however, display advanced cognitive abilities at an early age that may qualify them for gifted education programs" (para. 1). In regard to age-based versus ability-based classes

for early elementary students, Post (2019) posed the questions “Does it take into account their pace, depth and intensity of learning? What about asynchronous development and maturity?” (para. 2). Post (2019) recognized strategies parents of gifted students may consider, such as grade acceleration, “red-shirting” students by beginning elementary at a later age than the eligible age, and the implications of on-time start in elementary grades. Pierce (2022) indicated gifted programs “were created to support K-12 students with advanced abilities who need a more challenging academic program than their peers” (para. 2). Pierce recommended (2022) school districts decide on the type of gifted program to best meet the needs of the gifted students in that "some school districts opt to have gifted students attend separate schools or classrooms, while others provide the enrichment in their home schools as an add-on to traditional studies” (para. 6).

SEL learning needs in early elementary aged children

Pre-k classrooms could work with gifted education programs to design accelerated lessons to meet the needs of academically advanced early elementary students. Through purposeful and direct collaboration of stakeholders, such as parents, staff, and potentially gifted students, school districts held the potential to increase accelerated learning programs to students of early elementary aged pre-k program. Gifted researcher Finn (2014) held “to gain access to the future success...the education system would need to identify these gifted children in early elementary grades in order to counsel them and push them onto the right path” (para. 20). Without social emotional learning lessons for gifted students in early elementary programs, years of specialized educational needs were going unmet. Moreover, the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) (2024) contended “By paying attention to students’

developmental needs, educators can create supportive learning environments and coordinate practices across classrooms, schools, families, and communities to enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic learning" (para. 3).

Hult (2023) explained "scaffolding presents opportunities for students to be successful before they move into unfamiliar territory. This type of instruction minimizes failure, which decreases frustration, especially for students acquiring a new language" (para. 2). Robinson (2009) asserted "Rather than isolated, single-shot programs offered at limited grade levels…models of service that operate across the K-12 continuum and that are clearly linked to postsecondary opportunity get the nod from most experts in the field today" (p. 260). Furthermore, diverse student groups possessed specialized academic and social-emotional learning needs unique in comparison to classmates (Peterson, 2009). The dissemination of social emotional learning information throughout early elementary programs was student development and emotional growth. Research by Slovak et al (2016) emphasized the importance of a whole-child approach to learning, including scaffolding SEL lessons in both the classroom and the home.

> Luke et al. (2022) informed focus SEL lessons with the following advice:
>
> First, successful interventions combine the use of direct instruction in social and emotional skills and environmental conditions that foster SEL, such as creating a safe and caring school climate. Second, successful intervention programs are sequenced, encourage active learning, and are based on a theoretical model that targets SEL specifically, not just positive development generally. Third, successful interventions are administered by teachers who receive high-quality

> training and technical assistance. For preschool children in particular, the role of the teacher is critical. (p. 231)

Weissburg (2016) indicated “From an academic standpoint, students who participated in SEL programs saw an 11 percentile increase in their overall grades and better attendance” (as cited in National University, 2022, para. 1). “Students who are equipped to deal with problems that affect them on a personal level are then better able to navigate the pressures of adult life” (National University, 2022, para. 2).

Research by Aber et al., (2015) found “major educational and school reforms of the K–12 system over the last few decades have not focused sufficiently on the socio-emotional factors that are crucial to learning” (p. 60). Aber et al. (2015) suggested “the key to teaching SEL in school is to rebuild the trusting ties to competent adults that students should bring from home. Only then can behavior improve and academic learning begin” (p. 59). By combining gifted education programming and SEL curriculum at the early elementary stages of education, educators and school districts held the potential to craft a meaningful SEL program to scaffold SEL skills for students who were either identified and not identified for participation in gifted and talented programs to increase SEL awareness and coping strategies while simultaneously increasing academic performance.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Results

Problem Statement

The scholar practitioner developed the following problem statement: The pre-kindergarten, kindergarten learners and pre-kindergarten, kindergarten teaching staff needed to possess and understand advanced learning resources for learners in pre-k and kindergarten in a way for teaching staff to feel secure in ensuring student learning potential was maximized for all learners and to provide academic scaffolding for the unique needs of advanced or exceptional learners.

Design Thinking Process

The design thinking process was described as a human-centered approach to problem solve utilizing a creative, nonlinear method with the goal to tackle wicked societal problems while remaining grounded in empathy in which phases may overlap, skip, and repeat (Gallagher & Thorardson, 2020). The stages of the design thinking process included empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. Han (2022) explained the usefulness of the design thinking process in solving problems; “Innovation is defined as a product, process, service, or business model featuring two critical characteristics: novel and useful...Design thinking offers innovation the upgrade it needs to inspire meaningful and impactful solutions” (para. 3). Design thinking was used in diverse occupational workforces by a wide variety of professionals and was an ideal methodology to focus on wicked problems within the field of education.

Empathy Phase

The first stage of the design thinking process included the scholar practitioner learning as much as possible related to the problem of practice. To identify and better

understand the end users' difficulties, experiences, and motivation, the scholar practitioner, during the empathy phase, sought to "conduct research to get personal grasps of their users' needs. They set aside assumptions to obtain insights into the users' world by observing and consulting with users" (Interaction Design Foundation, 2020, para. 1). Once the initial research site of two elementary schools geographically located in a rural public school district was chosen, the scholar practitioner invited the building administrators, the seven total pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, and staff who worked closely with the early elementary age group to participate in a discussion related to areas of potential growth and skill development in early elementary classrooms. Specifically, the researcher began by creating a design team to include various stakeholders within the researched school district—early elementary pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, library and media specialists who also worked with the specific age groups, Parents as Teachers (PAT) staff, elementary school administrators, and the parents and guardians of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students. The empathy phase included three subgroups who provided feedback: (1) educators who responded to a survey, (2) parents of early elementary students who responded to a survey, and (3) a focus group of educators who addressed "How Might We" methods as a means of understanding and meeting the needs of the early elementary education stakeholders.

Educator Survey. The scholar practitioner began by inviting the early elementary teachers, the early elementary paraprofessionals, and elementary building administrators to complete an educator survey regarding pre-existing understanding and notions regarding gifted education in the early elementary pre-k setting (see Appendix A-Educator Survey Consent & Questions). Of the two certified pre-K teachers, two pre-K

paraprofessionals, and three elementary building administrators were invited to participate, one teacher (T1) and two administrators (A1 & A2) completed the online survey.

Staff were asked how they were able to recognize when pre-k learners were advanced in relation to peers, and the researcher qualitatively analyzed the responses into four categories: group size, pedagogy, specific examples, and affective needs (see Table 1).

Table 1

Educator Survey Results-- How are you able to recognize when pre-k learners are advanced in relation to peers?

Staff Survey Results
• Group size–*independent, group activities, one-on-one time, small groups* • Pedagogy– *PreK teacher observations and assessment checklists* • Specific examples– *larger more complex vocabulary, higher levels of questions, curiosity about certain topics, variety of topics, problem solvers, early readings, thought processes are higher than their peers* • Affective needs– *intense feelings and emotions*

The researcher concluded the faculty responses held similarities to the academic expressions and affective needs of gifted children of older ages. Therefore, further research and exploration on the topic was needed, as early elementary students were not identified for advanced learning lessons.

In relation to the social emotional (affective) learning needs the staff felt were most important to address (teach) in academically advanced pre-k students, the researcher categorized the responses into two categories: affective and overlapping size indication. The affective needs included coping skills, teachers who understand the student's needs, working in teams, getting along, being in charge of themselves, self-control, collaboration with peers, self-esteem and perseverance. Group sizes mentioned included working in teams and collaboration. The researcher concluded the examples would be instrumental in designing affective lessons in the future advanced pre-k curriculum.

When asked to describe what engagement looked like when academically advanced pre-k students were learning, the researcher categorized staff results into the following categories: pedagogy and specific examples. Pedagogical examples included: presented with problems to solve and opportunities to learn new things, pushing the student's thinking about concepts beyond, constructing meaning, and making independent discoveries. Other specific examples mentioned included participating, creating new things, asking questions, and (discoveries of) the world around them. The researcher concluded the staff believed by presenting students with new concepts, through independent learning and constructing meaning by positing new opportunities, students would have the potential for maximum engagement.

Two administrators and one pre-k classroom teacher responded to the survey with all three respondents indicating 13+ years of experience working in the field of education. The information from the empathy stage was analyzed and further assisted the scholar practitioner to clearly define the problem. When asked how the educators were able to recognize when pre-k learners were advanced in relation to peers, T1 responded with:

> Advanced preschoolers usually have a larger more complex vocabulary, tend to ask higher level questions, and have great curiosity about certain topics or a variety of topics. They are problem solvers. Sometimes they are early readers. Some advanced preschoolers have intense feelings and emotions.

The administrators mentioned advanced thought processes noted by A2, 'PreK Teacher Observations and Assessment Checklists'. In relation to the concepts and skills the respondents felt were most important to address (teach) in academically advanced pre-k students the participants included problem solving, literacy, and exposure to advanced curriculum. Interestingly, when asked what social-emotional (affective) learning needs the respondents felt were most important to address (teach) in academically advanced pre-k students, A1 mentioned 'Advanced preschoolers need coping skills and teachers who understand their needs as academically gifted. A2 noted 'working in teams, getting along, being in charge of themselves, self-control' and T1 stated 'Collaboration with peers and self-esteem and perseverance'. Finally, when asked to describe what engagement looked like when academically advanced pre-k students were learning, the responses included participation, problem solving, new conceptualizations, and discovery. The researcher concluded the educators recognized the existence of giftedness in the student population, as well as specific academic and social-emotional needs, such as exposure to new learning and in self-regulation.

Pre-K Family survey. As an additional measure of empathy data, the scholar practitioner requested the pre-kindergarten teachers nominate students who were potentially gifted based on the HOPE Teacher Rating Scale (see Appendix B). The HOPE Teacher Rating Scale was utilized as a teacher-nomination instrument for gifted

programs, and during the empathy phase was employed to “help guide teachers in identifying gifted students for programming. With multiple measures and multiple pathways crucial for reversing the inequities in identifying culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse students" (Gentry, 2024, para. 1).

The two pre-kindergarten teachers each taught 40 students per day of which half attended in the morning and the other half attended in the afternoon. Of the 80 pre-kindergarten students aged 3-6, the two pre-kindergarten teachers nominated 15 of the 80 total pre-kindergarten students based on HOPE scale ratings. The researcher requested the pre-kindergarten teachers use the HOPE Teacher Rating Scale to identify academically advanced and possibly gifted students, whose parents were invited to participate in the empathy stage of researching the status of their student’s development. The survey contained three Likert scale questions and three open-ended questions.

After the educators rated students on the HOPE Teacher Rating Scale, the scholar practitioner then invited the guardians of the 15 students to participate in the Pre-K Family Survey Consent & Questions (see Appendix C). Of the students identified as possibly gifted and talented, all parent or guardian email addresses registered in the school’s online information system were sent an email requesting participation in the survey. A total of 14 guardians responded to the survey questions. Parent responses indicated an overall very positive view of both academic and social-emotional needs were being met at the elementary school research site, with 12 parents reporting the student’s needs were met “very well” and all 14 parents responded the student’s social-emotional needs responded were being met “very well.” When asked what types of learning tools and resources parents would like to see in the pre-k classrooms to meet the child's

educational needs, responses included STEAM/STEM-based activities. Parents also responded the types of instructional strategies and/or teaching styles which worked well for the pre-k student included hands-on activities and technology and responded, ‘when the students were engaged the children were generally focused and inquisitive’. The researcher divided open-ended, constructive responses of the parents into four categories: group size, pedagogy, specific examples, and affective (see Table 2).

Table 2

Pre-K Family Survey

Pre-K Family Survey Questions
Please rate your student's current skillset based on skills in the following areas of social-emotional development:
1. To what degree are your child’s educational needs being met at the researched school district?
2. To what degree are your child’s social and emotional (affective) needs being met at the researched school district?
3. What types of learning tools and resources would you like to see in the pre-k classrooms to meet your child’s educational needs?
4. What types of instructional strategies and/or teaching styles work well for your pre-k student?
5. What does learning look like when your child is engaged?

Note. For each question, the scale was a choice of three Likert responses, where 1=not well, 2=somewhat, and 3=very well.

Pre-K Family Survey Results

In relation to question 1—to what degree the students’ education needs were being met at the researched school district—no parent indicated not well, 2 parents

indicated somewhat, and 12 parents indicated very well. The researcher sought to know more about the current state of education as perceived by families of early elementary students. The researcher drew the conclusion parents felt the researched school district was performing well in providing academic instruction from the viewpoint of the parents. Results for question 2—to what degree are the child's social and emotional (affective) needs being met at the researched school district—all 14 parents indicated very well. The researcher concluded parents had a positive feeling whether the students' affective needs were being met. The third question asked parents the types of learning tools and resources the parents would like to see in the pre-k classrooms to meet the child's educational needs, and the results included the following parent responses categorized by group size, pedagogy, specific examples, and affective needs (see Table 3).

Table 3

Family Survey Results-- What types of instructional strategies and/or teaching styles work well for your pre-k student?

Family Survey Results
• Group size–*independent, group activities, one-on-one time, small groups* • Pedagogy–*STEM, assignments, experiments* (the latter term used 3 times in parent responses for this question) • Specific examples–*bubble table, technology, puzzle/game; science, hands-on* • Affective needs– no mention for this question

Affective needs included themes such as repeated use of the term excitement and excited, eyes sparkling, likes, trust adults acknowledge, excited and enthusiastic, and very happy. Specific examples included activity/craft/artwork, asks questions, asks curious questions, explanations of her view of subjects and situations, and storyteller. The researcher concluded parents recognized when the pre-k students are engaged in learning, the students exhibit expressions of curiosity via excitement, questions, and thoughtful discussion. Results from the age demographic indicated thirteen responded in the age range of 30-39 and 1 parent responded as aged 40-49. The researcher concluded no pre-k students of parents in the 20-29 age demographic were nominated by pre-k teachers using the HOPE advanced learner scale.

Focus Group & Empathy Map. Gibbons (2018) explained "Visualizing user attitudes and behaviors in an empathy map helps UX teams align on a deep understanding of end users. The mapping process also reveals any holes in existing user data" (para. 1). Together, the educator design teams of stakeholders shared ideas while building on each other's suggestions and proposals for possible solutions to various problems for the targeted age group of early elementary students. Using Gallagher and Thorardson's (2020) story and journey map templates in conjunction with the design thinking process for solving wicked problems, the scholar practitioner created an empathy story/journey map (see Appendix E) based on a synthesis of information gleaned from the surveys and focus group.

After gathering data from the three stakeholder means—educator surveys, family surveys, and a focus group of early elementary staff members the scholar practitioner focused on synthesizing the collected information and data by responding to four

questions utilizing the empathy mapping design described as a “visualization tool designed to help teams use Emotional Intelligence to gain insight into a target group” (Gray, 2017, para. 1). The scholar practitioner focused on four overarching themes in creating the focus group questions and developed the following: What are the end users’ challenges and needs? What is the biggest frustration? What has the scholar practitioner learned about the end user?

The empathy map revealed the end users’ challenges and needs and would later assist in defining the problem. The responses of the staff members included the inability to meet the needs of accelerated learners due to various factors listed by the educators, including existing curriculum, time constraints, and lack of resources and knowledge and experience related to using resources. The design team revealed advanced learners in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten had already mastered most or all the curriculum, and a result of the disengagement was displayed as boredom and, at times, resulted in negative classroom behaviors. Moreover, students who were not yet identified as gifted but displayed gifted and talented traits required specialized social-emotional focus due to extreme displays of emotion, lack of coping abilities, and unique social-emotional development, which were likely a result of neurodivergent giftedness traits.

When asked about the biggest frustration, the design team stakeholders revealed for teachers, the challenges included lack of time, resources, and understanding for how to meet the unique academic and social-emotional needs of advanced learners. Specifically, the empathy map revealed advanced pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students often exhibited behaviors of boredom, feelings of differentness from peers, lack of motivation and/or motivation to learn accelerated topics.

From the empathy phase of the design thinking process, the researcher discovered the end users—specifically the pre-kindergarten and early elementary staff—felt a combination of struggles and frustrations regarding meeting the needs of advanced learners. The educators revealed the lack of time and the need for adequate training and resources to meet the needs of accelerated learners (see Appendix E). Because the exceptional learners quickly mastered the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curricula, the results from the focus group reflected already-recognized specialized social-emotional needs in conjunction with previous research as mentioned in the literature review (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Davidson Institute, 2024; Ozkan & Kettler, 2022; State Government of Victoria, Australia, 2022; Tarrikone et al., 2019).

Results from the empathy stage, during the design thinking process, were synthesized to identify wicked problems and clarify the point of view statement. The stakeholder teams revealed the students may question the accelerated abilities and notice and struggle with the uniqueness and neurodivergence from peers. Furthermore, when students had already mastered the curriculum, behavioral issues possibly emerged from boredom, exacerbating the need for advanced learning topics and social-emotional instruction to meet the unique developmental needs of advanced learners (see Appendix E).

Empathizing with stakeholders meant seeking to understand feelings, previous experiences, hopes, and how the experiences related to the stakeholders. Additionally, empathizing was completed by immersing oneself in the environment and collaborating with early elementary educators (Gibbons, 2018; Gray, 2017). The end user for the study included the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers and teacher assistants, including

student helpers and paraprofessionals, and academically advanced pre-k students. Other end users included the families of the children, and the pre-kindergarten students themselves. The scholar practitioner wanted the end users to feel secure in understanding and utilizing academically advanced resources for accelerated pre-k and kindergarten learners to maximize learning opportunities. By determining the needs of the teachers, students, and families, the scholar practitioner was better equipped to continue the design thinking process toward improving the current state of early elementary education. During the empathy stage, the researcher was engaged with a variety of stakeholders to determine the user needs and the perceptions among all stakeholder points of view and perceptions within the variety of educational situations. Furthermore, the scholar practitioner used a variety of tools to gather information from the combination of educators and families of pre-kindergarten students.

Define Phase

The define phase of the design thinking process focused on organizing information gathered during the empathy stage while stating the end users' needs and problems. Dam (2024) explained after meeting with stakeholders, the research must "analyze your observations to define the core problems you and your team have identified up to this point. Defining the problem and problem statement must be done in a human-centered manner" (para. 6). In doing so, the researcher developed the problem statement, also known as a point of view statement.

Point of View Statement

Based on the responses of the end users during the empathy phase of the design thinking process, the researcher synthesized stakeholder responses and developed a point

of view statement. The point of view statement was developed in a manner to segue to the next phases of the design thinking process, as well as to focus in a goal-oriented manner. Thordarson and Gallagher (2020) noted the purpose of a POV statement is to "guide you and your team throughout the rest of the design process" (p. 75).

After the empathy data was analyzed the scholar practitioner developed the following point of view statement: The pre-k and kindergarten accelerated learners and pre-k and kindergarten teaching staff needed to possess and understand accelerated learning resources for advanced learners in pre-k and kindergarten in a way that makes teaching staff feel secure in ensuring student learning potential is maximized for advanced learners. In addition to the point of view statement the scholar practitioner further defined the problem utilizing stakeholders by asking "How might we…?" to further clarify the issue.

How Might We Questions

The scholar practitioner recognized the need to include as many end users as possible in crafting a team of stakeholders who were able to represent various education positions who encountered this age group of students during the school day. Therefore, two focus groups were held between the scholar practitioner and staff members who came into contact with early elementary students in various roles, such as the elementary librarian, an after-school learning program certified teacher, a middle school librarian whose daughter would be entering the preschool program in the next several years, and two certified Parents as Teachers (PAT) teachers who segue the transition from home to school starting in the earliest years of childhood. The scholar practitioner believed by holding the focus group, the staff members would further define the wicked problem.

Due to scheduling conflicts and before and after school duties, one focus group was held after school in the afternoon and the next was held in the morning following the afternoon focus group. The second focus group was able to draw upon the ideas of the first focus group.

Dam and Siang (2021) suggested using "How Might We" questions [to] frame and open up your design challenge" (para. 15). "Instead of saying, we need to design X or Y, Design Thinking explores new ideas and solutions to a specific design challenge" (Dam & Siang, 2021, para. 15). Specifically, the scholar practitioner met with the two pre-k teachers and posed "How Might We…" statements to determine which curricular areas the pre-k teachers felt would best meet the needs of the pre-k advanced learners. The scholar practitioner sought feedback from the early elementary teachers through pre-planning ideas and the teacher's perception on the lessons and activities. During the creation of the How Might We question with the teachers (see Appendix D), the curricular areas the pre-K teachers felt would meet the needs of advanced learners included 'hands-on; exposure to new ideas; individual attention' and examples included 'processing emotions; sorting emotions; health expressions of emotions; healthy coping mechanisms.'

After posing the How Might We questions to the elementary staff, the researcher further used the data to define the problem. The researcher began by dividing a poster board into halves with each side posing questions (See Appendix B). One side read How might we better meet the academic needs of advanced learners in pre-k/k classrooms? What types of lessons /units are most valuable? and the other half asked How might we meet the social-emotional needs of advanced learners in the pre-k/k classrooms? What

types of lessons /units are most valuable? Stakeholders, including educators who directly had school contact with the target population of students, were invited to brainstorm as many ideas as possible within about 10 minutes and share ideas and develop ideas from and with one another.

Results from the How Might We questions included focus groups, specifically academics, revealed themes such as extension activities, exposure to new ideas, hands-on and small-group activities, and exploring new information. The socioemotional side revealed more input from the stakeholders with 23 ideas posited, which indicated more of a need for socioemotional development as compared to academic development with 15 ideas posited. The socioemotional side of the chart divulged the student population needed trauma-informed social-emotional development, self-regulation strategies, emotional processing, empathy-learning activities, opportunities for practice and organic skill development, and healthy coping mechanisms. As a result of the focus groups, the researcher ascertained SEL skill development was at the forefront of the early childhood students' needs based on the number and variety of suggestions posed by stakeholders.

Fishbone diagram

Lewis (2020) explained the visualization tool fishbone diagram categorized potential problem drivers "in order to identify a problem's root causes. Typically used for root cause analysis, a fishbone diagram combines the practice of brainstorming with a type of mind map template" (para. 1). The researcher developed four themes utilizing the fishbone diagram (see Appendix C), including lack of funding, difficulty identifying giftedness at young ages, developmental gaps in early childhood students, and the need

for objective, equitable grouping which helped the scholar practitioner to further define the problem.

Lack of funding precluded educators and schools offering specialized enrichment and not covering the costs to assess students for exceptional learning traits due to assessment fees. Furthermore, the researcher discovered the target school district only offered specific gifted assessment, specifically the NNAT3 gifted screener, and if families preferred an IQ test to measure accelerated traits, the scheduling and cost of an IQ test would have to be covered by the families. Additionally, there remained challenges in accurately identifying giftedness in early childhood years (Almeida et al., 2016; Wirthlin, 2022). Furthermore, giftedness may be masked by cultural differences (Ford et al., 2021; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Renzulli and Brandon, 2017; Sarouphim, 2004), language differences (Allen, 2017; Naglieri & Ford, 2015; Renzulli and Brandon, 2017), and issues with young students not testing well (Bainbridge, 2022a; Long, 2023; Paris, 2021).

Other themes which emerged included developmental gaps in early childhood years, which were a long-known markedly unique trait in gifted children (Bainbridge, 2022b; McClusky, 2000; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.f; Papadopoulos, 2021; Peterson, 2009; Robinson, 2009), as well as the need for educators or examiners to understand which traits were considered gifted versus high achievers based on a combined objective and subjective scoring scale (Almeida et al., 2016; Dlugosz, 2012; Gentry et al., 2022 Wirthlin, 2022).

Ideation

The ideation component of the design thinking process comprised of eliciting stakeholder and participant ideas through a brainstorming process to develop thoughtful, novel formulation of all possible solutions to problems. During ideation, questions and answers were posed rapidly and without judgment following careful consideration of the empathize and define stages. “Ideation is a creative process where designers generate ideas in sessions (e.g., brainstorming, worst possible idea). Participants gather with open minds to produce as many ideas as they can to address a problem statement in a facilitated, judgment-free environment” (Interaction Design Foundation, 2024b, para. 1).

For the scholar practitioner, the ideation stage was an exciting step since ideation was a no-holds-barred activity where all ideas were welcomed, and the possibility of molding novel ideas into unprecedented solutions held great potential and value. Complex problems required complex solutions, many of which were derived from unconventional, novel approaches. The process of ideation can be revisited as many times as needed to produce real solutions to improve human-centered designs. The scholar practitioner recognized there was no one-size-fits-all approach that would universally succeed, but the diverse methods of ideation could be utilized depending on the topic and stakeholders involved.

During the ideation phase, the researcher and stakeholders gathered to develop new perspectives and challenge outdated modes of operation. From the empathy phase of the design thinking process, the researcher concluded the need for additional SEL implementation and support was at the forefront of the stakeholders’ needs, including early elementary students, the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, and the

students' families. At the ideation stage of the process, the researcher believed the most realistic, practical, and helpful solutions to the problem of a lack in SEL curriculum and supports was to pilot an SEL program to determine if an SEL program would made significant changes, if any, to a student's social-emotional development over the course of a 12-week implementation.

To engage the ideation process with participants, the researcher hosted ideation sessions both online and in person. The in-person and online ideation sessions lasted between 30-60 minutes. Pre-k and K classroom teachers and certified educational staff who worked in the elementary school and directly with the researched age group participated in eliciting ideas for pre-k and K students aged 3-7 to participate in social-emotional learning lessons.

The researcher recorded responses to the following questions: Question 1: How might we at the researched school district better meet your child's academic needs? That is, what specific academic learning opportunities would you like to see explored with your students during small group lessons? What learning areas could we explore that may help your students in his or her academic growth as an advanced learner? Please list as many ideas as you would like. Question 2: How might we at the researched school district better meet your child's social-emotional needs? That is, what specific emotions or emotional challenges would you like to see explored with your student during small group lessons? What types of emotions could we explore that may help your student regarding affective (social-emotional) growth? Please list as many ideas as you would like.

Participants were encouraged to answer questions in either order or alternating responses as each response came to mind. The researcher provided pencils and sticky notepads for the participants to write answers and record on the corresponding side of the chart (Mindmaps.com, n.d.). Participants were encouraged to draw upon one another's ideas in creating new ones and were instructed all ideas were welcomed, regardless of seeming reasonability.

Following ideation, respondent answers were compiled in thematic categories. The academics side of the graphic contained 14 responses and the social-emotional side of the organizer contained 23 responses. Because the scholar practitioner encouraged the individuals to brainstorm and write as many ideas as the participants could generate, there existed overlaps in ideas. The scholar practitioner categorized the following themes: On the academics' portion of the graphic (see Appendix D), the 14 responses were categorized into five themes: hands-on activities (2), experiential learning (6), advanced learning opportunities and resources (3), small class or group size (3), career-focused learning. On the social-emotional learning area of the graphic, a total of 23 ideas were generated with the following themes: interpersonal relationships (8), self-regulation of emotions and behaviors (10), trauma/safety (3), and self-esteem (2).

The results from the brainstorming ideation session revealed a greater need in social-emotional development with 23 responses in comparison to the academic area of development with 14 responses. During the ideation session, the scholar practitioner noted the educators spent more time discussing and listing ideas for the social-emotional development category when compared to the academic category. When comparing the data collected during the ideation session, the scholar practitioner concluded the

responses revealed the stakeholders' needs for social-emotional supports for teachers through a means of resources and training as suggested by the stakeholder ideation responses, as well as social-emotional supports for advanced learners through practice and focused, intentional lessons.

Because the social-emotional development portion of the brainstorming session received more responses than the academics section, with a ratio of 23:14, the scholar practitioner recognized the stakeholders' desire and need to focus on social-emotional learning (SEL). Additionally, the scholar practitioner was able to thematically categorize responses into the four overarching themes of interpersonal relationships, self-regulation of emotions and behaviors, trauma/safety, and self-esteem. "There are multiple frameworks that connect the skills and competencies that fit underneath social and emotional learning, but significant overlap can be found across them; it is better to think of them as providing complementary perspectives that competing ones" (Afterschool Alliance, n.d., para. 3). In searching for an ideal program, the scholar practitioner found an abundance of information and research on the efficacy of the CASEL framework for SEL (Fry et al., 2022; Snyder & Connolly, 2022; Santone, 2022). Lawson et al. (2019) explained:

> To assist in the broad dissemination of SEL curricula, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a framework for organizing SEL competencies and systematically identifying well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs. Given the abundance of SEL programs, the CASEL Guide aimed to assist educators in selecting carefully evaluated curricula with well-documented impact and efficacy on student outcomes. The guides

> published by CASEL provide a list of SEL programs that meet CASEL standards to be considered evidence based. (p. 458)

CASEL (n.d.) explained "Implementation of evidence-based programs in schools…[is] grounded in research and principles of child and adolescent development, and scientifically evaluated and shown to produce positive student outcomes" (para. 1). Evidence-based practices were driven by research and data to optimize outcomes. "Evidence-based practice reduces reliance on outdated information and personal biases" (University of Tulsa, 2023, para. 6). The researcher determined the CASEL framework was data driven, research based, and had the potential to encompass the themes identified during the ideation stage.

Prototype Phase

The prototype consisted of a plan for social-emotional learning (SEL) skill development focused lessons for students in pre-k and kindergarten classes wherein all students participated in lessons focused on specific SEL skills, students rotated in small groups through a variety of centers in the general education classroom. The prototype consisted of the classroom teachers rating students' SEL skills using the CASEL scale during week 1. The researcher, who was certified to teach gifted students in grades k-12, provided weekly push-in lessons and the classroom teachers completed follow up surveys on the students' social-emotional development in weeks 6 and 12.

The goal was to provide SEL learning opportunities for all students, and to determine to what degree, if any, the SEL intervention may increase the student's knowledge on SEL skills and the student's ability to apply SEL skills in the classroom. During pre-k and kindergarten years:

> basic cognitive skills like executive function (i.e. a combination of attention control, inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility) began to emerge when children are 3-4 years old and go through dramatic transformation during early childhood and the early school years (ages 4-6) as the pre-frontal cortex of the brain expands. This includes competencies like the ability to focus, remember, stop and think before acting, or switch between different thoughts or tasks. Emphasizing these skills during early childhood and the transition to kindergarten helps lay a foundation for more complex skills that are critical to success later in life. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 24)

A once-weekly meeting with the students lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and included discussions and lessons on various social-emotional topics as deficits by classroom teachers as indicated during the ideation stage, as well as using the five SEL strands designed for gifted learning, including: self-awareness, mindsets, social capacity, life skills, and emotional well-being (Nobbe, n.d.).

Testing Phase & Data Analysis

The scholar practitioner obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Lindenwood University, as well as permission from the participating school district's administration, prior to implementing the design thinking process testing phase. The scholar practitioner utilized the five SEL learning areas based on CASEL's framework of "five broad and interrelated areas of competence and highlights examples for each: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (CASEL, 2024c, para. 6). The aforementioned areas were the focus of the five areas of the 5-point Likert survey given at the beginning and end of

the 12-week pilot timeline. Each question on the survey aligned with the five CASEL aspects: question 1 measured self-awareness, question 2 measured self-management, question 3 measured social awareness, question 4 measured relationship skills, and question 5 measured responsible decision-making (see Appendix G: Test Phase—Codebook). The CASEL 5 was chosen as an ideal SEL development scale which:

> Can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts. Many school districts, states, and countries have used the CASEL 5 to establish preschool to high school learning standards and competencies that articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers. (CASEL. 2024c, para. 5)

The five specific CASEL SEL competencies "framework takes a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across four key settings: classrooms, schools, homes, and communities" (CASEL, 2020 para. 3). Niemi (2020) explained "In the 26 years since CASEL introduced the term 'social and emotional learning,' the research and practice of SEL have grown tremendously" (para. 1). After three decades of implementation, the scholar practitioner recognized the efficacy of the CASEL wheel and CASEL's focus on five SEL framework categories along with advocacy of explicit SEL instruction "to address issues of identity, agency and belonging that are fundamental to human development" (Niemi, 2020, para. 7).

The specific methodology employed during testing included mixed methods research gathering qualitative and quantitative data. By seeking a cumulative view of the

stakeholders' points of view and needs, the researcher sought to create an overall understanding of the situation. "Reliance on a single methodological stance is no longer tenable in an increasingly complex multicultural and interdisciplinary context, or in the translation and dissemination of population and behavioral research to broader applications and conditions" (Johns Hopkins University, n.d., para. 1). The testing groups included the (1) parent/family perceptions of the child's beginning and ending social-emotional development and (2) classroom teacher perceptions of the child's beginning and ending social-emotional development. The pre-survey was sent during the first week of school to family email addresses and the scholar practitioner requested responses within one week. Additionally, the same surveys were provided to the classroom teachers during the second week of school only to be completed for the students whose parents had agreed to participate in the research study. After requesting and reviewing pre-surveys from the parents during week 1 of school, the corresponding classroom teachers were given the same pre-survey during week 2 and were asked to complete within a week for each student who had received parent permission to participate in data collection. The 12-week social-emotional learning pilot lessons were initiated immediately following the second week of school.

The participant pool was selected from all the 9 pre-k and K classrooms, which ranged from at least 10 participants to 250 students. The participants were grouped into 3-5 students per group, by the classroom teacher. Children aged 3-5 were best engaged within lessons between 10-15 minutes, and no more than 20 minutes due to attention span limitations which usually spanned 10-15 minutes of engagement time before focus was reduced, while children aged 6-7 were recommended to participate no more than 25

minutes in focused lessons (Brain Balance Achievement Centers., 2023; CNLD Testing & Therapy, 2022; Jackman, 2022).

The testing pre-test and post-test surveys included five quantitative items and one qualitative item. The five quantitative items focused on perceptions of the five CASEL areas of social emotional development based on a five-point Likert scale, while the sixth and final question was an open-ended item inviting families to add concerns, thoughts, and questions. Booren (2024) asserted "researchers should start with a question and then let that question drive the methods used to answer for the highest quality study...having both qualitative and quantitative options, or mixed methods, could provide a more holistic and comprehensive understanding" (para. 7). Moreover, Kimmons (2022) explained "mixed-methods designs also vary in the relative importance they ascribe to qual vs. quan methods, either prioritizing qual (QUAL>quan), prioritizing quan (QUAN>qual), or treating the two approaches with equal weight (QUAL=QUAN)" (para. 10). In the case of the pre-survey and post-survey test instruments, the focus of social-emotional development research data concentrated on qualitative in comparison to quantitative (QUAN>qual) but included both methods of data investigation to collect richer information, create a greater scope, and give the stakeholders the opportunity to posit new information to guide the research and analysis.

Testing Schedule

The schedule was determined amongst the classroom teachers, building administrators, and the researcher. The schedule ideally included the researcher meeting with students in small groups for approximately 10-15 minutes once weekly, which was initially to be determined based on building and classroom schedules. However, due to

time constraints of the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classroom routines and procedures, the lessons evolved into whole-group activities rather than small-group, as the small groups would have reduced time from the classroom curriculum. The change was agreed upon between the researcher and classroom teachers prior to the implementation of the SEL pilot program. The small-group SEL lessons were refined and revised to match the whole-group 45-minute allocated weekly time slot the classroom teachers were able to provide for SEL lesson implementation. All classrooms were able to continue participation and the mode of instruction was switched from small group to whole group, which translated to switching from small groups of 3-5 students to the entire classroom of no more than 20 students per classroom lesson. During the allocated weekly SEL lesson time, the researcher focused on social-emotional development tasks while also implementing SEL lessons and learning strategies for the students (see Appendix H).

The testing phase included launching, debugging, beta-testing, and or promoting a new process. The design thinking process was defined as an infinite loop, where reflecting and learning about the problem aided in the process of continual learning and seeking creative solutions (Dam, 2024). To ensure preparation for the researched school district's gifted service expansion to early childhood change project viability, the scholar practitioner considered a range of methods and interventions. Hayes (2022) explained "change efforts can be less successful than they might be because those responsible for managing the change are unaware of the full range of interventions that are available" (p. 167). Planning for diagnosing and remedying issues that arise along the changemaking journey required foresight and flexibility in identifying and solving problems.

Qualtrics pre- and post-intervention implementation surveys

To measure the prototype, the scholar practitioner created an implementation schedule based on the CASEL framework (see Appendix H). The researcher invited all families whose email addresses were on file with the school district for all of the approximately 80 pre-kindergarten students, all families whose email addresses were on file with the school district for approximately 120 kindergarten students, two certified pre-kindergarten teachers, and five certified kindergarten teachers to participate in a Qualtrics survey consent and questions, which was estimated to take approximately 5 minutes to complete (see Table 4) (see Appendices E & F). Of the entire student population, approximately five students' families did not have an email address recorded with the school district. In developing the survey instruction, each question was based on the CASEL framework, which categorizes five overall facets of social and emotional learning development needs—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024c).

The survey was a measurement of the prototype, a plan for an SEL skill development focused lesson pilot for students in pre-k and kindergarten classes wherein all students participated in lessons focused on specific SEL skills. The original implementation prototype included students rotating in small groups with the researcher implementor; however, due to classroom scheduling conflicts and the amount of time needed to implement, the lessons evolved into whole-group activities lasting between 30-45 minutes once per week for 12 weeks in the general education classroom. As planned in the prototype, both the families and the classroom teachers rated students' SEL skills using the CASEL scale during week 1. The researcher, who was certified to teach gifted

students in grades k-12, provided weekly push-in lessons and the classroom teachers completed follow up surveys on the students' social-emotional development in week 12 but omitted the 6-week contact as unneeded.

Pre-tests and post-tests are designed to measure student growth, which can yield valuable information. The survey was designed to measure the status quo of the social-emotional conditions as a pre-test, or baseline information, for which to compare the perceived social-emotional status of the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students prior to the implementation of the SEL pilot program. After 12 weeks of implementation, the researcher surveyed the stakeholders using the same survey instrument and questions. "The process ends with an analysis of the difference between the student's test scores or performance at these two points in time" (Brophy, 2019, slide 2). This baseline information was further categorized into two populations of focus: family responses and classroom teacher responses. The scholar practitioner was interested in learning if there would exist similarities or dissimilarities between family and teacher responses on the survey.

Of the approximately 200 families contacted to respond, almost 93 family respondents agreed to participate and responded to the Likert scale questions. Additionally, the family members were asked to identify their child(-ren) to obtain the same information which was included in the students' teacher's responses to the same above survey questions. At the culmination of 12 weeks of testing implementation, all the families who originally agreed to participate in the initial survey were invited to complete the second, and final, survey.

Table 4

Social-emotional learning (SEL) parent survey 1 of 2 and Social-emotional learning (SEL) staff survey 1 of 2

Survey Ratings
Please rate your student's current skillset based on skills in the following areas of social-emotional development:
1. Self-awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.
2. Self-management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals.
3. Social awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
4. Relationship skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.
5. Responsible decision-making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

For each question, the scale was a choice of Likert responses, where 1=almost never, 2=once in a while, 3=sometimes, 4=frequently, 5=almost always.

Of the 93 family respondents who originally agreed to participate and completed the first survey, 26 family respondents completed the follow-up questionnaire for the child(-ren) in grades pre-k and kindergarten. “Attrition bias happens when participants drop out from a study; the drop-outs have unique study-related characteristics, resulting in a difference between initial and ending samples” (Leonardo, 2024, para. 1). Of the original 93 family respondents, only 26 completed the follow-up survey; 26 student families’ data and the teacher responses of the 26 students were collected.

For the 26 students whose families agreed upon participation, the family data was first collected, followed by all seven early elementary teachers completing the pre- and post-questionnaires for the 26 students divided amongst the seven the teachers’ classrooms.

Data Analysis

Mixed methods research was employed as a method for collecting a more comprehensive set of data to build upon the potential nuances amongst qualitative and quantitative data for deeper insight and a more comprehensive method of collecting information. Mixed methods research held the potential to “produce a robust description and interpretation of the data, make quantitative results more understandable, or understand broader applicability of small-sample qualitative findings” (Harvard College, 2024, para. 1).

Research indicated SEL learning in the elementary classroom improved academic achievement, contributed to healthy wellbeing and safe schools, and students developed

skills which promoted future readiness and led to increased achievement of goals (CASEL, 2023a). While most SEL lessons were taught as focused lessons by school counselors, the counseling curriculum began in kindergarten with once-monthly lessons and did not include pre-kindergarten lessons (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). While pre-kindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers alike taught SEL skills in the moment through experiential learning, the scholar-practitioner considered the possible outcomes of a focused SEL pilot program for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, especially the "coronials," or those children who were the Coronavirus generation and were prevented from early social interactions during the first years of life, which may have slowed SEL growth, language abilities, and educational progress (Adams, 2022; Nevo, 2023).

Research Question

The scholar practitioner developed the following research question: How does the scholar practitioner perceive the implementation of SEL lessons in an early childhood setting?

Hypotheses

H_o: The introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons will result in no difference in emotional coping skills.

H_A: The introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons will result in a difference in emotional coping skills.

The quantitative portion of the study explored the possible outcomes of piloting social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons in the early elementary classrooms. The framework for statistical inference included one null hypothesis statement of no effect

and the alternative hypothesis of an effect" (Pernet, 2015, para. 10). The null hypothesis held the introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons would result in no difference in emotional coping skills, whereas the alternative hypothesis stated the introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons would result in a difference in emotional coping skills. A combined sample of 26 faculty/ staff and 26 parents responded to five survey questions (Table 4) using a pretest-posttest research design. The researcher chose to use the parent and teacher surveys as a homogenous group due to the similar characteristics of the roles the participants played in the lives of the students, such as overlapping roles as caregiver and educator for both groups.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Narkhede (2018) explained "Descriptive statistics are broken down into two categories. Measures of central tendency and measures of variability (spread)" (para. 5). The researcher sought to explore the results to determine the outcome of the data and possible relationships to the hypotheses. Narkhede continued "Central tendency refers to the idea that there is one number that best summarizes the entire set of measurements, a number that is in some way 'central' to the set" (para. 6). In the case of the pretest and posttest assessment questions, descriptive statistic difference traits were revealed (see Table 5). Histograms and boxplots were also constructed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Version 28) to examine the shape of the data distributions and position of data, including outliers.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for five CASEL framework areas

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Mean Differences	.06	.17	.29	.06	.35
Std. Error	.127	.128	.141	.136	.15
Std. Deviation	.916	.923	1.016	.978	1.083
Skewness	.201	.264	-.618	-.38	.414
Kurtosis	.331	.648	1.18	.378	.069

Note: Respondents were asked to rate the students' current skillsets based on skills in the CASEL scale questions and measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = almost never, 2 = once in a while, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = almost always). Q1=self-awareness; Q2=self-management; Q3=social awareness, Q4 = relationships skills. Q5 = responsible decision-making.

Inferential statistics

The researcher used two inferential methods to evaluate statistical significance based on the prototype results: (1) the parametric paired sample *t*-test, and (2) the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test. “In instances when the data are ordinal or the assumptions of the paired samples *t*-test are not met, it is appropriate to use the nonparametric alternative to the paired samples *t*-test, and that is the Wilcoxon signed ranks test” (Chumney, n.d., p. 20). The researcher used the combined parent and staff scores (n =52) to calculate descriptive statistics and evaluate each set of paired questions individually for normality based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, outliers, and visual examination. “The null hypothesis for the Shapiro-Wilk test is that a variable is normally distributed in some population...we reject the null hypothesis if $p < 0.05$ [and] conclude that our variable is not normally distributed” (SPSS Tutorials, 2022, para. 7). Sainani (2012) explained, “Researchers need to be aware of whether variables follow normal or non-normal distributions because this influences how data are described and analyzed” (p. 1001). Normality assumptions were met due to the size of the data set; therefore, the

researcher chose to utilize the parametric paired sample *t*-test, and the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test. The two tests were utilized in combination to produce conservative results.

The results indicated insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for questions 1 (self-awareness), 2 (self-management), and 4 (relationship skills), as findings proved not significant. The researcher used the combined parent and staff scores (n =52) to calculate descriptive statistics and analyze each set of paired questions individually for normality based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, outliers, and visual examination. However, in relation to questions 3 (social awareness) and 5 (responsible decision-making), the results indicated statistical significance (See Table 7). The confidence intervals quantifying the improvement in ratings by parents and staff for questions 3 and 5 were [.006, .571] and [.045, .648], respectively, as measured on a 5-pt. Likert scale. Interpreting, the true mean difference (pre vs. post) will fall within the intervals above. Therefore, for questions 3 and 5, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis. In the case of the SEL pilot, the introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) resulted in a statistical difference in emotional coping skills in the areas of social awareness and responsible decision-making. However, the researcher did not reject the null hypothesis for questions 1, 2, and 4. Therefore no significant statistical difference existed in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, or relationship skills.

Tests of Normality

The researcher concluded for each individual question (Q1-Q5), because the significance of the mean scores was ≤ the alpha value .05, the distribution was not normal (see Table 6). Using the Shapiro-Wilk data was a reason to consider using the Wilcoxon

Signed-Rank Test as one method of significance testing. Looking at the underlying assumptions of the parametric test, the paired samples t-test assumes is normally distributed (McClave & Sincich, 2017) and "the dependent variable has been measured on an interval/ratio scale" (Gignac, 2019, p. C6.36). However, Gignac (2019) cautioned "If the dependent variable has been measured on a scale with 4-points [sic] or less, however, a non-parametric statistic should be considered to test the difference between two or more paired means" (Gignac, 2019, p. C6.37) Examination of the histograms in Appendix I depicted measures across at least five interval measures on all five questions. "The paired samples *t*-test can be expected to provide relatively accurate results when the difference scores are associated with skew and kurtosis less than |2.0| and |9.0|" (Gignac, 2019, p. C6.37). The largest skewness actual value was |.618), far less than the threshold of |2.0|, justifying the use of the paired sample t-test. Furthermore, Yates et al. (1999) claimed, "the t procedures can be used evenly for clearly skewed distributions when the sample size is larger, roughly $n \geq 40$" (p. 606). The researcher's sample size was $n = 52$.

Table 6

Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Statistic	.880	.887	.893	.867	.916
df	52	52	52	52	52
Significance	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
		.001			

Therefore, in the interest of conservatism, the researcher used the two inferential methods-- the parametric paired sample *t*-test and the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test--inferential methods to evaluate statistical significance based on the prototype

results. Because both statistical methods produced similar results, the researcher was led to draw the same conclusions (see Table 7). The effect sizes *r* for the Wilcoxon Signed Rank two-sample paired signed rank test.

The results from the two tests produce similar results. Q3 results from both tests indicated the results were not valid due to normality. Pallent (2020) explained "For the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. Cohen's d criteria is .1 = small effect, .3 = medium effect, and .5 = large effect" (p. 242). Per Cohen's d criteria, the *r* effect size was small to medium for all five questions.

Table 7

Comparison of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test and Paired Samples t-Tests

Question	Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (two-tailed)		*r* effect size	Paired samples t-test (two- tailed)	
Q1 (pre-post)	0.618	non-significant	0.220	0.652	non-significant
Q2 (pre-post)	0.203	non-significant	0.230	0.182	non-significant
Q3 (pre-post)	0.034	significant	0.317	0.046	significant
Q4 (pre-post)	0.779	non-significant	0.206	0.672	non-significant
Q5 (pre-post)	0.028	non-significant	0.302	0.026	non-significant

Cignac (2019) explained "researchers prefer to report effect sizes as Cohen's d in the context of the difference between two groups" (p. C16.6). "Cohen classified effect sizes as small (d = 0.2), medium (d = 0.5), and large (d ≥ 0.8)...These designations large,

medium, and small do not take into account other variables such as the accuracy of the assessment instrument and the diversity of the study population" (Sullivan & Feinen 2012, pp. 280-281). The data collected had small relative effect sizes (see Table 8). "Cohen suggested that d = 0.2 be considered a 'small' effect size, 0.5 represents a 'medium' effect size and 0.8 a 'large' effect size. This means that if the difference between two groups' means is less than 0.2 standard deviations, the difference is negligible, even if it is statistically significant" (McLeod, 2023, para. 4). In the case of the paired mean effect sizes, the differences were small for each of the pair pairs of questions.

Table 8

Effect Sizes using Cohen's d Point Estimate

Question	Point Estimate	Relative Effect Size
Q1 (pre-post)	0.063	small
Q2 (pre-post)	0.188	small
Q3 (pre-post)	0.284	small
Q4 (pre-post)	0.059	small
Q5 (pre-post)	0.320	small

Statistical Analysis Limitations

Because two dependent samples were measured, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was employed to validate the results. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used when assumptions were not met to employ the dependent samples *t*-test. The Wilcoxon signed rank test was employed as the "non-parametric of the dependent samples *t*-test. Because

the dependent samples *t*-test analyzes if the average difference of two repeated measures is zero, it requires metric…and normally distributed data" (Statistics Solutions, 2024, para. 1). The advantage of nonparametric tests was the tests did not require meeting underlying assumptions about the normality of the population(s) (Pallant, 2020). In using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, "the data are ranked, if they are not already in rank form. Additionally, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test does not calculate a standard error of the difference between means, or mean ranks, or medians for that matter" (Cignac, 2019, p. C16.14). A disadvantage of the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test is the test of significance is based on ranked data and not the data itself.

The researcher recognized the need to consider the outliers within the SEL framework survey results, when computing the z-scores. "Z-score is a statistical measure that quantifies the distance between a data point and the mean of a dataset. It's expressed in terms of standard deviations. It indicates how many standard deviations a data point is from the mean of the distribution" (Nevil, 2024, para. 3). In the case of the collected data points, examples included two or three standard deviations from the mean. In this case, the most extreme outlier z-scores included Q1 with an outlier z-score of -2.25, Q2 outlier with z-score -2.35, Q3 z-score of -3.24, Q4 z-score of -2.11, and Q5 z-score of 3.09. While two of the z-scores exceeded the generally accepted threshold of 3 standard deviations from the mean (Q3 and Q5), the researcher determined the outliers likely would not majorly affect the validity due to the robust number of participants, which included a data set of 52. Therefore, a minor impact on validity of the results was possible. However, the scholar practitioner combined the Wilcoxon nonparametric test in combination with the paired samples *t*-test to produce conservative results.

"An outlier is an observation which deviates so much from the other observations as to arouse suspicions that it was generated by a different mechanism" (Hawkins, 1980, p. 1). Within the data sets, there may have been a minor impact in validity due to outliers, specifically, the outliers of Q3 and Q5. Crain and Lysy (2016) explained:

> Outlier analysis may identify valid as well as invalid data. Invalid outliers are the target of outlier analysis, as they represent errors in the data. On the other hand, valid outliers may appear to be outside the norm, but investigation demonstrates that the data are not in error. Valid outliers may occur due to random variation, which occurs due to chance and is inherent in a system. (p. 4)

Moreover, the scholar practitioner reviewed the results, which indicated some data were not normal but were close to normal when viewing the histograms, which were all mound-shaped bell curves (see Appendix I).

Furthermore, Aronson and Nunan (2017) warned "a rule of thumb states that <5% attrition leads to little bias, while >20% poses serious threats to validity....It is important to note that even small proportions of patients lost to follow-up can cause significant bias" (para. 14). Attrition rate formula was calculated by identifying the total number of participants who left the study between the pre- and post-tests, dividing the number by the average number of participants, and multiplying by 100 (D'Alessandro, 2024, para. 16). In the case of the study, 67 family participates left the study (in the case of this research, 93 original respondents from the pre-test and 26 on the post-test resulted in 67 family participants who did not complete the second survey), when divided by the average number of participants between the pre- and post-tests (67/59.5=1.1260) and multiplied by 100 resulted in an attrition rate of 112%. Aronson and Nunan (2017)

warned “systematic differences between people who leave the study and those who continue can introduce bias into a study’s results – this is attrition bias. However, the results may not necessarily be biased, despite different drop-out rates in the groups” (para. 4). Therefore, attrition bias may have been a limitation to the research.

Finally, extraneous variables may have affected the perceptions of the parents and teachers, as well as the behavior of the students. For example, many students had never previously spent time in a school setting and were, thusly, unfamiliar with traditional school setting rules and routines. One extraneous variable included the scheduling conflicts which occurred throughout the pilot when school was not in session due to holidays and teacher professional development days when students were not in attendance. Also, the theory and psychological perception of a “honeymoon period” at the beginning of the school year has been well researched and can last up to several weeks from the beginning of the school year (Davis, 2019; Goodyear & Casey, 2013; Hooker, 2023; Plotinsky, 2023; Shell, 2023). Davis (2019) explained “With each new school year, there is an established “honeymoon” period; where the students [as well as teachers] appear to demonstrate their very best due to the notion of a fresh start. In many cases, this period lasts four to six weeks” (para. 1). Shell (2023) described this beginning time of the school year as the honeymoon period “when applied in the classroom it means that the anticipation of the new school year is winding down and everyone’s (children AND adults) true colors start to emerge” (para. 1). The researcher concluded the honeymoon period may have affected the pre-test scores of the educators, who likely did not yet know the personalities and idiosyncrasies, as well as the maturity and SEL levels, of most of the students who were enrolled in their classroom when completing the pre-

tests for the students. Therefore, the baseline data of the teachers may have been inaccurate assessments of the students' SEL developmental statuses based on misperceptions of the students' SEL skills and development, and the researcher could not delete the potential phenomenon from the analysis. Finally, by grouping parents and teachers into a homogenous group, the researcher was unable to differentiate the variability between the subsets of guardians and educators, which had the potential to reveal additional information.

Journal Data & Emergent Themes

During the twelve weeks of the SEL program implementation, the scholar practitioner kept a journal making notes of the topics, scheduling conflicts, absences, and any anomalies (see Appendix J). Originally, the scholar practitioner intended to maintain the schedule on the prototype for the 12 weeks of SEL implementation (see Appendix H). By journaling observations and teacher comments, the researcher categorized the information into various qualitative themes to better understand the interactions of the stakeholders and how the implementation of an SEL pilot program may have been affecting the students. Topics included overall classroom engagement, student enthusiasm in participation, teacher suggestions for follow-up SEL topics for which they felt the students would benefit most, and general notes. The researcher used the journal notes to develop areas for thematic analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2022) explained thematic analysis can be understood as "a) summaries of topics or categories (what is shared and unites the observations in the theme is the topic...); or b) capturing a core idea or meaning (what is shared and unites the observations in the theme is meaning)" (p. 2), then using the qualitative data to

understand and interpret the reality for the stakeholders. In the case of the early elementary research, the teachers often acted in the position of guide on the side and would express the need for the early elementary students to focus on specific areas of SEL growth, including ‘growth mindset;’ ‘self-control;’ anger;’ ‘conflict resolution;’ and ‘anger management strategies’ (see Appendix J). Therefore, the researcher used the input from the teacher stakeholders to interpret the needs of both the students and the educators to further refine and meet SEL developmental goals in the classroom, which was a fundamental aspect of the nonlinear empathy and ideation stages of the design thinking process (Dam, 2024; Interaction Design Foundation, 2020; Interaction Design Foundation; 2024b). Each week the researcher would check in with the teachers prior to or following the implementation of the SEL program to inquire about the pros, cons, and teacher-perceived effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the lessons, which were modified to meet the needs of the students as expressed by the classroom teachers.

During week one, the topic of My Body and My Feelings, the scholar practitioner implemented whole-class lessons as the classroom teachers felt the students were not yet ready for small groups. The lesson focused on recognizing and demonstrating appropriate emotions and calming techniques. During week two, the classroom teachers agreed modifying from small group lessons to whole group lessons was the teachers’ preferred implementation route, as small group lessons would prove more time consuming than the classrooms could accommodate. Additionally, during week two the students reviewed calming techniques and focused on how the body felt during calming. Students created faces of various emotions of Play-Doh. During week three, several classes were unable to participate due to holidays off school, as well as a school assembly. Students reviewed

emotions with finger puppets and appropriate and inappropriate responses by modeling situations with them. During week four, several classes were unable to participate due to a holiday off school. The topic for week four included growth mindset paired with yoga. Week five included identifying and expressing emotions by creating various paper plate masks and creating emotion stories. Week five also included several classes not being able to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Week six focused on self-control and self-regulation in various environmental situations; however, due to scheduling conflicts, several classes were unable to participate. The focus of week seven became strategies to cope with anger; however, during the same week several classes were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Week eight focused on coping strategies for realistic and unrealistic fears. Week nine's lesson involved conflict resolution, where students were presented with images of conflict and were asked to create resolutions. Week ten reviewed alternative strategies of dealing with conflict and producing appropriate reactions while dealing with big emotions. Week eleven involved anger management strategies in a variety of situations. Finally, week twelve culminated with a review of strategies as well as affirmation yoga to celebrate the twelve weeks of SEL learning and development.

The researcher created a codebook to analyze the five CASEL themes and other qualitative areas (see Appendix K). Q1 self-awareness scale was coded as SelfAS; Q2 self-management scale was coded as SMS; Q3 social awareness scale was coded as SocAS; Q4 relationship skills was coded as RS; and Q5 responsible decision making was coded as RDM. While overlap certainly existed within the emergent themes, each week took on an overall SEL theme or combination of two themes in unison. SelfAS (Q1) was

the, or one of the, primary focus(-es) of implementation during weeks 1, 6, and 12. SMS (Q2) was the, or one of the, primary focus(-es) of implementation during weeks 2, 6, 7, 8, and 11. SocAS (Q3) was the, or one of the, primary focus(-es) of implementation during weeks 3, 5, 10, and 11. RS (Q4) was the, or one of the, primary focus(-es) of implementation during weeks 9 and 10. While RDM (Q5) was the, or one of the, primary focus(-es) of implementation during weeks 4 and 10. Emergent themes indicated a higher need in the CASEL areas of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, as compared to relationship skills and responsible decision making.

Summary

The researcher addressed five areas of social-emotional learning aligned with those of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to determine if regular social-emotional lessons within the early elementary classroom created a difference in SEL skills in students enrolled in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, ages 3-7 measured by parent perception. The researcher found statistically significant differences in the areas of social awareness and responsible decision-making but was unable to find a statistically significant difference in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. The researcher's journal with teacher suggestions revealed the continuous theme for the need to adapt lessons to meet the needs of the individual students. During the implementation of the SEL lessons in the seven early childhood classrooms, the teachers' feedback focused heavily on incorporating more SEL lessons in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness as compared to relationship skills and responsible decision making. The researcher interpreted the comments as the need for more foundational SEL skills at the beginning

of the school year during the first months of school. Furthermore, for most pre-k students, the school year was the student's first experience in a school setting, and this was true of many kindergarten students, too. The researcher interpreted the teachers' feedback as the need to incorporate fundamental skills as a basis for other SEL skill development. The null hypothesis (H_o) stated the introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons resulted in no difference in emotional coping skills. Interestingly, while the lessons primarily focused on survey questions Q1, Q2, and Q3, the researcher concluded the results indicated insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for Q1, Q2, and Q4. However, the research concluded the results were sufficient evidence to accept the null hypothesis for Q3 and Q5. Moreover, Q3 results were not valid due to issues with normality.

In sum, the results provided insufficient evidence the pilot had an overall positive outcome on students' SEL skills within the 12-week allotted time. While the stakeholders played an active role in providing feedback, the researcher believed extraneous variables may have affected the outcome of the data. For example, a theorized "honeymoon period" where students were on best behavior may have affected the pre-test data, as the teachers may not have known the personalities of the students during the first weeks of school. Nonetheless, the researcher concluded there existed the possibility the focus on the overarching three themes may have influenced the SEL development of Q1 and Q2, self-awareness and self-management, respectively. Moreover, the need for foundational skill development may have been at the forefront of the students' SEL needs, but the researcher recognized CASEL did not prioritize within these five overarching SEL framework areas or recognize any of the five skills as more basic or developed before

another. Instead, CASEL stated all five areas are foundational to SEL development (2024c). Therefore, the researcher concluded further investigation was needed to determine if the five developmental areas could be categorized by age or ranked by SEL developmental level, which was unclear at the time of research. However, the researcher concluded the possibility the SEL-focused pilot study may have had an effect and produced a positive change could not be discounted.

Chapter Four: Critical Analysis – Integration into Practice

Critical Analysis

Using the design thinking process, the researcher utilized the cyclical steps of empathy, define, ideate, prototype, and test to meet the social-emotional needs of the early elementary pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students and classrooms which previously had no defined SEL program. Design thinking was described as "cross-functional teams [who] work together to understand user needs and create solutions that address those needs. Moreover, the design thinking process helps unearth creative solutions" (Interaction Design Foundation, 2024a, para. 3). From the elementary school research site, the scholar practitioner invited a combination of building administrators, pre-kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers, and an array of educational staff stakeholders to participate in the nonlinear design thinking process and culminating research study. All invited professionals participated at various levels of the design thinking process stages. While the administrators participated in the empathy stage, the teachers participated in empathy, define, ideate, prototype and test phases throughout the study. With the participation of the educators and administrators, the scholar practitioner explored the current situation at the elementary schools and innovated ideas with the help of the elementary staff. As mentioned in the literature review, the whole child learning approach "transitions from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children" (ASCD, 2024, para. 1), which included a combined focus on academic and social-emotional needs, as well as unique needs which may arise in asynchronous development (Davidson Institute, 2024; Ozkan & Kettler, 2022; Papadopoulos, 2021). Moreover, the parents of the early

elementary students were invited to participate in all the stages throughout the research. Research indicated parents and guardians held strong understanding of their students' emotional states and antecedents, or triggers, to various emotional states, including boredom (McCluskey, 2000; Nutt et al., 2016; Papadopoulos, 2021; Quinn, 2023). By inviting an array of adults who were prominent in the students' lives, the researcher sought to understand the overall status of the learning in the early elementary childhood classrooms, specifically pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students.

Integration into Practice

Transformational leadership involved making careful considerations as to how carefully crafted SEL programs impacted communication, solution finding, accessibility, and ethical leader roadmaps for success. The researcher recognized scholar practitioners integrate knowledge into practice. Leaders deemed most efficient in meeting goals were those who responded to planned and unplanned changes in the organization (Mohiuddin, et al. 2022). Leadership, innovation, creativity, and tenacity were linked to the success of organizations which navigated the fast-paced and ever-changing waves of innovation within education (Binci & Scafarto, 2020; Rivin, 2023). The ambidextrous approach to leadership held theoretical and practical implications for digital age evolution and relevance. In digital leadership, the ambidextrous approach refers to the dichotomous "balance the need for both exploration and exploitation in its organizational strategy and organizational development. Exploration involves developing new products, services, or processes, while exploitation focuses on optimizing existing ones" (Deffenbacher, 2023, para. 2). In the design based study, the researcher recognized the opportunities to create a scaffolded approach to SEL learning in the school system by piloting a program to

students who would otherwise not have a specific curriculum on SEL development, which began in kindergarten but took place for an hour once monthly. Instead, the researcher piloted a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten SEL-focused program based on the CASEL SEL framework to potentially determine whether the weekly lessons would lead to a difference in the SEL developmental outcomes of the early elementary-aged children. Specifically, the researcher was interested to know if there would be a significant difference between the parent and teacher perceptions of the students' SEL development and coping skills rated in five areas based on the CASEL framework. The null hypothesis stated the introduction of social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons will result in no difference in emotional coping skills. The researcher also sought to answer the research question: How does the scholar practitioner perceive the implementation of SEL lessons in an early childhood setting?

Many approaches had been developed within the ambidextrous approach, such as the flexible work schedule blending teleworking or working outside of the physical premises with in-person, physical meetings. Binci and Scafarto (2020) recommended "smart working" as a blend of flexible working conditions to promote the framework of leadership toward "empowering behaviors" which "coexists with the traditional way of working…to set a leadership approach based on followers' autonomy and trust, typical of empowering leadership" (p. 25). The ambidextrous leadership approach "varies according to the modes in which workers decide to perform" (p. 25) and produced different scenarios based on the theoretical framework. In the case of the research conducted by the scholar practitioner, the participants were presented with minimum weekly ongoing opportunities to posit ideas and suggestions, as well as ask for clarification, and share any

misgivings, information, and provide feedback. Furthermore, the researcher was available to parents and educators electronically through email and phone. Using the ambidextrous and "smart working" approaches to research, the scholar practitioner sought to incorporate best practices through the cyclical stages of the design thinking process.

Furthermore, Binci and Scafarto (2020) produced a quadrant theoretical framework about leadership styles based on directive leadership and empowering leadership, including bureaucratic, digital changing, single entrepreneur, and flexible organizations leadership styles (p. 26). The implications of the framework included "situational perspective" regarding how leadership styles may or "should operate within a Digital Working context" (p. 29). Dieffenbacher (2023) described the dual approaches of the ambidextrous approach as goals twofold: "separate units for exploration and exploitation [and] aligning units for effective collaboration" (para. 5). In sum, "ambidextrous leadership means…the possibility for the teams to work both in directive and empowering fashion, by asking them to continuously adapt to such [delegation based on situation] changes within the context in which they are working" (Binci & Scafarto, 2020, p. 29). In the case of the research, the scholar practitioner aimed to utilize the already-existing classrooms and school resources to develop a functional and potentially foundational SEL program for early elementary students who were not already involved in focused SEL lessons. Additionally, the researcher witnessed small-group or individual SEL developmental lessons occurring organically within the classroom when intrapersonal or interpersonal conflicts would arise; however, no focused curriculum was utilized within the pre-kindergarten classrooms whatsoever and within the kindergarten classrooms only once monthly, which the researcher theorized as insufficient

implementation based on the age group of the student SEL requirements. Additionally, the researcher considered a piloted program for pre-kindergarten to set a foundation for SEL skill development earlier in life as compared to existing SEL curriculum.

In education, the scholar practitioner connected the leadership transformation ideas and approached the researched educational institution with a mindset of turning failure into success as a hallmark of innovative leadership. Leyes (2020) explained while failing may be difficult to associate with successful leaders, "the reality is that failure is an indispensable part of the success of many entrepreneurs" (para. 1). Instead of considering failure a final and ineffective end to the means, successful organizational leaders consider failure as an opportunity to rethink the needs of the organization and recraft a plan to action. The scholar practitioner considered all angles of possibilities but held an open mind to the unknown as a driver to future insight and innovation. During the cyclical design thinking process, the scholar practitioner consistently engaged in reflection as a means of consideration. Miles (2022) cautioned "Reflection is an important part of failure. Without reflection, we wouldn't learn. It's important that after we fail, we take a moment to sit with it" (para. 34). Reflecting on possibilities and the potential for changemaking through diversified means was a crucial component of innovation. Miles (2022) explained:

> Innovation is critical to learning. But to innovate, we need to know what went wrong. Failure leads to learning because we're able to identify where we went off track. From there, we can implement new ideas, new approaches, and new strategies. (paras. 36-37)

The scholar practitioner put reflection and changemaking into innovative practice by molding and evolving the SEL pilot program based on the needs of the stakeholders as shared by the adults in the lives of the children through both pre- and post-surveys and throughout all stages of the research.

The following quote was posed by Mohiuddin, et al (2014) as cited by Eric Schurenberg (2014) "the thread that stands out, partly because it's unexpected, is a failure. Or more precisely: the ability to absorb failure and – by determination, grit, pugnacity, whatever – turn it into success" (p. 29). The assertion that the ability to turn a failure into success is the true definition of innovative leadership. To do so, organizational leaders must adopt a growth mindset. Henderson (2023) suggested "Using failure as a catalyst for growth can be a powerful tool for personal and professional development…Reframe your perspective on failure: Rather than seeing failure as a negative, view it as an opportunity for growth and learning" (paras. 8-9). In the scholar practitioner's case, modifying lessons to meet the end users' needs was at the core of the design thinking process. Rather than reflecting on a lesson which did not sustain the students' attentions as well as others as failures, but rather continued to modify lessons to meet the needs of students and all the stakeholders.

"The design thinking process starts by looking at the needs, dreams and behaviors of people—the end users" (Interaction Design Foundation, 2024a, para. 8). As the research progressed, focusing on meeting the end users' needs, themes developed heavily focused on social-emotional learning needs. The four pre-K classes did not have a specific SEL curriculum in use, and the kindergarten classes met periodically with counselors, but only monthly. Teachers indicated specific SEL gaps and missing pieces in

student behavior, student mindset, and interpersonal contact amongst students. Through the iterative and cyclical phases of design thinking, the scholar practitioner and early elementary staff stakeholders were able to realize the greatest possible need within the age group of 3-7 included social-emotional learning. The need was supported by the literature, which indicated the need existed especially for the special education subgroup of gifted and talented students, who were recommended as possessing unique social-emotional needs which affected learning and the process abilities of the brain (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Davidson Institute, 2024; Ozkan & Kettler, 2022; Tarrikone et al., 2019). The researcher recognized the need for specialized SEL in unique groups at very early ages and extended the idea to the entire population of underserved and unserved students. The researcher wanted to learn if implementing focused SEL lessons at earlier ages than the present curriculum provided at the time could provide a scaffold for segueing into other SEL development, growth, and curricula.

Short- and Long-Term Implications

The Case for CASEL

Research had long touted the positive outcomes of SEL development when implemented in applied and organic lessons (Cavilla, 2020; Luke et al., 2022; Shaughnessy, 2019). In determining if emotional coping skills would increase or remain the same, as stated in the hypotheses, the goal was to determine a difference in the students' coping skills in the areas of CASEL's framework, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making during the piloted 12-week period of instruction. (CASEL, 2024b, para. 4). The nonprofit organization CASEL—Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning—was chosen as a model for SEL as CASEL was developed with a focus on the whole

student approach. CASEL was chosen for an emphasis on collaboration and held "efforts are unified by a commitment to evidence-based SEL to support all students' learning and development" (CASEL, 2023c, para. 2). Furthermore, CASEL's framework was ideal for an early elementary environment as "the CASEL 5 can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts" (CASEL, 2024b, para. 6). The CASEL-based SEL framework pilot implemented within early elementary years held the potential to create a scaffolded-approach to SEL learning from early childhood to later years within the public school district.

SEL Scaffolding Related to Gifted Programs

Because only 40% of Missouri's public-school districts possessed state-approved gifted programs (Nelson, 2023, para. 2), the scholar practitioner was interested in learning more about the long-term outcomes of SEL from early elementary ages and scaffolded throughout the students' educational journey as possibly part of a future longitudinal investigation. Specifically, the educational researcher was interested in further investigating the phenomenon for gifted education programs to be misunderstood in scope and purpose (Grisson et al., 2019; Seward & Gentry, 2022; Weber at al., 2014; Westhuizen, 2007) and the potential for dissemination of data-backed information to dispel myths and misconceptions, such that gifted programs were associated with unnecessary expenditures of time and money or as elitist for affluent schools, further exacerbating inequitable educational programs (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Dreilinger, 2020; Grayson & Hall, 1992; Haberlin, n.d.; Knight, 2019; Reeves, 2019; Wahl, 2019). In the short term, the purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between SEL opportunities in early elementary grades (pre-kindergarten through kindergarten) and the

ability to better reach learning potential in students by scaffolding SEL lessons beginning at the onset of formal public education in the earliest grades by piloting a CASEL-based program based on the needs of the students as indicated by teachers, early elementary staff members, and administration. Previous research advised programs focused on community, justice, equity, and SEL support (Frazier, 2023; Ozkan & Kettler, 2022). The first years of education were an ideal starting point for piloting SEL lessons, as indicated by the elementary staff stakeholders, especially in the wake of COVID-19 (Bishop, 2022; Li, 2022; Lowe & Van Rizen, 2023). The need for gifted education at early elementary levels, as well as focused SEL curricula for all early elementary students, had been well documented (Cavilla, 2021; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.c; Wait & Lovett, 2021; Yaluma & Tyner, 2021), as had the benefits of gifted lesson programming beginning in early elementary years (Finn, 2014; Franklin, 2009; NAGC, n.d.b; Robinson, 2009).

Educators as Advocates

To dispel myths and stereotypes, educators and administration sought to advocate and employ strategies within the buildings to ensure an intensive examination for equity-driven research. While all early elementary pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students participated in the SEL pilot at the cooperating school district, the long-term implications remained unclear. However, the research had long advocated for focused SEL lesson implementation in the classroom, as classroom teachers benefitted from SEL curriculum to meet the needs of all diverse learners in the classroom (Deslisle, 2015; Prothero, 2022; Schmoker, 2010; Steton et al., 2019) , many of whom possessed unique social-emotional

needs (Brown, 2015; Hertberg-Davis, 2009; Reis & Renzulli, 2009; Sisk, 2009; VanTassel & Baska, 2007).

Advocating for Minorities

Moreover, underrepresentation through an inequitable distribution of minority and non-minority students in gifted programs had long been indicated through research relating to demographic information, especially African American, Latinx, and Native American (Ford et al., 2021; Grisson & Redding, 2016; Sarouphim, 2004). Long-term implications of early elementary SEL lessons had the potential to alleviate the tendency for the groups to score lower on standardized tests, possibly based on culture differences for a more biased-free approach to learning and screening (Allen, 2017; Ford, 2020; Grisson & Reading, 2016; Naglieri & Ford, 2015; Renzulli & Brandon, 2017). Historical lack of minority representation had been detrimental to educational equity.

Research indicated minority elementary students who participated in specialized developmental programs were more likely to be positively identified during gifted screening in later years (Franklin, 2009), further suggesting steps toward the alleviation of historical minority disadvantages and rural geographic isolation disadvantages. Clearly, without specialized SEL curriculum to guide the whole child learning approach, years of specialized educational needs would go unmet for innumerous diverse student groups.

Advocating for Disadvantaged Areas to Increase Educational Equity and Avoid Brain-Drain

Rural disadvantaged areas ranged in distance from urban areas but were generally accepted as being outside of typical proximity to urban centers (National Center for

Education Statistics, n.d.). Of the 15-20% of Americans who resided in rural areas (America Counts Staff, 2021; Johnson, 2017), another 21% of rural residents identified as minorities (Johnson, 2017). Geographically isolated areas tended to face educational hardships, such as lack of proximity to cultural city centers, lower pay, a shortage of highly skilled teachers, and absence of gifted programs (Johnson, 2017; Morton, 2021; Parks, 2021). Defined as impoverished in the literature, oftentimes the students and families regarded education as secondary to the primary needs of food and shelter (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2019; Wahl, 2019). Moreover, the stereotypes of perceived superiority of more affluent areas with disproportionate access to resources exacerbated the implementation and longevity of gifted programs and community investment in education (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Besnoy, 2005; Kaplan, 2013).

Neuroscientific Evidence

Because neurotypical and non-neurotypical children experienced emotional and social development differently (Davidson Institute, 2024; Shearer, 2020), considerations for approaches to SEL development was imperative. Multiple Intelligences (MI) was emphasized through student inventories to determine neural processes and learning preferences. Social-emotional development was considered through a neuroscientific lens to differentiate the lessons to meet the students' unique needs. In the case of the design based research study, wherein an understanding on neuroscience was not necessary for the educators to recognize prefrontal cortex activation during specific activities, the administration and classroom teachers nonetheless considered prior knowledge and scientific research to identify manners in which neural processing occurred for children

aged 3-7. Using such best practices was utilized to provide educational equity with exceptional and neurotypical learners alike in meeting unique SEL needs.

Expanding SEL in Early Years as a Scaffold for Later Gifted Services

Targeted Populations

As mentioned in the literature review, targeted populations which have been historically underrepresented in diversified educational programs, including but not limited to gifted programming, included k-12 students who lived in areas considered lower socioeconomic and geographically disadvantaged and/or rural (Hodges & Gentry, 2021; Reinhardt et al., 2020; Rose, 2001; Shi, 2019). By creating a scaffolded SEL program where none existed in the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.a) counseling standards SEL curriculum held the potential to be crafted to meet the needs of the neurotypical and non-neurotypical unique needs of the students. The piloted lessons held the potential segue to later SEL programs as defined by state standards during the early years to elementary.

Previous Case Studies

Longitudinal research had previously indicated graduation rates were altered by income race, and gender (Rose, 2001). When students had access to diversified programs, specifically gifted programs, Rose (2001) found graduation rates increased and theorized higher graduation rates for schools when such programs were offered. Research found an overrepresentation of Asian American and European American students in gifted education programs and an underrepresentation of Latinx, African American, and Native American students (Hodges & Gentry, 2021; Peters et al., 2019; Reinhardt et al, 2020; Shi, 2019). Shi (2019) offered evidence of gains in SAT scores from the groups and those

from rural neighborhoods and low-achieving schools when given access to gifted programs. McCluskey (2000) had long indicated behavior issues had the tendency to develop when high ability children were unable to participate in accelerated learning paces and pointed to long-term studies of accelerated learners who had reduced social risks when involved in talent programs.

Battling Legislative and Funding Barriers

In addition to the absence of counseling standards for pre-kindergarten students (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.b), Missouri also possessed loopholes in the legislation Section 162.720, which instituted mandatory gifted education programs beginning in the 2024-2025 school year but failed to institute a requirement for screening students for gifted services (Harris & Atwood, 2022). Individual families were left with the responsibility and cost to screen their children for gifted identification as school districts had no mandate to identify gifted learners. Advocating for the removal of legislative barriers would likely prove a future volatile issue in the political future of gifted education programs.

Furthermore, budget issues had been a historical barrier not only in the development of specialized programs to meet the needs of diverse student populations, but also in teacher training and staffing (Cutler, 2022; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], n.d.a; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], n.d.b). Because resources were shared amongst educational programs and spread so thinly, insufficient funding had been a barrier to developing specialized programming, such as those in counseling to meet the specialized SEL needs of students, as well as instituting necessary gifted programming. Finally, when states were given the responsibility of defining gifted education without

state mandates requiring gifted programs (Cutler, 2022; NAGC, n.d.f; U.S. Department of Education, 2019)., a disconnect existed between student needs and school offerings and equated to no more than $4 spent per gifted student annually and only for students identified as gifted in state-approved programs (Griffith, 2016, para. 9). Without changes to the legislative barriers blocking specialized programs for diverse students, including scaffolded SEL programs in early elementary and access to gifted programs, the scholar practitioner believed students would continue to be unable to achieve their full potential.

The need for SEL in early elementary classrooms was well documented as a fundamental aspect of the whole child learning approach and the need for schools to identify and meet students' specialized needs (Finn, 2014; Gailbraith & Deslisle, 2015). Further, Finn (2014) long held the assertion the education system held the responsibility to meet the students' needs, specifically including social emotional learning development of gifted students, whose SEL needs varied from neurotypical peers. To prevent negative and harmful behaviors, Gailbraith and Deslisle (2015) warned the SEL needs of gifted students must be met.

Noted in the current literature, early elementary students had necessary and specific SEL needs, especially after COVID-19. Finn (2014) insisted future success of gifted students rested on the early identification and counseling to meet unique SEL needs (para. 20). Robinson (2009) urged a k-12 curricular continuum, and the scholar practitioner posed the idea of scaffolding beginning with a pre-k through 12th grade whole-child approach to SEL and academic curricula. Peterson (2009) touted the need for specialized academic and SEL learning for diverse groups who possessed specialized learning needs. Slovak et al. (2016) emphasized a further step by scaffolding whole-child

learning at home by including both academic and SEL lessons from the classroom into organic and daily practice.

NAGC (n.d.d) outlined skill and ability development in gifted students as asynchronicities often possessed by young high-potential learners who are often neglected as (1) not receiving specialized SEL skill curricula, (2) not being identified until aged 8 or later, and (3) not having teachers with necessary related training. Luke et al. (2022) heeded successful interventions must combine SEL development with intervention programs which combine skill development lessons both inside and outside the classroom environment with planned and unplanned opportunities for practical use. Furthermore, educators must receive high quality training to positively develop student whole-child potential (Luke et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The results of the research lead to further discussion of which skills were to be areas of focus as well as developing differentiated strategies to directly meet the needs of students and educators. Within social-emotional lessons, “differentiation goals focus on adjusting the content, process, product, and environment of instruction to match students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles...aligned with the standards and expectations of the curriculum…[and] reflect the individual strengths and challenges of each student” (Daly, 2023, para. 2). By adapting SEL lessons to each classroom’s specific SEL needs based on teacher observation, the researcher continually sought feedback from the stakeholders.

As previously mentioned, innovating and testing an SEL pilot program in early elementary grades held the potential to scaffold SEL learning in later grades to meet the

unique SEL needs of students as the needs evolved throughout childhood. Denham (2018) illustrated "the SEL process is marked by such age-differentiated developmental tasks" (p. 2). Furthermore, Denham (2018) noted "SEL is embedded in, or must be seen in the context of, the developmental tasks children and youth are facing, including aspects that change and stay the same" (p. 3). Additionally, "the outcome we care about is how they [students] can successfully respond to these tasks by developing their social-emotional competence" (Denham, 2018, p. 3). Specifically, scaffolding SEL programs throughout all stages of public education and personal development in grades pre-k through 12 may hold the potential to meet the needs of gifted learners, as well. The researcher recognized the potential to develop the research into a longitudinal study to ascertain the differences, if any, between gifted students who had not previously taken part in a focused SEL program during early elementary and the incoming students who did or would take part in an SEL program based on the CASEL developmental scale. Furthermore, the researcher posited a possible need to replicate the research study at different points during the school year to alleviate the aforementioned "honeymoon period" preconceptions if any existed. By replicating the research study at various months of the school year, a more robust dataset would be allocated to determine extraneous variables and better understand the end users' needs and the outcomes of the piloted and future SEL early elementary program.

As mentioned in the literature review, scaffolding was an essential component of gifted programs. Prominent researcher McClusky (2000) had long touted the positive outcomes of gifted learners and gifted learning programs when academic programs also incorporated SEL lessons based on student needs. The unique SEL needs of gifted

students had long been explored and recognized (McClusky, 2000; Papadopoulos, 2021; Robinson, 2009). While Lee et al. (2020) explained “social and emotional learning (SEL) is often highlighted as a promising approach to ensuring healthy development for all youth and providing equitable access to a well-rounded education” (p. 14). “Geographic isolation has long been hypothesized to have a role in the origins and development of mental disabilities” (Hudson & Doogan, 2019, p. 1). The scholar practitioner was committed to determining the positive outcomes of the project through tenacity and a commitment to equitable SEL education.

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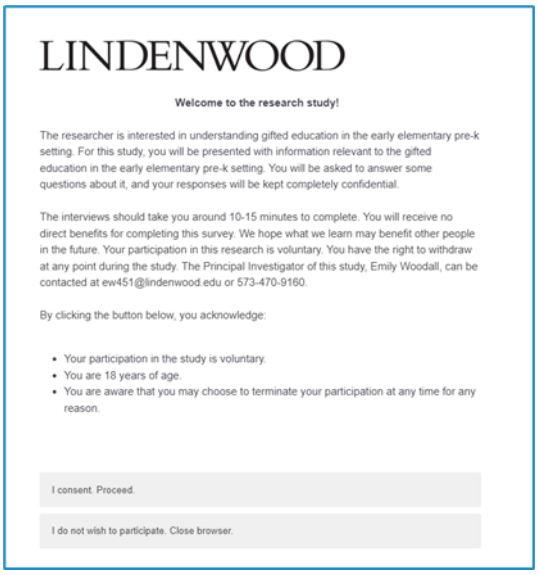
Appendices

Appendix A: Educator Survey Consent & Questions



LINDENWOOD

Welcome to the research study!

The researcher is interested in understanding gifted education in the early elementary pre-k setting. For this study, you will be presented with information relevant to the gifted education in the early elementary pre-k setting. You will be asked to answer some questions about it, and your responses will be kept completely confidential.

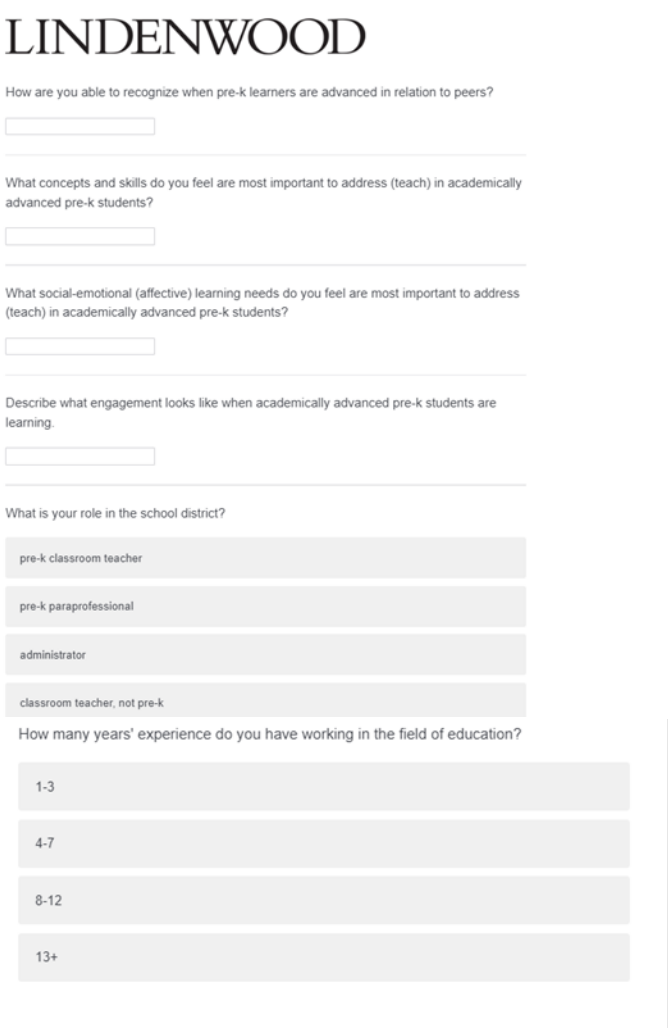
The interviews should take you around 10-15 minutes to complete. You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator of this study, Emily Woodall, can be contacted at ew451@lindenwood.edu or 573-470-9160.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary.
- You are 18 years of age.
- You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

I consent. Proceed.

I do not wish to participate. Close browser.



LINDENWOOD

How are you able to recognize when pre-k learners are advanced in relation to peers?

What concepts and skills do you feel are most important to address (teach) in academically advanced pre-k students?

What social-emotional (affective) learning needs do you feel are most important to address (teach) in academically advanced pre-k students?

Describe what engagement looks like when academically advanced pre-k students are learning.

What is your role in the school district?

- pre-k classroom teacher
- pre-k paraprofessional
- administrator
- classroom teacher, not pre-k

How many years' experience do you have working in the field of education?

- 1-3
- 4-7
- 8-12
- 13+

Appendix B: HOPE Teacher Rating Scale

HOPE TEACHER RATING SCALE

TEACHER'S NAME/CODE: _____

Marcia Gentry, Ph.D. • Scott J. Peters, Ph.D. • Nielsen Pereira, Ph.D. • Jason S. McIntosh, Ph.D. • C. Matthew Fugate, Ph.D.

Developed with funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation 2007

Student Name/ID#:		Grade:
Date of Birth:	☐ Male ☐ Female	☐ English language learner

☐ American Indian/Alaska Native ☐ Asian ☐ Black or African American ☐ White
☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ☐ Mixed Race ☐ Hispanic/Latino/a

When rating students on each item below please think about the student *compared to other children similar in age, experience, and/or environment.* Use the following scale to indicate how frequently you observe the traits and behaviors listed in items 1–11.

1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often 5 = Almost Always 6 = Always

The student demonstrates . . .	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
1. Performs or *shows potential* for performing at remarkably high levels.						
2. Is sensitive to larger or deeper issues of human concern.						
3. Is self-aware.						
4. Shows compassion for others.						
5. Is a leader within his/her group of peers.						
6. Is eager to explore new concepts.						
7. Exhibits intellectual intensity.						
8. Effectively interacts with adults or older students.						
9. Uses alternative processes.						
10. Thinks "outside the box."						
11. Has intense interests.						

12. Please indicate all content areas in which the student shows talent.

☐ Math ☐ Reading ☐ Creative Writing ☐ Social Studies
☐ Science ☐ Foreign Language ☐ Arts ☐ Other: _____

Please provide additional information concerning this student's potential:

_____

_____

_____

Additional copies of this form may be purchased from Prufrock Press Inc., P.O. Box 8813, Waco, TX 76714-8813; Phone 800/998-2208; Fax 800/240-0333; http://www.prufrock.com; ProdCode: 4546

Appendix C: Pre-K Family Survey Consent & Questions

LINDENWOOD

Welcome to the pre-k advanced learners research study!

The researcher is interested in understanding gifted education in the early elementary pre-k setting. For this study, you will be presented with information relevant to accelerated educational strategies in the early elementary pre-k setting and asked to answer some questions about it. Your responses will be kept completely confidential.

The survey questions should take you around 10-15 minutes to complete. You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator of this study, Emily Woodall, can be contacted at ew451@lindenwood.edu or 573-470-9160.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary.
- You are 18 years of age.
- You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

I consent. Proceed.

I do not wish to participate. Close browser.

What types of instructional strategies and/or teaching styles work well for your pre-k student?

What does learning look like when your child is engaged?

What is your age demographic?

20-29

30-39

40-49

50+

prefer not to answer

LINDENWOOD

To what degree are your child's educational needs being met at BGSD?

not well

somewhat

very well

To what degree are your child's social and emotional (affective) needs being met at BGSD?

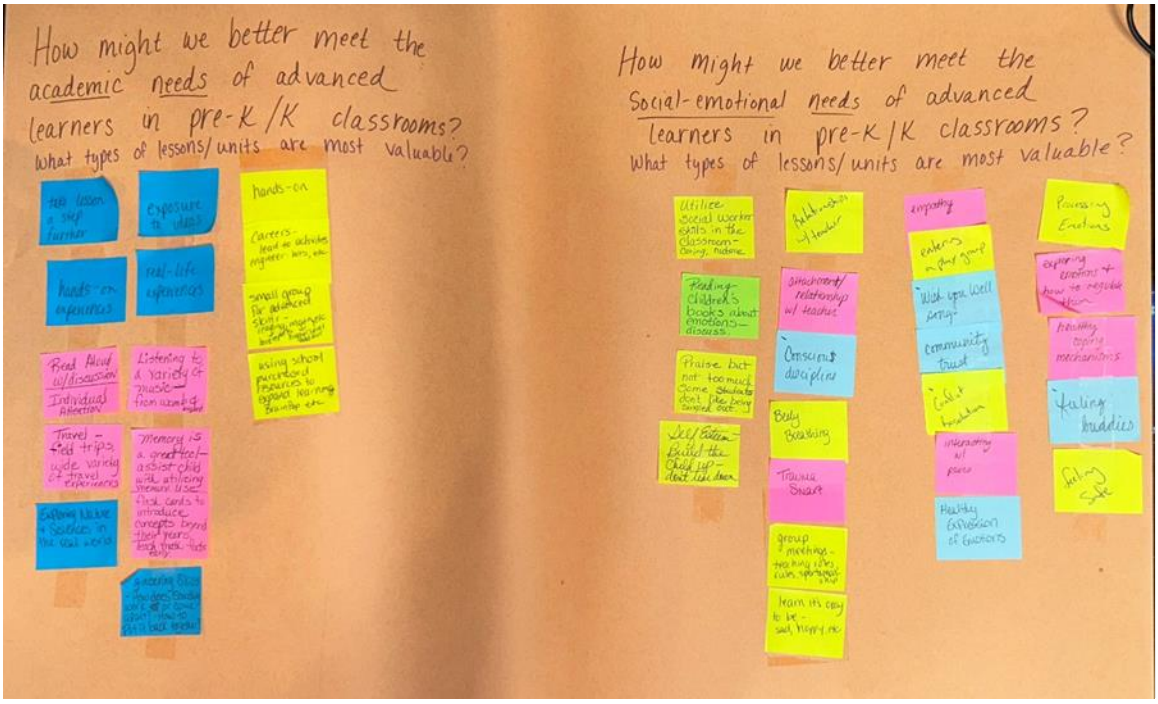
not well

somewhat

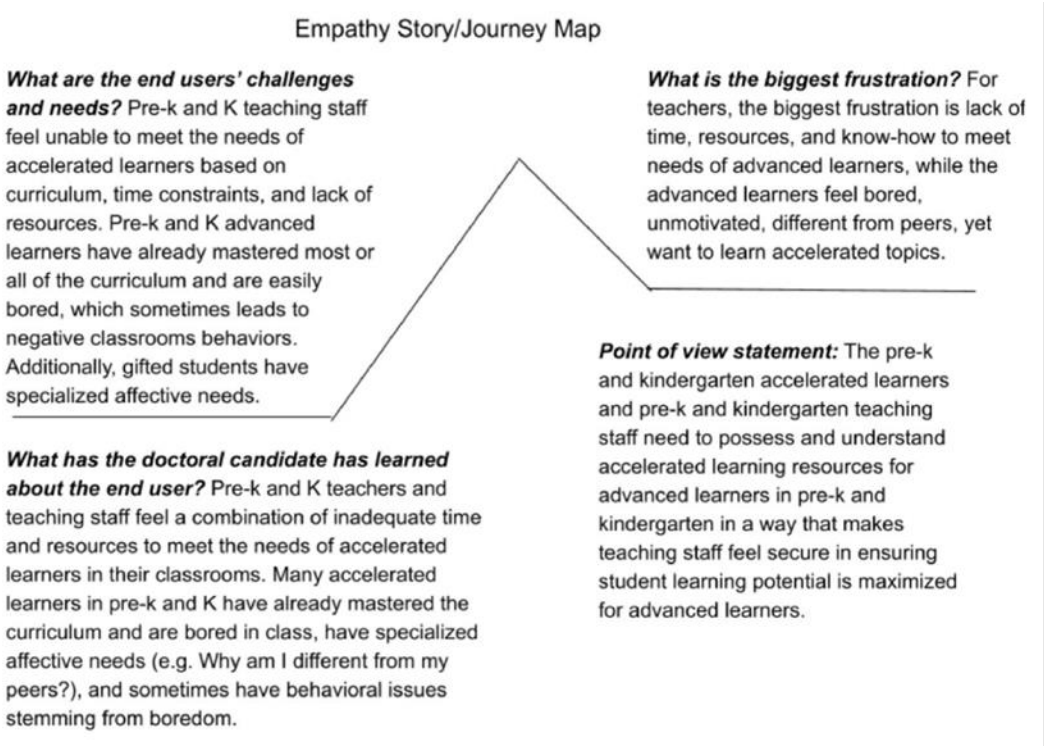
very well

What types of learning tools and resources would you like to see in the pre-k classrooms to meet your child's educational needs?

Appendix D: How Might We



Appendix E: Focus Session Empathy Story/Journey Map



Appendix F: Pre-Test Survey Instrument

"Social-emotional learning (SEL) parent survey 1 of 2"

LINDENWOOD

Welcome to the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten social-emotional learning (SEL) research study! As a teacher in your student's school district and a student at Lindenwood University, the researcher is interested in understanding social-emotional education in the early elementary setting and piloting a study for [redacted] to best meet the needs of all our diverse learners. For this study, you will be asked to take a short survey in regards to your pre-k or K student. Your responses and information will be kept completely confidential.

The survey questions should take you around 5 minutes to complete. You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other students in the future as we grow our SEL curriculum.
Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator of this study, Emily Woodall, can be contacted at ew451@lindenwood.edu or 573-470-9160.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:
* Your participation in the study is voluntary.
* You are 18 years of age.
* You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

I consent. Proceed.

I do not wish to participate. Close browser.

Please rate your student's current skillset based on skills in the following areas of social-emotional development:

Self-awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.

1 = Almost never

2 = Once in awhile

3 = Sometimes

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost always

Self-management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Social awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Relationship skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Responsible decision-making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

1 = Almost never

2 = Once in awhile

3 = Sometimes

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost always

Feel free to add any concerns, thoughts, or questions you may have here.

I will compare your student's original scores to the final scores you provide. Please type your student's name here:

I will send you a final, follow-up email survey during the second quarter to assess your child's social-emotional growth to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum I will be piloting this semester. To ensure I have the correct parent/guardian, please type your email here.

Appendix G:

Post-Test Survey Instrument "Social-emotional learning (SEL) parent survey 2 of 2"

LINDENWOOD

Welcome back to the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten social-emotional learning (SEL) research study! As a teacher in your student's school district and a student at Lindenwood University, I am interested in understanding social-emotional education in the early elementary setting and piloting a study for [redacted] to best meet the needs of all our diverse learners. As part of this study, will be asked to take a short survey in regards to your pre-k or K student. Your responses and information will be kept completely confidential. This is the second and final survey I ask you to complete.

The survey questions should take you around 5 minutes to complete. You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other students in the future as we grow our SEL curriculum.
Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator of this study, Emily Woodall, can be contacted at ew451@lindenwood.edu or 573-470-9160.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:
* Your participation in the study is voluntary.
* You are 18 years of age.
* You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

I consent. Proceed.

I do not wish to participate. Close browser.

Please rate your student's current skillset based on skills in the following areas of social-emotional development:

Self-awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.

1 = Almost never

2 = Once in awhile

3 = Sometimes

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost always

Self-management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Social awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Relationship skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Once in awhile
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Frequently
- 5 = Almost always

Responsible decision-making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

1 = Almost never

2 = Once in awhile

3 = Sometimes

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost always

Feel free to add any concerns, thoughts, or questions you may have here.

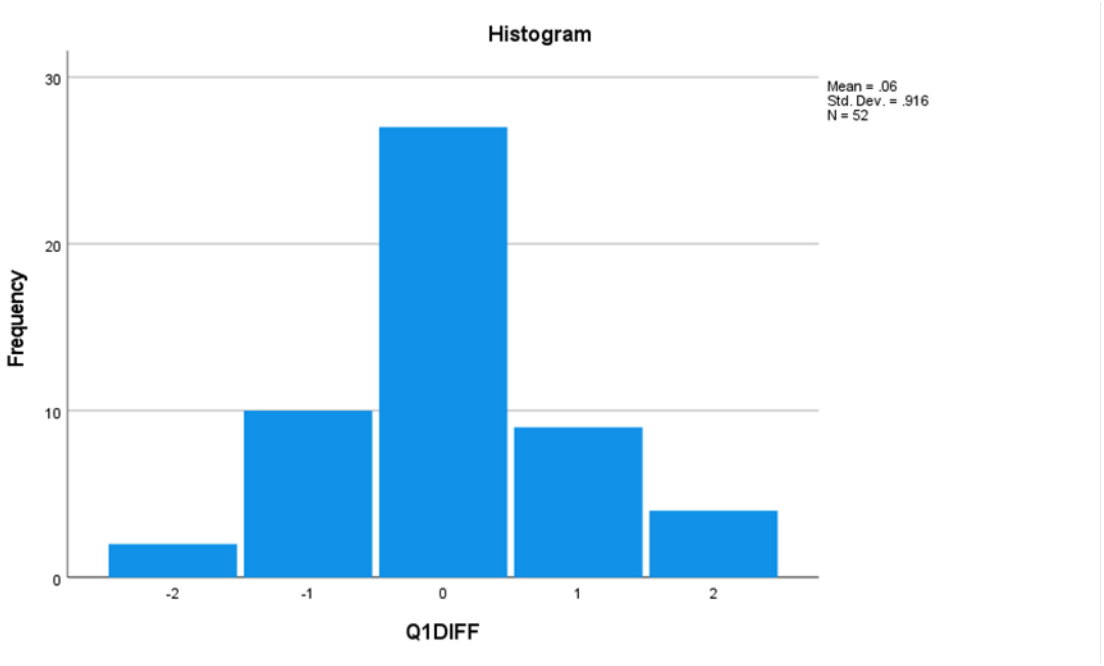
I will compare your student's original scores to the final scores you provide. Please type your student's name here:

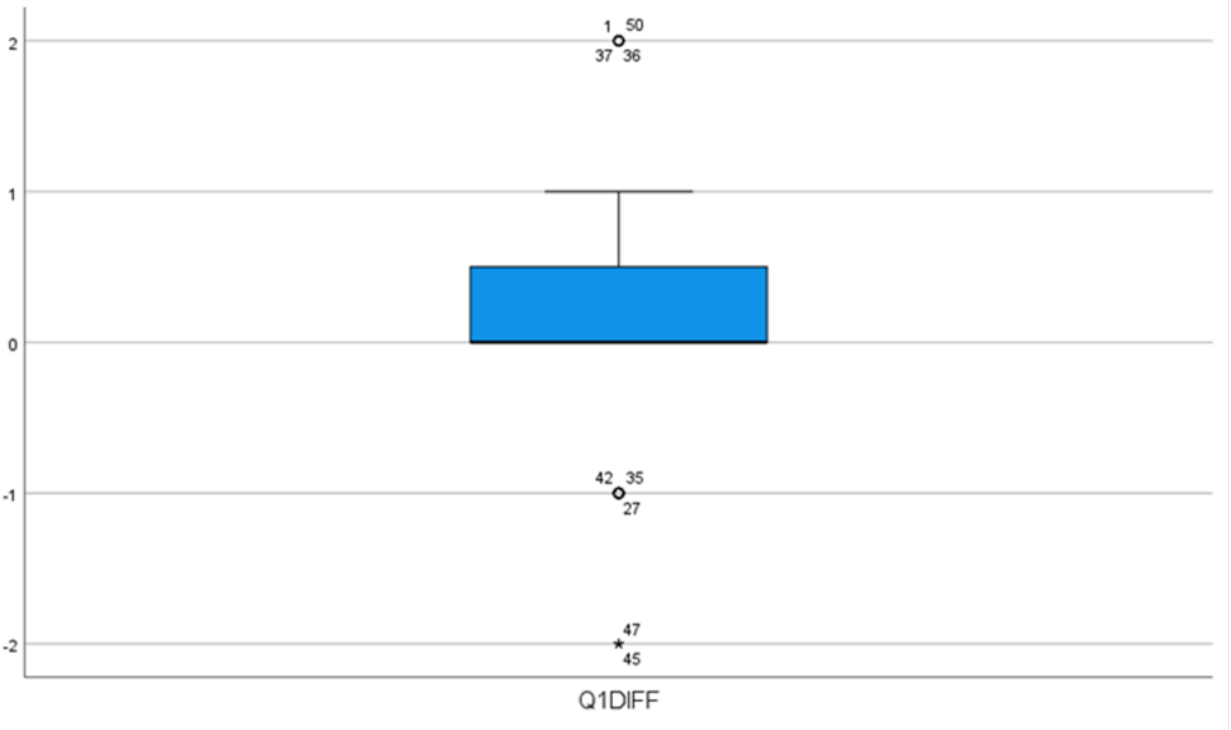
Appendix H:

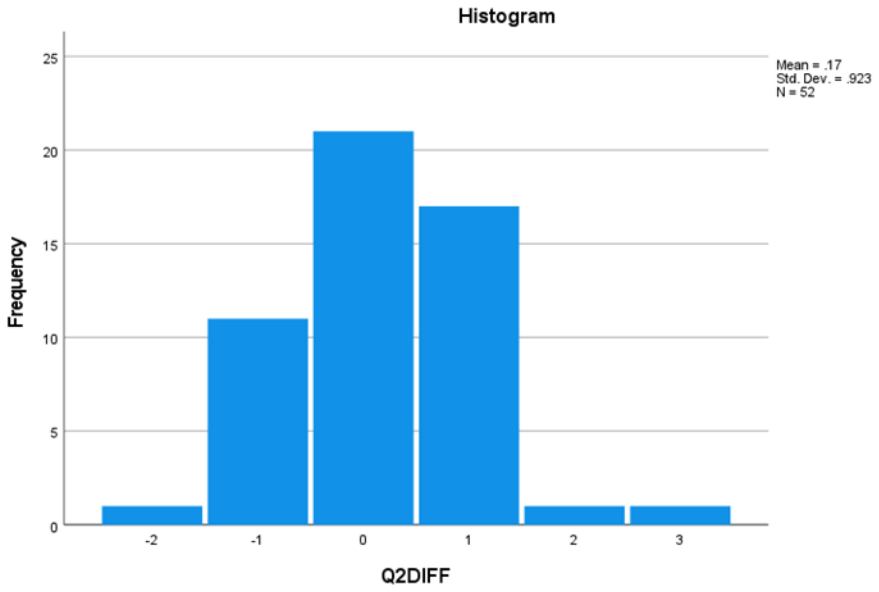
Prototype graphic, initial and revised "SEL Scope & Sequence"

DATE	WEEK	LESSON TOPIC
Aug 21-25	1	SEL pretest; My body and my feelings
Aug 28-Sep 1	2	Friends and feelings
Sep 4-9	3	Feelings and conflicts
Sep 11-15	4	Empathy in action
Sep 18-22	5	Kindness and compassion circle
Sep 25-29	6	Problem-solving role play
Oct 2-6	7	Responsibility role play
Oct 9-13	8	Calming techniques
Oct 16-20	9	Emotion walk
Oct 23-27	10	Conflict resolution circle
Oct 30-Nov 3	11	Friendship circle
Nov 6-10	12	Choice & consequences; SEL posttest

Appendix I: Histograms and Box-Whisker Charts






Histogram
Mean = .17
Std. Dev. = .923
N = 52
Frequency
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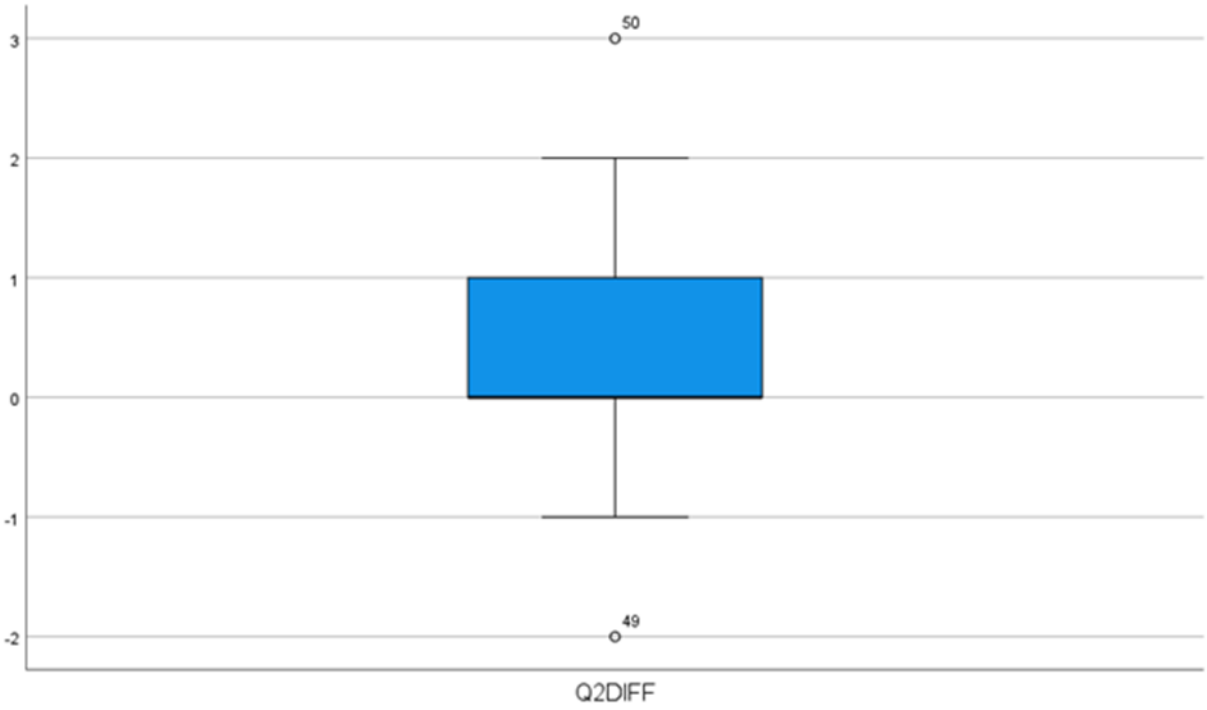
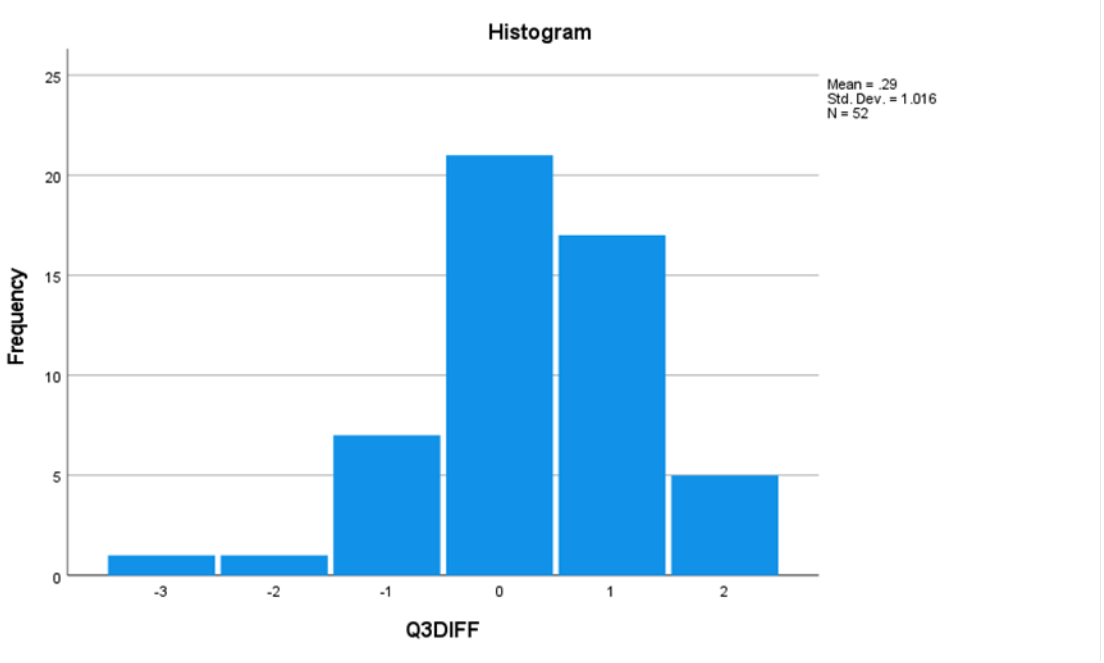
20
15
10
5
0
-2
-1
0
1
2
3
Q2DIFF


50
49
3
2
1
0
-1
-2
Q2DIFF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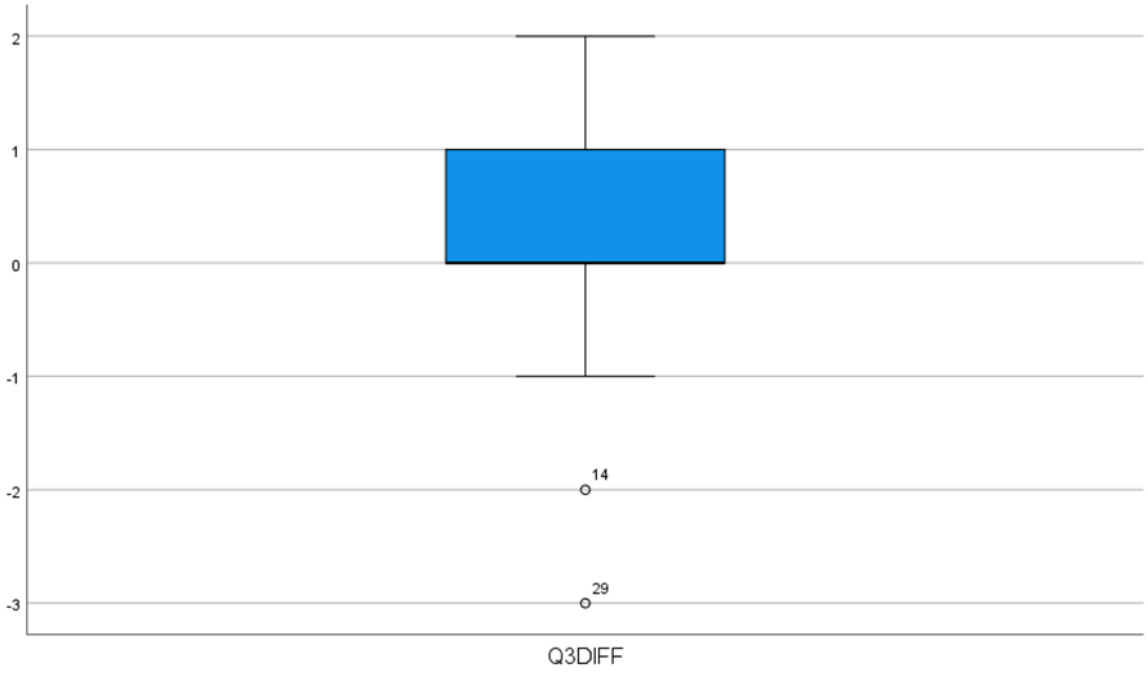
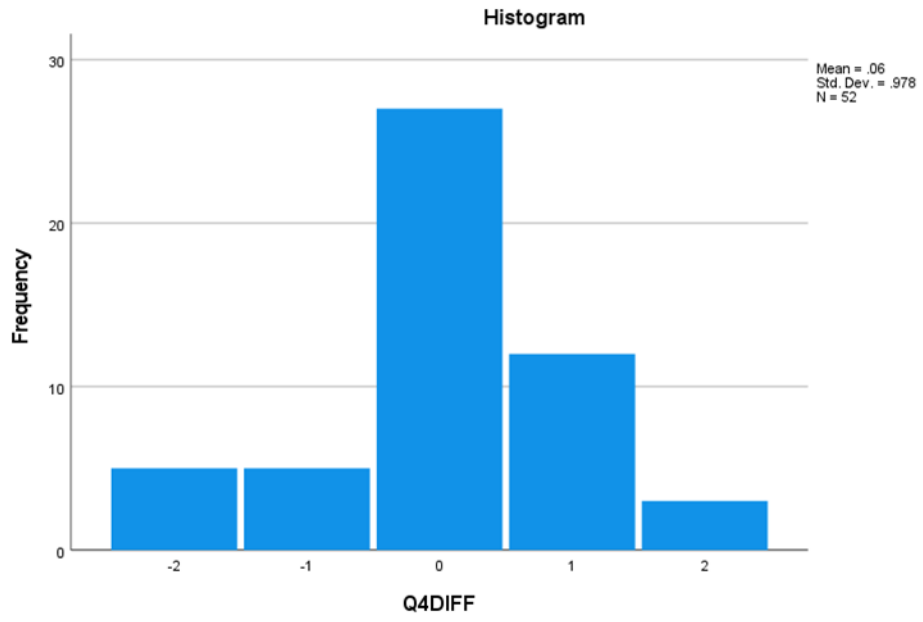
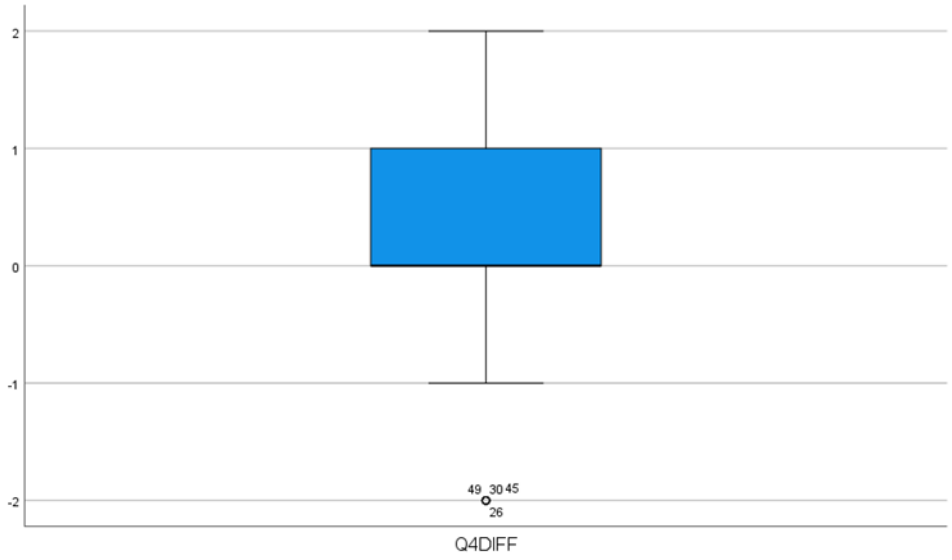
Mean = .29
Std. Dev. = 1.016
N = 52
Frequency
25
20
15
10
5
0
-3
-2
-1
0
1
2
Q3DIFF


2
1
0
-1
-2
-3
14
29
Q3DIFF


Histogram
Mean = .06
Std. Dev. = .978
N = 52
Frequency
30
20
10
0
-2
-1
0
1
2
Q4DIFF


2
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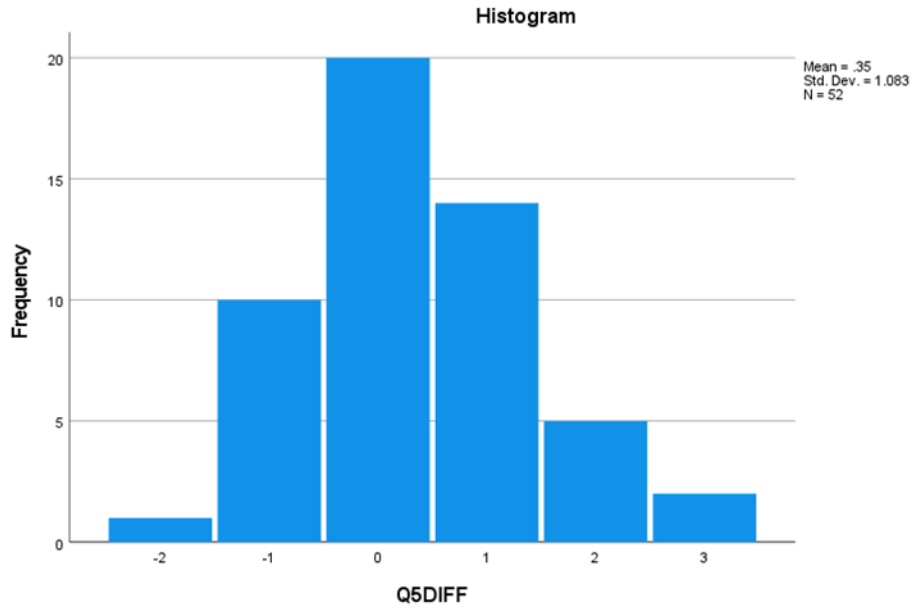
0
-1
-2
49 30 45
26
Q4DIFF


Histogram
Mean = .35
Std. Dev. = 1.083
N = 52
Frequency
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15
10
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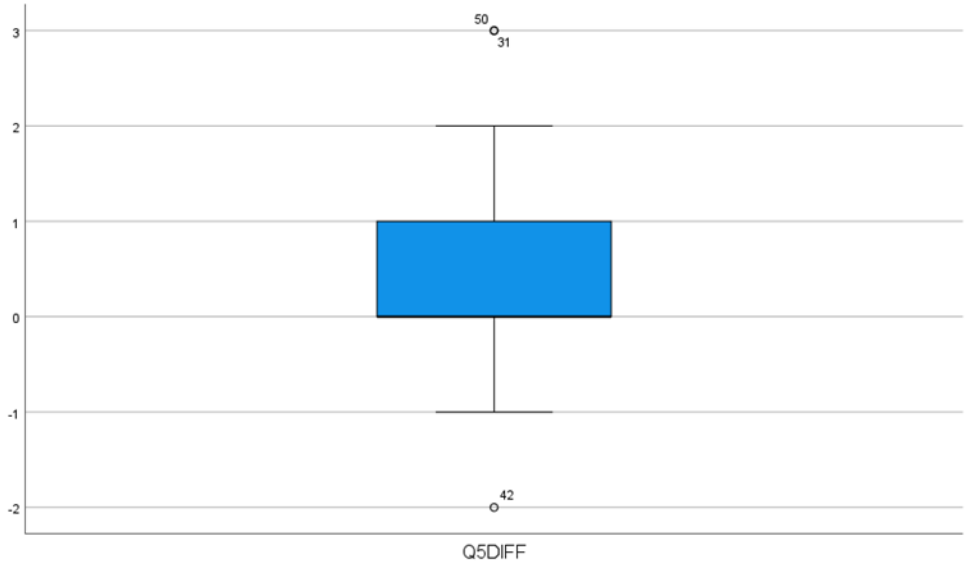
-1
0
1
2
3
Q5DIFF


50
31
42
3
2
1
0
-1
-2
Q5DIFF

Biographical Information

Education

Doctorate of Education (EdD) Leadership with Curriculum & Instruction Emphasis

Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri

Graduation May 2024; Current GPA: 3.93

Dissertation Topic: A Design Thinking Qualitative Method Study on Social-Emotional Learning Lessons for Early Elementary Learners

Coursework: Creative Courage; Principles of Design Thinking; Leadership, Ethics, and Education; American Education; Leadership Theory and Application; Leading Organizational Change; Research Design, Methods, and Ethics in Educational Research; Applied Qualitative Research Methods

Gifted Teaching Certification K-12

University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, Missouri

Completed July 2023 GPA: 3.957

Coursework: A Survey of Gifted and Talented Education; Programming; Planning and Development: An Understanding of Administration and Supervision of Gifted Programs; Screening, Assessing, and Evaluating Gifted Students; Curriculum and Instruction for the Gifted; Meeting the Affective Needs of Gifted Students; Graduate Research Procedures; Culminating Clinical Experience with Gifted Students

Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and initial teaching certifications

Missouri Baptist University, St. Louis, Missouri

Graduation May 2016 GPA: 3.945

Initial teaching certifications Language Arts 5-9 and English 9-12

Professional Affiliations:
Chapter President, Chi Pi Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education, 2015-2016
Chapter President, Student Missouri State Teacher Association (SMSTA), 2014-2015
Member, Student Missouri State Teacher Association (SMSTA), 2013-present
Member, Student Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (SASCD), 2013-present

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification

International Teacher Training Organization, Guadalajara, Mexico

Completed August 2010

4 week, 140 hour- intensive TEFL course with 10 hours of instructor-observed teaching practice Comprised of groups of varying fluency and class sizes, and a range of ages from child to adult. Additional TEFL Certifications completed: Language Experience Approach, Lesson Planning, Role Play, Dialogue Drill, Early Production/Natural Approach, Information Gap, Problem-Solving, Focused Listening, Total Physical Response, Narrative Reading, Life Skills Reading, Business English

Bachelor of Science (B.S.) Psychology and Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) Communications

Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri

Graduation May 2005 GPA: 3.270

Minors: Interpersonal & Small Group Communications; Family Studies
Professional Affiliations: Lambda Pi Eta National Communication honor society, founding member of COMMrades communication majors club

Experience

Bowling Green R-1 School District

Classroom teacher—English-Language Arts grades 9-12, Bowling Green High School, 2016-2021

Courses taught: Language Arts 2, Speech Communications, Debate, Language Arts 4, Honors Senior Composition (dual credit via Missouri State University), Publications (Yearbook & School Newspaper), Summer school credit recovery grades 9-12 (4 years)

Classroom teacher—Gifted K-5, Bowling Green Elementary & Frankford Elementary, 2021-

present

Courses taught: Push-in STEAM lessons for kindergarten classes, pull-out gifted classes for grades

1-5

Clubs sponsored: High School Academic Bowl, High School Student Council, High School Nerd
Society, Elementary Girls Lego League Robotics, Middle School Chess Club

Leadership Roles: Professional Development Committee (5 years), served as Chair (2 years);
District Testing Coordinator (3 years)

Louisiana R-2 School District

Paraprofessional—grades 6 & 7—Louisiana Middle School, Louisiana, Missouri, 2014-2015

Roles: Provided educational benefits for students by assisting, supporting, and working closely with teachers, administrators, and other team members. Often covered class periods for classroom teachers. Worked with individuals and small groups in a number of courses. Completed ongoing trainings, especially relating to Autism and other disorders.; Nonviolent Crisis Intervention certified for 2015-2016, Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) workshop

International Mediterranean Academy, Summer camp for English language learners

Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)--Fethiye, Turkey, T, summer 2011

Roles: Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA-certified); Taught multilingual and multicultural students from Europe, Asia, & Middle East; Beginner to Advanced courses taught, including children and adults

Instituto Mexicano Americano de Cultura (IMAC) Ingles Total, Educational language institute

Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)--Guadalajara, Mexico, 2010-2011

Role: Certified Teacher for English as a Foreign Language (CELTA-certified); Comprised of groups of varying fluency and class sizes, and a range of ages from child to adult; Instructor from Intermediate to Advanced Levels; TOEFL (fluency exam) course instructor; Conversation class instructor; Over 1200 hours of direct classroom teaching; Ongoing professional enhancement workshops and mentor support

Certifications

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Language Arts grades 5-8

English grades 9-12

Gifted education grades k-12

International Teacher Training Organization (in conjunction with Cambridge University, England, UK)

Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA)