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A Mixed-Methods Design-Based Research: Study of Teacher Self-Efficacy and the
Implementation of Social Emotional Learning in the High School Classroom

by

Avia Brown

December 5, 2025

Problem of Practice

Research submitted to the Education Faculty

Lindenwood University, College of Education and Human Services

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education, Leadership EdD

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This Problem of Practice Research has been approved as partial fulfillment
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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.

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Abstract

The escalating mental health crisis among adolescents, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, positioned schools as critical intervention sites for supporting student well-being (K. McNamara, 2020). However, teacher capacity and self-efficacy in implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies remain significant barriers to effective, sustainable practice. This mixed-methods design-based research study examined the efficacy of professional development and instructional coaching in enhancing teacher self-efficacy and supporting the implementation of SEL competencies in high school classrooms.

The researcher employed a comprehensive, five-stage design thinking framework (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test) to develop and evaluate a structured eight-week professional development and coaching intervention targeting SEL implementation aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. The study utilized a pre-post intervention design with ten high school teachers ($N = 10$, with $N = 7$ completing the full intervention) from an urban Midwestern school serving predominantly African American students from low-income backgrounds. Data collection encompassed multiple quantitative measures (pre-post Likert-scale surveys assessing knowledge and self-efficacy) and qualitative approaches (semi-structured interviews, classroom observations using validated, 20-item CASEL-aligned instruments, and thematic analysis).

Statistical analysis using paired-samples t -tests revealed statistically significant improvements across all measured knowledge domains and self-efficacy measures ($p < .05$ to $p < .01$), with large effect sizes ranging from moderate to large (Cohen's $d = 0.68$

to $d = 1.25$). The largest gains were observed in CASEL Training knowledge ($M = 1.50$ to $M = 2.29$, $d = 1.25$), followed by SEL Intervention Competency ($M = 2.10$ to $M = 2.71$, $d = 0.88$). Overall self-efficacy improved significantly from pre-test ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.89$) to post-test ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(6) = 3.48$, $p = .007$, with a large effect size ($d = 1.10$). Teacher self-reported implementation confidence increased across multiple dimensions, with gains in perceived implementation ability ($M = 2.40$ to $M = 3.14$, $d = 1.06$) and implementation preparedness ($M = 2.30$ to $M = 3.00$, $d = 0.93$).

Classroom observations corroborated these self-reported gains, documenting substantial improvements in observable SEL practices across the intervention period. Week 3 baseline assessments revealed emerging implementation of supportive classroom climate strategies, while Week 7 final assessments demonstrated significant progress in creating affirming classroom environments, increased student voice and opportunity sharing, comprehensive integration of SEL concepts into physical classroom spaces, and explicit connection of classroom routines to SEL competencies.

Qualitative analysis revealed six primary themes related to SEL implementation: knowledge development and professional growth, implementation challenges and barriers, resource and support needs, implementation approaches and strategies, sustainability and school-wide impact, and teacher personal growth and reflection. Teachers identified five essential supports for successful implementation: ongoing professional development, administrative support with protected instructional time, ready-to-use grade-appropriate materials, collaborative teacher learning communities, and individualized coaching with constructive feedback.

The study's null hypothesis that professional development and instructional coaching would not result in statistically significant improvements in teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy was rejected, based on comprehensive evidence across quantitative and qualitative data sources. Post-intervention qualitative findings demonstrated a marked shift from reactive to proactive and systematic SEL implementation approaches, with teachers describing enhanced confidence, intentional integration of SEL principles throughout curriculum, and stronger peer collaboration.

The findings revealed substantially significant differences between pre- and post-intervention measures, demonstrating that high school teachers who participated in structured professional development and instructional coaching showed meaningful improvements in both SEL knowledge and implementation self-efficacy. The intervention's effectiveness was attributed to five key elements: scaffolded support structures transitioning from intensive to on-demand coaching, job-embedded professional development through multi-tiered professional learning communities, explicit alignment with research-based frameworks (CASEL and Illinois SEL Standards), responsive design thinking methodology that centered teacher voice and iteratively refined supports, and integration of multiple support mechanisms addressing individual, classroom, and school-level factors.

However, the study identified significant systemic barriers limiting sustainability and scalability, including inadequate time for SEL planning within packed curricula, inconsistent administrative engagement in professional development, unanticipated logistical disruptions affecting program continuity, variability in teachers' baseline knowledge and readiness, and potential self-selection bias inherent in voluntary

participation. Leadership emerged as a critical factor, with transformational leadership practices including modeling SEL competencies, protecting instructional time, and fostering collaborative professional communities identified as essential for sustaining SEL implementation beyond the intervention period.

The results have significant implications for educational practice, suggesting that relatively brief but carefully structured professional development combined with sustained instructional coaching can yield substantial improvements in teacher self-efficacy and SEL implementation without extensive curriculum overhauls. The research contributed to the limited literature on effective professional development models for secondary teachers implementing SEL and provides a replicable design thinking-based framework for bridging the gap between teacher capacity limitations and student mental health needs.

This study affirms that SEL implementation is not merely a technical exercise of curriculum adoption but an adaptive leadership challenge requiring culture change, organizational alignment, and sustained commitment across individual, school, and system levels. Future efforts must extend beyond individual professional development cycles to encompass leadership training, structural redesign, and authentic stakeholder partnerships. The research demonstrates how targeted, comprehensive professional learning grounded in design thinking principles can enhance teachers' confidence and competence in supporting adolescent social-emotional development, particularly in high-poverty, under-resourced urban schools.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, teacher self-efficacy, professional development, instructional coaching, design-based research, adolescent mental health, COVID-19, CASEL framework, urban education, transformational leadership, high school implementation

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem of Practice

Research demonstrated mental health challenges as the primary contributors to disability in young people (McGorry et al., 2025). Adolescence represented a developmental period marked by significant biological, psychological, and social changes, increasing vulnerability to mental health challenges. Research consistently demonstrated mental health disorders often emerged during this formative stage, with approximately half of all lifetime mental illnesses beginning by age 14 (National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 2023; World Health Organization, 2021). In addition, 25% of youth were affected by a mental health concern, and about 20% experienced a mental health disorder resulting in significant impairment (Sullivan et al., 2021, p. 1). However, fewer than half of youth diagnosed received the necessary treatment.

These national statistics reflected a crisis manifesting acutely in schools across the country, particularly in under-resourced urban communities. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2020 along with the related restrictions, heightened mental health challenges and limited access to healthcare services for students (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2020; Lee, 2020; Leeb et al., 2020; Leff, et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2020). While healthcare services were limited, youth across the country faced heightened and emerging stressors, such as illness, bereavement, social isolation, financial strain, food insecurity, family challenges, and an increased risk of child abuse and neglect (Patrick et al., 2020). These factors contributed to mental health outcomes, including depression and behavioral issues (Paredes et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021),

anxiety disorders, and the worsening of pre-existing conditions (Garfield & Chidambaram, 2020; Leff, Waasdorp, et al., 2021).

The pandemic restrictions more severely affected youth's emotional and social development than adults (Sullivan et al., 2021). Early studies identified a rise in depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns stemming from the pandemic (Garfield & Chidambaram, 2020; McArthur et al., 2021), with symptoms manifesting as disrupted sleep, nightmares, reduced appetite, agitation, and heightened separation anxiety (Jiao et al., 2020).

To address these mounting concerns, schools increasingly turned to interventions such as professional development and instructional coaching to implement social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom as a means to support teachers once students returned to in-person learning. Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the ongoing process through which people of all ages develop and use the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand themselves, manage their emotions, set and achieve meaningful goals, relate to others with empathy, sustain positive relationships, and make ethical, caring choices (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2022). The primary goal is to strengthen students' social and emotional competence, which involves the coordination of thinking, feeling, and behavior in ways that help individuals adapt effectively across different cultural and situational environments while achieving growth and task-related success (Durlak et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2021). A comprehensive SEL approach emphasizes the intentional cultivation of intrapersonal abilities like self-awareness and emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, including empathy, social understanding, and relationship maintenance.

The present study sought to inform best practices for supporting teacher self-efficacy in SEL implementation within this challenging context. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organize and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations and produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Within this study, teacher self-efficacy specifically relates to educators' confidence in effectively implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) practices in the classroom. Bandura's social cognitive theory serves as the guiding framework for this definition, emphasizing the role of mastery experiences, social modeling, and verbal persuasion in shaping efficacy beliefs. This perspective is particularly relevant given the study's focus on instructional coaching and professional development as mechanisms to build teachers' confidence and competence in addressing student mental health needs through SEL implementation.

Teachers who participated in such interventions identified a positive attitude as a benefit from instructional coaching, describing enhanced confidence, motivation, and overall optimism (Nix, 2024; Warnock et al., 2022). Understanding how these interventions functioned in practice became important for developing sustainable, school-based mental health strategies.

Position of the Problem within Practice

The study presented here examined whether professional development and instructional coaching supported high school teachers in implementing SEL competencies and enhanced self-efficacy. The study focused on the implementation of SEL in a small Midwestern high school serving a predominantly African American, low-income student population, where mental health challenges became increasingly

prevalent since the onset of the pandemic. Such a context exemplified the broader national crisis: a community where traditional support systems had proven inadequate and where schools served as the primary mental health access point for many students.

To address adolescent mental health challenges, understanding how the mental health issues manifested within the educational landscape was vital. Understanding the critical role of schools as frontline providers of adolescent mental health services highlighted the necessity of examining the specific educational challenges impacting student well-being. This perspective frames the context of adolescent mental health as an educational challenge, particularly significant in under-resourced communities.

Adolescent Mental Health as an Educational Challenge

The study occurred in a small Midwestern city near a central urban area, marked by high poverty, food insecurity, crime, and limited access to healthcare. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the population was 18,490, and 96.2% identified as African American (p. 1). The median household income was \$26,001, well below the state average of \$76,700 (U.S. Census, 2021, p. 1). Nearly 30% of residents live below the poverty line, including nearly half of children under age five (p. 1). Moreover, 29.3% of residents lived below the poverty line, including 48.8% of children under age 5 and 40.2% of youth aged 15 to 17 (U.S. Census, 2021, para. 8). The city's employment rate stood at 44.4%. The unemployment rate was 6.5%, which was higher than the state average of 3.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, para. 11). Additionally, the urban high school served more than 4,500 students across multiple campuses, with a reported high school absenteeism rate of 89%, a dropout rate of 8.7%, and a graduation rate of only 68% (ISBE District Report Card, 2023a, p. 3).

Despite the community and systemic issues, the school became a central access point for adolescent mental health support. Research highlights adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges (Naff et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2022), positioning schools as critical intervention sites. However, while wraparound services aim to address mental health needs, their impact remains limited without internal school capacity.

This context framed the importance of implementing structured, school-based supports like SEL. However, implementation is often hampered in under-resourced districts due to gaps in teacher preparation and professional development (Thierry, 2022). This study explores how targeted professional learning and coaching can bridge this gap and support sustainable SEL practices within high-need urban schools.

Previous Interventions

Multiple intervention strategies have been implemented in schools to address adolescent mental health challenges, yet these approaches have consistently fallen short of meeting comprehensive student needs. Traditional school-based mental health services, primarily delivered through counseling offices, proved insufficient due to severe understaffing ratios, with counselor-to-student ratios exceeding the recommended 1:250 standard (National Association of School Psychologists, 2023). This structural limitation meant even before the pandemic, schools could not adequately serve students requiring mental health support.

Brief psychoeducational programs represented another common intervention approach failing to produce lasting effects. These short-term, often one-session programs provided students with basic mental health information but lacked the sustained

engagement necessary for meaningful behavioral change (Capurso et al., 2022).

Similarly, one-time crisis interventions, while addressing immediate safety concerns, did not establish the ongoing support systems students needed for long-term mental health stability.

Recognizing the limitations of historical interventions provided crucial insights into the urgent need for systematic and sustainable solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated these shortcomings, amplifying existing student mental health challenges and intensifying the necessity for innovative, structured interventions within educational settings. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these intervention failures and created additional barriers to student mental health support.

The Influence of the COVID-19

Building on these pre-existing intervention failures, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing adolescent mental health challenges and disrupted education worldwide, making the inadequacy of traditional approaches even more apparent. School closures, social isolation, and family instability increased students' vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties (Racine et al., 2021). As primary access points for mental health support, schools faced growing demands amid limited resources and persistent inequities (Karbasi & Eslami, 2022; Paredes et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Implementing SEL became especially crucial as students endured significant disruptions, including prolonged closures, peer isolation, and family stressors such as financial instability and loss (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Patrick et al., 2020). These factors hindered social and emotional development, with

many students struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Selph & McDonagh, 2019; O’Sullivan, 2021). Educators observed increased social-emotional challenges linked to the pandemic (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Hawes et al., 2022). Hamilton and Gross (2021) noted teachers’ difficulties addressing these issues virtually, as traditional support and counseling access were often unavailable. The loss of routine and in-person connections further deprived students of essential coping supports (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Following the pandemic, educators reported rising behavioral and emotional challenges, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive, sustainable school-based mental health interventions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022a; Cipriano et al., 2024). Early observations noted increases in poor behavior and social anxiety, reinforcing the study’s focus on equipping teachers to implement SEL as a preventive, whole-school approach. These pandemic-related challenges and the historical intervention failures described above necessitated a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the interconnected effects on student behavior and academic outcomes.

Framework Surrounding the Problem

Given the intricate interplay of these identified educational disruptions, mental health impacts, weakened support networks, structural barriers, and staff burnout, it became clear a structured framework was essential. Thus, the study adopted a comprehensive Theory of Action to address these interconnected challenges and guide effective interventions systematically.

Theory of Action

The literature revealed several variables contributing to the increase in negative behaviors observed in school's post-pandemic, including increases in fights, suspensions, and chronic absenteeism (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2022). The theory of action posited implementing organizational change required addressing five key drivers emerging from the pandemic and influencing student behavior: educational disruptions, mental health influence, weakened support networks, structural barriers, and staff burnout challenges. These drivers provided a theoretical foundation for understanding the systemic factors influencing student behavior in this urban school district and directly informed both the research questions guiding this study and the resulting interventions.

Educational Disruptions

Educational disruption caused by extensive school closures represented the first key driver influencing post-pandemic student mental health. In the wake of widespread and extended school closures, families and caregivers found themselves unexpectedly navigating the challenges of homeschooling (Catty, 2021; Mazrekaj & DeWitte, 2023; K. McNamara, 2020). The abrupt transition to remote or hybrid learning models during the pandemic led to a lack of structure and routine for many students (Lischer, et al., 2022; Mulvihill, 2025). Lee (2020) documented the sudden shift to virtual pedagogy, compounded with peer isolation and the pervasive uncertainties introduced by the pandemic, levying significant psychological strains on students. Additionally, students faced disruptions in gaining access to school-based services and support systems (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

In the United States, 55 million children, approximately twice the population of Texas, in kindergarten through 12th grade were affected by school closures (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023, p. 1). The prolonged interruption of educational services deprived children of the learning experiences necessary for full development (Buonsenso et al., 2021, p. 149). These disruptions continued to influence students' negative behavior and mental health, creating an ongoing need for targeted interventions capable of addressing the lasting effects through systematic SEL implementation.

Mental Health Influence

The recurring theme of mental health and social-emotional development for adolescents appeared, and was significant both before and after the pandemic. Empirical studies signified the crucial role of early detection and intervention in mitigating students' mental health issues, significantly bolstering academic achievement and social competence, and diminishing psychological distress (Naff et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2022). However, a deficit in sufficient support for adolescent mental health during the pandemic led to attention difficulties, behavioral concerns, and diminished academic achievement (Richter et al., 2022).

The mental health crisis directly informed the study's focus on SEL interventions. SEL interventions were emphasized to address students' evolving mental health needs (K. McNamara, 2020). While mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques aided focus and emotional regulation (CASEL, 2023), both proved insufficient, highlighting the need for more comprehensive, integrated approaches within schools.

Weakened Support Networks

Weakened support networks further intensified the influence of pandemic-related challenges on student mental health, creating the third driver necessitated the study's focus on building teacher capacity for SEL implementation. The lack of support systems for students emerged as a factor affecting student well-being and academic performance. Allocating resources for additional counseling and mental health services and expanding access to mental health professionals within schools became essential priorities. According to Naff et al. (2022), "80% of school-aged children with mental and behavioral health needs relied on school-based services" (p. 3), highlighting the importance of these support systems within educational settings.

Structural Barriers and Resource Inequities

The fourth driver encompassed the combined challenges of policy implementation gaps and systemic inequities in resource access created urgent barriers to student mental health support, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These structural challenges directly influenced the study's selection of an intervention's functionality within resource-constrained environments. The pandemic exposed the failure to translate policy into practice, despite the long-recognized need for mental health advocacy in education. While initiatives, such as the Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant Program and the School-Based Mental Health (SBMH) Services Grant Program introduced by the Biden-Harris Administration to expand access to qualified mental health professionals, these well-intentioned policies often failed to reach the most vulnerable communities, due to entrenched disparities in funding, staffing, and infrastructure (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; The White House, 2022).

Students in marginalized districts, especially students of color, faced stark inequities in accessing the basic tools necessary for learning and emotional support (Sullivan et al., 2021). Many lacked consistent access to mental health resources, like counseling, group therapy, or SEL materials. Inadequate technology, poor facilities, and shortages of trained personnel intensified existing disparities and undermined the delivery of support services, highlighting the need for interventions that could leverage existing school personnel.

Staff Burnout and Challenges

The fifth driver addressed how pandemic-related staff burnout and capacity limitations significantly impaired schools' abilities to support student mental health, directly informing the study's focus on building teacher self-efficacy rather than adding additional responsibilities. The pandemic exacerbated staff burnout and capacity limitations (Agyapong et al., 2022; Pellerone, 2021), and intensified emotional and professional demands on educators who were expected to manage academic recovery while responding to escalating mental health crises without adequate training or support (Pellerone, 2021; Pressley, 2021). The dual burden increased stress, burnout, and attrition (Agyapong et al., 2022).

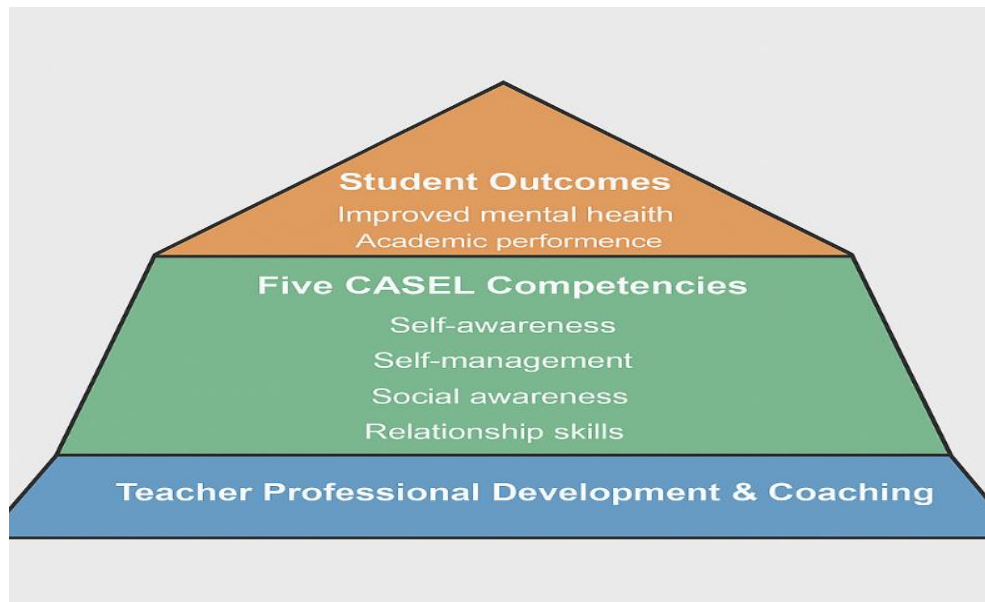
This reality shaped this study's approach to SEL implementation through professional development and coaching. Without systemic improvements in workloads, staffing, and support (Pellerone, 2021), schools risked losing essential personnel needed for delivering SEL and mental health interventions. Therefore, addressing staff well-being through supportive professional development became crucial to establishing sustainable, whole-school mental health strategies (Brooks et al., 2022; Pellerone, 2021).

The CASEL Framework

The researcher considered several frameworks to support the development of social and emotional competencies, but selected the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework due to the strong empirical foundation, broad adoption in K–12 educational settings and alignment with the urgent post-pandemic needs of both students and educators.

Drawing from the five key drivers identified above, implementing organizational change in this urban high school required a fundamental shift in the culture and climate surrounding student mental health support. The interconnected nature of these drivers, from educational disruptions to staff burnout, demanded a comprehensive yet practical approach addressing multiple challenges simultaneously, while building on existing school capacity. The CASEL framework provided this structured approach for addressing these challenges through social-emotional learning being implemented by classroom teachers with appropriate support (2022).

The CASEL framework organized SEL into five core competencies supporting students' emotional and social development: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). Each competency guided specific instructional strategies, such as morning check-ins to build self-awareness and collaborative problem-solving tasks to develop responsible decision-making. The practical applicability made the framework particularly suitable for addressing the implementation challenges identified in the five drivers.

Figure 1*CASEL Framework Implementation in Post-Pandemic Contexts*

Note. Figure 1 illustrates how the CASEL competencies align with the post-pandemic educational challenges identified in the study.

The CASEL framework aligned directly with the five drivers identified in this study, providing a structured approach for addressing adolescent mental health challenges through teacher-led SEL implementation functioning within the resource constraints and staff capacity limitations documented in the literature. The selection of the CASEL framework was grounded in both empirical foundation and practical applicability in diverse educational settings, particularly students facing the challenges outlined in the five drivers. The framework provided clear implementation strategies, for integration into various learning environments while supporting alignment with existing educational practices (CASEL, 2023). CASEL demonstrated success across different student populations, reinforcing its potential for addressing the mental health challenges

identified in this study's context of resource-limited, predominantly African American school communities.

Zinsler et al. (2014) suggested utilizing teacher-led initiatives and integrating SEL practices into existing curricula as cost-effective approaches to promoting emotional and social development. Additionally, forming community partnerships and leveraging online resources provided valuable support and training opportunities, enhancing SEL implementation in resource-limited environments (CASEL, 2023; Garfield & Chidambaram, 2020). Research by Durlak and Weissberg (2011) demonstrated SEL programs improved emotional well-being and enhanced student engagement and academic performance when successfully integrated, making this framework particularly relevant for addressing the multiple drivers identified in this study.

Instructional Coaching

Instructional coaching was used to support classroom teaching and integrate social and emotional learning strategies, directly addressing the staff burnout and capacity challenges identified as the fifth driver while leveraging existing school personnel. The instructional coaching approach-built teachers' self-efficacy and developed new skill sets for addressing student mental health needs through SEL implementation, providing a sustainable solution working within the constraints identified in the theory of action.

Implementation of social-emotional learning in classrooms required more than a strong framework for students; targeted support for educators was essential to address the weakened support networks and resource inequities identified in the drivers. The researcher examined the role of instructional coaching as a strategy for building teachers'

capacity and confidence to integrate SEL practices into daily instruction (Neufeld, 2025; Sanchez, 2023), specifically investigating how pairing experienced SEL social workers with classroom teachers could bridge the gap between SEL theory and practical classroom implementation while addressing staff capacity limitations. Research showed using resources already established in the district would be more beneficial than looking for outside sources (Sharples et al., 2024).

Instructional coaching proved key in improving specific teaching practices (Warnock et al., 2022), such as helping teachers learn to facilitate morning circles, implement conflict resolution strategies, and integrate mindfulness techniques into daily transitions. For example, coaches modeled how to guide teachers through emotional check-ins or demonstrated how to use restorative justice circles when addressing classroom conflicts. For the study, SEL social workers worked with teachers to reflect on teaching practices, plan together, and use research-based SEL teaching strategies (CASEL, 2023; Knight & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2024; Peddigrew et al., 2022, Connolly, et al., 2022).

Recognizing the dependency on coach quality within resource-constrained environments, the implementation of instructional coaching relied on the recruitment and support of highly skilled coaches available within the existing school structure. For this study, the researcher utilized the school social workers' expertise to support teachers, addressing both the resource constraints and the need for qualified personnel. School social workers formed a crucial part of the mental health team within schools and served as primary providers of social services in educational environments (Ding et al., 2023). Strategic use of existing personnel proved crucial for creating sustainable coaching

programs within the resource limitations identified in the structural barriers' driver (Sharples et al., 2024). The strategic approach proved effective when supported by evidence-based methods addressing the cultural and equity concerns identified by the drivers. Instructional coaching supported SEL implementation by providing teachers with ongoing job-embedded professional development emphasizing building trusting relationships between coaches and teachers, creating psychologically safe spaces for experimentation and growth (Warnock et al., 2022). Secondly, this approach focused on empowering teachers as change agents within the classrooms rather than imposing top-down mandates potentially exacerbating staff burnout. Finally, instructional coaching incorporated culturally responsive practices honoring teachers' and students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, particularly important in the study's context of a predominantly African American school community (Shorb, 2021).

Building on the conceptual framework and theory of action outlined above, this study formulated specific research questions to explore the effectiveness of professional development and coaching interventions in supporting SEL implementation.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The methodological framework for this study centered on fostering adolescent student mental health through social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation, directly emerging from the five key drivers and CASEL framework selection described above. Guided by the driver's educational disruptions, mental health influence, weakened support networks, structural barriers, and staff burnout challenges the researcher developed targeted research questions to examine both quantitative and qualitative

influence of professional development interventions designed to address these systemic issues.

Research Question 1. To what extent does professional development and instructional coaching result in statistically significant changes in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom?

Null Hypothesis. Professional development and instructional coaching do not result in statistically significant improvements in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing classroom social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom.

Research Question 2. What supports and resources do teachers identify as necessary for successful implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classrooms?

These research questions directly addressed the educational challenges identified through the five key drivers. RQ1 examined how professional development interventions could address educational disruptions and mental health influence while building teacher capacity within existing staff constraints. RQ2 explored the resources and supports needed to overcome weakened support networks, structural barriers, and policy implementation challenges, providing practical guidance for sustainable implementation.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative data to answer these questions comprehensively within the complex context outlined by the drivers and framework selection. Quantitative data were collected through pretest and posttest Likert-scale surveys, providing statistical evidence of teacher self-

efficacy changes. Qualitative data, collected through semi-structured interviews with participating teachers, provided deeper contextual understanding of teachers' lived experiences with the professional development and coaching interventions.

This methodological approach aligned with transformational leadership theory by examining both measurable outcomes and the deeper psychological and social processes through which teachers developed ownership and commitment to SEL implementation. The mixed-methods design was used as qualitative research explored complex topics quantitative methods could not adequately measure or understand (Harvard Catalyst, n.d.)), and educational researchers needed to interrogate how methodological choices influenced equitable implementation (Lindberg, 2022; Newton & Knight, 2022). Such consideration proved crucial given the study's focus on a school primarily serving African American students from low-income backgrounds, directly connecting to the structural barriers and equity concerns identified in the drivers.

Definitions

1. *CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning)*. A program used for social and emotional learning that was an essential factor for all students from preschool to high school (CASEL, 2023).
2. *Commendable School*. "A commendable school was a school that met certain criteria set by the state the school district was in (ISBE 2023, para. 1). The criteria included no underperforming student groups performing at or below the lowest-performing 5% of Title I-eligible schools, the graduation rate should be above 67%, and the schools' performance was not in the top 10% of schools statewide" (ISBE, 2023a, para. 1).

3. *Implementation*. Developing an action plan to improve a desired task through strategies and interventions (Krainer, 2021).
4. *In-School Suspension*. "In-school suspension (ISS) referred to a disciplinary action where a student was temporarily removed from their regular classroom and required to remain within the school building, typically in a designated area supervised by school staff, while still being expected to complete assigned coursework (Cohen et al., 2023).
5. *Instructional Coaches*. collaborate with teachers and administrators to create teaching strategies, lesson plans, and co-teaching opportunities. Coaches may also demonstrate strategies and lessons, allowing teachers to observe how new approaches can be put into practice (Elmhurst University, 2023).
6. *Out-of-School Suspension*. "Out-of-school suspension ensured an offending act was punished by removing the offending student from the school environment to make the school environment safer (Lamont et al., 2013).
7. *Self-Efficacy*. A person's beliefs in his/her abilities to complete a task to produce desired results (Bandura, 1997; Waddington, 2023).
8. *Social-emotional competencies*. CASEL (2023) defined social-emotional competencies as five areas (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) that could be applied to children and adults.
9. *Social-emotional learning*. Applying skills for self-esteem, emotion regulation, goal setting, empathy, relationship building, and responsibility that was an essential factor in education and human growth for young and old individuals (CASEL, 2023).
10. *Suspension*. "A disciplinary sanction imposed by a responsible school authority, in reaction to a student's misbehavior" (Valdebenito et al., 2018).

11. *Well-being*. Positive feelings of happiness and satisfaction, performing well while showing growth in self-control, relationships, abilities, and purpose, continuously changing and succeeding (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Limitations and Researcher Bias

The present study encountered several methodological limitations warranting careful consideration when interpreting the findings. One primary limitation involved participation and data collection challenges, particularly concerning the researcher's position within the study context. As the researcher conducted interviews while maintaining a professional role within the school environment, this dual position introduced considerations regarding researcher reflexivity (Rinchen et al., 2025). Specifically, familiarity with participants and shared professional context may have affected interview responses, potentially leading to social desirability bias as participants may have tailored responses to meet perceived expectations. From an improvement science perspective, researcher bias manifested in several ways within this study. As a school social worker embedded in the study environment, there was potential for confirmation bias through unconsciously filtering observations through pre-existing beliefs about SEL implementation challenges (Machost & Stains, 2023). Reflecting on the Liberatory Design principles from the improvement science framework, there was acknowledgment of potential cultural and power dynamics influenced data interpretation, particularly regarding assumptions about what constituted SEL implementation in this specific cultural context (Ryoo & Kekelis, 2023).

To address these methodological challenges, the researcher implemented several strategic measures to minimize potential bias. These included utilizing open-ended, non-

leading interview questions and emphasizing participation's confidentiality and voluntary nature (Nowell et al., 2017; Qaissi, 2024). Additionally, a consistently neutral demeanor was maintained during interviews to avoid signaling specific expectations.

A fundamental limitation of the study centered on the relatively small sample size of ten participants. While this sample size facilitated in-depth qualitative analysis and manageable data collection, the small number constrained the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Future research could address this limitation through expanded participant pools, incorporating teachers from diverse educational settings, grade levels, and demographic backgrounds.

Despite these methodological limitations, the study offers valuable insights into SEL implementation challenges and opportunities within resource-constrained educational environments. The following summary recaps the chapter's key points.

Summary

This problem of practice explored whether professional development and coaching supported high school teachers in implementing social-emotional learning competencies in classroom settings. The research examined how a Midwestern high school serving predominantly African American students from a low-income community responded to the urgent mental health crisis among adolescents. With 50% of lifetime mental illnesses beginning by age 14 and 37% of high school students reporting poor mental health during the pandemic (CDC, 2022, p. 1; NAMI, 2023), traditional school support systems proved inadequate to meet these escalating needs.

Grounded in a theory of action, the five contextual drivers, educational disruptions, mental-health strain, weakened support networks, structural barriers, and

staff burnout are posited to undermine teachers' SEL self-efficacy and implementation. In response, professional learning aligned to the previously described CASEL competencies serves as the organizing framework; targeted, job-embedded PD is expected to strengthen self-efficacy and improve implementation fidelity (CASEL, 2023; Sanchez, 2023).

The research context, is a district with 89% chronic absenteeism, an 8.7% dropout rate, and significantly higher suspension rates than state averages, exemplified the challenges facing under-resourced communities. The comprehensive approach aimed to transform teachers into mental health support providers and address the systemic gap between student needs and available resources, providing a sustainable solution functioning within existing school capacity while addressing the multiple systemic challenges identified in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

The identified drivers, the selected theoretical framework, and the research questions form the foundation for a comprehensive investigation into how instructional coaching can enhance teacher self-efficacy in SEL implementation. To further support this inquiry, chapter two provides an in-depth review of the literature on adolescent mental health, instructional coaching as a professional learning model, and the effectiveness of the CASEL framework. This review establishes the scholarly and empirical basis for the current study's design.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified adolescent mental health concerns and highlighted the urgency for educators to implement effective social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies in schools. However, this mental health crisis did not begin with the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) tracked that from 2009 to 2019, high school students' reports of persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased from 26.1% to 36.7% (S. M. Jones et al., 2021, para. 1). Also, nearly 1 in 5 children had a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder. However, only 20% of children received care from a mental health provider (CDC, 2025, para. 2).

The devastation of the pandemic resulted in more than 8 million youth losing a caregiver, with youth of color disproportionately affected (Chatterjee, 2022, para. 1). Furthermore, a survey of U.S. public sector workers found that K-12 public school educators were the most likely profession to report higher levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout during the pandemic (Mission Square Research Institute (MSRI), 2021). In addition, 55% of educators expressed a desire to leave the profession early (Jotkoff, 2022, para. 1). Consequently, it is imperative to act with real solutions to better support mental health in school settings, such as more counselors, more resources, and more support for students, educators, and families.

Schools, particularly in underserved communities, became critical settings for addressing these crises by fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions through SEL initiatives (CASEL, 2020; Colorado Department of Education, n.d.). However, the success of such interventions depends heavily on teachers' capacity to integrate SEL practices consistently and effectively into daily instruction. Teacher self-

efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to organize and execute the actions necessary for achieving desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997), which plays a central role in this process. Educators with higher self-efficacy are more likely to adopt SEL practices, persist in overcoming implementation challenges, and adapt strategies to meet diverse student needs (Holmes, 2021; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Ultimately, strengthening teachers' confidence and competence through sustained professional development is crucial for mitigating the pandemic's adverse effects on adolescent mental health and enhancing long-term student outcomes.

Building on this context, examining the specific ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected adolescent mental health is essential. Understanding the nature and extent of these impacts provides a critical foundation for evaluating the role of SEL in school-based recovery efforts.

Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescent Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with sharp increases in adolescent anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms alongside deteriorations in school climate (e.g., more disruptions and disrespect toward staff; NCES, 2022; Racine et al., 2021). Mechanisms included prolonged social isolation, disrupted routines, and heightened family stress, each of which was linked to internalizing symptoms and behavioral challenges (Branje & Morris, 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020). Effects were uneven: students in low-income and minoritized communities faced compounding risks, greater exposure to stressors, reduced access to resources, and interrupted supports, magnifying both distress and service needs (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In response, many educators increased time devoted to socioemotional

supports, but capacity constraints persisted, highlighting the need for coherent, school-embedded mental health systems (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; NCES, 2022).

Federal responses, including the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program, signaled a national shift toward prioritizing youth mental health (The White House, 2022; U.S. Departments of Education, 2021). Yet these systemic efforts highlighted the urgent need for school-embedded approaches that rely on teachers' capacity and confidence to deliver SEL effectively (Bandura, 1997; Sanchez, 2023; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Holmes, 2021; CASEL, 2022).

In response, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) noted the crisis not only halted learning nationwide, but also deepened long-standing educational inequities. In the midst of these unprecedented challenges, federal leaders acknowledged the tireless work of teachers, administrators, and support staff, as well as the critical role of parents and caregivers in sustaining student learning. Despite widespread hardship, the period created opportunities for transformative reform to advance equity and expand access for all students.

Recognizing the compounding mental health crisis among youth, the Biden–Harris administration announced two major initiatives on July 29, 2022. The Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program used targeted grants to expand the pipeline of qualified school-based mental health professionals (The White House, 2022). Complementing this effort, the Mental Health Services Grant Program provided competitive funding to states and districts to increase the number of mental health providers in schools.

These initiatives arrived at a pivotal moment, as schools struggled to meet escalating mental health needs. By improving staffing capacity and reducing provider caseloads, schools aimed to expand service access for vulnerable student populations, an urgent priority given that 37% of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the 2021 academic year (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2021b, para. 2). Research consistently confirmed that the pandemic fueled rising levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among children and adolescents (Balkhair, 2020; Orgilés et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2020). While initially framed as educational recovery measures, these programs also represented an explicit acknowledgment of the pandemic's profound psychological toll, positioning youth mental health as a priority for immediate and sustained intervention. Because mental health and learning are reciprocally reinforcing, the same conditions that drove psychological distress also undermined academic engagement and growth.

Educational Disruption

Disruption to academic learning, with substantial and inequitable impacts on high school students in urban, under-resourced communities, was noticeable. The scale of this educational disruption was massive, affecting approximately 55 million children from kindergarten through 12th grade across the United States (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023). This extensive disruption of educational services resulted in substantial losses of essential learning experiences vital for complete development (Buonsenso et al., 2021). Quantitative assessments revealed alarming declines in academic achievement, with students experiencing a 67% reduction in expected math skills and an 87% decrease in reading ability (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 4). These setbacks translated to

approximately three months of lost progress in mathematics and one and a half months in reading ability (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; NCES, 2022a; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Learning deficits were massive among children from low socio-economic backgrounds (Betthäuser et al., 2023). These effects were particularly acute in secondary schools, where the compressed timeline to graduation heightened the risk of long-term consequences for college access and career readiness (Engzell et al., 2021).

Urban high schools faced additional challenges due to structural inequities, including limited access to reliable internet and digital devices, fewer quiet learning spaces at home, and greater caregiving responsibilities among students (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The transition to remote learning widened pre-existing achievement gaps, with African American and Latinx students disproportionately affected (Lischer, et al., 2022; 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Beyond academics, school closures severed access to essential supports, such as counseling, mentoring, and nutrition programs, services that are critical for student safety and well-being in high-poverty districts (Catty, 2021; García & Weiss, 2020; Mazrekaj & DeWitte, 2023). In this context, the disruption to learning was not only academic, but also influenced SEL, highlighting the need for interventions that could address both skill recovery and student mental health.

SEL emerged as a key component of recovery strategies, offering a framework for rebuilding classroom connections, restoring engagement, and fostering resilience (CASEL, 2023). These academic losses and inequities reinforced the need for interventions that addressed not only learning recovery but also the emotional and social dimensions of schooling.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL encompasses the development of five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022; Jotkoff, 2022). These skills foster coping strategies, emotional regulation, and resilience factors directly linked to adolescent mental health and well-being (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2022). The primary goal of SEL is to strengthen students' abilities to coordinate thinking, feeling, and behavior in ways that promote adaptation across diverse contexts, foster personal growth, and support academic and task-related success (Durlak et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Research affirms that SEL interventions help students process trauma, build resilience, and recover from pandemic-related challenges, while also improving classroom behavior, academic achievement, and long-term outcomes (Durlak et al., 2022). SEL's adoption as a whole-school strategy has further highlighted its potential to rebuild well-being and promote equity (CASEL, 2022).

However, successful implementation depends heavily on teachers' confidence and preparation. Many educators report limited training and inadequate systemic support, leaving classroom practice vulnerable to missed opportunities or, in some cases, the reinforcement of exclusionary or deficit-based messages (Cipriano & Strambler, 2020; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). Barriers exist at multiple levels: individual (knowledge, self-efficacy), organizational (time constraints, competing initiatives), and systemic (policy alignment, professional development supports).

Research showed self-management interventions improve stress regulation and digital self-control (Greenberg, 2023). Meanwhile, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making enhance academic outcomes, cultural competence, and ethical reasoning (Kim, 2024). Self-awareness interventions, in particular, have demonstrated moderate to significant effects on psychological well-being and emotional regulation (CASEL, 2022; Cipriano & Strambler, 2023). Collectively, these findings highlighted SEL's promise for supporting both recovery and long-term equity, while emphasizing the need for intentional design, teacher development, and systemic support.

While SEL offers a promising framework for supporting students, its success depends on teachers' ability to implement practices with fidelity. The following section examines teacher self-efficacy and the barriers educators face in embedding SEL into daily instruction.

Teacher Implementation Challenges

Despite strong empirical support for SEL effectiveness, teachers face significant implementation barriers across individual, organizational, and systemic levels. Research identified time constraints as the primary barrier, with educators reporting difficulty finding space in already packed curricula for dedicated SEL instruction (Prothero, 2024). Teacher preparation represents a critical gap, as most teacher education programs provide minimal SEL exposure, leaving educators unprepared for implementation (Rikoon et al., 2024). The RAND Survey (Rand Corporation, 2022) found that over 50% of teachers received no SEL training (sec. 2). Professional development challenges include one time workshops without follow-up, generic training lacking contextual relevance, and insufficient ongoing coaching (Graham et al. 2024).

Additionally, competing academic priorities create further tensions during implementation. A survey of 824 educators consider academic catch-up as a significant challenge for SEL implementation, with teachers reporting conflicts between test preparation pressures and SEL goals (Klein, 2022). Curriculum overcrowding exacerbates these time constraints, as teachers struggle to balance achievement testing requirements with comprehensive SEL programming (Thompson et al., 2024). Administrative and resource limitations create systemic barriers, with multiple studies documenting constraints including financial limitations, personnel shortages, and insufficient materials (Neufeld, 2025).

Organizational factors significantly influence the success of implementation at individual, school, and macro levels. Leadership support proves critical for SEL success, with strong administrative commitment essential for creating a supportive culture, providing resources, ensuring sustainability, and removing implementation barriers (Filer, 2024). Research reveals that successful SEL implementation requires comprehensive support systems addressing teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, adequate resources, strong leadership, and systemic alignment (Prothero, 2022; Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023). The most promising approaches involve sustainable, integrated models that work within existing constraints while maintaining program fidelity and addressing the complex web of implementation barriers through coordinated efforts spanning individual preparation, organizational support, and systemic policy alignment. However, Research showed that without confident, well-prepared teachers, schools cannot implement even the best-designed SEL frameworks or support students' mental and emotional health with fidelity. (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Mental Health and Emotional Disorders

The increasing prevalence of emotional disorders during the pandemic manifested through various psychological conditions. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2022), an emotional disorder is a psychological condition characterized by maladaptive, inappropriate, or disproportionate emotional reactions to situations. These manifestations encompassed several anxiety variants, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety, panic attacks, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kindred & Bates, 2023 National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) 2021).

Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety disorders typically involve excessive fear, worry, or nervousness that interferes with daily activities and functioning. These conditions manifest in various forms, including GAD, characterized by persistent and excessive worry; social anxiety, involving intense fear of social situations; panic disorder, featuring unexpected episodes of intense fear; and PTSD, which develops after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events (Fortuna et al., 2023). A closer examination of anxiety disorders reveals substantial influences on adolescent development and functioning.

A change in youth mental health became particularly evident in escalating anxiety and depression rates. Global statistics revealed a 25% increase in anxiety and depression prevalence during the pandemic's first year (WHO, 2022, para. 1). A comprehensive analysis of 80,000 youth demonstrated doubled rates of depression and anxiety symptoms during this period, with approximately 20% reporting anxiety symptoms (Fortuna et al., 2023, para. 1). These findings highlighted the urgent necessity for addressing adolescent mental health challenges during this unprecedented period.

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are among the most common adolescent mental health challenges, manifesting as excessive fear, worry, or avoidance that interferes with daily functioning. Studies have shown that a high level of anxiety, when persistent over time, interferes with a student's ability to learn and engage successfully in school environments (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2023; Stack, 2022). Therefore, understanding and supporting students with anxiety is essential to ensuring adolescents' educational and overall well-being (AACAP, 2023).

To support students with anxiety effectively in school settings, interventions that blend (SEL), resilience training, and targeted behavioral strategies show promise. For example, Raimundo et al. (2024) found that a SEL program implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety among Portuguese elementary students, especially for those with higher baseline anxiety or lower SEL skills. Similarly, a meta-analysis of school-based interventions for resilience (Cai et al., 2025) demonstrated that such programs improve students' ability to adapt to stressors reducing maladaptive anxiety responses by providing emotional regulation, peer support, and coping skills. Although anxiety can take many forms, one of the most prevalent and disruptive for adolescents is social anxiety disorder (SAD).

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) involves avoidance, fear, or distress in social and performance situations, significantly impairing academic and social functioning (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022; Kindred & Bates, 2023). Prevalence estimates indicate that about 7%–9% of adolescents experience SAD, with severe

impairment in approximately 1% of cases (Alves et al., 2022, para. 1; Ernest, 2023, p. 1). Symptoms, such as avoiding class participation, limited eye contact, or speaking softly often reduce confidence and self-esteem, contributing to lower academic performance and increased risk for co-occurring depression (AACAP, 2023).

Supporting students with social anxiety benefits most when interventions are accessible, context-sensitive, and embedded in the environments that regularly trigger anxiety. One approach with growing evidence is school-based or online cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which teaches skills like exposure to feared social situations, cognitive restructuring of negative self-evaluation, and social skills training; for example, fully unguided internet-CBT has been shown to reduce sub-threshold SAD symptoms in adolescents and young adults (Matsumoto, 2024). Additional supports include improving school climate (e.g., fostering belonging and supportive peer relationships), teacher training in recognizing social anxiety signs, and integrating social anxiety interventions into school attendance and behavioral support systems to reduce barriers, such as fear of judgment or avoidance. For instance, in one recent study, symptoms of social anxiety were negatively associated with school attendance when students did not receive supportive intervention highlighting the importance of school policies and practices that reduce stigma and make seeking help safe and normal (Karel; 2025).

While social anxiety is often rooted in fear of evaluation, depression presents differently, characterized by persistent sadness, withdrawal, and loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities. Both conditions can overlap, but depression poses distinct risks for adolescents' emotional well-being and academic performance.

Depression

Depression is a common and treatable mood disorder marked by persistent sadness, loss of interest, and impaired functioning lasting for two weeks (APA, n.d.; Brody & Hughes, 2023). During August 2021 – August 2023, the prevalence of depression was 13.1% in adolescents 12 and older (Brody & Hughes, 2023). These patterns highlight the urgency of school-based supports to address adolescent depression.

To support adolescents with depression, school-based and digital interventions that integrate cognitive-behavioral strategies, resilience training, and multi-component prevention show encouraging results. For example, a meta-analysis of school-based mental health programs found that interventions in K-12 settings reduced depressive symptoms with a small but meaningful effect (Effect Size ≈ 0.24), especially when delivered by clinicians and when they included CBT components (Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, universal prevention programs, delivered to all students, also produce small improvements in depressive symptoms and anxiety in large samples while not replacing targeted support, they can reduce overall burden and stigma (Hertz, 2025).

In addition to depression, some adolescents experience panic disorder, marked by sudden, intense episodes of fear or discomfort that can resemble medical emergencies. These panic attacks add another layer of complexity to adolescent mental health, often co-occurring with generalized anxiety or depressive symptoms.

Panic Disorder

Panic disorder involves repeated, unexpected panic attacks; sudden surges of intense fear or discomfort that peak within minutes (APA, n.d.; Cackovic et al., 2023). It affects about 1% to 3% of adolescents, most often beginning between ages 15 and 19

(Baker et al., 2022, p. 135). Symptoms include overwhelming physical sensations and catastrophic thinking, which can lead to school absenteeism, social avoidance, and in some cases, agoraphobia (Finning et al., 2019; Ernest, 2023). These disruptions significantly impair adolescents' educational and social development (Kindred & Bates, 2023).

Effective support for adolescents experiencing panic disorder includes interventions that combine cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with school-based or low barrier delivery formats. School nurse led CBT interventions are emerging as promising, helping reduce anxiety symptoms, which may include panic symptoms, in adolescents by providing localized, familiar, and stigma-reduced access to care (Osland, 2025).

Whereas panic disorder reflects acute episodes of fear, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stems from exposure to traumatic experiences. Adolescents coping with trauma may face recurring distress, avoidance, and hyperarousal that disrupt daily functioning.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD can develop after exposure to traumatic events, such as abuse, community violence, or disasters, with symptoms including nightmares, avoidance, and heightened arousal. Trauma exposure is common, up to 43% of children experience at least one event, and 3%–15% of girls and 1%–6% of boys develop PTSD (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023; para. 1). Risk factors include trauma severity, prior exposure, and low social support, while protective factors, such as parental and school support buffers against symptoms (Lotzin et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2022). Adolescents with PTSD are at increased risk for depression, substance use, and suicidal behavior, highlighting the

importance of supportive school environments that promote safety and connection (Herd et al., 2023).

Supporting students with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) requires a multi-tiered approach that prioritizes safety, stability, and access to evidence-based care. In schools, interventions can include structured routines, predictable classroom environments, and access to safe spaces where students can self-regulate during moments of distress (Lotzin et al., 2022). Teacher training is also critical, as educators who understand trauma responses are better equipped to recognize triggers and respond with empathy rather than discipline. Social support, particularly peer and family connections, has been shown to buffer PTSD symptoms and reduce long-term impairment (Xiong et al., 2022). By combining therapeutic interventions, supportive environments, and early identification, schools can play a central role in mitigating the academic and emotional consequences of PTSD for adolescents.

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Emotional disorders and behavioral challenges among adolescents highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support systems in schools. Disruptive behavior disorders (DBDs) particularly attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) are among the most prevalent conditions, exerting a substantial impact on students' mental health and academic performance (DSM-IV, 2013). These disorders are marked by difficulties with impulse control, self-regulation, and aggressive behavior (Milone & Sesso, 2022). In educational settings, they frequently present as ADHD, ODD, or conduct disorders (CDs), making them some of the most common behavioral concerns encountered by educators (Milone & Sesso, 2022; Ogundele, 2018).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of addressing these conditions alongside depression and anxiety to strengthen adolescent mental health and improve academic outcomes (Rogers & MacLean, 2023).

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders, typically beginning in childhood and often persisting into adulthood (APA, 2022; Faraone et al., 2024). It is characterized by difficulties with organization, sustained focus, planning, and impulse control, making everyday tasks and routines particularly challenging (APA, 2022; CDC, 2023). Recent estimates place United States prevalence among youth ages 4 to 17 at approximately 10%–11%, with little variation across the past decade (CDC, 2022, para. 4). Most children with ADHD receive school-based services, including special education support, individualized instruction, and classroom accommodations, such as modified assignments, organizational assistance, and frequent teacher feedback (CDC, 2023).

Closely related to ADHD in school contexts is oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which involves persistent patterns of defiance, irritability, and argumentative behavior. ODD often co-occurs with ADHD, compounding the difficulty of managing behaviors that interfere with learning and peer relationships.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

ODD is a disruptive behavior disorder characterized by persistent patterns of defiance, irritability, and argumentative or vindictive behavior toward authority figures, such as parents and teachers (APA, 2022; Mars et al., 2024). Its origins are multifactorial, involving biological, genetic, and environmental influences, with contributing factors,

such as neurochemical imbalances and, in some cases, brain injury (APA, 2022; DSM-5-TR, 2022). These behavioral and emotional challenges often result in strained family relationships, difficulties with peers, and significant disruption in academic and social functioning (Mars et al., 2024).

Effective support for students with ODD involves a combination of individualized interventions, consistent routines, and collaborative strategies that reinforce positive behavior. Evidence highlights the importance of parent management training and family therapy, which improve communication and consistency across home and school settings (Mars et al., 2024). In classrooms, structured environments with clear expectations, predictable consequences, and reinforcement of appropriate behavior are critical. Teachers benefit from professional development in positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) and strategies that emphasize relationship-building over punitive discipline (Briesch et al., 2020).

Social skills training and problem-solving interventions also help students manage anger and conflict more effectively. In severe cases, multimodal treatment, combining behavioral therapy with carefully monitored medication can reduce symptom intensity and improve functioning (Mars et al., 2024). Overall, coordinated support between educators, families, and mental health professionals is essential to helping students with ODD succeed academically and socially.

While oppositional defiant disorder often presents as persistent defiance and hostility toward authority figures, conduct disorder represents a more severe progression along the spectrum of disruptive behavior disorders.

Conduct Disorder

Conduct disorder is a severe disruptive behavior disorder characterized by persistent violations of the rights of others, including aggression toward people and animals, property destruction, and other behaviors that may result in legal difficulties (APA, 2022; DSM–5–TR, 2022). It is associated with significant impairment in adolescents' academic, social, and emotional functioning, and is strongly linked to criminal activity and substance abuse (Frick & Kemp, 2021). Conduct disorder falls within the broader spectrum of disruptive behavior disorders (DBDs), alongside ODD and ADHD, but is distinguished by the greater severity, intensity, and intentionality of behaviors (Sönmez & Kayaalp, 2018).

Supporting students and addressing students with conduct disorder requires early, coordinated, and multi-systemic interventions. Evidence supports the use of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to help students develop problem-solving, anger management, and social skills that reduce aggressive behaviors (Frick & Kemp, 2021). School-based programs that incorporate Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practices provide structured environments with clear expectations and consistent consequences, reducing disruptive behaviors, while promoting accountability (Briesch et al., 2020). Family-focused interventions, including parent management training, strengthen consistency across home and school contexts and are shown to improve outcomes. In more severe cases, multisystemic therapy (MST), which integrates family, school, and community supports, has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing delinquency and improving long-term functioning. Collaboration among educators, school social workers, mental health providers, and families is essential in addressing

both behavioral challenges and the underlying social-emotional needs of adolescents with conduct disorder, particularly when coordinated through evidence-based, multi-system approaches (Briesch et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2022; Frick & Kemp, 2021). Beyond externalizing disorders, such as conduct disorder, adolescents may also struggle with internalizing conditions involving ritualistic behaviors, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is marked by intrusive, distressing thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions) performed to relieve anxiety (APA, 2022; DSM-5-TR, 2022; Nazeer et al., 2020). Common themes include contamination, orderliness, and cleanliness, and attempts to resist compulsions typically intensify distress (Stiede et al., 2023). Ranked among the world's 10 most disabling disorders (WHO, 2021), OCD can severely disrupt daily functioning. Early identification and interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), family counseling, and school-based programs are effective in reducing symptoms and supporting adolescent well-being (Nazeer et al., 2020; Stiede et al., 2023). Beyond internalized distress, many adolescents also confront externalized challenges, including substance use and suicidality, which further complicate schools' efforts to promote well-being during and after the pandemic.

Effective support for students with OCD requires early identification, evidence-based treatment, and coordinated school involvement. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with exposure and response prevention (ERP) remains the gold standard, helping adolescents gradually face feared thoughts, while resisting compulsive rituals (Feusner et al., 2025; Stiede et al., 2023). School-based adaptations of CBT, including collaboration

between teachers and mental health professionals, allow interventions to be delivered in familiar environments, increasing accessibility and reducing stigma (Meherali et al., 2025; Stiede et al., 2023). Family counseling further strengthens treatment outcomes by improving parental understanding and consistency across settings. In the classroom, supportive strategies include offering structured routines, flexible deadlines, and discreet safe spaces that minimize triggers without reinforcing compulsions (Velasco et al., 2023). Together, these supports mitigate the disabling effects of OCD and help adolescents sustain both academic performance and social well-being.

Adolescent emotional and behavioral disorders, ranging from anxiety and depression to ADHD, ODD, CD, and OCD, pose significant challenges to learning, social development, and overall well-being. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) consistently emerges as an effective intervention, yet its direct implementation within school settings is often not feasible. While schools provide important supports, there is limited experimental evidence (RCTs) specifically examining classroom-level accommodations, such as flexible deadlines, safe spaces, or structured routines for youth with disorders like OCD. Much of the current knowledge base is drawn from observational or qualitative studies and clinical practice, meaning that recommendations for classroom strategies should be understood as informed by related evidence rather than rigorously tested in school contexts. These limitations highlight the need for comprehensive, school-embedded approaches that not only address internalizing and externalizing disorders but also prepare educators to respond to related risks. One of the most concerning of these risks is adolescent substance use, which often co-occurs with or emerges from untreated mental health difficulties and will be explored in the following section.

Substance Use

Adolescent substance use remains a pressing public health concern, with alcohol and drug consumption linked to academic decline, addiction, legal involvement, and even mortality (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). In the United States, long-term trends show a general decline in alcohol and marijuana use since the late 1990s. Recent data revealed marijuana use rates of 20.5% among Black students, 16.7% among Hispanic students, and 14.8% among White students, while alcohol use was most common among White students (25.9%), followed by Hispanic (22.9%) and Black (13.2%) students (Hoots et al., 2023, sec. 8). In addition, prescription opioid misuse also varied, ranging from 4.6% to 8.6% (Hoots et al., 2023, sec. 1).

Substance use declined notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend likely influenced by social distancing measures and increased parental supervision. For instance, alcohol use among 10th graders dropped from 40.7% to 28.5%, while overall substance use among 12th graders decreased from 55.3% to 46.5% between 2020 and 2021 (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2021, sec. 8). Illicit drug use, excluding marijuana, also fell during this period, with prevalence rates in 2021 at 5.1% for 10th graders and 7.2% for 12th graders (NIDA, 2021, sec. 1). However, these gains began to reverse in 2022. Misuse of prescription narcotics, such as Vicodin and OxyContin inched upward among 12th graders, while fentanyl-related overdose deaths among adolescents rose sharply (Friedman et al., 2022; Mars et al., 2019).

Despite these initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified adolescent distress, amplifying the urgency for comprehensive, school-based strategies. These sobering trends sheds light as to why schools have become a frontline setting for suicide

prevention through interventions, such as SEL, mindfulness practices, counseling, and restorative approaches.

School-Based Interventions

Schools are uniquely positioned to address students' emotional, academic, and behavioral needs, serving as primary access points for mental health services (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [PBIS], 2023). These services span universal prevention efforts and targeted interventions, including mindfulness practices, anti-bullying initiatives, SEL, peer mentoring, and therapeutic counseling. Comprehensive frameworks for these efforts often integrate prevention education, professional development for educators, mental health curricula, culturally responsive practices, and suicide prevention training (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL and mindfulness interventions demonstrated significant benefits in enhancing students' focus, emotional regulation, and resilience (McKeering & Hwang, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011). Peer mediation programs have been shown to promote conflict resolution skills, empathy, and prosocial behavior (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020; Lešková & Haburajová Ilavská, 2023; Matthews, et al., 2022), whereas restorative justice approaches have shifted disciplinary systems toward repairing harm and addressing the underlying causes of misconduct (Katic et al., 2020). Counseling and group therapy provided structured, ongoing emotional support (The School Counselor & Group Counseling, 2020), and trauma-informed practices equipped educators to identify and respond to behavioral signs of trauma (Trauma-Informed Schools, 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). Mentoring relationships with trusted adults or peers

further enhanced protective factors and fostered school engagement (National Mentoring Resource Center, 2025).

When implemented effectively, these interventions strengthened students' emotional intelligence, social awareness, and overall psychological well-being (Clarke et al., 2022). However, the abrupt transition to virtual schooling disrupted the delivery of many supports, creating new risks and highlighting the need for intentional strategies to sustain student well-being.

Virtual Schooling

The large-scale shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced both opportunities and risks for adolescent well-being. Research has shown that virtual learning is connected to positive mental health, as students appreciate the time spent at home (Jones, et al., 2022; S. M. Jones et al., 2021; Penner et al., 2021). However, being at home led to feelings of loneliness and distress (Naff et al., 2022). Although virtual platforms had been integrated into K–12 education in limited capacities prior to 2020 (Black et al., 2021; Mohtar & Yunus, 2022), the pandemic necessitated the immediate and universal adoption of these platforms. Students engaged through video conferencing, email, and learning management systems, enabling flexible and personalized instruction (Jones, et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Despite these advancements, virtual learning environments exposed gaps in emotional and behavioral support (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023; Naff et al., 2022). Research documented declines in physical activity, increases in sedentary screen time, and reduced academic motivation (Branje & Morris, 2021; McArthur et al., 2021). Excessive online engagement also carried mental health risks: Naff et al. (2022) found

that 71.8% of youth and 69.3% of parents reported heightened internet use associated with decreased self-esteem and emotional well-being (p. 20). Nearly one-third of adolescents reported more than five hours of daily screen time, with a subset meeting the criteria for internet addiction. This overexposure correlated strongly with anxiety and depressive symptoms (McArthur et al., 2021;). Conversely, McArthur, et al. (2021), argued that increased screen time, while associated with psychological distress, was not evident when used to connect with friends and family.

While healthcare providers expanded digital counseling and teletherapy services during the pandemic, evidence suggests that online interventions, though more effective than no treatment, may be less impactful than in-person modalities (Garrido et al., 2019; Hollis et al., 2020). The lack of structured school routines further compounded challenges, reducing opportunities for physical activity and social interaction both of which are protective against mental health decline (Pfleiderer et al., 2022). Globally, more than 1.5 billion students, 87.6% of the world's student population, experienced these disruptions (Buonsenso et al., 2021; p. 6), with younger and socially vulnerable students disproportionately affected (Schoon & Henseke, 2022). Despite the challenges of online learning, recent longitudinal studies show that adolescents with strong school belonging or connectedness report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and negative emotions across adolescence and into young adulthood (Allen et al., 2024; Raniti et al., 2025).

Amid these challenges, research has consistently identified school connectedness, the sense of being supported, cared for, and belonging within the school community as a critical protective factor for adolescent mental health (Jones et al., 2022). Jones et al., (2022) showed students who reported feeling connected to both peers and adults at school

were significantly less likely to experience persistent sadness or hopelessness (35% vs. 53%), to seriously consider suicide (14% vs. 26%), or to attempt suicide (6% vs. 12%) (S. E. Jones et al., 2022, para. 6). Yet, during the pandemic, only 47% of students reported feeling close to others at school (S. E. Jones et al., 2022, para. 6).

As in-person learning resumed, strengthening connectedness through inclusive environments, positive adult–student relationships, and peer support structures became essential to recovery. SEL, mentoring programs, and restorative practices played a particularly important role in rebuilding trust, fostering relationships, and enhancing engagement (Eklund et al., 2020; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Reestablishing these connections quickly became central to reentry efforts, with SEL and other comprehensive interventions serving as key vehicles for supporting student well-being.

Teacher Self-Efficacy in Implementing SEL

Albert Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory provides a valuable lens for understanding why some teachers readily adopt (SEL), while others hesitate. Teachers with stronger self-efficacy tend to persevere, adapt, and integrate new practices more successfully (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). In the SEL context, confident educators are more likely to adopt routines, engage students, and navigate implementation challenges (Holmes, 2021; Lee, 2024). In contrast, lower self-efficacy can contribute to inconsistent adoption and overreliance on scripted curricula (Zinsser et al., 2014).

Bandura (1997) identifies four primary sources of efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological/affective states that collectively suggest concrete levers for professional learning. These sources provide a useful framework for strengthening SEL implementation in practice. For example, mastery

experiences, such as successfully leading a community circle or resolving conflicts through restorative practices reinforce teachers' confidence to embed SEL across instruction. Vicarious learning occurs when educators observe peers model effective strategies, a process often supported in professional learning communities.

Encouragement from administrators and instructional coaches can help teachers stay motivated and work through challenges (Bandura, 1997; Knight & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2024; Kraft et al., 2018). When teachers learn how to manage their own emotions, they are better able to model social and emotional learning (SEL) for students and create a calm and supportive classroom environment (Mahoney et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021). In urban high schools, large class sizes, limited resources, and ongoing inequities can lower teacher confidence, making it especially important to strengthen these areas of self-efficacy (Jagers et al., 2019; McCoy & Hanno, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2021). Teachers who have higher self-efficacy tend to adjust lessons to meet students' needs and make learning more culturally relevant, while teachers with lower confidence are more likely to follow set scripts that limit the impact of SEL (Clayback et al., 2023; Fowler, 2024; S. Liu et al., 2025). By offering consistent support and building trust, school leaders can help teachers grow in their confidence and effectiveness, which strengthens SEL implementation and improves student outcomes (Gimbert et al., 2023). Teacher confidence is not automatic; it requires intentional support structures. As a result, professional learning communities, coaching, and ongoing SEL-focused training are essential for helping educators apply these practices consistently and effectively in the classroom.

Coaching and structured, job-embedded training can cultivate these sources, yet many educators report limited preparation for SEL in both pre-service and in-service settings (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; CASEL, 2022). This preparation gap fuels strong interest in further training but uneven access to sustained support (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2024; Meland & Brion-Meisels 2024). Research consistently links teachers' beliefs to program outcomes more positive beliefs predict more substantial uptake, higher fidelity, and better sustainability (Clayback et al., 2023). Still, comfort and confidence remain only moderate in many samples, with persistent uncertainty surrounding teaching competencies, such as self-awareness and emotional regulation (AIR, 2024).

Higher teacher self-efficacy enhances professional well-being, as it increases job satisfaction, strengthens instructional commitment, and fosters more positive teacher–student relationships (Dreer, 2023; Li 2023). Confident teachers are more likely to model, scaffold, and coach students' emotional development; teachers who are less confident often adhere narrowly to external scripts.

In urban high schools, embedding culturally sustaining, equity-centered pedagogy within SEL is essential for relevance and impact (Jagers et al., 2019; 2021). Professional learning communities (PLCs) can extend individual capacity by creating collaborative structures to share strategies, examine student data, and troubleshoot implementation (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025).

Self-efficacy is a decisive determinant of whether SEL initiatives take root and endure. Because mastery-oriented, collaborative professional learning can intentionally build efficacy, the following section explains how ongoing PD and coaching strengthen

teachers' confidence and sustain high-quality SEL in urban high school contexts (Pan, 2023; Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024).

Professional Development

High-quality professional development (PD) is crucial for equipping teachers, particularly in urban high schools, with the skills, confidence, and resources necessary to implement SEL effectively. Design PD around mechanisms that change practice insight, motivation, technique, and practice-embedding instead of one-time workshops or generic "best features" checklists (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2023). In practical terms, effective SEL PD couples' content on CASEL's five interrelated competencies with active learning, rehearsal with feedback, and iterative cycles that embed new routines into daily instruction (CASEL, 2020; CASEL, n.d.-a). Notably, recent national data indicate secondary schools receive less SEL-focused PD than elementary schools, underscoring the need for sustained, context-specific learning in high-school settings (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024).

A widely recognized heuristic for effective SEL programming is the SAFE framework: Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit. Contemporary meta-analyses, including a 2024 U.S.-only review and a global synthesis, reaffirm the classic evidence base (Durlak et al., 2011) and find that well-implemented, SAFE-aligned SEL significantly improves students' SEL skills, school functioning, and academics (CASEL, 2025; Cipriano et al., 2024). Framing PD around SAFE principles helps move learning from awareness to classroom routines that are explicitly taught, practiced, and coached.

Beyond workshops, job-embedded supports are critical. Meta-analytic evidence shows that instructional coaching and other job-embedded PD produce meaningful

improvements in teacher practice and measurable though smaller gains in student outcomes, outperforming stand-alone training (Kraft et al., 2018). For SEL specifically, modeling and rehearsing CASEL's SEL 3 Signature Practices during PD (welcoming rituals, engaging strategies, optimistic closures) strengthens transfer to classrooms and aligns adult learning with the schoolwide SEL climate we want for students (CASEL, n.d.-a). District-level indicators and schoolwide SEL guidance further highlight educator PD, adult SEL, and continuous-improvement routines as key levers for implementation fidelity (CASEL, n.d.-b; Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024).

Finally, adult SEL and educator well-being should be explicit PD targets. National survey and policy analyses link professional learning on educators' own SEL and guidance for integrating SEL into academic courses to stronger, more systemic implementation; yet fewer than half of schools report these elements in place, with secondary schools trailing elementary (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). Building time for adult SEL, collaborative inquiry (PLCs), and fidelity/data-use cycles (e.g., practice walkthroughs tied to CASEL indicators) helps address common high school barriers, such as time, competing initiatives, and content coverage pressures (CASEL, 2023b; Greenberg, 2023). In short, sustainable SEL implementation requires more than awareness; it requires continuous, job-embedded, collaborative professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Pan, 2023).

Instructional Coaching

Instructional coaching is a high-leverage, job-embedded PD model that pairs observation–feedback cycles with modeling and goal-setting tailored to teacher needs (Knight, 2009). Meta-analyses and large randomized controlled trials (RCTs) show

coaching reliably improves classroom practice and, in many cases, student learning particularly when feedback targets specific techniques and teachers have structured time to rehearse and reflect (Clark et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2018; Sims et al., 2023). Micro-level studies illuminate how coaching works, revealing that modeling, guided rehearsal, and actionable, bite-sized feedback predict higher implementation fidelity and better class-wide outcomes classic pathways for strengthening self-efficacy through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1997; Glover et al., 2023).

In SEL contexts, interaction-focused coaching, such as MyTeachingPartner–Secondary (CLASS-S), focuses on providing emotional support, maintaining classroom organization, and enhancing instructional interactions. Across multiple RCTs, this approach has strengthened teacher–student interactions and boosted secondary students’ achievement, translating SEL theory into day-to-day routines (Wayne et al., 2023).

Current PD guidance aligns with this evidence base: Learning Forward’s 2022 Standards position coaching within sustained, data-informed professional learning systems, and CASEL’s Schoolguide emphasizes ongoing, job-embedded learning tied to schoolwide SEL goals rather than one-off workshops (Learning Forward, 2022; CASEL Schoolguide, n.d.).

Taken together, the most effective SEL-aligned coaching designs feature: (a) short, structured cycles with protected time for practice; (b) precise, classroom-anchored feedback on specific interaction moves; and (c) iterative goal-setting mapped to an SEL framework to support transfer to instruction (CASEL, 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2023).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Professional learning communities (PLCs) add a collaborative layer to job-embedded PD by giving teachers structured time to analyze engagement/achievement data, share and rehearse strategies, and hold one another accountable for trying and refining new practices. Recent syntheses and extensive multi-site studies link PLC participation to stronger teacher self-efficacy and collective teacher efficacy and, in some cases, improved student outcomes especially when PLCs have clear goals, use evidence to guide inquiry, and stay tightly connected to classroom practice (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Emerging evidence in secondary settings clarifies how PLCs work. Studies show that specific PLC features (shared vision, reflective dialogue, and co-planning) are associated with higher teacher self-efficacy and with instructional improvements; effects on student learning appear to operate through collective teacher efficacy and cognitively demanding instruction (Pan, 2023; Yada & Savolainen, 2023). In other words, PLCs function as an engine for implementation, not just discussion, by driving concrete changes in interaction moves and lesson design.

To support sustainable SEL implementation in high schools, a phased PLC design helps PD evolve with teachers' needs:

First, the launch phase, the first 6 to 8 weeks, focused on building shared SEL language, co-designing a small set of high-leverage routines (e.g., discussion norms, goal-setting check-ins), and agreeing on quick-look data (short engagement pulses,). This work was grounded in PLC norms and evidence-use practices linked to efficacy gains (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Secondly, the deepening phase (monthly cycles) used meetings for brief, live modeling or video study of specific interaction moves, guided rehearsal, and plan–do–study–act problem-solving tied to current classes. This phase emphasized cognitively activating tasks and peer feedback, which mediate PLC effects on outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2024)

Finally, the sustainability phase (quarterly) emphasized growing teacher-leaders to facilitate PLCs, incorporating peer walkthroughs with (SEL) look-fors, and running data reviews that connect behavior and engagement trends to next-step adjustments, thereby creating conditions associated with stronger collective teacher efficacy and more durable practice change (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024; Pan, 2023).

Taken together, the newer literature highlights PLCs as a practical mechanism for transitioning SEL from awareness to durable classroom routines by fostering teacher (and collective) efficacy through goal-focused, evidence-driven collaboration (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Connection to Current Study

The literature consistently demonstrates that SEL interventions support student well-being and academic outcomes, but success depends heavily on teachers' self-efficacy and sustained professional development. In under-resourced districts, educators often report inadequate preparation, limited training, and inconsistent systemic support, creating gaps in fidelity of implementation. These realities directly inform the present study's focus: equipping high school teachers with the confidence, knowledge, and coaching necessary to integrate SEL into daily instruction.

To address this gap, the study employed a design-based research approach, pairing professional development with instructional coaching grounded in the CASEL framework. This iterative model was chosen because it builds teacher capacity through feedback-driven cycles while embedding SEL practices into authentic classroom contexts. In doing so, the study bridges empirical evidence and local practice needs, responding to both the literature's call for implementation fidelity and the urgent mental health challenges facing adolescents in high-poverty, urban schools.

These findings showed the need for sustained, job-embedded, and context-specific professional learning that directly targets the mechanisms of practice change modeling, guided rehearsal, and actionable feedback and aligns with a coherent SEL framework. Evidence from meta-analyses and large randomized controlled trials demonstrates that coaching reliably improves instructional practice and can enhance student outcomes (Clark et al., 2022; Glover, Reddy, & Crouse, 2023; Kraft et al., 2018). Similarly, syntheses of SEL research highlighted that the quality of implementation strongly predicts program effectiveness (Cipriano et al., 2024; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023).

Accordingly, the study examined whether a sustained professional learning approach grounded in design-thinking principles could strengthen teachers' self-efficacy in implementing SEL competencies in a predominantly low-income, African American high school. The model centered teachers' needs and contexts through iterative cycles that (a) acknowledged day-to-day challenges, (b) defined SEL-aligned problems of practice, (c) generated feasible strategies within an SEL framework, (d) prototyped high-leverage routines, and (e) tested and refined the routines in real classrooms with coaching

and PLC support (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Wayne et al., 2023). By integrating design-thinking cycles with coaching and PLCs, the study aimed to build teachers' efficacy through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). In addition, educators translated SEL principles into durable, classroom-embedded practices that prioritized equity and student well-being (Jagers et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2021; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024).

Summary

Chapter Two synthesized evidence on the intertwined academic, behavioral, and mental-health challenges facing schools exacerbated during the COVID-19 period and most acute in under-resourced communities highlighting inequities in student well-being and access to supports (AIR, 2024; Office of Population Affairs, 2023). In response, schoolwide frameworks, such as SEL, and PBIS emerged as promising approaches; however, the literature consistently indicated that outcomes depend less on program adoption and more on teachers' capacity, confidence, and implementation fidelity (Briesch et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2024).

Grounded in self-efficacy theory, Chapter Two highlighted the mechanism linking teacher beliefs to practice and student outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001;). It then reviewed evidence for professional learning designs that reliably change instruction: sustained, job-embedded PD aligned to clear frameworks, with modeling, guided rehearsal, actionable feedback, and data-informed cycles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2022; Sims et al., 2023). Meta-analytic and ample RCT evidence showed that coaching improves classroom practice and often student learning while PLCs provide the collaborative infrastructure to spread and sustain

those routines (Clark et al., 2022; Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Kraft et al., 2018). CASEL resources further specified the indicators and signature practices that support transfer from PD into daily instruction (CASEL, 2020).

Together, this body of research established the theoretical and empirical rationale for the present study: testing whether a sustained, design-thinking oriented professional learning model, braiding coaching with PLCs and anchored in CASEL, can strengthen teacher self-efficacy and support durable, high-fidelity SEL implementation in a high-need secondary context (AIR, 2024; Learning Forward, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021).

Chapter Three: Methodology and Results

Problem Statement

Teachers across the United States recognize the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a critical component of education reform aimed at addressing students' social, emotional, and academic needs particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic (CASEL, 2023; Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2023; ED.gov, 2023; Gimbert et al., 2023). Despite understanding the value of SEL, many teachers face significant barriers to implementation in classrooms, including inadequate training, insufficient administrative support, and overwhelming workloads (Holmes, 2021; Lawson et al., 2020; McCoy & Hanno, 2023).

This study addresses the identified problem of practice: evaluating whether professional development and instructional coaching supported teachers in successfully implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) within 9th through 12th-grade classrooms at an urban high school in a small Midwestern community. While previous research established the importance of SEL implementation (CASEL, 2023; Lawson et al., 2020), in elementary and preschools, a gap exists in understanding how consistent, ongoing support affects teachers' ability to integrate SEL practices effectively into high school classroom instruction. The focus centers on understanding whether provided professional development enhanced teachers' ability to integrate SEL strategies into instructional practices. The study directly examined the relationship between professional development and teachers' self-efficacy in implementing SEL, evaluating how targeted training builds confidence and enhances competence in delivering SEL. A mixed-methods methodology was employed to analyze the phenomenon comprehensively. This

approach integrates qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of how professional development and instructional coaching influence SEL implementation. Design thinking served as the guiding framework, emphasizing a process prioritizing empathy, collaboration, and iterative refinement. This process included defining challenges, ideating solutions, prototyping strategies, and evaluating outcomes through feedback loops, enabling a holistic examination of teachers' experiences and perceptions.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

With the goal of fostering adolescent student mental health, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: To what extent does professional development and instructional coaching result in significant changes in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom?

Null Hypothesis: Professional development and instructional coaching do not result in statistically significant improvements in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom.

RQ 2: What supports and resources do teachers identify as necessary for successful implementation of social and emotional learning in their classrooms?

The researcher used a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively evaluate the success of ongoing professional development and instructional coaching in supporting teachers' self-efficacy when implementing SEL competencies in the classroom. The quantitative data was collected through pretest and posttest Likert-scale surveys administered via paper. The surveys

measured variation in teachers' self-efficacy scores before and after participating in the professional development and instructional coaching interventions. The measurable changes in these scores provided statistical evidence of the interventions' influence on teacher confidence during SEL implementation.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers. The interviews explored teachers' perceptions of professional development and instructional coaching interventions, specifically focusing on the supports and resources they identified as necessary for successful SEL implementation. Additionally, these interviews examined whether teachers found the support beneficial in improving their knowledge and self-efficacy. Qualitative insights helped contextualize and deepen the understanding of quantitative results by revealing personal experiences, challenges, and perspectives.

Results from the quantitative and qualitative analysis were integrated to determine the overall success of the prototype professional development and instructional coaching model. Quantitative findings provided measurable evidence of changes in teacher self-efficacy, while qualitative findings offered rich, descriptive data to explain the "why" behind the numerical trends. Together, these findings will guide refinements to the professional development and instructional coaching interventions to optimize their success. To address these research questions, the researcher employed a comprehensive methodological approach grounded in design thinking principles.

Design Thinking

The design thinking process was utilized to discover an innovative approach to addressing the problem of practice. Design thinking is a non-linear, iterative process used

to understand stakeholder needs, challenge assumptions, redefine problems, and create innovative solutions to prototype and test (Hastings, 2021). This framework employs a human-centered approach to problem-solving, ensuring that solutions are tailored to the needs and experiences of others. The process involves five phases: empathy, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2020). Each phase plays a vital role in solving a ‘wicked problem’—a term used to describe complex social or cultural issues that are difficult or impossible to solve through conventional means due to their interconnected nature, changing requirements, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders (Dam & Siang, 2020).

Empathy Phase

The empathy stage of design thinking focuses on understanding the users’ or stakeholders’ needs and experiences (Hastings, 2018). This phase is critical for ensuring solutions are human-centered and successfully address users’ real problems. For this study, first-hand information was collected through various methods, including interviews, surveys, focus groups, and observations with 9th-12th grade teachers. Teachers were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure participants possessed direct experience relevant to the study’s focus. The researcher invited individuals to participate based on their current instructional roles and willingness to engage in professional development and SEL implementation activities. Participation was voluntary, with consent obtained through signed forms in person and electronically (see Appendix D). This sampling approach allowed the researchers to collect data from individuals most closely aligned with the study’s objectives.

The empathy phase activities helped uncover explicit and implicit needs that may not have been immediately clear to the researcher (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2020). The empathy phase allowed the researcher to step into the teachers' shoes, moving beyond assumptions and biases to gain insights into their experiences implementing SEL (Hastings, 2018).

Four anonymous Likert scale survey questions were distributed to stakeholders through Qualtrics (see Appendix A). The survey received ten responses out of ten, a 100% response rate. The survey aimed to gather initial insights into teachers' interests, understanding of perceived challenges, and support needed for successful SEL implementation in the classroom. Additionally, semi-structured interviews using the same questions were conducted to gain deeper insights into survey responses (see Appendix E).

In addition, an empathy map was also used as a visual tool to help the researcher understand how teachers think, feel, regarding SEL implementation. The structured diagram was divided into quadrants capturing what users say, think, do, and feel, helped create a shared reference point for identifying pain points, motivations, and opportunities that might otherwise remain hidden (see Appendix A). The visual nature of the empathy map directly informed the development of "How Might We" questions in the Define phase of design thinking (Dam & Siang, 2020).

Key Findings

During the empathy phase, analysis of survey data, interviews, and empathy mapping revealed five predominant themes: specialized training needs, gaps in SEL knowledge, time constraints, desire for structured curriculum implementation, and administrative support requirements. The findings correspond with research that showing

teachers uncertainty with delivering SEL due to lack of professional skills and knowledge (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). These findings align with current research on social-emotional learning implementation challenges in educational settings.

Teachers expressed significant interest in SEL training, emphasizing the need for high-quality, practical instruction with real-world applications (Pelliccio, 2023). Adequate teacher preparation in social-emotional learning is essential for creating supportive classroom environments where students feel safe and valued. Although some educators expressed skepticism based on previous ineffective professional development experiences, most remained optimistic about SEL's potential impact when properly implemented.

This phase of the study revealed considerable variation in teachers' preparedness for SEL implementation. Many reported limited formal knowledge, often relying on intuitive or informal strategies rather than structured approaches. Despite these varying skill levels, most educators were eager to enhance their SEL competencies to support student development.

Several implementation barriers consistently tempered this enthusiasm for professional growth. Time constraints, financial considerations, and stakeholder buy-in emerged as the most significant concerns. These findings correspond with recent scholarly evidence suggesting that stakeholder inclusion is beneficial when planning for SEL implementation (Kaspar & Massey, 2022). Addressing these barriers through collaborative stakeholder discussions will likely facilitate more successful implementation processes.

Teachers requested ongoing professional development featuring practical, hands-on strategies supplemented by ready-made resources, such as structured curricula and lesson plans. They emphasized the critical importance of administrative support, leadership buy-in, and dedicated time for peer collaboration as essential elements for successful SEL integration into existing educational frameworks.

While educators expressed willingness to embrace SEL as a transformative tool for student development, they highlighted significant concerns about resource limitations and potential workload increases. Despite these reservations, teachers believed with proper guidance, robust support systems, and practical implementation tools SEL could become an integral part of their teaching practices.

The insights gathered during the empathy phase provided a solid foundation for understanding teacher perspectives on SEL implementation. This collaborative approach directly informed subsequent phases of the design thinking process, ensuring that solutions remained grounded in authentic user needs rather than assumptions. By prioritizing human-centered design principles, the process made all stakeholders feel included and valued, creating a stronger foundation for sustainable SEL implementation. Building upon the rich insights gathered during the empathy phase, the research progressed to defining the core challenges.

Define Phase

The define phase is the second stage of the design thinking process and clearly articulates the core problem based on insights gathered during the Empathy phase. Its primary purpose is to synthesize user feedback and observations into a focused problem statement that reflects the actual needs and challenges of the stakeholders (Hastings,

2018). This phase transforms scattered qualitative data into a meaningful point of view that sets the direction for solution development. Rather than making assumptions, the define phase centers on understanding the root causes of a complex issue (Dam & Siang, 2020).

The Define phase aimed to uncover the specific challenges teachers in an urban school district encounter when implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies. Through collaboration with key stakeholders during the empathy phase and the analysis of the survey and interview data, a core point of view was found: Teachers in the high school setting find it challenging to implement SEL strategies due to insufficient training, lack of resources, and limited administrative support. This point of view statement, a key outcome of the research, served as a guiding principle throughout the rest of the research process (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2020).

Stakeholder collaboration played a vital role in validating the data analysis findings and ensuring that the perspectives reflected the experiences and concerns of all parties involved. The stakeholder team included teachers, administrators, and SEL specialists, offering unique insights that shaped the research process. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that each stakeholder held a relevant role in SEL planning, implementation, or instructional support. Teachers who participated in the professional development pilot contributed firsthand classroom experiences.

Administrators provided institutional perspectives on policy alignment and resource allocation. SEL specialists contributed content expertise and knowledge of best practices for curriculum integration. This intentional selection process allowed the problem of

practice to be examined from multiple angles, strengthening the credibility and practical relevance of the findings.

As the primary implementers of SEL strategies, teachers provided firsthand accounts of their challenges through surveys and interviews administered initially during the empathy phase. Their feedback revealed consistent themes, including inadequate training, limited resources, and minimal administrative support. In addition to these barriers, teachers identified practical needs, such as clear SEL guidelines and adaptable classroom materials. These insights directly informed the development of the problem statement and guided the design of subsequent phases of the research.

Administrators contributed valuable insights into institutional barriers, such as budget constraints and systemic challenges that influenced SEL implementation. Their feedback was gathered through semi-structured interviews and follow-up discussion sessions conducted during the Define phase. These interviews examined key administrative concerns, including policy alignment, staffing limitations, and scheduling logistics affecting SEL integration. Additionally, administrators participated in a virtual feedback session via Microsoft Teams, where they reviewed emerging themes from the Empathy phase and responded to the "How Might We" problem-framing questions. Administrative perspectives ensured the problem statement addressed organizational factors critical to successful SEL implementation.

Similarly, teachers participated in individual interviews and small focus group discussions, where they validated the emerging problem areas and helped refine the priorities identified during the Empathy phase. Their classroom experiences and

implementation concerns added context to the instructional challenges of applying SEL within secondary education.

SEL specialists provided input through targeted feedback sessions focused on the proposed professional development model. They reviewed key components of the CASEL framework and Illinois SEL Standards, offering expert recommendations on instructional alignment and implementation supports (see Appendix C). This multi-method, role-specific engagement with stakeholders ensured that the Define phase reflected the collective insights of all key contributors and resulted in a problem statement that was contextually grounded, actionable, and aligned with stakeholder realities.

The collaboration between these stakeholders yielded meaningful and productive results, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the problem while establishing a solid foundation for later research phases.

Ideation Phase

The Ideation phase, the third stage of the design thinking process, focused on generating a wide range of creative solutions to the problem defined in the previous phase. Ideation encourages divergent thinking, allowing stakeholders to brainstorm freely without judgment and explore innovative possibilities that may not arise through traditional problem-solving approaches (Dam & Siang, 2020). Participants are guided by "How Might We" questions, which frame the problem in an open-ended, solution-oriented way to stimulate collaborative thinking (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2020).

Ideation is critical for transforming insights from the empathy and define phases into practical strategies that can be tested and refined. In educational settings, the Ideation

phase enables teachers, administrators, and content specialists to contribute diverse perspectives and co-create interventions that respond to real classroom challenges. By prioritizing the quantity and variety of ideas over immediate feasibility, this phase lays the foundation for prototyping impactful, user-centered solutions.

Building upon this strong collaborative foundation, the research naturally progressed to the creative problem-solving stage. The ideation phase capitalized on stakeholders' collective insights, transforming gathered data into innovative solutions for the identified problem of practice. 'How Might We' questions functioned as powerful catalysts during brainstorming sessions (Dam & Siang, 2020).

Structured brainstorming sessions were facilitated using collaborative tools to bring together stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and SEL experts. These sessions aimed to develop actionable ideas for improving teacher support, training, and resource availability to enhance teacher self-efficacy during SEL implementation. Participants were invited via email and the session was hosted on Microsoft Teams; a platform familiar to all participants. Stakeholders included Dr. Tiffany Gholson (SEL expert), Andrea Vickers (teacher), and Krista Germann (teacher), with Dr. Jana Haywood (administrator) absent from the session. After introductions, an overview of the brainstorming process was provided along with a demonstration of the use of Jamboard, an interactive online collaboration tool. Participants used color-coded sticky notes to post ideas in response to the 'How Might We' questions designed to stimulate creative thinking and problem-solving (see Appendix B).

The brainstorming session revealed four key themes shaping the approach to SEL implementation. These themes were: Training, which emerged as a priority with four

distinct responses; Teacher Community Support, which garnered five responses; demonstrating a strong interest in collaborative approaches; tools and resources, the most prominent category with six responses; and Communication, which received three responses (see Appendix B). Fourteen responses were gathered, with some naturally bridging multiple categories. For instance, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) appeared consistently under training and teacher community support. Several core needs became evident throughout the varied responses: comprehensive SEL training and professional development, sustained teacher support systems, and transparent communication channels.

However, once the brainstorming session ended, stakeholders were uncertain how SEL should be implemented. Initially, stakeholders found themselves at a crossroads regarding implementation methods. The central debate focused on whether SEL should primarily use technology or prioritize social interaction and interpersonal approaches. This fundamental disagreement prompted a more informal follow-up meeting, conducted via Microsoft Teams, to explore perspectives and work toward consensus thoroughly. This follow-up discussion proved valuable as stakeholders ultimately reached a thoughtful compromise: the group would champion teacher autonomy, empowering educators to select implementation methods best suited to their unique classroom dynamics and student needs.

The ideation phase resulted in a clear direction for designing solutions, including a commitment to supporting teachers throughout SEL implementation and a flexible approach to SEL integration. Fowler (2024) explored how reinforcing teachers' motivations enhances their confidence and commitment to SEL instruction. The CASEL

framework was used to help support teachers' autonomy and self-efficacy when implementing SEL in the classroom (CASEL, n.d.) and the State SEL Standards as a guide for the curriculum. The ideation phase laid the foundation for the prototype phases, where actionable solutions would be developed and tested. With clear direction established during ideation, the research transitioned to developing tangible solutions through prototyping.

Prototype Phase

The prototype phase identifies the best solutions for each problem (Hastings, 2021). With expertise in social-emotional learning and professional development, a practical and actionable tool was created to address the challenges identified in the earlier stages of the study. An ongoing professional development and instructional coaching pilot program served as the prototype to support teachers in implementing social-emotional learning competencies while enhancing their self-efficacy. "At its core, professional development empowers you to engage in self-reflection, critically analyze your teaching methods and strategies to identify areas for improvement" (Sims et al., 2023, para. 6), while empowering teachers with innovative techniques.

Current research recommended utilizing instructional coaches to help improve educators' SEL practice through coaching cycles that involved reviewing lessons beforehand, observing implementation, and reflecting with teachers afterward (Neufeld, 2025; Kaspar & Massey, 2022). Teachers believed workshops alone are insufficient, with one educator noting SEL researchers not only have to work with teachers in that workshopping setting, but you also have to work with them in their classrooms (Dyson et

al., 2023). Thus, researchers offered a toolkit to support teachers with the implementation of SEL. The professional development toolkit included several key components:

Training guide aligned with State SEL standards (stateselstandard.org, n.d.)

Pre-designed, adaptable lesson plans for various grade levels and core subjects (CASEL, 2023)

Implementation guide with step-by-step instructions for integrating SEL into existing curricula (CASEL, 2023)

The professional development initiative used here was designed with a high degree of flexibility, offering intensive, intermittent, and as-needed coaching sessions for ongoing guidance. This approach was specifically designed to address common barriers, such as insufficient training, resource limitations, and support concerns, while also ensuring the program remains adaptable to individual classroom content. This adaptability is a key feature of the program, providing teachers with reassurance and confidence in implementing SEL.

The prototype was presented to the stakeholder team of SEL specialists, administrators, and teachers for feedback. During this meeting, stakeholders reviewed the professional development and instructional coaching program for usability and alignment with teacher needs. While teachers appreciated the clarity of the lesson plans, they suggested including more examples specific to high school subject areas and requested a more transparent scheduling structure. The researcher used the CASEL framework, Illinois Classroom in Action platform, the Illinois classroom collaboration kit - facilitator's guide, and SEL integration guide to support teacher needs (Illinois Classrooms in Action, 2023). Additionally, based on feedback, the instructional coaching

framework was revised to include a detailed schedule and guidelines for virtual and in-person sessions. These revisions aligned the prototype more closely with stakeholder needs and adequately addressed the challenges named during the empathy and ideation phases.

Professional Development Design

Building upon the stakeholder feedback and the refined prototype design, the researcher developed a comprehensive implementation framework. Effective social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation requires comprehensive teacher support systems that bridge theory with classroom practice. Research indicates that educators often feel underprepared to integrate SEL competencies into their teaching despite recognizing their importance (Lee, 2024; Neufeld, 2025). The researcher developed a multifaceted professional development approach focused on practical classroom application to address the implementation gap.

An 8-week continuous professional development program supporting teachers' classroom implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) was implemented. The professional development occurred during 1-hour professional learning communities (PLCs), teacher 45-minute planning periods, and 20-minute individual meetings. Professional development was integral to the intervention, providing teachers with real-time demonstrations of SEL practices. The CASEL 5 framework focuses on the following SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024c, para. 6), and state SEL standards guided the training with specific goals set for high school students (ISBE, 2023b).

Participant and Consent Process

This study involved ten high school teachers (N = 10) from grades 9-12 at an urban high school in a small Midwest community. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling, a method commonly employed in improvement science research to identify participants with direct experience and contextual relevance to the study's goals and willingness to engage in SEL implementation. To ensure ethical research practices, the researcher distributed detailed information sheets in person to potential participants, allowing for immediate questions and clarifications about the study. Interested individuals confirmed their voluntary participation by returning signed consent forms either in person or via email. Additionally, this information was provided via email as the introductory page in Qualtrics, ensuring participants received information through multiple channels.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participants created self-selected identification numbers for survey completion, ensuring no personally identifiable information was collected. All paper data was securely stored in a locked container accessible only to the researcher, and digital data was password-protected. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The study experienced some attrition, with seven participants (N = 7) completing the full program.

SEL Coaches and Support Personnel

Two instructional coaches provided specialized support throughout the professional development and implementation process. Coaches were selected through purposive sampling based on their demonstrated expertise in social-emotional learning

frameworks, prior experience delivering professional development to educators, and familiarity with high school curriculum integration strategies. One coach held formal certification in SEL facilitation and had previously contributed to district-level SEL alignment initiatives, bringing institutional knowledge and policy perspective to the instructional coaching process. The second coach was a veteran teacher leader with an established track record of supporting instructional change through peer mentoring and collaborative professional learning. Both coaches possessed deep understanding of the CASEL framework and Illinois SEL standards, enabling them to provide content-specific guidance aligned with state requirements. The coaches were not selected randomly but were intentionally chosen based on their demonstrated capacity to provide individualized, research-based support that could bridge theoretical SEL knowledge with practical classroom application. To ensure ethical research practices, instructional coaches received detailed information about their roles in the study (Appendix D).

Preliminary Data

Before implementing the prototype, the researcher gathered baseline data through a pre-implementation survey designed to assess teachers' readiness and current SEL implementation practices. Using a descriptive survey methodology with Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, the instrument captured various aspects of SEL implementation readiness from the teacher participants (N = 10). The results provided essential insights that informed the design of the professional development intervention.

The analysis of current SEL implementation approaches revealed considerable variation among respondents. The survey showed that 30% of respondents reported active engagement through regular check-ins and discussions. In comparison, 20% of each

reported taking a reactive approach, utilizing structured implementation models, or having limited to no implementation. Only 10% reported integrating SEL within their subject matter instruction (see table).

Table 1

Implementation Approach

Implementation approach	Percentage of respondents
Active engagement (check-ins and discussions)	30%
Reactive approach (responding to issues as they arise)	20%
Structured implementation models	20%
Limited or no implementation	20%
Integration within subject matter Instruction	10%

Knowledge and Expertise Levels

Assessment of knowledge and expertise levels across different SEL domains revealed notable gaps, particularly in CASEL Training and Illinois SEL Standards knowledge (see tables). For CASEL Training, 60% of respondents reported no knowledge, 30% reported minimal knowledge, and only 10% reported adequate knowledge. Similar patterns emerged in Illinois SEL Standards knowledge, with 40% reporting no knowledge, 30% minimal knowledge, 20% adequate knowledge, and 10% superior knowledge. Coaching expertise showed a more balanced distribution, with 20% reporting no knowledge, 40% minimal knowledge, 30% adequate knowledge, and 10% superior knowledge. SEL Intervention competency indicated higher confidence levels, with 40% reporting adequate knowledge, though 30% still reported no knowledge. Teacher collaborations showed the most even distribution across knowledge levels.

Table 2*Knowledge and Expertise Levels Across SEL Domains*

Domain	No knowledge	Minimal knowledge	Adequate knowledge	Superior knowledge
CASEL training	60%	30%	10%	0%
Illinois SEL standards	40%	30%	20%	10%
Coaching expertise	20%	40%	30%	10%
SEL intervention competency	30%	30%	40%	0%
Teacher collaborations	25%	25%	25%	25%

Note. $N = 10$. Scores range from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Superior knowledge). $*p < .05$

Support and Implementation

The survey revealed significant insights into educators' support needs and implementation capabilities regarding social-emotional learning (SEL) (see Table C). When examining support requirements, CASEL training emerged as the predominant area of need, with 70% of respondents identifying this as their primary concern. Meanwhile, 15% of respondents identified both general intervention strategies and multiple areas of support, indicating a range of professional development needs across the staff.

In addition, the data showed promising results, with 60% of respondents expressing confidence in their ability to implement SEL given the proper conditions, including adequate time, training, and resources. Furthermore, 30% of respondents reported already implementing SEL practices in their classrooms. However, 10% of

respondents expressed uncertainty or limited belief in their ability to implement SEL effectively, suggesting that this group may need targeted support.

These findings about implementation readiness connect directly to the survey's additional insights regarding teachers' self-efficacy regarding SEL implementation. The relationship between perceived support needs and implementation confidence highlights the importance of addressing professional development strategically to build capacity across all educators.

Table 3

Areas Requiring Support

Support area	Percentage of respondents
CASEL training	70%
General intervention strategies	15%
Multiple areas of support	15%

Confidence Levels

The survey findings on confidence levels reveal a typical distribution pattern in educators' self-efficacy regarding SEL implementation. At the extremes, 20% of respondents reported no confidence, while another 20% indicated they were very confident in their ability to implement SEL practices (see Table 4). Between these two poles, 20% expressed being slightly confident, while the most significant segment 40% of respondents—described themselves as somewhat confident.

The distribution of confidence levels offers valuable insight into teacher self-perception of implementation readiness. However, the researcher examined educators' obstacles in daily practice to gain a more comprehensive understanding of SEL integration challenges. By identifying these barriers, educators can develop targeted support strategies addressing the root causes of implementation difficulties rather than simply focusing on confidence levels alone.

Table 4

Confidence Levels in SEL Implementation

Confidence level	Percentage of respondents
No confidence	20%
Slightly confident	20%
Somewhat confident	40%
Very confident	20%

Challenges

The survey revealed several anticipated challenges educators face when implementing SEL in their classrooms. These challenges clustered into four distinct themes. Time management and curriculum integration emerged as the most significant concern, with 30% of respondents identifying this as their primary challenge. Two equally prevalent concerns followed this issue: student engagement and buy-in (25%) and lack of knowledge or training (25%). Interestingly, 20% of respondents reported no anticipated challenges with implementation.

These findings align with previous research in the field. Studies by Greenberg (2023) and Lawson et al. (2020) have similarly identified time constraints and training deficiencies as significant barriers to effective SEL implementation across educational settings. The consistency between our survey results and established research underscores the persistent nature of these challenges.

When asked about desired support types, educators clearly preferred training and professional development opportunities, with 40% selecting this as their primary need. Following this, 25% of respondents expressed interest in receiving additional resources and materials to support their SEL implementation efforts. Additionally, 20% of respondents valued collaboration opportunities with colleagues and experts as their preferred support form. The remaining 15% were either uncertain about what support they needed or provided no response to this question.

Table 5

Implementation Challenges

Challenge type	Percentage of respondents
Time management and curriculum integration	30%
Student engagement and buy-in	25%
Lack of knowledge or training	25%
No anticipated challenges	20%

Desired Support

When asked about desired support types (Table), educators expressed clear preferences, with 40% prioritizing training and professional development opportunities. Resources and materials ranked second at 25%, while 20% of respondents valued collaborative learning with colleagues. The remaining 15% were uncertain about their support needs or did not respond.

Table 6

Desired Support Types

Support type	Percentage of respondents
Training and professional development	40%
Resources and materials	25%
Collaboration opportunities	20%
Uncertain or no response	15%

Gaps

The survey results revealed two significant gaps that require attention for successful SEL implementation. First, a substantial training and knowledge gap exists, with 90% of respondents reporting no or minimal knowledge of CASEL Training and 70% lacking familiarity with Illinois SEL Standards. This widespread knowledge deficit highlights a critical need for foundational professional development explicitly focused on these essential frameworks. Second, an interesting capability versus confidence gap emerged from the data. While 60% of respondents believe they could implement SEL

with proper support (time, resources, and training), their actual confidence levels follow a more distributed pattern across the confidence spectrum. This discrepancy suggests that merely providing resources and training opportunities may prove insufficient; educators also need targeted confidence-building experiences that address their specific uncertainties about implementation. These findings suggest that while teachers generally recognize the value of SEL implementation, they require substantial support in training, resources, and structural considerations to integrate SEL practices into their classrooms with fidelity (CASEL, 2023; Greenberg, 2023; Lawson et al., 2020). Addressing the gaps together would likely yield the most significant improvements in successful SEL integration. Building upon these identified needs, the study proceeded to implement targeted interventions and collect comprehensive data to measure effectiveness.

Professional Development Structure

Based on the pre-implementation survey findings, a three-phase professional development and instructional coaching plan was developed to gradually transition teachers from intensive support to independent implementation (see Appendix C). This scaffolded approach aligns with research-based recommendations that effective SEL instructional coaching should include initial intensive training followed by ongoing support and opportunities for reflection (Neufeld., 2025). The structure begins with foundational knowledge building, progresses through collaborative refinement, and culminates in autonomous practice providing teachers with the skills and confidence needed for sustainable SEL integration in their classrooms.

Table 7*Professional Development and Coaching Plan*

8-week plan
<p>Weeks 1–3: Intensive support</p> <p>Introduction to SEL, the CASEL framework, and Illinois SEL Standards. Workshops on SEL competencies and lesson planning. Observations and modeling.</p> <p>Weeks 4–5: Intermittent support</p> <p>Check-in meetings and peer observations. PLCs focused on specific SEL competencies. Adjustments to SEL strategies based on feedback.</p> <p>Weeks 6–8: On-demand support</p> <p>Independent implementation with access to the researcher for consultations. Peer mentoring and final review of SEL progress.</p>

Phase 1: Intensive Support (Weeks 1–3)

The professional development model was organized three Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Each PLC was composed of three to four teachers, grouped according to their availability and subject area alignment when possible. The three PLCs met weekly for 45-minute sessions over the course of the eight-week intervention. These sessions provided a structured space for collaborative planning, reflection, and review of SEL strategies. PLC configurations were intentionally designed to foster cross-curricular collaboration while maintaining enough commonality to allow for shared instructional practices. One SEL instructional coach rotated between PLCs, facilitating discussions, modeling SEL integration, and guiding teachers through structured reflection activities.

This multi-tiered configuration combining whole-group training, small group PLC collaboration, and individualized coaching allowed the professional development to be tailored to teachers' specific classroom needs while maintaining cohesion across the

broader school initiative. This structure also aligned with research-supported strategies for effective adult learning and sustainable SEL implementation (CASEL, 2020).

Week 1 began with foundational orientation sessions introducing SEL principles, the CASEL framework and state SEL standards (see Appendix C). Activities included workshops exploring the five CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). The week concluded with interactive activities and role-playing scenarios for practicing SEL techniques.

Week 2 emphasized curriculum integration (see Appendix C). Teachers designed lessons incorporating SEL competencies, such as fostering self-awareness through exercises and enhancing social awareness through group discussions. Collaborative reviews of lesson plan provided peer and expert feedback to refine instructional strategies.

During Week 3, teachers transitioned into classroom implementation through small-group, hands-on sessions designed to build confidence and deepen understanding. The week began with observation and modeling sessions, where teachers worked in small cohorts to observe expert practitioners and discuss practical strategies in real-time. These sessions provided an intimate setting for targeted questions and collaborative learning.

Following the observations, teachers engaged in co-teaching sessions that paired them with mentors or instructional coaches. These small-group environments allowed participants to practice new techniques with immediate, personalized feedback actively. This structure promoted a supportive atmosphere for skill-building and experimentation.

The week concluded with reflective sessions held in small groups, where teachers shared their implementation experiences, exchanged insights, and discussed challenges encountered. These discussions encouraged peer-to-peer learning and helped foster a professional community focused on continuous improvement.

Phase 2: Intermittent Support (Weeks 4–5)

Snow cancellations eliminated three days from this phase, requiring adjustments to the schedule. The most impactful components were prioritized while maintaining research integrity.

Week 4 promoted teacher autonomy while maintaining structured support. Check-in meetings addressed challenges and provided guidance, while condensed peer observation sessions allowed teachers to learn from each other's SEL practices. The team integrated collaborative meetings to share best practices during peer observation debriefs.

Week 5 deepened SEL practices through a streamlined approach. Professional learning communities focused on specific competencies like self-management techniques and fostering classroom respect. Targeted workshops addressed teacher-identified implementation needs while blending independent work with optional coaching supported lesson refinement. Classroom observations were also completed.

Phase 3: On-Demand Support (Weeks 6–8)

Week 6 focused on reflection and adjustment, with structured sessions to assess progress and adapt strategies based on teacher feedback. PLC meetings fostered collaborative problem-solving for everyday challenges. Data collection integrity was preserved by consistently applying standardized protocols across all implementation phases. All instruments, including observation rubrics and interview guides, were used

uniformly by trained facilitators to minimize variability (see Appendix C). Clear documentation procedures ensured accuracy; the researcher stored data and ensured security. Regular check-ins with data collectors ensured adherence to procedures, while any deviations due to timeline adjustments were recorded and accounted for during analysis to maintain transparency and reliability.

During Week 7, teachers independently implemented SEL practices while maintaining access to experts for consultations through weekly drop-in sessions. Final classroom observations were also completed.

Week 8 supported teachers who requested additional assistance, ensuring continuity and personalized guidance. Peer mentoring and collaboration through informal discussion groups fostered the sharing of successes and challenges. An informal discussion group is a loosely structured gathering of educators who come together voluntarily to share ideas, challenges, and reflections in a conversational setting without a predefined agenda or formal facilitation (Swain & King, 2022). Unlike Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are organized, goal-oriented, and typically guided by specific outcomes or protocols, informal discussion groups are more spontaneous and flexible, fostering open dialogue and peer support (Antinluoma et al., 2018). This program's informal discussions occurred organically during breaks, transitions between sessions, or after structured activities. These conversations often took place in small groups and were initiated by participants seeking to connect ideas or share practical experiences. While not part of the official schedule, these moments played a valuable role in building trust, strengthening collaboration, and deepening the learning during formal sessions.

The program concluded with a final review, ensuring teachers felt confident to sustain SEL practices beyond the program. Following the implementation of the professional development structure, the researcher conducted a final review to assess the effectiveness of the professional development. This final review included structured reflection sessions, post-program surveys, and debrief meetings facilitated by SEL coaches. Teachers reflected on their growth, shared implementation outcomes, and identified areas for continued support. The review also incorporated classroom observation data and feedback collected throughout the program to triangulate findings. These elements provided insight into the program's impact and guided future planning and sustainability efforts. The review process served as both a summative assessment and an opportunity for participants to celebrate progress and reinforce their commitment to ongoing SEL integration.

Testing Phase

The prototype was evaluated using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. This comprehensive methodology allowed for triangulation of findings, providing a more complete understanding of the prototype's effectiveness and areas for improvement. The evaluation focused on assessing changes in teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and implementation practices resulting from the professional development and instructional coaching intervention.

Data Collection Methods and Rationale

The researcher employed multiple data collection methods to triangulate findings and enhance validity:

1. **Pre- and Post-Implementation Surveys.** Likert-scale surveys were administered to measure changes in teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and implementation practices. This quantitative approach provided measurable data points to assess the effectiveness of the professional development program (see Appendix E).
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews.** Follow-up interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes were conducted with participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of the professional development program. These interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants and provided rich qualitative data to contextualize survey findings (see Appendix E).
3. **Classroom Observations.** The researcher conducted structured observations at three strategic points (Week 3, Week 5, and Week 7) using a validated 20-item instrument aligned with CASEL competencies. This observational data provided objective evidence of implementation practices beyond self-reported measures (see Appendix C).
4. **Empathy Mapping.** This visual tool captured teachers' thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding SEL implementation, providing foundational data for the design thinking process (see Appendix A).

This comprehensive mixed-methods approach was selected to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions, combining the statistical rigor of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry.

Before the prototype was put into action, the researcher gathered baseline data through a pre-implementation survey. This survey, designed to assess teachers' readiness

and current Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation practices, used a descriptive survey methodology with Likert-scale items. The researcher collected data on teachers' current implementation approaches, knowledge levels across SEL domains, support needs, implementation capabilities, confidence levels, anticipated challenges, and desired support types. This comprehensive assessment formed the solid foundation for designing targeted professional development and implementation strategies for the prototype.

Data Analysis and Results Quantitative Analysis

Following the intervention, post-implementation survey data was collected from the remaining educators (N = 7) to evaluate the impact of professional development and coaching on SEL implementation (see Appendix F). The post-implementation survey comprised six primary items using 4-point and 5-point Likert scales to assess changes in understanding, comfort levels, perceived helpfulness of the professional development, and self-reported knowledge of specific SEL strategies. Open-ended questions explored sustainability plans and additional support needs. To maintain confidentiality, participants' responses were identified using anonymous codes (BR157, T980, M514, H157, C157, J157, W157). In addition to survey data, naturalistic classroom observations provided objective evidence of implementation practices.

After administering a pre-implementation survey, the researcher analyzed the post-implementation data using descriptive statistics. To ensure statistical validity, the researcher first examined the normality of the data distribution using a Shapiro-Wilk test on both pre-test and post-test scores. After establishing the distribution characteristics, the researcher conducted a paired samples t-test to determine statistically significant

differences between pre-test and post-test knowledge scores. The researcher calculated Cohen's d to quantify the significance of these differences beyond statistical significance and assess the effect's size. The researcher performed statistical analysis using SPSS version 27 software.

Qualitative Analysis

For qualitative data analysis, the researcher employed thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This process began with data familiarization, where the researcher thoroughly reviewed interview transcripts, observation notes, and open-ended survey responses multiple times to gain an intimate understanding of their content. The researcher then generated initial codes by identifying meaningful text segments relevant to the research questions. Following initial coding, the researcher searched for potential themes by examining code relationships and patterns. These preliminary themes were then reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness, ensuring they accurately represented the data. The researcher created thematic maps during this phase to visualize relationships between themes and subthemes. The themes were subsequently defined and named to capture their essence and relationship to the research questions. Several strategies were employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the qualitative analysis. First, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Second, the researcher implemented analyst triangulation through collaboration with a colleague experienced in qualitative research who independently coded a subset of the data. The researcher and the collaborating colleague discussed discrepancies in coding until they reached a consensus.

The researcher compared findings across multiple data sources (interviews, observations, and survey responses) to achieve data triangulation. In addition, the researcher analyzed the qualitative data using NVivo 12 software to organize, code, and map thematic patterns. This systematic approach ensured that the qualitative findings were rigorous, transparent, and reflective of participants' experiences while complementing the quantitative results to understand the research questions comprehensively.

Outlier Analysis

Prior to interpreting the statistical results, the researcher conducted outlier analysis to ensure robust findings. To enhance the robustness of the findings, a comprehensive outlier analysis was conducted on both pre-test and post-test data using established statistical methods.

Outlier Detection Procedure

For this study, a multi-method approach to outlier detection was employed. Data for each knowledge domain and self-efficacy measure was first visualized using box plots in SPSS 27, where points plotted beyond the whiskers (extending to 1.5 times the interquartile range) were flagged for further examination. Standardized z-scores were then computed for each observation using the formula $Z = (X - \mu) / \sigma$, where X represents the individual score, μ represents the mean, and σ represents the standard deviation. Following conventional statistical practice, observations with absolute z-scores exceeding 2.5 were identified as potential outliers. As a supplementary measure, the interquartile range (IQR) was calculated as $Q3 - Q1$, with values falling outside the range $[Q1 - 1.5 \times IQR, Q3 + 1.5 \times IQR]$ identified as potential outliers. These data screening procedures

were performed using SPSS 27 through the Explore function (Analyze → Descriptive Statistics → Explore), with box plots and outlier identification selected. Z-scores were computed using the Descriptive function with the save standardized values option selected.

Outlier Analysis Results

The outlier analysis revealed two noteworthy cases:

Knowledge Domain Outlier

In the pre-test measure for "Illinois SEL Standards" knowledge, participant C157 scored 4.0 on the 4-point scale, resulting in a z-score of 2.7. This exceeded our threshold of ± 2.5 standard deviations from the mean, suggesting substantially higher initial knowledge than other participants in this domain.

Self-Efficacy Outlier

In the pre-test confidence measures, participant BR157 demonstrated notably lower initial self-efficacy score = 1, $z = -2.6$ compared to peers. Interestingly, this same participant showed above-average gains in the post-test score = 4, $z = 1.2$, representing the largest improvement in the sample.

Treatment of Outliers and Sensitivity Analysis

Given the small sample size ($N = 7$) following attrition, removing outliers would further compromise statistical power. Therefore, a sensitivity analysis approach was implemented to assess the impact of these outliers on the statistical conclusions. Two parallel analyses were conducted: the primary analysis using paired-samples t-tests including all participants as reported in Tables 9 and 10, and a sensitivity analysis employing two approaches analysis with outliers excluded to determine if results

remained consistent, and non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (which are less sensitive to outliers) conducted using SPSS (Analyze → Nonparametric Tests → Related Samples). The sensitivity analysis revealed that excluding the identified outliers did not substantially alter the statistical significance or direction of the findings. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test for overall knowledge showed significant improvement ($Z = -2.371$, $p = .018$), consistent with the parametric test results. Similarly, the test for overall self-efficacy yielded significant results ($Z = -2.264$, $p = .024$), confirming the robustness of our findings despite the presence of outliers.

Contextualizing Outliers Through Qualitative Data

Qualitative data provided valuable context for understanding these statistical outliers. Follow-up interviews revealed that participant C157 had prior exposure to Illinois SEL standards through a district-level initiative before our intervention, explaining their higher baseline knowledge. During the interview, C157 stated: "I had been part of a district training on SEL standards last year, but this professional development helped me translate that knowledge into practical classroom applications." Conversely, participant BR157's dramatic improvement in self-efficacy aligns with their interview responses, where they described significant initial apprehension followed by transformative experiences during the coaching phase: "At first, I felt completely overwhelmed by the idea of implementing SEL, I didn't even know where to start. The individualized coaching sessions were game-changers for me. Having someone observe my teaching and provide specific, constructive feedback made all the difference in my confidence."

Implications for Data Interpretation

Rather than compromising our findings, these outliers provide instructive insights into differential intervention effects based on teachers' prior knowledge and baseline confidence levels. The presence of these outliers underscores the value of our mixed-methods approach while quantitative measures detected overall significant improvements, qualitative data illuminated the varied pathways through which different teachers experienced growth. These findings suggest that our professional development intervention benefited both teachers with minimal prior exposure to SEL frameworks and those with some foundational knowledge, though potentially through different mechanisms. Future research with larger samples could explore whether teacher characteristics and prior knowledge systematically moderate professional development outcomes in SEL implementation. The outlier analysis ultimately strengthens confidence in our conclusion that professional development and instructional coaching positively influenced teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing SEL competencies, as the results remain robust even when accounting for unusual data patterns.

Results

RQ1: To what extent does professional development and instructional coaching result in significant changes in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom?

Evolution of Understanding and Implementation of SEL

The researcher collected survey data from seven participants to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Most participants 71.4%, n = 5 reported their understanding had "Moderately Evolved," while

28.6% (n = 2) indicated "Slight Evolution." No participants selected "Not at All" or "Significantly Evolved" categories.

Participants demonstrated varied confidence levels in implementing SEL strategies. Equal proportions 28.6%, n = 2 each reported feeling "Slightly Confident," "Somewhat Confident," and "Very Confident." One participant 14.3% expressed being "Not at All Confident."

The professional development program was rated as "Slightly Helpful" by 42.9% (n = 3) and "Moderately Helpful" by an equal percentage 42.9%, n = 3. Only one participant 14.3% considered it "Very Helpful," with no one selecting "Not at All Helpful."

Self-Reported Knowledge Across SEL Implementation Strategies

Below is a displays participants' self-reported knowledge levels across specific SEL implementation strategies. Most participants reported "Minimal Knowledge" in CASEL Training 71.4%, Illinois SEL Standards 57.1%, and Instructional Coaching 57.1%. Teacher Collaboration emerged as the area with highest expertise, with 57.9% reporting "Adequate Knowledge" and 14.1% indicating "Superior Knowledge" (Table 8).

Table 8

Self-Reported Knowledge/Expertise in Implementing SEL Strategies

Strategy	Not at all helpful	Minimal knowledge	Adequate knowledge	Superior knowledge	Mode
CASEL training	0.0%	71.4%	28.6%	0.0%	Minimal
Illinois SEL standards	0.0%	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	Minimal

Strategy	Not at all helpful	Minimal knowledge	Adequate knowledge	Superior knowledge	Mode
Instructional coaching	0.0%	57.1%	14.3%	28.6%	Minimal
Interventions	0.0%	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%	Minimal/Adequate
Teacher collaboration	0.0%	28.0%	57.9%	14.1%	Adequate

Note. $N = 7$. Percentages are based on participant self-reports. Mode reflects the most frequently selected knowledge level per strategy.

Pre-Post Knowledge Changes

Table 9 presents the results of paired-samples t-tests comparing pre- and post-intervention knowledge levels across five key SEL domains. Statistically significant improvements were observed across all domains, with the greatest gains reported in CASEL Training ($M_1 = 1.50$, $SD = 0.68$; $M_2 = 2.29$, $SD = 0.49$), $t(6) = 3.96$, $p = .004$, $d = 1.25$. These findings indicate a large effect and support the intervention's effectiveness in enhancing teachers' SEL-related knowledge. Full results are detailed in Table 9.

Table 9

Changes in Knowledge Levels Pre to Post-Intervention

Knowledge domain	Pre-test mean \pm SD	Post-test mean \pm SD	Mean difference	t-value	p-value	Effect size (Cohen's d)
CASEL training	1.50 \pm 0.68	2.29 \pm 0.49	0.79	3.96	.004**	1.25
Illinois SEL standards	2.00 \pm 1.00	2.43 \pm 0.53	0.43	2.57	.031*	0.81
Coaching expertise	2.30 \pm 0.91	2.71 \pm 0.91	0.41	2.14	.047*	0.68
SEL intervention competency	2.10 \pm 0.85	2.71 \pm 0.73	0.61	2.79	.024*	0.88
Teacher collaborations	2.50 \pm 1.13	3.00 \pm 0.82	0.50	2.31	.042*	0.73

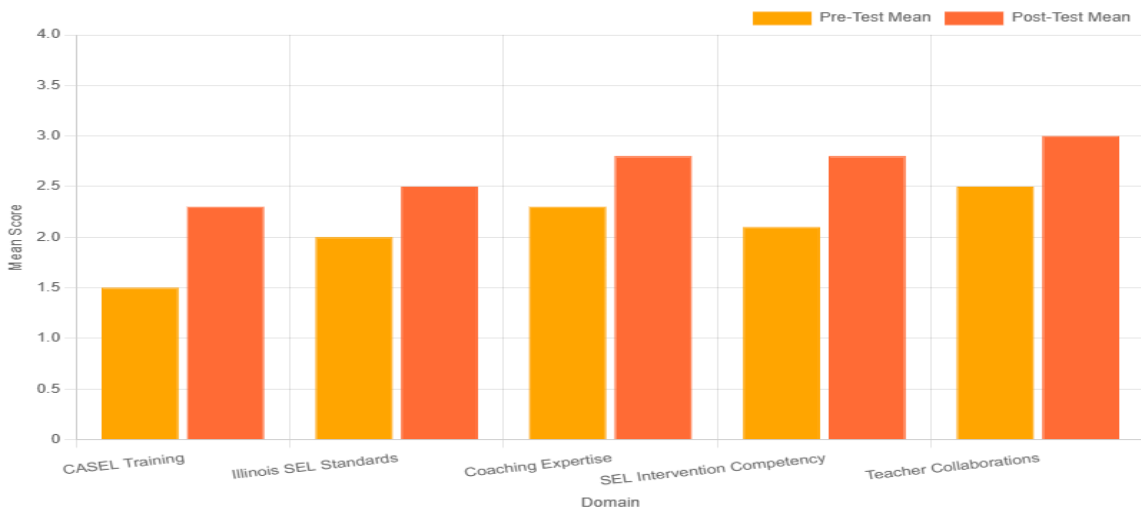
Knowledge domain	Pre-test mean \pm SD	Post-test mean \pm SD	Mean difference	t-value	p-value	Effect size (Cohen's d)
Overall knowledge	2.08 \pm 0.76	2.63 \pm 0.65	0.55	3.48	.007**	1.10

Note. $N = 7$. Scores range from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Superior knowledge). $p < .05$, $p < .01$.

To complement these findings, Figure 2 provides a visual comparison of pre- and post-intervention knowledge means, illustrating the relative magnitude of gains across domains.

Figure 2

Pre/Post Knowledge Scores Across Domains



The analysis indicated statistically significant improvements in all knowledge domains with the largest gains observed in CASEL Training knowledge ($d = 1.25$).

Self-Efficacy Improvements

Teachers’ self-efficacy in implementing SEL also improved significantly following the intervention. As shown in Table 10, all three self-efficacy measures demonstrated statistically significant changes. The most notable improvement was in

perceived implementation ability ($M_1 = 2.40, SD = 0.96; M_2 = 3.14, SD = 0.69$), $t(6) = 3.35, p = .012, d = 1.06$. The overall self-efficacy composite score increased from 2.43 to 3.14 ($p = .007, d = 1.10$), indicating a large effect.

Table 10

Changes in Self-Efficacy Measures from Pre to Post Intervention

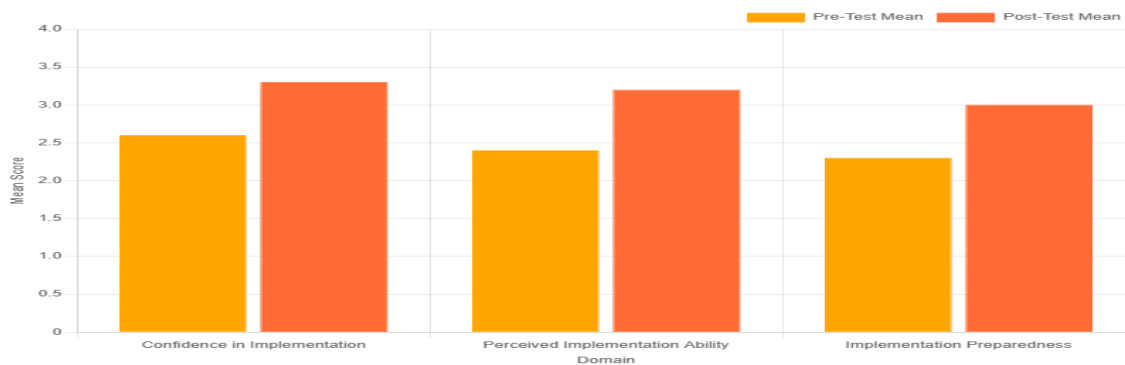
Self-efficacy measure	Pre-test mean \pm SD	Post-test mean \pm SD	Mean difference	t-value	p-value	Effect size (Cohen's d)
Confidence in implementation	2.60 \pm 1.05	3.29 \pm 0.76	0.69	3.12	.017*	0.99
Perceived implementation ability	2.40 \pm 0.96	3.14 \pm 0.69	0.74	3.35	.012*	1.06
Implementation preparedness	2.30 \pm 0.82	3.00 \pm 0.58	0.70	2.95	.022*	0.93
Overall self-efficacy	2.43 \pm 0.89	3.14 \pm 0.66	0.71	3.48	.007**	1.10

Note. $N = 7$. Scores range from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Superior knowledge). $p < .05$. $p < .01$.

Figure 3 visually summarizes these self-efficacy shifts, further underscoring the positive trajectory following professional development and instructional coaching.

Figure 3

Pre-Post Self-Efficacy Scores



Null Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis: Professional development and instructional coaching does not result in statistically significant improvements in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom.

Statistical analysis provided substantial evidence to reject this null hypothesis across multiple domains of knowledge and self-efficacy. For overall self-efficacy measures, a paired samples *t*-test revealed statistically significant improvements from the pre-test ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.89$) to the post-test ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(9) = 3.48$, $p = .007$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.10$). This statistical evidence supports the conclusion that the professional development and instructional coaching intervention positively influenced teachers' self-efficacy in implementing SEL. Similarly, the significant improvements across all knowledge domains (CASEL Training, Illinois SEL Standards, Coaching Expertise, SEL Intervention Competency, and Teacher Collaborations) contradict the null hypothesis. The most significant effect was observed in CASEL Training knowledge ($d = 1.25$), representing a substantial practical significance beyond statistical significance.

Future professional development should specifically target areas with predominantly minimal knowledge ratings while leveraging the relative strength in teacher collaboration as a potential vehicle for peer-based learning. A more practice-oriented approach focusing on skill development rather than conceptual understanding would likely improve implementation confidence and perceived helpfulness. To further explore these recommendations and gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences, qualitative data was analyzed along with quantitative findings.

Research Question Two

RQ2: What supports and resources did teachers identify as necessary for successfully implementing social and emotional learning in the classrooms?

The thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed six major themes that provided insights into the influence of professional development and instructional coaching on teachers' implementation of SEL competencies.

Theme 1: Knowledge Development and Professional Growth

Participants described a progression from theoretical to practical understanding, emphasizing the value of experiential learning opportunities. One participant noted, "I now see myself not just as a teacher but as a supporter of students' human development" (Participant, T980). This theme highlighted how SEL implementation influenced teachers' professional identities beyond simple knowledge acquisition. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that teachers value the importance of supporting students' holistic development and growth as individuals (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Implementation Challenges and Barriers

Time constraints emerged as the primary obstacle among participants. When asked about perceived obstacles to teaching SEL, teachers frequently identify a lack of classroom time as a significant barrier (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). One teacher explained, "Finding consistent time in an already packed curriculum has been my biggest challenge" (Participant, B157). Curriculum integration difficulties varied by subject area, with another teacher observing that integration "works well for language arts but has been harder in math" (Participant, T980). Analysis revealed a clear relationship between knowledge levels and implementation confidence, with one participant explicitly stating,

"In areas where I have adequate knowledge I feel somewhat comfortable implementing strategies. However, in areas where my knowledge is still minimal... my comfort level drops significantly" (Participant, M514). These findings contribute not only to the academic understanding of teachers' familiarity with SEL, their beliefs, training, and the surrounding school culture, but also offer valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and school personnel by highlighting key barriers to effective SEL implementation in schools. (CASEL., 2022).

Theme 3: Resource and Support Needs

Teachers consistently requested structured curriculum materials. One participant specified a need for "templates that include brief daily activities along with weekly deeper lessons" and "script suggestions, student materials, and assessment tools" (Participant, T980). These findings correspond with CASEL's evidence-based research, which showed that including curriculum templates and frameworks helped guide teachers with using SEL standards into lesson plans (2020). Administrative support and structural alignment were deemed essential for sustainability, with another teacher emphasizing the need for "administrators to designate specific time in the schedule for SEL" (C157) (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Implementation Approaches and Strategies

Responses revealed diverse approaches to SEL implementation, from designated activities to curriculum integration. Many teachers described shifting from reactive behavioral management to proactive skill development. One participant noted a shift "from a reactive approach to a more proactive one" focused on "building students' capacity to regulate emotions" (C157). This parallels CASEL research which showed,

when implemented, SEL promoted a shift from reactive to proactive behavior management in the classrooms by allowing teachers to foster students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (2020).

Theme 5: Sustainability and School-Wide Impact

Teacher collaboration emerged as a key factor in sustainable implementation, with one participant stating, "Teacher collaboration is essential for sustainability" (Participant, M514). Research showed systemic support was deemed necessary for long-term success, and many teachers envisioned SEL as potentially transformative at the institutional level (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). One participant expressed concern that without "structural support, SEL will become another educational initiative that fades away" (Participant, B157).

Theme 6: Teacher Personal Growth and Reflection

An unexpected theme was teachers' application of SEL skills to their professional practice. One participant reflected, "I was surprised by how much I needed these skills myself" (BR157). This corresponds with research showing SEL implementation reconnected many teachers with their core educational values, and successful implementers emphasized the importance of an incremental rather than a comprehensive initial approach (Gimbert et al., 2023).

Implementation Supports Factors

The analysis identified five key supports for successful SEL implementation. Results emphasized the need for ongoing professional development beyond initial training to reinforce skills and address emerging challenges. Administrative support with

dedicated implementation time in the school schedule was deemed crucial for sustainability. Additionally, ready-to-use grade-appropriate materials aligned with classroom contexts were essential, along with collaborative learning communities where experiences and strategies could be shared. Finally, one-on-one coaching with constructive feedback was identified as essential for refining SEL implementation approaches and building confidence in practice.

These findings were validated by participant testimonials illustrating the practical impact of these supports. The first testimonial highlighted the critical importance of sustained professional development over time:

We need not just one-and-done workshops but ongoing professional development that helps us adapt as new challenges arise. I've found my implementation improved dramatically when I could attend monthly follow-up sessions where we tackled real classroom situations that emerged after the initial training.

(Participant T256)

Complementing this emphasis on continuous learning, another participant highlighted how administrative backing created the structural foundation necessary for successful SEL implementation:

Our principal carved out a dedicated 20-minute block three times weekly specifically for SEL instruction, and that administrative commitment made all the difference. Without that protected time in the schedule, SEL would just become another thing we are expected to squeeze in somehow. Building it into our day signals its importance and ensures it actually happens. (Participant M514)

Building upon the need for ongoing support and administrative commitment, a third participant demonstrated how practical resources and peer collaboration work synergistically to enhance teaching success:

The combination of ready-made materials and collaborative team meetings transformed my practice. Having grade-appropriate lesson plans that I could immediately implement saved precious planning time, while our bi-weekly SEL teacher community provided a space where I could troubleshoot difficulties and borrow successful strategies from colleagues who were facing similar challenges. (Participant C157).

This is consistent with research showing staff collaboration highlighted how SEL teams can foster stronger connections by intentionally setting aside structured time for relationship-building activities throughout the school year (Brodie, 2021; CASEL, 2020). SEL teams and provided materials can foster stronger relationships among staff by intentionally setting aside time for meaningful connections throughout the school year. Embedding SEL practices into regular staff meetings creates opportunities for colleagues to build rapport, express gratitude, and reflect on their experiences and challenges. Building a sense of connection and community is an ongoing effort (CASEL, 2025).

Classroom Observations

The researcher used a validated 20-item instrument to measure teachers' implementation of social-emotional learning practices in K-12 classrooms (CASEL, 2020). Section 1 of the guide, "Classroom Climate and Practices," which contains 10 observable indicators organized into four categories aligned with CASEL competencies,

was utilized. Each indicator was scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 4 (strong evidence) to 1 (weak or no evidence).

The researcher conducted observations at three strategic points during the 8-week intervention: Week 3 (baseline), Week 5 (mid-point), and Week 7 (final assessment).

Week 3: Baseline Implementation Assessment

The initial observations revealed the emerging implementation of supportive classroom climate strategies. Teacher-student relationships demonstrated varying levels of development, with most educators addressing students by name and using affirming language. However, opportunities for students to share personal perspectives appeared limited. Physical classroom environments contained basic visual representations of SEL concepts, though these were not consistently referenced during instruction. Classroom routines were generally established but lacked explicit connections to SEL competencies.

Week 5: Mid-Point Assessment.

By Week 5, progress in implementation was evident across multiple indicators. Classroom learning environments demonstrated increased responsiveness to student needs, with more frequent positive teacher language observed. Student-to-student interactions showed improvement through structured partner activities that incorporated communication skills practice. A significant development was the increased integration of SEL vocabulary into academic instruction, with teachers referencing self-management and relationship skills more frequently during transitions and academic work periods.

Week 7: Final Implementation Assessment

The Week 7 observations demonstrated substantial progress in creating supportive classroom environments aligned with CASEL indicators. Teachers consistently

demonstrated affirmation of student efforts and responsiveness to individual student needs. Student voice was significantly more prominent, with multiple opportunities for learners to share ideas, perspectives, and concerns. Physical environments reflected comprehensive integration of SEL concepts, with student-created displays demonstrating an understanding of core competencies. Classroom routines explicitly reinforced SEL skills, with teachers regularly referencing specific competencies during transitions and instructional activities.

Cross-Week Analysis

Analysis across the three observation points revealed a progressive implementation trajectory aligned with CASEL's framework for systemic SEL (2025). The most significant growth areas occurred in teacher-student relationships, cultural responsiveness, and integrating SEL objectives into instructional practices. Less developed areas included student-to-student relationship building and consistent opportunities for student reflection on social-emotional development. These findings align with research indicating that effective SEL implementation requires intentionally focusing on classroom climate as a foundation for skill development (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). The progressive improvements observed between Weeks 3 and 7 suggest that targeted professional development and implementation support yielded tangible changes in classroom environments.

Follow-Up Interviews

Building on these insights, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews using the post test questions (see Appendix E), with four available 9-12 grade teacher participants to better understand how professional development affected teachers' SEL

implementation approaches. The semi-structured interviews explored changes in self-efficacy, unexpected implementation challenges, and additional resource needs.

Transformation of SEL Implementation Approaches

When asked about implementation changes resulting from professional development, participants described a shift from reactive to proactive and systematic approaches. This transformation reflected a deeper integration of SEL principles throughout the curriculum rather than treating them as isolated interventions.

Participant 1 articulated this evolution: "Before professional development, I mostly used informal check-ins and occasional social skills lessons when problems arose. I didn't have a systematic approach. Now, I have a structured daily morning meeting where we focus on one SEL competency each week."

Development of Teacher Self-Efficacy

The development of teacher self-efficacy emerged as a significant outcome of the professional development experience. Participants described how structured frameworks, supportive feedback, classroom success, and collaborative opportunities contributed to enhanced confidence in their SEL implementation.

Participant 4 captured this journey: "I started with very little confidence because I didn't have the vocabulary or framework to teach these skills effectively. I knew SEL was important but was not sure if what I was doing was 'right.' This initial hesitation transformed through structured learning experiences and coaching.

Implementation Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Despite professional development, participants encountered several unexpected challenges when implementing SEL strategies. Time constraints emerged as a primary

implementation barrier. Beyond logistical challenges, participants identified student resistance and parental concerns as significant implementation obstacles.

Participant 4 explained: "I also underestimated how much some students would resist talking about emotions particularly some of my boys who had received messages that discussing feelings was not 'cool.'" Communication with stakeholders presented another challenge, as some parents questioned the terminology being used by schools." Caregivers generally support the idea that educational institutions should help students develop practical skills tied to SEL, like setting personal goals and appreciating diverse perspectives. However, they tend to react less positively to vague ideas or terminology, especially when phrases like social and emotional learning are used explicitly (Tyner, 2021). Additionally, the adoption of various SEL programs by schools can influence how teachers perceive parental interest in SEL, which in turn affects the way they communicate with families about the program's implementation. Furthermore, research showed schools that actively integrate SEL into academic instruction, support staff well-being, and incorporate student perspectives are more likely to increase parents' awareness and understanding of SEL implementation (CASEL, 2021).

Resource Needs for Sustainable Implementation

When asked about additional resources that would enhance SEL implementation efforts, participants identified several key areas where supplemental support could strengthen sustainable practice. These included comprehensive SEL curricula aligned with state standards but flexible to adapt to specific student needs, ongoing coaching as new challenges arise, and appropriate assessment tools to measure growth in SEL competencies.

Limitations

This study faced several limitations when interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size (N=7) after attrition from the original (N=10) limits the generalizability of the results to broader educational contexts. While the mixed-methods approach provided rich qualitative data to complement the quantitative findings, the statistical power of the analysis was constrained by the limited number of participants. Time constraints presented another significant limitation. The 8-week implementation period, while sufficient to observe initial changes, may not have allowed for observing the long-term sustainability of SEL implementation. Additionally, the snow cancellations during Phase two necessitated schedule adjustments that compressed some aspects of the professional development sequence, potentially affecting the implementation depth. The reliance on self-reported data for assessing knowledge and confidence levels introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where participants may have reported more positive perceptions than they experienced. While classroom observations provided some objective measures, a more comprehensive assessment system might have strengthened the validity of the findings. As an improvement science researcher, the researcher acknowledges potential biases that may have influenced this study. The researcher's professional background in SEL and belief in its importance could have affected how the researcher interpreted the qualitative data. To mitigate this, the researcher utilized member checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants and incorporating their feedback. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process to document potential biases and their influence on data collection and analysis decisions.

Furthermore, the researcher's dual role as researcher and professional development provider may have influenced participant responses, particularly during interviews. Participants might have hesitated to express critical viewpoints about the professional development they received, knowing the researcher had designed and implemented it. To address this concern, the researcher emphasized the importance of honest feedback for improving future professional development initiatives and assured participants that their responses would not affect our professional relationship.

Integration of Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive picture of professional development's impact on SEL implementation, and the support needed for success. The quantitative results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in knowledge and self-efficacy following professional development. At the same time, the qualitative findings illuminated the complex mechanisms through which these improvements had occurred and the multi-level supports required for sustainable implementation.

Key insights from this integrated analysis included:

- Professional development positively influenced teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy, but the degree of impact varied across individuals and knowledge domains.
- Time constraints represented the most significant barrier to implementation, suggesting structural changes might have been as important as individual training. Greenberg (2023) stated that teachers needed training and support to deliver SEL effectively.

- Different teachers required different types of support based on their implementation stage, subject area, and personal confidence levels.
- Sustainable implementation required coordinated support across individual, classroom, school, and system levels.
- The relationship between knowledge and confidence appeared bidirectional, with increased knowledge enhancing confidence and facilitating implementation that further built knowledge.

Summary

The mixed-methods analysis revealed complementary findings that strengthened the understanding of the influence of professional development on SEL implementation. Consistency appeared across data sources, with quantitative improvements in self-efficacy aligning with qualitative reports of increased confidence. Both data sources indicated a similar progression of teacher development throughout the 8-week intervention, suggesting the validity of the findings across methodological approaches. The null hypothesis was rejected, as professional development and coaching significantly enhanced teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing SEL competencies. These findings suggested that structured, comprehensive professional development, including theoretical foundations and practical application opportunities, effectively supported teachers in implementing SEL in classrooms. This mixed-methods study demonstrated the significant impact of comprehensive professional development and coaching on teachers' ability to implement social-emotional learning in high school classrooms. The design thinking framework provided a structured yet flexible approach to addressing the problem of practice, ensuring solutions remained grounded in authentic

user needs. The statistically significant improvements in teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy, coupled with qualitative insights into implementation experiences, provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the approach. These results suggest important implications for educational practice.

Schools and districts seeking to implement SEL should invest in comprehensive professional development combining knowledge-building and ongoing coaching support. Additionally, addressing structural barriers, such as time constraints and curriculum integration challenges is as important as building individual teacher capacity. Chapter Four will build upon these findings by discussing their broader implications for educational practice, policy, and research. It will explore how these results align with existing literature, consider the limitations of the study, and provide recommendations for schools and districts seeking to implement social-emotional learning effectively in high school settings. Additionally, Chapter Four will address the sustainability of SEL implementation beyond the intervention period and suggest directions for future research that could further enhance our understanding of effective SEL professional development and implementation.

Chapter Four: Critical Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Critical Analysis

This study examined the effectiveness of professional development and instructional coaching as interventions to enhance teacher self-efficacy in the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) within an urban high school context. Employing a mixed-methods, design-based research approach, the investigation integrated quantitative and qualitative analyses to capture both the measurable impact of the intervention and the nuanced perspectives of participating educators. This dual lens facilitated a robust understanding of how targeted professional learning and sustained coaching influenced teacher confidence, instructional practice, and the overall integration of SEL competencies. The following sections present a critical synthesis of these findings, moving beyond descriptive reporting to interpret their significance within the broader context of SEL implementation research and practice.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Two primary research questions guided this study:

RQ1: To what extent does professional development and coaching result in significant changes in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom?

Null Hypothesis: Professional development and coaching do not result in statistically significant improvements in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning competencies in the classroom.

RQ 2: What supports and resources do teachers identify as necessary for successful implementation of social and emotional learning in their classrooms?

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative findings indicated statistically significant improvements in teachers' self-reported knowledge and self-efficacy regarding the implementation of SEL. Results from paired-sample *t*-tests demonstrated increased confidence among educators in their ability to deliver SEL competencies consistent with the CASEL framework, with large effect sizes observed in several domains. The most pronounced growth in self-efficacy occurred in relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management, suggesting the intervention effectively addressed key areas of teacher competency identified in prior research (Mulvihill, 2025; Peddigrew, et al., 2022). These outcomes are consistent with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes mastery experiences and social persuasion both of which were facilitated through targeted coaching as mechanisms for enhancing educator confidence. The findings further suggest that sustained, structured professional development can serve as a catalyst for advancing SEL integration in classroom practice, offering implications for both instructional design and district-level policy. Notably, the themes emerging from the qualitative data echoed these quantitative gains, with teachers describing greater confidence, more intentional SEL integration, and stronger peer collaboration as direct outcomes of the intervention.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews reinforced the quantitative results, offering insight into how increased self-efficacy translated into practical instructional changes. Teachers consistently described the value of ongoing professional development, which provided continuous learning opportunities and supported sustained growth and adaptability. They highlighted the importance of strong administrative

support, noting that leadership commitment and strategic adjustments to scheduling created an environment conducive to effective SEL implementation. Access to ready-to-use, grade-appropriate materials further enhanced instructional practice by reducing preparation time and enabling seamless integration of SEL into daily lessons.

Collaborative learning communities emerged as another critical support, fostering shared problem-solving, peer exchange, and collective efficacy. Additionally, individualized coaching played a pivotal role in addressing specific instructional needs, refining SEL delivery, and bolstering teacher confidence. Together, these supports not only corroborated the statistical evidence of growth but also provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which the intervention enhanced educators' capacity to implement SEL with fidelity and impact.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that the intervention not only produced measurable gains in teachers' SEL knowledge and self-efficacy but also fostered the professional conditions necessary for sustaining those gains. The alignment between statistical improvements and teachers' reported experiences suggests that targeted professional development, collaborative learning structures, and individualized coaching function synergistically to enhance both the confidence and the capacity required for high-quality SEL implementation.

Results

The intervention began with ten high school teachers, of whom seven completed the full professional development and coaching program along with both pre- and post-intervention surveys. Analyses of these participants revealed significant improvements in teacher knowledge across all five domains of SEL. The greatest gains were observed in

the area focused on the CASEL framework, indicating that this component of the training was especially impactful. Overall, teachers demonstrated increased understanding of SEL concepts following the intervention. In addition to gains in knowledge, teachers also showed marked improvements in their self-efficacy related to SEL implementation. They reported feeling more confident and capable in applying SEL strategies in their classrooms. These findings suggest that the professional development and instructional coaching meaningfully enhanced both teachers' SEL knowledge and their confidence in implementing SEL practices, supporting the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

Integration of Mixed Methods Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a holistic understanding of how professional development and instructional coaching impacted teachers' SEL implementation. Quantitative results demonstrated statistically significant gains in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy. These findings answered RQ1, confirming that targeted professional learning experiences produced measurable improvement.

Qualitative findings added essential nuance to these statistical results. While the surveys showed overall improvement, interviews revealed variation in how confidently and consistently teachers implemented SEL strategies. For example, although overall self-efficacy increased, some teachers still expressed hesitation when addressing emotionally charged classroom situations. This nuance illustrates how improvements in knowledge do not automatically translate into mastery of practice, particularly when teachers face systemic barriers, such as time constraints or cultural resistance.

Mixed-methods integration also illuminated the supports teachers found most beneficial. While surveys showed a general appreciation for coaching and resources, interviews revealed that ongoing support, collaborative problem-solving, and ready-to-use materials were critical for sustained implementation. This synthesis addressed RQ2 by identifying the specific types of support and resources teachers required.

The integrated analysis confirms professional development alone is not sufficient for successful SEL implementation without the presence of contextual supports that address both technical elements, such as skills and materials, and adaptive factors, including beliefs and school culture. The study identified five key supports essential for sustaining SEL efforts over time. First, ongoing professional development was highlighted by teachers as vital to maintaining continuous learning and growth. Second, administrative support, including leadership commitment and adjustments to schedules, played a crucial role in creating an enabling environment. Third, the availability of ready-to-use, grade-appropriate materials helped streamline lesson planning and instructional delivery. Fourth, collaborative teacher learning communities fostered peer problem-solving and the sharing of effective strategies. Lastly, individualized coaching emerged as a critical support for refining instructional practices and building teacher confidence in SEL delivery.

Literature supported the critical factors identified by teachers as essential for successful SEL implementation. Ongoing professional development emerged as a foundational element, with research highlighting that sustained, job-embedded training particularly when it includes modeling, guided rehearsal, and timely feedback is significantly more effective than isolated workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017;

Sims et al., 2023). This form of continuous learning contributes to both instructional quality and long-term teacher growth. In addition, administrative support was found to be a key enabling condition. Leadership commitment, including flexibility with scheduling and resource allocation, plays a pivotal role in fostering a school culture that prioritizes social-emotional learning (Filer, 2024). While less explicitly emphasized, the availability of ready-to-use, grade-appropriate materials also support effective implementation by easing planning demands and ensuring developmental alignment (CASEL, 2022; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Moreover, collaborative teacher learning communities, such as PLCs, were shown to enhance collective problem-solving and facilitate the sharing of effective instructional strategies. These communities support reflective practice and build both individual and collective teacher efficacy (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). Finally, individualized coaching was identified as one of the most impactful supports for teachers. Coaching provides personalized, classroom-based guidance that improves self-efficacy and helps refine instructional delivery, especially when aligned with specific SEL competencies (Clark et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2018). Together, these components form a comprehensive framework of support that significantly enhances SEL integration in educational settings.

Resource Needs and Support Systems

Building on the integrated findings, participants provided detailed accounts of how the identified supports operated in practice and where significant gaps persisted. Teachers emphasized that even with increased knowledge and self-efficacy, successful SEL implementation required resources that were both accessible and contextually relevant. High-quality materials explicitly aligned with state standards and adaptable to

diverse classroom contexts were viewed as critical, particularly when they reduced preparation demands and allowed SEL strategies to be embedded seamlessly within academic instruction. Participants also underscored the importance of structures that sustained professional learning over time, fostered peer collaboration, and ensured consistent instructional approaches across classrooms. These accounts illustrate that resource availability and well-designed support systems were not supplementary but integral to translating training into lasting, high-fidelity SEL practice.

The Design Thinking Framework

The design thinking framework proved to be a valuable structure for developing and refining the professional development intervention. Each stage contributed meaningfully:

- **Empathy Phase:** Interviews and initial surveys uncovered teachers' authentic frustrations and needs, such as lacking structured SEL frameworks and struggling with inconsistent school-wide support.
- **Define Phase:** These insights were synthesized into clear problem statements that reframed the issue from "teachers need more SEL training" to "teachers require integrated, ongoing support systems for effective SEL implementation."
- **Ideate Phase:** The intervention design included workshops, coaching, and collaborative learning communities. However, this phase could have been improved by incorporating the voices of administrators and parents, whose perspectives were underrepresented.
- **Prototype and Test Phases:** The intervention was iteratively refined through surveys and interviews, embodying the test phase of the design thinking model.

Despite its success, the design thinking process was limited by the absence of key system-level stakeholders in early design phases. Future interventions should expand the empathy and ideation phases to involve district leaders and families to address broader systemic barriers.

In comparison to more linear professional development models, design thinking enabled responsive, teacher-centered solutions that adapted to challenges in real time. However, it required sustained stakeholder engagement, a challenge for short-term interventions.

Limitations of the Intervention

While the intervention improved teacher capacity, it did not fully address structural barriers, such as time constraints and inconsistent administrative support. Future iterations should include school leaders as active participants in professional development, rather than peripheral supporters. One of the most pronounced challenges was the lack of sufficient time for SEL planning, collaboration, and implementation. Teachers repeatedly noted that despite their enthusiasm, the demands of academic instruction, grading, and non-instructional duties left minimal space for consistent SEL integration. As emphasized in the empathy and define phases (see Chapter Three), time constraints emerged as a dominant barrier to effective SEL implementation. These findings echo the existing literature, where time scarcity is frequently cited as a critical obstacle to SEL success (CASEL, 2025; Lawson et al., 2020).

Moreover, while some administrative leaders expressed initial support, the level of engagement was inconsistent throughout the intervention. Administrators were not actively involved in the professional development sessions, which limited their

understanding of the instructional shifts required for successful SEL integration. Research suggests that leadership commitment and modeling are essential for sustaining SEL implementation, particularly when it comes to aligning schedules, policies, and professional expectations with SEL priorities (Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Neufeld, 2025). Without direct administrator participation, teachers lacked the necessary top-down support to embed SEL practices within the broader school culture. The professional development model could be significantly strengthened by embedding administrators into training, thus allowing them to co-plan logistics, observe implementation, and reinforce SEL goals during faculty meetings and evaluations.

In addition to time and leadership challenges, logistical disruptions, such as snow days further hindered program continuity. Three days of instruction were lost during the intermittent support phase, compressing an already tight implementation schedule and reducing opportunities for classroom modeling and peer observation (see Chapter Three). While the coaching framework attempted to mitigate this loss by offering flexible support, the time-sensitive nature of school calendars and unanticipated disruptions highlighted the importance of contingency planning in future models.

Another limitation was the variability in teachers' baseline knowledge and readiness. Survey results revealed wide disparities in familiarity with CASEL frameworks and Illinois SEL Standards. Despite coaching efforts, some teachers continued to feel underprepared or lacked confidence to implement SEL with fidelity. This misalignment between professional development content and participants' starting points reflects the need for differentiated support structures (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

Lastly, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias. Teachers who opted into the intervention were likely more motivated or predisposed toward SEL integration. This raises concerns about scalability and sustainability in more diverse faculty groups. Future research should explore whole-staff implementation strategies and investigate how SEL programming can be integrated into mandatory schoolwide initiatives to avoid dependency on teacher goodwill alone.

In future iterations, a more robust model would integrate structured time within the school day dedicated to SEL practices, and provide tiered professional development pathways tailored to varying levels of teacher readiness. Including flexible scheduling options, virtual coaching supports, and clear accountability measures could also buffer the impact of unforeseen disruptions. Addressing these limitations proactively will be essential for scaling and sustaining SEL implementation across secondary education settings.

Leadership Implications and Organizational Change

Transformational Leadership and SEL Integration

Transformational leadership is characterized by leaders who inspire and motivate their staff through a shared vision, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and the modeling of high expectations (Bass, 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Within the context of this study, transformational leadership emerged as essential for embedding SEL into school culture. Rather than treating SEL as a peripheral initiative, transformational leaders elevate it as a core component of teaching and learning.

Modeling SEL in Leadership Practice

Recent scholars (Billera, 2025; Jose et al., 2025) emphasize that leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence, model inclusivity, and actively engage in SEL initiatives create environments where teachers feel supported and empowered. For example, Jose (2025) illustrates that leaders can normalize healthy coping strategies by openly acknowledging stress and sharing constructive ways of managing it. Similarly, Park University (2025) highlights that leaders who remain calm and solution-focused during conflict model effective self-management. These visible actions reinforce SEL as part of the organizational culture and provide daily examples for teachers and students alike.

Protecting Instructional Time

A critical leadership responsibility involves allocating and protecting instructional time for SEL. Research demonstrates that dedicating structured time reduces the risk that competing academic demands will push SEL aside (S. M. Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Klein, 2022). Protected time also creates space for sequenced, active, and focused learning experiences aligned with CASEL's SAFE framework, which has been shown to strengthen both SEL skills and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023). By safeguarding this time, leaders affirm that SEL is not supplemental, but central to resilience, equity, and long-term student well-being.

Building Collaborative Communities

Leadership must also cultivate collaborative professional communities. Intentional structures, such as professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teachers to co-plan lessons, reflect on student needs, analyze SEL data, and share strategies for

integration. Within these settings, teachers can collectively address challenges, such as balancing SEL with test preparation or managing student resistance. Effective leaders play a crucial role by protecting time in the schedule for collaboration, providing facilitation support, and framing PLCs around reflective practice rather than logistics (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). These communities foster teacher efficacy, consistency in SEL delivery, and a culture of shared ownership that extends beyond individual classrooms (Fullan, 2016).

Adaptive and Change Leadership Models

While transformational leadership establishes the vision and foundation, adaptive and change leadership models deepen the process of organizational change. Fullan's (2016) adaptive leadership framework underscores the importance of leaders facilitating cultural shifts rather than relying on top-down mandates. Similarly, Kotter's (2012) change leadership model emphasizes the need for a clear vision, stakeholder engagement, and incremental wins. These models extend the transformational approach by providing practical steps for embedding SEL into daily practice.

Incremental Wins for Sustaining Change

Incremental wins are particularly important in sustaining momentum for SEL initiatives. Small, visible successes, such as teachers expressing greater confidence in using SEL strategies, students showing stronger engagement during morning meetings, or reduced behavioral referrals signal progress and reinforce commitment (Kotter, 2012; Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). Publicly celebrating these achievements, whether in staff meetings, newsletters, or parent communications, sustains motivation and validates the effort required for change (Fullan, 2016). Recognizing early adopters or innovative

practices also demonstrates that SEL is woven into academic instruction rather than treated as an add-on (Billera, 2025; Jose et al., 2025). Over time, these incremental milestones build credibility and lay the groundwork for broader cultural transformation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study faced several limitations that affect the generalizability and depth of the conclusions. The small sample size of seven participants and the focus on a single school district constrain the external validity of the findings. Although the mixed-methods approach provided valuable insights, the brief intervention period of eight weeks was not sufficient to evaluate the long-term sustainability of the observed practice changes. To address these limitations, future research should pursue several avenues. Longitudinal studies tracking teachers and schools over multiple academic years are needed to determine whether SEL practices are sustained in the absence of ongoing external support. Expanding the research to include larger and more diverse samples from rural, urban, and suburban districts with varied student demographics and resource levels would enhance the applicability of the findings. Additionally, future studies should investigate the impact of SEL professional development on student-level outcomes, including growth in SEL competencies, academic engagement, and behavioral improvements. Comparative studies examining different professional development delivery models, such as intensive workshops versus year-long coaching cycles, could identify the most effective strategies for lasting change. Finally, cost-benefit analyses would provide valuable insights to help school districts make informed decisions about resource allocation for SEL implementation.

Integration into Practice

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to support the integration of SEL into educational practice, targeting teachers, school leaders, district administrators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. For teachers, it is essential to engage in ongoing professional learning around SEL frameworks, such as CASEL, collaborate with peers to co-plan lessons and address implementation challenges, and seek coaching opportunities to refine their practice and build confidence. School leaders should allocate dedicated instructional time for SEL and protect it from competing academic demands, model emotional intelligence, and cultivate safe environments where both teachers and students can practice SEL skills.

Additionally, they should support the formation of professional learning communities centered on SEL. At the district level, administrators are encouraged to integrate SEL into strategic plans, professional development schedules, and curriculum frameworks, as well as to develop authentic, developmentally appropriate assessment tools to measure SEL growth. They should also provide training for administrators on transformational leadership practices that foster a culture of SEL. Policymakers play a crucial role in advocating for the inclusion of SEL in state education standards and accountability frameworks, as well as allocating funding for teacher coaching and the development of SEL resources. Lastly, curriculum developers are encouraged to design grade-appropriate, ready-to-use SEL materials aligned with state standards and the CASEL framework, and to offer flexible implementation models that allow SEL to be embedded within academic instruction, rather than treated as a standalone subject.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive analysis of the mixed-methods findings from a professional development and instructional coaching intervention designed to improve high school teachers' implementation of SEL competencies. Quantitative analyses demonstrated statistically significant increases in teachers' perceived knowledge and self-efficacy across multiple SEL domains. Qualitative findings further contextualized these improvements, revealing teachers' progression from fragmented SEL practices to intentional, framework-guided implementation.

The integrated analysis illustrated that while professional development and coaching enhanced teacher capacity, systemic barriers, such as limited instructional time and varying levels of administrative support impeded full-scale implementation. Applying the design thinking framework allowed the intervention to adapt responsively to teacher needs, though broader stakeholder inclusion was identified as a future improvement area.

Leadership emerged as a critical factor in sustaining SEL practices, with transformational leadership actions, such as modeling SEL competencies, protecting implementation time, and fostering collaborative communities identified as essential supports. Limitations of the study, including its small sample size and short timeline, underscore the need for longitudinal and system-level research. The chapter concluded with targeted recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to advance SEL integration in schools.

This study contributes to the growing understanding of how professional development and instructional coaching support the meaningful implementation of SEL

in high school classrooms. Through a design thinking approach, the intervention responded to authentic teacher challenges and fostered measurable improvements in both knowledge and self-efficacy.

However, the findings also underscore that teacher-level growth alone is insufficient for lasting change. Systemic barriers including time constraints, cultural resistance, and inconsistent leadership support limit the scalability and sustainability of SEL practices. Sustainable SEL implementation requires educational leaders to embrace transformational leadership practices, fostering school cultures where SEL competencies are modeled, prioritized, and continuously supported.

This research illustrates the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders including teachers, administrators, parents, and district leaders in collaborative problem-solving to address adaptive challenges. Design thinking proved to be an effective framework for centering educator voice and iteratively refining support structures, but its full potential will be realized only when applied across entire educational systems.

Ultimately, this study affirms that SEL implementation is not merely a technical exercise of curriculum adoption but an adaptive leadership challenge requiring culture change, organizational alignment, and sustained commitment. Future efforts must extend beyond individual professional development cycles to encompass leadership training, structural redesign, and authentic community partnerships. In doing so, schools can create learning environments where SEL competencies are not an addition to learning but a foundation for student success.

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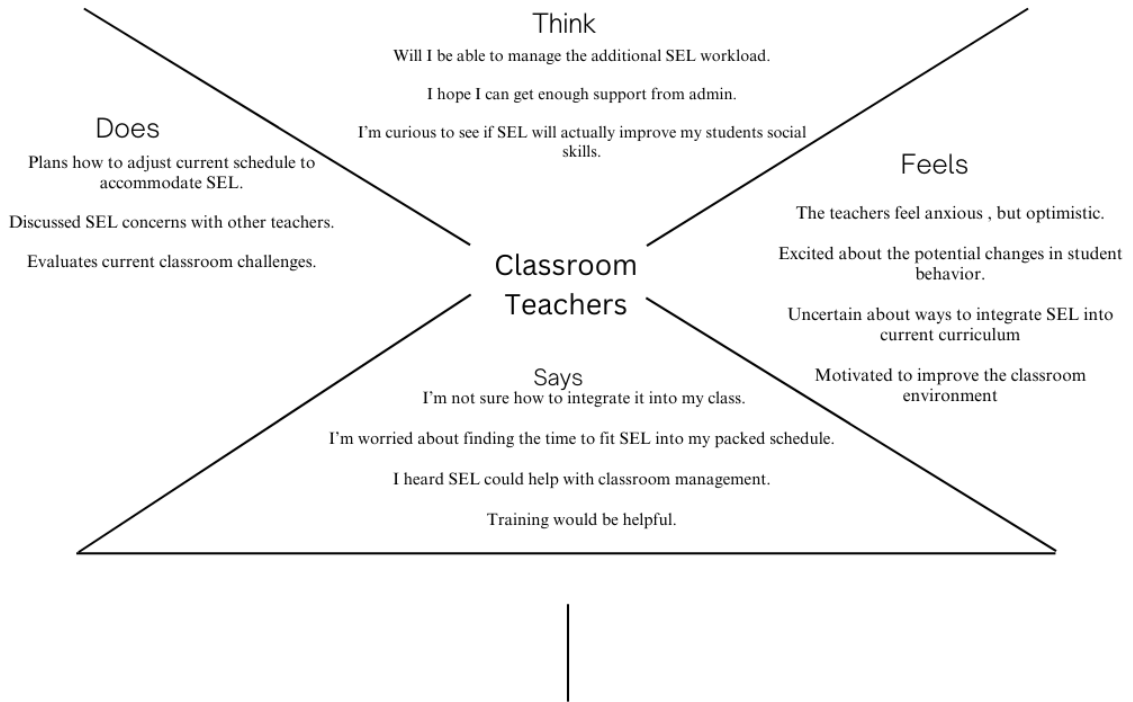
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Appendices

Appendix A: Empathy and Define

Empathy Map

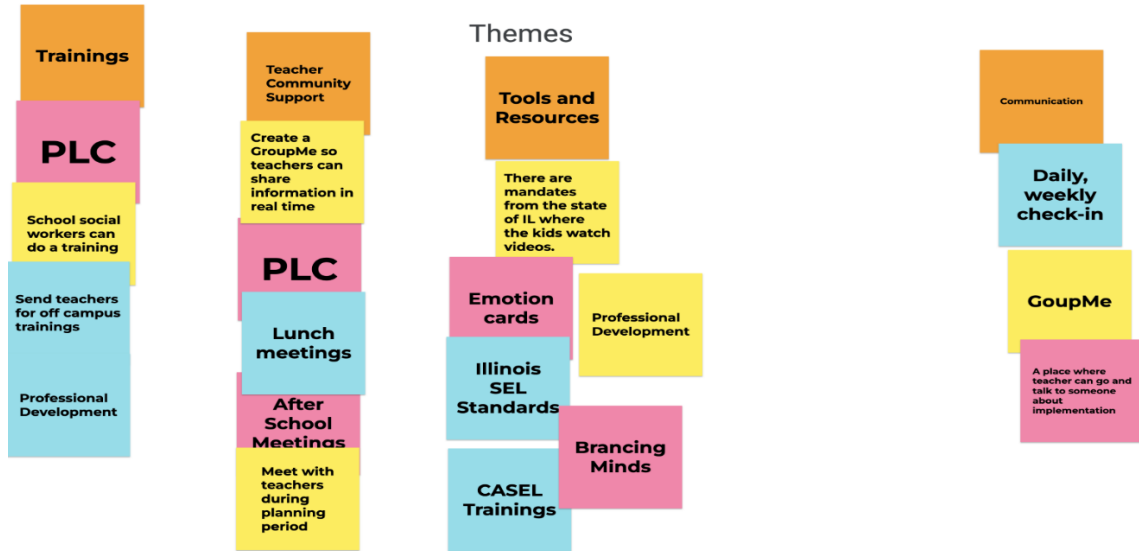


Link to Qualtrics empathy survey questions

https://lindenwood.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_e52yjZFEEVnVN4y

Appendix B: Ideation Phase – Brainstorming

Jamboard Brainstorming Session



How Might We Questions

1. How might we provide opportunities for teachers to enhance the understanding and implementation of the Illinois SEL standards?
2. How might we create a supportive community among teachers where they can share challenges and successes related to implementing the SEL standards?
3. How might we develop and integrate tools and resources that can be easily adapted into any classroom setting?
4. How might we measure and communicate the influence of SEL implementation in the classroom and self-efficacy.
5. How might we empower teachers with decision-making capabilities to adapt SEL standards in ways that best fit the classroom environment?

Link: [Ideation Request](#)

Appendix C: Prototype Graphic and Links

Professional Development and Coaching Plan

Weeks 1-3: Intensive Support

Introduction to SEL, the CASEL framework, and Illinois SEL Standards.
Workshops on SEL competencies and lesson planning.
Observations and modeling.

Weeks 4-5: Intermittent Support

Check-in meetings and peer observations.
PLCs focused on specific SEL competencies.
Adjustments to SEL strategies based on feedback.

Weeks 6-8: On-Demand Support

Independent implementation with access to the researcher for consultations.
Peer mentoring and final review of SEL progress.

Hyperlinks

[CASEL SEL in the classroom](#)

[CASEL Framework](#)

[Illinois SEL Standards](#)

CASEL Observation Tool

<https://schoolguide.casel.org/content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Indicators-of-Schoolwide->

[SEL-Observation-Protocol-5.8.20-FINAL.pdf](#)

Appendix D: Consent Form**LINDENWOOD****Research Study Consent Form**

Exploring the Integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into Teacher Curriculum: Implications for Education Practice

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Avia Brown under Dr. Michelle Whitacre at Lindenwood University. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Before deciding to take part, you may discuss the study with family, friends, or your physician. Please ensure that all your questions and concerns are fully addressed before making your decision. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

Why is this research being conducted?

This study aims to determine whether supporting teacher self-efficacy in implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom can enhance teachers' comfort and confidence in incorporating SEL into their daily curriculum.

What am I being asked to do?

You will be asked to complete a pre-, mid-, and post-survey assessment, along with two professional development modules designed to enhance your understanding of social and emotional learning, the Illinois SEL standards, and strategies for implementing SEL interventions and activities using the CASEL framework. Your final task will be to apply these SEL activities in your classroom.

How long will I be in this study?

The research study will span 10 to 12 weeks. You will complete a pre-, mid-, and post-assessment survey, each lasting about 5 minutes. The two 60-minute professional development modules will be held after school during professional learning community sessions. The pre-test survey will be conducted on day one, the mid-survey at week six, and the post-test survey at the end of week ten. Additionally, the researcher will conduct interviews and observations. The SEL activities will be implemented during one class period of your choice, five days a week.

What are the risks of this study?

Some survey questions and SEL implementation activities might make you uncomfortable. You have the option to skip any questions and can choose to stop participating at any time.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will not collect any identifying information about you.

Data will be gathered online, and we will take all reasonable steps to ensure security. Information will be collected anonymously using Qualtrics software, with the survey link provided only to participants and the researcher to ensure responses are secure. However, be aware that information shared during this study could always be accessed or used by individuals not associated with the research.

What are the benefits of this study?

This study could be highly beneficial to you. The pilot program offers several advantages, including enhanced teacher empowerment and effectiveness through targeted training and continuous support for SEL implementation. This empowerment can lead to increased job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and a stronger sense of professional competence. By allowing teachers the autonomy to choose their preferred methods for implementing SEL, the program encourages personalized learning and fosters innovative classroom practices that address the unique needs of students.

Will I receive any compensation?

There will be no compensation for this study.

What if I do not choose to participate in this research?

Participation in this study is entirely your choice, and you may withdraw at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits. You are also free to skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable. If you decide to withdraw, please use the contact information provided at the end of this form.

What if new information becomes available about the study?

If we discover any information during this study that may be important to your decision to continue participating, we will inform you as soon as possible.

How will you keep my information private?

We are committed to protecting your privacy. We will ensure that no identifying information about you is included in any publication or presentation. All data collected will be securely stored by the researcher. Access to your data will be limited to the research team, qualified staff at Lindenwood University, and representatives of state or federal agencies.

How can I withdraw from this study?

Notify the research team immediately if you would like to withdraw from this research study.

Who can I contact with questions or concerns?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board at (636) 949-4155 or {mail to: irb@lindenwood.edu}. You can contact the researcher, Avia Brown, directly at 314-732-9503 or AB998@lindenwood.edu. You may also contact Dr. Michelle Whitacre at MWhitacres@lindenwood.edu.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

<hr/> Participant's Signature Date <hr/> Participant's Printed Name
--

<hr/> Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee Date <hr/> Investigator or Designee Printed Name

Appendix E: Pre-Test

1. How do you currently implement social and emotional learning in your classroom?

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2. Rate your level of knowledge/expertise in implementing the following social and emotional strategies in your classroom:

Strategies	Not at all	Minimal knowledge	Adequate knowledge	Superior knowledge	Comments
CASEL Training					
Illinois SEL Standards					
Coaching					
SEL Intervention					
Teacher Collaborations					

3. Of the strategies listed above, which strategies do you feel you will need the most support with implementing?

4. Do you believe you can implement social and emotional learning strategies in the classroom? Why or why not?

5. How confident do you feel in your ability to implement social and emotional learning in the classroom?

1. Not at all confident
2. Slightly confident
3. Somewhat confident
4. Very confident

6. What specific challenges do you anticipate when implementing social and emotional learning in your classroom?

7. What types of support would be most helpful in overcoming these challenges?

Appendix F: Post-Test

1. How has your understanding of social and emotional learning evolved following your participation in professional development?

- 1. Not at all
- 2. Slightly evolved
- 3. Moderately evolved
- 4. Significantly evolved

2. How comfortable do you feel with implementing social and emotional strategies after the professional development?

- 1. Not at all comfortable
- 2. Slightly comfortable
- 3. Somewhat comfortable
- 4. Very comfortable

3. How helpful was the professional development in supporting the implementation of social and emotional learning in your classroom?

- 1. Not helpful at all
- 2. Slightly helpful
- 3. Moderately helpful
- 4. Very helpful

6. Rate your level of knowledge/expertise in implementing the following social and emotional strategies in your classroom:

Strategies	Not at all helpful	Minimal Knowledge	Adequate Knowledge	Superior Knowledge	Comments
CASEL Training					

Illinois SEL Standard Training					
Coaching					
Interventions					
Teacher Collaboration					

7. How do you envision sustaining SEL in your future teaching practice? Please explain.

8. What additional support would be useful in helping you continue to implement SEL in your teaching practices? Please be specific.

Appendix G: Organization Approval

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ui=2&ik=2c048aa9fe&attid=0.1&permmsgid=msg-f:1837272906652771238&th=197f4df96c7ce3a6&view=att&zw&disp=inline>

Biographical Information

Avia Brown is a dedicated educator, social work leader, and advocate for equitable student support systems. She was born and raised in a single-parent household in a low-income housing community, where she witnessed firsthand the transformative power of education, mentorship, and perseverance. These lived experiences shaped her commitment to ensuring that all students particularly those from historically marginalized and under-resourced communities receive high-quality academic, social, and emotional support.

Mrs. Brown currently serves as the Social Work Coordinator for Cahokia School District #187, where she leads a comprehensive school social work department serving pre-K through 12th grade students. In this role, she supervises district social workers, oversees professional learning initiatives, ensures compliance with state and federal mandates, coordinates universal mental-health supports, and builds partnerships with community agencies to expand services for students and families. Her leadership emphasizes trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive service delivery, and systems-level improvements that prioritize student well-being and educational equity.

Her professional background includes extensive experience in school social work, clinical practice, crisis intervention, and program development. Throughout her career, she has championed the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) in school systems, recognizing its critical role in student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and healthy school climates. She has led district-wide SEL initiatives, designed professional development series for educators, and implemented coaching models to build teacher capacity, particularly in urban school environments with diverse learner needs.

Mrs. Brown earned her Doctor of Education in Leadership from Lindenwood University. Her research focused on teacher self-efficacy and the implementation of social-emotional learning in high school settings, utilizing a mixed-methods design-based approach. Her dissertation contributes to a growing body of scholarship on professional learning, instructional coaching, and sustainable SEL integration that equips educators with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to support the whole child.

Deeply committed to service and educational transformation, Mrs. Brown continues to champion collaborative, strengths-based, and culturally responsive practices that empower educators and uplift students. She is motivated by her belief that every child deserves the opportunity to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally and that schools play an essential role in shaping equitable futures. She credits her faith, family, and community for instilling in her the determination, resilience, and vision that guide her work and scholarship.

FA/2023