

UNDERSTANDING HOW A SCHOOL DISTRICT IMPLEMENTS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL  
LEARNING

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an understanding of how a school district implements Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Evidence suggests that SEL positively influences academic growth and achievement (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). Current efforts are focused on developing social emotional domains and measurable competencies that integrate developmental psychology, educational theory, and cultural relevance (Ross & Tolan, 2018). Despite the development of these frameworks, successful widespread implementation is limited in completeness of integration and sustained SEL integration in coursework throughout the school year. Therefore, a need exists for research on implementation practices related explicitly to SEL (Osher et al., 2016). I followed the exploratory case study research design (Yin, 2018). Data collection included semi-structured interviews of 15 district personnel of one school district in the Midwest. Two models of implementation science provided a conceptual understanding of how a district implemented SEL, those were Moullin et al., (2019) and Greenberg et al., (2017). Key contributions include the identification of bridging factors of inner and outer contexts influence the process of choosing a framework and how a district manages its organizational structure and resources for implementation social emotional learning during a pandemic.

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To

Amy, for her encouragement and patience

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The development of happy, healthy, and high-achieving students is the shared goal of educational policymakers, district leaders, school administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students themselves. The 21st century is a complex world requiring higher forms of mental balance and the navigation of many social dynamics, and educators are becoming increasingly aware of the role that social and emotional skills play in student success. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions have been shown to positively impact student academic performance and achievement test scores, as well as behavioral issues, mental health, social skills, and self-image (Sande et al., 2019). Research has also demonstrated that SEL programs reduce problem behavior, such as bullying, violence, and drug use and abuse, and promote discipline, as well as personal and civic growth (Osher et al., 2016).

SEL has blossomed in the last 20 years (Weissberg et al., 2015). Some hold that SEL is rooted in John Dewey's published work *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* as well as the works of Greek philosophers (Elias et al., 2007). Those seeds of thought grew throughout the 20th century with Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on "valleys of despair" and the "fierce urgency of now." With a growing awareness of educating the whole child, organizational meetings started to occur in the mid-1990s. In 1994, a group of educators and researchers assembled at the Fetzer Institute in Michigan with the specific goal of developing social and emotional competencies and, ultimately, a theoretical framework (Weissberg et al., 2015). Almost ten years later, Illinois became the first state to implement SEL state standards. Since that time, all 50 states have implemented some form of SEL standards.

As SEL interest grew, two main questions arose, "Is it expensive?" and "How does a district implement an SEL program?" SEL investment is cost-effective. Columbia University

found that each \$1 invested in SEL resulted in an \$11 return (Weissberg, 2019). Meaning, for every dollar spent on SEL programming, there was an \$11 return on personal and societal benefits, such as reduced costs of delinquency, risky driving, sexual risk behaviors, illegal drug use, and aggression (Belfield et al., 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Because of the evidence of the benefits of SEL, all 50 states currently have SEL standards. State policies have been shaped by SEL theoretical frameworks that have been developed by think tanks and organizations (Eklund et al., 2018). As a result of the large number of frameworks coming from different origins with different purposes and definitions, there exists conflicting terminology in use by various educators, researchers, and policymakers (Berg et al., 2017). Without clarity and consensus on competency terminology, a district is likely to be impeded in its ability to ensure that SEL interventions are effective, backed by research, and in compliance with state and national policy regulations.

The lack of current coordination between efforts by SEL researchers, policymakers, educators, and private educational companies has contributed to a wide gap between research and practice. Despite the amount of research and evidence surrounding SEL competencies, frameworks, and benefits in controlled situations, there is a lack of clear information in translating this research into programming that works within the setting of unique school environments and districts.

### **The Implementation Problem**

Meaningful progress in district initiatives requires commitment and effort from many moving parts. Research indicates that coordinated programs in the context of systemic district and school-wide programming will provide the most significant benefit for students (Alexander

& Vermette, 2019). Administrative and policy support is necessary for teachers to effectively provide SEL programming (Weissburg et al., 2015). Without coordination between teachers, administrators, policymakers, district leaders, and support staff, a district may not realize the benefits promised by SEL research.

While there are implementation recipes provided by think tanks, such as RULER, an acronym for Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate Emotions (Durlak et al., 2015), and state and local policymakers have significant documentation for successful implementation, it is not as simple as having the printed formula on a recipe card. Nor does the implementation process guarantee that the outcome will occur as desired (Durlak, 2016). Qualitative studies could shed light on barriers and resistance to district-wide implementation (Oberle et al., 2016). This gap between research and practice can be mitigated by taking a systemic approach to set up and sustain SEL interventions. A systemic approach should include the alignment of SEL competency terminology, an examination of implementation barriers, and using implementation theory to view moving parts' interconnections.

Two known barriers to implementation are resources, such as professional development and implementation support and time. Buchanan et al. (2009) examined teachers' perceptions and practices of social and emotional learning and revealed that while teachers feel that SEL is necessary, the resources required for implementation are lacking. Teachers report that they do not have the time for SEL implementation, with the majority of respondents expressing that it was "not feasible" to spend 30 minutes of prep time to prepare SEL teaching materials and that spending 15 minutes was only "somewhat feasible." Essentially, the "not feasible" positions rank higher than the "very feasible" position (Buchanan et al., 2009). A report from the Foundation

for Young Adult Success questions the practicality of giving “another thing” for teachers to design and disseminate when they are often already overloaded (Farrington et al., 2016).

Another implementation barrier at the district level is a lack of SEL skills in the instructional staff, specifically in the competency of self-awareness. Wood (2018) states that SEL can promote the marginalization of some students’ experiences if teachers lack self-awareness of their own bias or lack cultural literacy. Panayiotou (2019) contends that a lack of teacher self-awareness is the highest limiting factor to SEL implementation. This might suggest that educators ought to frame their SEL experiences in a pluralistic context, thereby allowing students to apply multiple values to their experiences rather than assign a meaning to the experience by the power structure operating in the district.

In addition, increasing teacher self and social awareness will benefit students with social justice education (Gorski & Dalton, 2020). Some SEL frameworks are very aligned to social justices, such as *Ways of Being* (Blyth et al., 2017), and if teachers develop a reflective self-awareness and students participate in self-reporting of SEL growth, critical reflection by teachers of their own instructional practices and students reflecting on their own actions, then multicultural awareness and a cultivation of social justice will follow (Gorski, 2019).

### **Implementation Theory**

Implementation has been studied extensively in public education (Aarons et al., 2011). Two particular facets of implementation seem to be pertinent to the SEL implementation process: resource management (Chen, 1990) and the proximity of influences of those resources (Aarons et al., 2011). The resource model of implementation focuses on the relationship of five resources associated with implementation theory: human, financial, informational, physical, and

technological. Clarification of these processes is paramount for implementation success (Greenberg et al., 2005).

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how a district implements social emotional learning. The information that was gathered could benefit districts in future implementation efforts. This study expected to contribute to the body of knowledge that currently informs SEL implementation practice. Findings from this study would hopefully influence public administrators and educators in their planning and practice of SEL implementation, thus providing the student the benefits of increased academic achievement, increased protective behaviors, and social and emotional development.

### **Research Questions**

District-wide SEL implementation was difficult. Gaps existed in the research regarding how a district implements social emotional learning. It was not clear how a school district used their resources to decide on an SEL framework, navigated implementation barriers, and successfully implemented social emotional learning in an embedded practice. With this condition, the following research questions guided my inquiry: 1) How does a school district create or decide on a conceptual framework? and 2) How does the district's organizational structure manage resources for implementation? A qualitative research design was followed to answer the two research questions.

### **Research Design**

An exploratory case study model provided an advantage when asking a "how" question (Yin, 2018). Qualitative case studies are particularly useful when the researcher has less control over variables, or the variables are embedded within each other and cannot be separated

(Merriam, 2009). District-wide SEL implementation was theoretically dependent on five interconnected resources (Greenberg et al., 2005). Understanding how those resources were integrated and applied is paramount for implementation (Meyers et al., 2019). The subject of the case was a single entity, a district, that could be interpreted in a particularistic sense (Yazan, 2015). The product of this case study was a holistic and intensive description of how that case or district implemented SEL.

This research process considered the particular implementation and the interrelationships of various resources. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their views and enabled me to understand their construction of meaning in SEL implementation. This research afforded the opportunity to focus on the relationship of the participant experience to implementation, including the historical context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I selected a district that had experienced SEL implementation. A single case design contributed to the knowledge and theory of SEL implementation by confirming, challenging, and extending current understanding (Yin, 2018). Greenberg's necessary resources for program implementation, human, financial, informational, physical, and technological resources provided the theoretical framework for implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). The selected district had embedded SEL in the curriculum across the district and had been involved in district-wide professional development and participated in semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were conducted within three groups, which included district administration, principals and building-level leaders, and instructional staff or teachers. All three groups received tailored, semi-structured interview questions for that group, which highlight the two

sub-questions and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. This process allowed me to understand the administrators' and educators' experiences in implementing SEL.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with two-cycle coding. The first cycle coding addressed the ontological belief of multiple realities or the participant's realities. Elemental and affective coding methodologies were used to analyze data in a constructivist framework (Saldaña, 2016). The elemental methodology employed descriptive and process coding while the affective methodology employed evaluative and values coding (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern coding guided the data analysis of second cycle coding. First cycle coding allowed me to summarize data on the four contexts of descriptive, process, evaluative, and values coding. Second cycle coding allowed me to group the summaries into categories and constructs (Miles et al., 2014).

### **Definition of Terms**

A list of terms is provided below in Table 1.1 to ensure understanding throughout this study.

Term	Definition
Affective Coding	A coding method for analyzing the subjective experiences of participants. The most common types are emotion, values, and evaluation coding (Miles et al., 2014).
Applied Practice Framework	An SEL framework that is rooted in the process of application in the classroom and not in a particular psychological origin (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b).
Competency Taxonomy	The study of SEL competency terminology, definition, and organization comparison (Berg et al., 2017).
Elemental Coding	A foundational coding method for analyzing questions that ask participants questions relating to how a process is achieved (Saldaña, 2016).

Term	Definition
Exploratory Case Design	The exploratory case study is used to explore presumed causal links that are too complex for a survey or experiment (Yin, 2018).
Human Resources	Implementation resources that involve human competency, skill, and duty that are based on job description and responsibility (Greenberg et al., 2005). For the purposes of this study, human resources are split into principal/administration, student services, and instructional staff.
Financial Resources	Implementation resources that are related to financial backing, such as operational budgets and grants (Greenberg et al., 2005).
Implementation	The process of putting a plan or framework into effect, including separate phases with specific goals in each phase and including role of available resources. (Greenberg et al., 2005).
Informational Resources	Implementation resources are policies and procedures based on literature and research (Greenberg et al., 2005). For the purposes of this study, those resources are SEL frameworks and professional development guidelines.
Instructional Staff	Human resources that include classroom teachers and instructional aids.
Physical Resources	Implementation resources that are linked to office space, classrooms, and physical requirements associated with implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005).
Principals/Administration	Human resources that include the building principal and administration, which may include administrative assistants.
Professional Development	The process of educators and administrators improving their skills and knowledge, or competencies, to better meet the needs of their students (Durlak et al., 2015).
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	The process by which individuals acquire the knowledge and skills, or competencies, to understand and manage their emotions and positive social development (Panayiotou et al., 2019).
SEL Competencies	Particular qualities that are desirable to have or develop within a particular SEL framework or lens. Competencies combine ability, knowledge, and required skills. Some frameworks use the term dispositions for competencies (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b).

Term	Definition
SEL Frameworks	A research-based systematic approach for identifying and/or implementing a social emotional curriculum with a specific lens or focus (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b).
SEL Program or Dispositional Framework	A specific list of dispositions or competencies that apply to a specific learning environment (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b).
Standards	State or national benchmarks of determined quality or achievement. An idea of a measure or a norm to which marks and assessments can be compared (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b).
Student Services	A branch of human resources with specific duties to counseling services and serving students with needs under either the ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act, or Special Education under IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This branch includes paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and guidance counselors (Bowers et al., 2017).
Technological Resources	Implementation resources that are based on technology, including designated computers and learning management systems (Greenberg et al., 2005).

**Table 1.1:** Definition of Terms

### **Summary**

The literature was rich in describing the benefits of SEL implementation. Such benefits included increased academic achievement, improved behavioral outcomes, increased social skills, and better self-image (Sande et al., 2019). Many states developed SEL standards, but the quality of implementation varied significantly (Durlak et al., 2015). This qualitative case study followed the exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018) and presented an examination of how a district implements SEL. One district participated in the study, with semi-structured interviews with district and school-level administrators and teachers. First and second cycle coding occurred with all levels of interviews and the interview transcripts were analyzed for findings. A review of the literature highlighted conceptual frameworks and studies related to SEL competencies and SEL implementation.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a process through which individuals acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, develop positive relationships, and manage responsible decision-making and risk-taking. SEL skills have been associated with academic engagement, positive behavioral outcomes, and the student's connection to the school (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Elias (2012) demonstrated that knowledge and application of SEL skills could be a protective factor for all youth, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Durlak et al. (2011) found, as part of a meta-analysis on SEL skills, that students involved in SEL programs demonstrated significant gains in social emotional skills, academic achievement, and improved behavior at school. While much of the research has focused on student gains, some empirical research has shown additional benefits for teachers. Practical and comprehensive SEL implementation is correlated with teachers reporting lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, and higher perception of personal accomplishment (Oberle et al., 2016). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that teachers needed to spend less time on behavioral management in classrooms that effectively implemented SEL.

As research on SEL's benefits continues to accrue, policymakers have determined that SEL should be an essential aspect of K–12 education. Currently, all 50 states have at least some SEL standards or competencies as part of their education policy (Eklund et al., 2018). Nine states have advanced to the development of preschool K-12 SEL standards, six states have preschool and early elementary standards only, and thirty-five states have just preschool standards (NCIS, 2018).

State policies have been informed by SEL theoretical frameworks that have been developed by think tanks and organizations (Eklund et al., 2018). The frameworks differ in their

philosophical origins and work to provide a taxonomy of SEL skills and competencies that reflect these origins. While some of the frameworks are used in public policy, others are used by private companies as part of proprietary SEL programs, and still others remain in the realm of research. This has led to complex and sometimes conflicting terminology in use by various educators, researchers, and policymakers (Berg et al., 2017).

The lack of current coordination between efforts by SEL researchers, policymakers, educators, and private educational companies has contributed to a wide gap between research and practice. Teachers and principals may already feel overwhelmed with their day-to-day duties, and district initiatives may not provide the funding, clarity, coordination, or support necessary for a district to achieve district and state goals. Educators and policymakers may have different understandings of SEL. Some consider SEL to be used as an umbrella term for a multitude of interventions and thus is often conflated with other efforts aimed at modifying student behavior or supporting mental health issues (Sande et al., 2019).

This gap between research and practice can be mitigated by taking a systemic approach to set up and sustain SEL interventions. Research indicates that coordinated programs in the context of systemic district-wide programming will provide the most significant benefit for students (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). Administrative and policy support is necessary for teachers to effectively provide SEL programming (Weissburg et al., 2015).

### **Literature Review Methodology**

This literature review informs an exploratory case study of SEL at the district level. The specific focus is on the integration of the administration, student services, and instructional staff through the theoretical lens of systemic district-wide SEL. The first section focuses on frameworks and the development of their competencies. The second section explores the theory

and practice of implementation of SEL programs. The third section focuses on the barriers to SEL implementation in districts.

The literature review was composed of 61 scholarly articles, 20 reports, 14 books, and four dissertations that were found to be relevant for this study found from searches in six databases. The initial search results from the databases were composed of 98 scholarly articles, 27 reports, 24 books, and 4 dissertations found from searches in six databases. The databases included – Education Administration Abstracts, EBSCOhost, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global (ProQuest). Google Scholar was also used for the discovery of salient literature in a historical context. Search terms included social emotional learning, SEL, SEL case studies, SEL implementation, implementation models, academic achievement, emotional intelligence, social justice learning, district environment, educational leadership, and equity education.

### **SEL Frameworks and Competencies**

Social emotional frameworks are an essential tool to organize and align ideas to support understanding, communication, and action. Essential purposes of SEL frameworks include the articulation of high-level social emotional skills into clear learning standards and competencies, creation of shared language in SEL goals to inform the assessment of student progress, and to build a bridge from theory and research to actual policy and practice (Berg et al., 2017). Social emotional frameworks vary in their form, philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, goals, purposes, taxonomies, competencies, and implementation (Osher et al., 2016).

Choosing a compatible conceptual framework is considered by many to be a necessary first step in successful SEL implementation for school districts (Blyth et al., 2019). This is a difficult task without a clear overview of SEL frameworks and competencies (Sande et al.,

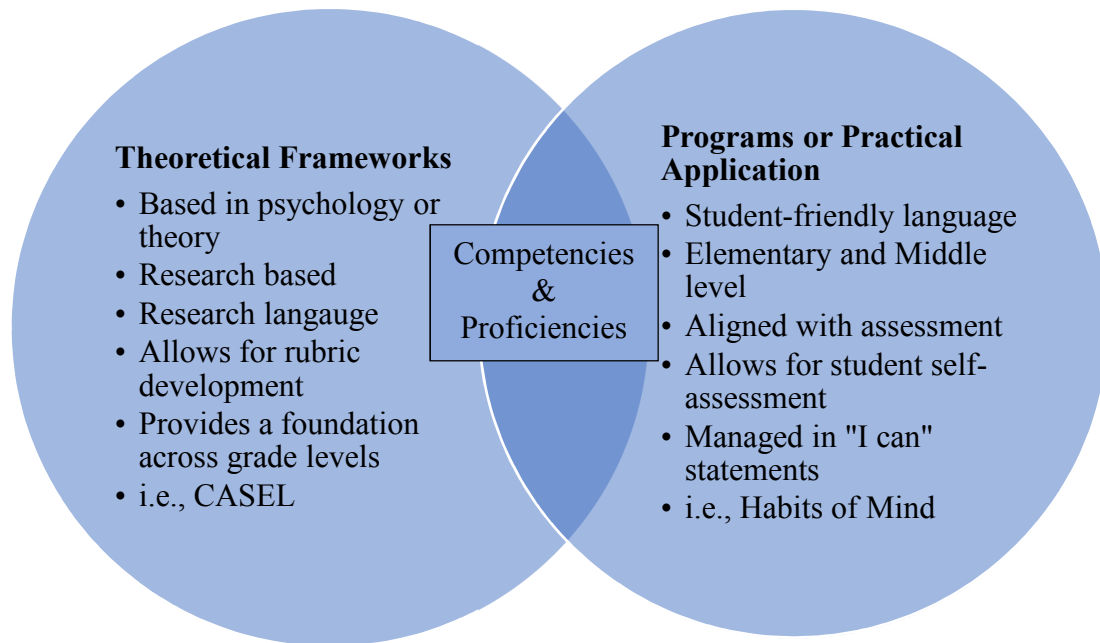
2019). Complicating the process is the large number and wide variety of existing frameworks, lack of a standard taxonomy for competencies, and the proprietary nature of many frameworks in applied practice, which can prevent thorough understanding before procurement.

### **Theoretical Frameworks of SEL**

Frameworks included under the umbrella of SEL are created by authors and developers across a number of fields of study, including psychology, workforce development, positive youth development, public health, juvenile justice, school-based competency development, and character education. Many framework authors build their overall framework structure by referencing specific past theories and conceptual understandings in their study area, and some reference theoretical and empirical evidence to support their choice of competencies. There is less use of theoretical or empirical evidence that supports the relationship between competencies or overall taxonomic framework structure (Berg et al., 2017). The fact that there is overlap of competency terms between frameworks of different areas, with different conceptual understandings and purposes, may indicate less that these are standard competencies and more that the frameworks view the definition or expression of the same competency term differently. For instance, “relationship skills” may refer to working well within a team in a workforce development framework, or kindness and honesty in a character education framework, or assertiveness and perceiving emotion in a psychology framework (Berg et al., 2017).

SEL programs, unlike frameworks, are focused on dispositions written in language that students understand at a variety of ages (K-12) (Blyth et al., 2019). Some researchers suggest that an amalgam of the two is essential for theory and practice, with one example taken from the New York Department of Education, which cross-walked Collaborative for Social and Emotional

Learning (CASEL) theory with Habits of Mind Practice (Alexander & Vermette, 2019b). I developed Figure 2.1 as an example of an amalgam of a framework and a program



**Figure 2.1:** Diagram of SEL Frameworks v. SEL Programs. Adapted from Alexander and Vermette (2019)

### School-Based Competency Development

Schools are seen as a safe and natural setting for the development of cognitive and social emotional skills (Sande et al., 2019), and thus this review focuses on school-based competency frameworks. Despite this similar focus, frameworks have different primary purposes. Some, such as the University of Chicago’s Foundation for Young Adult Success, are created to advance theory and research, as well as to influence policy. Others, such as Habits of Mind, arise out of research with an aim towards applied practice. Still others, such as the framework from Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), aim to outline standards and influence policy, although research and applied practice can be considered secondary purposes.

These three purposes, theory and research, applied practice, and influencing policy are listed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) report as the most common primary purposes of school-based SEL frameworks (Berg et al., 2017). These three purposes are explained in more detail below with particular frameworks.

### **Theory and Research – Foundations for Young Adult Success Framework**

The Foundations for Young Adult Success (FYAS) originated in 1990 out of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. The research focus has been on the factors that promote young adult success and determining the extent to which these factors can be improved by SEL intervention. Their research has informed policy change and reform in Chicago Public Schools and national movements. The framework draws on knowledge from several areas of youth development, including psychology, sociology, cognitive science, and education (Farrington et al., 2012).

FYAS provides robust and empirical research-based recommendations. Their report includes a chapter on the importance of SEL's developmental progression and explains how children learn through developmental experiences and developmental relationships. The framework also provides goals for each developmental stage from childhood to young adulthood (ages 3-5, 6-10, 11-14, 15-18, and 19-22) and clearly demonstrates the developmental opportunities of each age. Despite its acknowledged importance, the inclusion of developmental standards in a framework is relatively rare (Berg et al., 2017). The FYAS report also reviews in detail how race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and socioeconomic status impact access to opportunities and reports ways to reduce the racial/ethnic achievement gap, a similarly rare inclusion in other SEL frameworks. Finally, FYAS recommends that districts focus on “actionable” SEL skills instead of wasting resources on competencies that are non-malleable

(cannot be changed) or proven to have only a correlational and not causal relationship to academic success. CASEL and others often reference their research and recommendations. The FYAS report and framework offer essential information for whole-district implementation but do not have practical application resources.

### **SEL Standards and Policy – CASEL**

The concept of CASEL became a fledgling framework in 1994 at an initial meeting with researchers, educators, and child advocates of differing backgrounds (Borowski, 2019a). While also inspired by recent interest in emotional intelligence, the idea of this conceptual framework originated from Plato’s *Republic*, with a focus on educating the whole child (“Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History,” 2011). James Comer piloted initial implementation in New Haven, Connecticut, in two schools with poor attendance, low academic achievement, and significant poverty. With pioneering efforts to establish SEL competencies aligned with the CASEL model, both schools exceeded the national averages in attendance and academic achievement and significantly reduced problematic behavior (Durlak et al., 2015). Head researchers Roger Weissberg and Maurice Elias expanded the program at Yale and implemented the K-12 New Haven Social Development Program from 1987-1992 (“Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History,” 2011). In 1996, the CASEL organization moved from Yale to the University of Illinois at Chicago and remains there today with Roger Weisberg as director (“Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History,” 2011).

CASEL’s SEL definition, competencies, and standards have been used in a wide variety of implementations in various grade levels (K-12), as well as in policies across all 50 states (Ross & Tolan, 2018). While more and more states have adopted CASEL-based SEL standards, CASEL has affected national public policy as well. In an effort to reduce chronic absenteeism,

Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) worked with CASEL to introduce the congressional bill, HR1864, to support evidence-based social and emotional learning programming and HR 1875, making SEL eligible for Title II funds under ESSA. A similar congressional bill, HR 4509, would amend the Higher Education Act (HEA) requiring SEL coursework in teacher training programs. CASEL's support of SEL has driven state boards and counties to study the impact of SEL on the growth and success of students socially, emotionally, and academically (Ross & Tolan, 2018; Durlak et al., 2015). With this influence, all 50 states have enacted SEL standards into the preschool curriculum. Eighteen states have SEL standards for their K-12 curriculum, and CASEL is working with 30 states to support SEL (Eklund et al., 2018). Twelve of the 18 states with SEL standards use the CASEL framework (Mahoney et al., 2020). Three of the remaining six still cover the CASEL core competencies but add their own state-specific competency emphasis. For instance, Kansas groups its competencies into character development, personal development, and social development, while Washington adds self-efficacy and social engagement competencies (Mahoney et al., 2020).

While CASEL does not itself offer a curriculum for applied practice, few frameworks surpass the number of resources offered, particularly for district-wide SEL implementation. CASEL has a district-wide SEL essentials toolkit directed towards superintendents for district-wide implementation, an SEL framework selection series for districts, targeted guidance tools, and information on best practices and an extensive SEL resource library of books, articles, reports, studies, and videos.

### **Applied Practice Programs – Habits of Mind**

The Habits of Mind model stemmed from the work of Costa and Kallick (2008) and was developed from existing research by Gardner in 1983 (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). The theory

states that humans are capable of knowing and processing information in seven somewhat independent forms. This research led to the discussion of the acceptability of intelligence tests and their inability to adequately test all seven forms of intelligence, as well as the question of how learning is defined. Costa began working with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 1981 to qualify what should be considered good thinking and how students can become more thoughtful (Borowski, 2019b). From that work, Costa and Kallick (2000) constructed the Habits of Mind (HoM) framework.

The habits are intended for a community-wide approach, including community support. While the framework does not explicitly mention the whole school theory, it is suggested that the habits should be immersed in the school community in a generative fashion (Borowski, 2019b). Immersions would include the vocabulary of the habits with a goal of shifting school culture so that everyone in the learning community—including teachers, students, and support staff—would be encouraged to move towards more critical and creative thinking and acting in more thoughtful and sensitive ways.

While the Habits of Mind website provides many free resources, including articles, videos, and examples from the field, it is a proprietary framework that suggests the assistance of a trained consultant as well as professional development workshops for district staff. For districts with less financial resources, there is a curriculum of instructional animations for each habit with 128 accompanying printable extension lessons, for pre-K through Grade 3, created in collaboration with WonderGrove. HoM has not produced any assessments themselves, but checklists and rubrics from others utilizing the framework are also accessible for free through the website. There is almost no unbiased, empirical evidence testing the effectiveness of the HoM framework. There is some doctoral research based on teacher dispositions using the Habits of

Mind taxonomy. Approximately 40 districts around the world are certified by the Habits of Mind Institute (Borowski, 2019b). It is unclear if any districts use free resources, such as posters, to encourage vocabulary use, without official certification. The lack of transparency and external testing, as well as the proprietary nature of this model, is extremely common to frameworks with an applied practice curriculum.

Applied practice programs are the black box of SEL; their proprietary nature precludes any real information on a specific classroom curriculum and its effects. Such practices offer training services and assessment at a cost. On the other hand, research and policy-focused frameworks support transparency but lack specific day-to-day programming and curriculum. CASEL implementation guides suggest adopting a theoretical SEL framework, such as their own, and strongly encourage the use of an applied practice program (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). CASEL, and several Midwestern states, offer resources to help; however, practitioners still face a considerable challenge in choosing or creating programming that is the applied practice of SEL.

The wide range of available SEL interventions, the lack of transparency that comes with proprietary programs (Berg et al., 2017), and the unfiltered information given by vendors selling their specific method of implementation (Grant et al., 2017) all make the selection of a ready-made SEL curriculum extremely difficult. In addition, practitioners often do not have the time to create an entirely new curriculum (Buchanan et al., 2009). Researchers warn against the creation of programs without an evidence-based foundation (Durlak et al., 2011), as well as the possible damage that can be done by interventions that lack research (Farrington et al., 2012). Districts may also use a hybrid model, for example, by combining frameworks or programs and adding their own interventions.

## **Competency Taxonomy**

A large number of frameworks and programs, as well as the wide diversity between them, is beneficial in the sense that they can apply to a wide range of unique district contexts.

However, it can also increase complexity and confusion. In a report by AIR, Berg et al. (2017) found that many frameworks use different terminology for competencies with similar definitions, while others appeared to use the same terms for competencies that had differing and sometimes contradictory definitions. Furthermore, skills and competencies are often categorized in confusing or contradictory ways.

Coming to a common understanding of competency definitions and categorizations is vital in district-wide implementation. Leadership, teachers, and students need to share a common SEL language. This is further complicated because both policy standards and assessments often use their own SEL terminology. A district might find their chosen curriculum, state policy, and SEL assessment using different terms (Berg et al., 2017). Therefore, there are many current efforts to align SEL competencies. CASEL has helped some states provide tools to align framework language with state policy (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). The Taxonomy Project, led by Stephanie Jones at Harvard University, developed as a coding system that clarifies the competencies in various frameworks and identifies overlap (Jones et al., 2016). Similarly, the Ways of Being (WOB) framework, created by a collaboration between Minnesota 4-H and Youthprise, consists mostly of a model whose purpose is to align the competencies of other frameworks and interventions in place (Walker, 2015).

The Taxonomy Project divides all SEL competencies into six areas: cognitive regulation, emotional processes, interpersonal processes, values, perspectives, and identity/self-image. It provides tools such as diagrams that indicate where a specific skill might be found in each

framework; for instance, it suggests that the skill “self-efficacy – growth mindset” can be found in the Foundations for Young Adult Success framework under “agency,” in the CASEL framework under “self-awareness,” and in Habits of Mind as “learning continuously,” “striving for accuracy and precision,” and “responding in wonderment and awe” competencies (Jones et al., 2016).

The WOB model consists of three skill areas: Ways of Feeling, Ways of Being, and Ways of Relating, within three layers of skill development: Identity, Awareness, and Navigation (Blyth et al., 2017). The model's intended use is a mapping of existing or possible frameworks or individual competencies onto the model areas, an activity shown to synchronize definitions of terms and deepen practitioners’ understanding of what the skills look and sound like in action (Walker, 2015). While the Taxonomy Project’s infographics and tools are based on research and provide an extraordinary amount of information, it represents a “top-down” approach in which researchers inform practitioners of the relationship between SEL terms. Some of their conclusions might be less intuitive, such as declaring “critical thinking” to be a part of “perspective-taking” (Jones et al., 2016). On the other hand, the WOB model illustrates a “bottom-up” approach where practitioners make decisions as to what SEL terms and competencies refer to and how they interact. The process of mapping SEL competencies onto the WOB model could clarify dialogue and increase practitioner involvement and buy-in. However, it might be difficult for a group to reach a consensus, and it may be extremely challenging to find time for this process.

While academic competencies in traditional subject areas have been developed for centuries, social emotional competencies are in their early developmental stages. Educators face several questions, such as what competencies and frameworks to adopt, whether to purchase a

program or curriculum or create one, how to implement the chosen intervention, and how to ensure the intervention aligns with district and state policy. Traditionally, standalone programs have been favored over embedded programs in the curriculum due to ease and simplification of implementation. However, such standalone programs are far less effective than an embedded model (Wigelsworth et al., 2016). It would then follow that the decision of framework or program adoption would rest on the types of competencies and compatibility of the framework and curriculum to the district, not unlike adopting a math, science, or literacy curriculum.

I limited this review to those frameworks and programs represented in peer-reviewed literature, with the search criteria “SEL conceptual frameworks,” using the databases EBSCO and ERIC, along with Google Scholar. Six primary frameworks are represented in peer-reviewed journals. The frameworks are CASEL, Clover, Foundations for Young Adult Success, Ways of Being, Habits of Mind, and OECD Conceptual Framework for the Study of Social and Emotional Skills. More research-based SEL models may exist that are not represented with the above search criteria. Each framework has a different origin, unique competencies, and descriptors, as well as various philosophical starting points and outcomes.

### **Conceptual Model of Implementation**

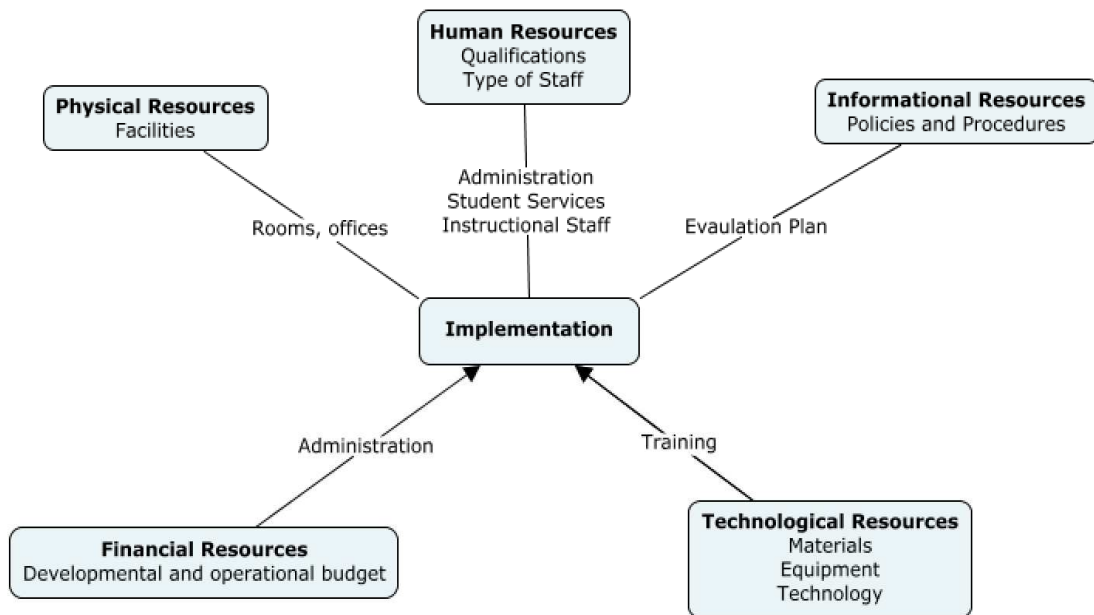
A traditional model of method-driven evaluation focuses on the successful completion of predetermined steps. This method has led to preconceived notions of success or failure prior to full implementation and often does not take into consideration the causal effects associated with implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). Method-driven evaluation is a check box evaluation and rarely focuses on why a process or implementation has met a timeline or succeeded or failed.

Program implementation failure can result from poor theory development. One meta-analysis shows that a majority of implemented programs, 68.5%, are too broad in their description and do not include a means of determining successful implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005).

The evolution of the conceptual model of implementation has led to an increase of specific steps that relate to causative theory. One model proposed by Aarons et al. (2011) suggests a four-phase model: Exploration, Adoption/Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment.

An added depth of the four-phase model breaks implementation factors into outer and inner contexts. The relationship of these contexts is thought to significantly determine the outcome of successful implementation (Aarons et al., 2011). An example of inner context factors would be internal district characteristics, including the adopters and implementers themselves. Outer context factors would be the educational environment, the relationship between the district and the SEL framework, outside advocacy for implementation, and outside adversity.

Chen's (1990) conceptual model of implementation could inform SEL implementation by categorizing the five resources. These categories are helpful in classifying the points and processes of implementation in a district. See figure 2.2 below. The literature states that more research is needed to understand the factors of SEL implementation (Ross & Tolon, 2019). Systematic clarification of the relationships between the factors contributes to implementation success (Greenberg et al., 2005).



**Figure 2.2** Components of the Conceptual Model (Greenberg et al., 2005)

## **Resources**

The resources represented in the conceptual model for SEL implementation are described below. A gap exists in the literature in terms of which resources are important or required for SEL implementation.

### ***Human Resources***

The human resources working most closely with implementation can be separated into inner and outer groups. Working in the unit of analysis of the district, human resources include the district and school-level administration and instructional staff. The instructional staff includes teachers, paraprofessionals, and possibly administrative assistants depending on the location. The research suggests that teachers are the base for healthy environments and are critical causal agents to successful implementation (Panayiotou et al., 2019). School counselors are found to increase the success of a functional district-wide implementation (Bowers et al., 2017). Further,

the research suggests that teachers should be disentangled and separate from other groups, such as coaching or administrative (Al-Ghabban, 2018). In short, adopting and implementing a framework requires separation across the human resource chain.

Data collection for evaluative purposes is vital to effective implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). If data collection is accurate and there is a two-way flow of information among the resource chain, then nimble procedural changes in prescriptive theory can adjust to other environmental changes within the building, increasing SEL effectiveness (Hamilton, 2015). This process can be elusive as teachers may differ in their skill sets. Further training of staff may be required for more accurate data collection and increased communication with administration. For instance, research shows that generally teachers are accurate with recording externalized student behavioral data, but not as precise with internalized behaviors, such as knowing when a student is experiencing internalized shame (Panayiotou et al., 2019). This means, sometimes teachers do not accurately understand what they are witnessing and may not consistently communicate with others along the inner human resource chain.

The outer group would be other building principals and leadership outside teachers. Additional human resources would be community partners in the implementation, such as athletic coaches, instructional partners, and hired consultants.

One additional factor would be human resources that are critical of SEL implementation. While many researchers support meta-analyses of the benefits of SEL (Weissberg, 2019), there are also many critics of SEL as well, and there is less consensus around the frameworks and implementations than many would believe (Zhao, 2020).

### ***Informational Resources***

The most causal inner factor in informational resources is the prescriptive theory of implementation and consistent data collection within the evaluation plan. These data inform the reactive and proactive adjustments for SEL implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). Additional inner factors include district policies that have been adopted or developed by district leadership and the dispersal of those resources to the staff, including the resources associated with instructional coaching.

Additional organizational factors are state and district policies and the conceptual framework that is adopted. While many states have adopted policy and sporadic standards, there is little in the way of prescriptive theory coming from state-level leadership in terms of applied practice (Greenberg et al., 2005).

Choosing the SEL framework is a significant decision (Durlak et al., 2015). It requires human resource decisions (Durlak et al., 2015). The frameworks have considerable variance in their structure, such as competencies and subsequent function, as was highlighted in the first section of this review. Choosing a framework compatible within a district culture and philosophy is a vital factor in success (Durlak, 2016). A significant factor that may be included with framework choice is the amount and quality of professional development that might accompany that framework. Two advantages of some frameworks are existing research literature with specific implementation practices and implementation materials with professional coaches to provide guidance to leadership teams.

### ***Facilities Resources***

Facilities within the district are defined as meeting spaces, rooms, and any other facility-based factor. This factor is entirely physical and may be related to classroom size and internal

environment. The quality of the internal environment would be a facility factor (Greenberg et al., 2005).

***Financial Resources***

District funding is dependent on many factors. The complexity of that funding is beyond the discussion of this research. The financial resources are those that are available in the district budget or through grants (Greenberg et al., 2005). This funding source could be from the operating budget through various funds. It could also include grant funds that may be dedicated to SEL programming and implementation. If more resources are available, then more efforts can be devoted to implementation, which could include extra instructional staff, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches.

***Technological Resources***

District-based learning management and assessment systems would be examples of technological resources. This could also include assessment systems that require outside analysis, such as the Clover model, a management and assessment system controlled outside of the district (Greenberg et al., 2005).

The resources are defined below in a table 2.1.

Implementation Resources	Definition
Human	Allocated resources of personnel at the district, school, and classroom level, involving board members, district office staff, building principals, student services and guidance counselors, and teachers.
Informational	Allocated resources for framework discovery and/or development.

Technological	Allocated technology for learning management systems, communications, and internet services.
Financial	Allocated revenue for professional development, framework purchasing and training, compensation for training staff, and funds for any required technology, space, or equipment.
Physical	Allocated space for planning and instruction.

**Table 2.1** Definition of Implementation Resources (Greenberg et al., 2005)

**Theoretical Barriers to Implementation**

There are known barriers to educational program implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). Some of those known barriers directly apply to SEL implementation, with the most common obstacles existing at the human resource level (Alexander & Vermette, 2019). Understanding the barriers is not the same as knowing how to navigate the challenges. The research is limited in the discussion of the latter. Understanding how human resources are integrated with barriers is a key to successful implementation.

**Human Resource Barriers**

The instructional staff is defined by teachers, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, and instructional coaches. Teachers are the most influential human resource in program implementation (Panayiotou et al., 2019). With the weight of successful implementation on the instructional staff, it would seem necessary that the staff is not overstressed with duties or compromised by the lack of available time. However, the research is detailed in stating that teachers who feel unsuccessful in implementing SEL are often compromised by too many duties or things on their plate (Bottiani et al., 2019).

Teachers and principals may already feel overwhelmed with their day-to-day duties, and district initiatives may not provide the funding, clarity, coordination, or support necessary for a

school to achieve district and state goals. Schools may have already been involved with several district initiatives that were not effective, long-lasting, or well supported. CASEL recommends that a district first do a needs and resource assessment so that a district can identify current practices that can be aligned with new SEL initiatives, current ineffective or misaligned initiatives that can be retired, and what needs are not currently being met. According to causative implementation theory, this should increase faculty buy-in (Lencioni, 2012).

Furthermore, educators and policymakers may have different understandings of SEL, which can be used as an umbrella term for a multitude of interventions and thus is often conflated with other efforts aimed at modifying student behavior or supporting mental health issues. This can lead to confusion over staff roles as well as the purpose and value of SEL intervention for all students. A coordinated effort to foster a common understanding of SEL and language around competencies, as well as dedication to social emotional professional learning, is necessary for successful district implementation.

The SEL skills of the staff can play a large role in the success or failure of an SEL intervention. One such issue, pointed out by Alexander and Vermette (2019), is that many teachers are not self-aware to the degree required for effective implementation. Furthermore, teachers often require significant training to be functionally able to implement as well as trained practitioners (Wigelsworth et al., 2016). In short, the literature suggests that teachers will require significant training to functionally implement SEL.

One such example is pointed out by Wood (2018), who states that SEL can promote the marginalization of some students' experiences if teachers lack self-awareness of their own bias or have limited experience with or understanding of differing racial and ethnic identities.

Self-assessment data of teachers and administrators show that functional assessments and improvement procedures are essential in the process of professional development of self-awareness (Stillman et al., 2018). If this type of professional development were to increase, then the self-awareness of staff would become less of a limiting factor, leading to greater success of SEL implementation. A question that remains is, in what ways do teachers pursue their own SEL development or increase their own self-awareness?

Along the lines of self-awareness is the competency of openness to change. If teachers show a low openness to change, implementing SEL programs in an embedded format will become difficult (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). This quality is linked to the pace of implementation. If there is some resistance from the instructional staff, then the pace of implementation will be slower (Durlak, 2016). Increased openness to change and innovation would allow for a faster rate of embedded implementation. One way to combat a lack of openness is to keep implementers out of isolation (Meyers et al., 2019). A whole district agreement is necessary for district-wide implementation. As the research points to specific obstacles related to inner human relation factors, one must consider the best options for professional development that would lead to greater self-awareness and increased openness.

The lack of openness in the instructional staff leads to additional factors that prevent implementation. One researched factor is a clash between the teacher's educational philosophy or possible teaching style and the SEL philosophy and process (Greenberg et al., 2005). This inner human resource factor is often difficult for teachers to overcome. Being able to alter one's philosophy of teaching is dependent on openness to change (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). The research is mixed on teachers' ability to change. In some cases, as with changing to innovative ideas in the global pandemic, teachers are seen to be quick to adapt to change when necessary

(Ellis et al., 2020). In other cases, openness to change is determined to be the least fluid competency in developmental psychology (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). In this same vein, some research suggests that teaching methods and beliefs held by teachers are synonymous with teacher identity (Beijaard, 2019). It would follow those changing methods might be akin to changing one's identity. The literature calls for further study in the area of teacher openness to change, and the existence of the global pandemic may be a significant environmental factor.

The school administrator is the leader of the mission and vision of the school. This work is supported by strong communication, resource allocation, and leading the SEL culture of the building (Durlak et al., 2015). Successful leadership must be able to navigate the obstacles of implementation and support the staff in their growth (Schamberg et al., 2020). Assisting teachers in their own development is a significant and ongoing challenge. It would follow that the principals themselves must have self-awareness and an openness to learning about themselves and SEL programming. There are many toolkits available for principals that are research-based. Many of these are free, and some are for purchase. These toolkits are not a replacement for skills and efforts (Patti & Tobin, 2006).

### **Summary**

The research on SEL frameworks and implementation draws primarily on quantitative research conducted through surveys. Qualitative studies could shed light on barriers and resistance to district-wide implementation by addressing a range of attitudes and perceptions than covered by surveys limited to preconceived questions (Oberle et al., 2016). A high failure rate of implementation is common in scaling SEL programming to larger districts and schools (Elias et al., 2003). Research shows that successful district implementation requires a systemic approach

that coordinates efforts across the whole district, including work by teachers, administrators, and district staff, as well as policymakers.

My review of the literature has revealed the need for a whole district approach to SEL implementation in order to bridge the gap between SEL research and practice. This requires the alignment of state policy, existing research, district standards, and district curriculum within the district culture and climate, as well as professional development for administrators, teachers, and support personnel.

Specific guidelines for SEL implementation exist. However, guidelines are actually not that functional in guiding the implementation process (Elias, 2019). There is a gap in the literature on how all the inner and outer resources work together to implement SEL. Teachers need administrative and policy support to effectively provide SEL programming (Weissburg et al., 2016).

A gap exists in the literature regarding the experience of teachers implementing SEL within an embedded curriculum. This gap includes the variation of implementing different frameworks and implementing various competencies at varying grade levels. There is a need for a greater understanding of the process of implementing SEL competencies with local and statewide educational systems (Sande et al., 2019). Since the literature suggests that even modest investment in an SEL implementation leads to SEL gains in students and communities, one might consider the narrative of the district personnel and their experience embedding SEL into a standard curriculum.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

Social emotional learning is gaining momentum across the nation as compelling evidence suggests that academic, social, and emotional skills are related and connected (Durlak, 2016), with the most significant positive effect on self-management and self-awareness (Sande et al., 2019). Yet, over the last two decades, teachers have been skeptical of implementation due to the amount of extra time and resources (Buchanan et al., 2009) and their comfort level of being coached (Quraishi, 2019).

One common thread of inadequate implementation is the belief that SEL is just another fad in instruction, and the result is inconsistent implementation towards an embedded approach (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Another known implementation barrier is teachers not receiving adequate professional development (Quraishi, 2019). There are most likely several reasons why successful and sustained SEL implementation is challenging for schools and districts. This case study looked at how SEL is implemented in a district. This study can inform future practice and policy for SEL implementation.

In this chapter, I provide methodological details on understanding how a district implements SEL. I provide the purpose for the research, the research questions, and the conceptual framework. I give details of the qualitative research design, the district and participant selection process, and the data collection and analysis process. Further details of the research design include internal validity and reflexivity, limitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

Teachers are the engine that drive SEL implementation (Ross & Tolan, 2018). Much is written in terms of implementation methodology. Almost every state has specific SEL

implementation standards, and these SEL standards align with the Every School Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). However, the literature regarding how SEL is implemented in a district is sparse. Previous quantitative studies focus on the validity and benefits of SEL on students' social and emotional growth and academic achievement. The absence of comprehensive district-wide implementation in the literature suggests a need to understand how all the pieces of implementing SEL fit together. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How does a school district create or decide on a conceptual framework?

Research Question 2: How does the district's organizational structure manage resources for implementation?

These research questions helped me understand how a district implements SEL and how it depends on interconnected factors. This discovery generates a body of thought that can inform future SEL implementation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

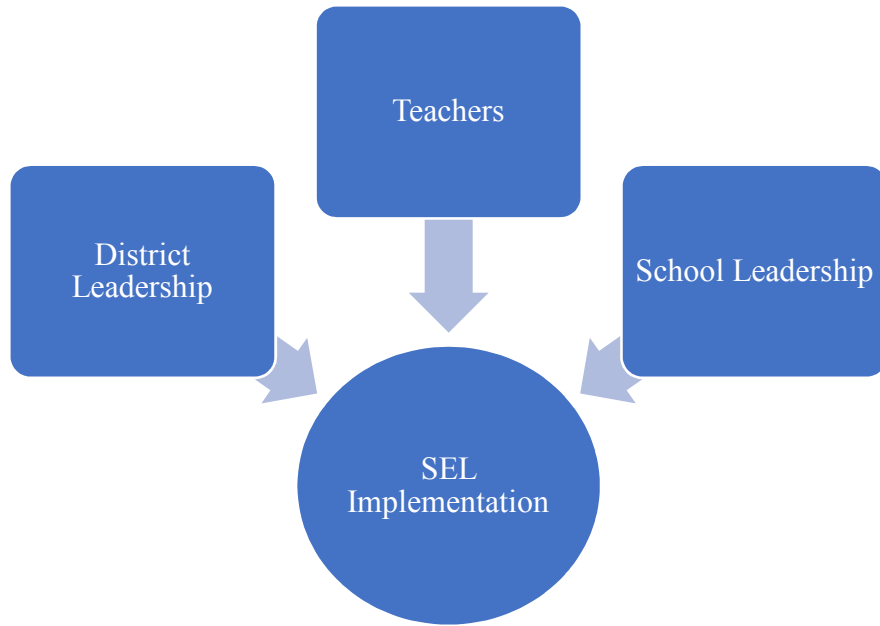
This exploratory case study investigated how a district implements an SEL framework. The study focused on relationships that were interdependent in the phenomenon of SEL implementation (Yin, 2018). While generalizations are common in the field of SEL implementation, this study investigated and captured complex action, perception, and interpretation of that implementation as applied to the synthesis of Greenberg's model of implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005) and how inner and outer factors affect that implementation (Aarons et al., 2011). Explanations were expected to shed light on a comprehensive analysis of factors in how a district implements SEL (Yin, 2018). The choice of a

case study was appropriate when the research question seeks to know "how" a social phenomenon works (Yin, 2018).

This research interpreted the concept of a case from a constructivist epistemology. The subject of the case was a single entity, a district, that was interpreted in a particularistic and holistic sense (Yazan, 2015). This research process considered the particular implementation and the interrelationships of various factors.

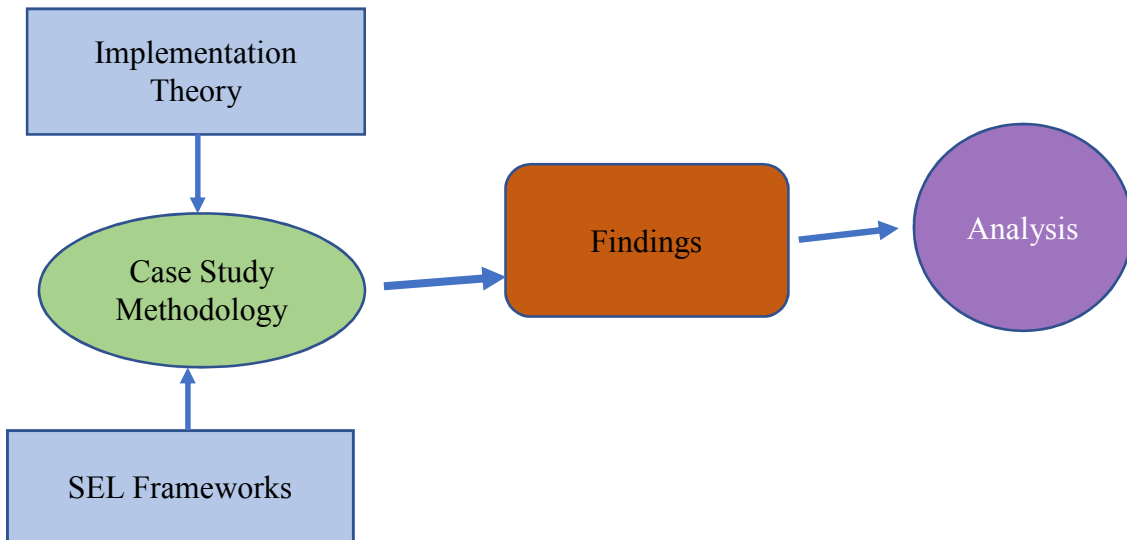
The discovery of participants' constructivist understanding occurred through semi-structured interview questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their views and allowed me to understand their construction of their meaning of SEL implementation. This research afforded the opportunity to focus on the participant experience, including the historical and cultural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I selected a district that has experienced the implementation of SEL. The district implemented a research-based framework that appears in the review of the literature. The district was chosen by convenience sampling of meeting the criteria of framework type, imbedded SEL implementation, and district-wide professional development (Miles et al., 2014). If the factors of SEL implementation were interconnected, as research indicates (Greenberg et al., 2005), then an exploratory case study allowed for the discovery of how SEL was implemented in a district. The degree of interconnectedness of resources and processes were unique to the district and across the levels of leadership and teachers. The exploratory single case design allowed for the discovery of those resources and processes that occurred at the varying levels of leadership. Figure 3.1, below, indicates the resources and processes by arrows leading to SEL implementation.



**Figure 3.1** Resources and Processes that determine SEL Implementation

This exploratory single case study considered existing implementation theory and SEL learning frameworks in forming interview questions for data collection and the determination of coding structures for constructing the findings. Figure 3.2 provides a visual for the case study model.



**Figure 3.2** Exploratory Single Case Model (Yin, 2018)

The Exploratory model was a good research choice as it allowed for the interpretation of multiple types of information (Yin, 2018). Interviews took place with heterogeneous positions of administration, student services, and instructional staff. Semi-structured interviews guided conversations that drew on the subjective experience of implementation and the experiences of objective commonality of SEL implementation itself or the implementation parameters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used the conceptual framework identified in chapter 2 to guide the semi-structured questions to understand how a school district implements social emotional learning.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

There were several Midwestern public educational service agencies that published lists of districts that had implemented SEL. These lists provided administrators and educators contact information for districts currently engaged in various developmental stages of SEL implementation.

I reached out to the superintendents of districts that had strategically planned for implementation via email, engaged in district-level professional development, and had implemented SEL in their district. Qualifying districts had selected an SEL framework or developed a hybrid of a theoretical framework. The desirable district was medium-sized with roughly 3500 students. An email letter to superintendents of districts can be found in Appendix A – Letter to Superintendents.

The superintendent of the qualified district responded via email and he and I discussed the purpose and method of the case study. After the superintendent agreed to participate, principals received an email, found in Appendix B – Principal Recruitment Email. The principal

and guidance counselor were required for the case study; teachers were selected based on availability. The teachers received the Teacher Recruitment Email, Appendix C.

I discussed the purpose and method individually with administrators upon their email reply. The results of those conversations provided confidence that all interview requirements could be met and all required participants for the case study would likely be able and willing to be interviewed. The district was selected as the subject of the case study. The criteria are listed below in Table 3.1.

District Size	1500 – 4500 students or 1 high school 1 middle school 2 – 4 elementary schools
District Board Discussion	Documented agenda discussion
Framework Selection	Any SEL framework with or without hybridization
Required Participants: District Office	Superintendent Asst. Superintendent Director of Pupil Services Other district leaders
Required Participants: Building Level	Principal Assistant principal or teacher in charge School psychologist or guidance counselor Five teachers with embedded SEL practice

**Table 3.1** Table of District Selection Criteria

These criteria were chosen based on implementation literature (Greenberg et al., 2005). Implementation research suggests that districts should support human and informational resource development, be able to act on improvement strategies, and have foundational support at the district level (Ross & Tolan, 2018).

Interviews with the chosen participants were scheduled through the UWM Outlook email calendar meeting notice and the participant's selected time. An email confirmation announcement was sent to all participants. A copy of the notification can be found in Appendix D – Interview

Confirmation Email. A reminder email was sent to participants two days before the interview. This communication can be found in Appendix E – Interview Reminder Email.

The IRB consent form, Appendix F, was attached to the Interview Confirmation Email, Appendix D. An electronic copy of the signed consent form was required before the beginning of each interview. Additionally, each interview began with an overview of the IRB consent form.

### **Data Collection**

The case study included one medium-sized school district as the unit of analysis. Data collection consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews for a duration of 40-60 minutes each. Participants included district and school-level administration, including members in student services and SEL coaches, and teachers. Semi-structured interviews provide indirect information that is filtered through the interviewee's views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process allowed me to understand the educator's experiences in implementing SEL. I followed the format highlighted by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Each interview began with basic information of the interview, purpose of study, and consent review, followed by opening questions and content questions. Probes were used to garnish a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experience in implementing SEL. Each interview ended with the assurance of confidentiality and gratitude for their participation, thoughts, and invested time. A list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix G – Interview Questions for District-Level Administrators, Building-Level Administrators, and Teaching Staff.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the permission of the participant. Recordings were transcribed through the transcription program Rev.com. All electronic data were stored on a single, password-protected, non-networked, non-affiliated

computer. All paper documents and data were stored in a locked file cabinet in a non-company office. All video recorded data and transcripts were destroyed after the study was completed.

The 15 participants are listed below in Table 3.2. The participants are listed by gender, area of licensure or position, and years of experience. The first five are district-level administrators, the second five are school-level administrators, including the SEL coaches and the last five participants are teachers.

<b>Admin/Teacher Level</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Years</b>
High-Level Administrator	M	Elem teacher, administration	21
Director of Student Services	F	Teacher, SWD, CESA, more than two districts admin	28
Program Director	F	Elem teacher, college & career readiness org, administration	20
Multilevel System Support Specialist	F	Licensed psychologist, school psych	10
Program Coordinator	M	Business teacher, admin	21
Elementary School Principal	F	Science teacher, admin	21
Middle School Principal	F	Teacher, admin	21
SEL Coach Elementary School	F	Social worker, MSW, counselor	15+
SEL Coach Middle School	F	Rehabilitation specialist, SWD, university professor, international experience	15+
School Psychologist	F	School psychologist	7
Teacher Elementary 1	F	Elem teacher	27
Teacher Elementary 2	F	Elem teacher	4
Teacher Middle School 1	F	Middle-level teacher, several states	31
Teacher Middle School 2	M	Middle school teacher	30
Teacher Middle School 3	F	Middle school teacher	5

**Table 3.2** Table of Participants

## **Data Analysis**

The transcripts were analyzed in Microsoft Word. Comment analysis was categorized in Microsoft Excel. This allowed for the creation of a complete summary of all participants as well as each participant's own summary page of first cycle coding. Second cycle coding led to the development of themes. The first cycle coding addressed the ontological beliefs and

epistemological understandings of how a district implements an SEL framework. Second cycle coding explored patterns and similarities of implementation (Saldaña, 2016). The purpose of first cycle coding was to organize the data into elemental and affective coding methodologies. Both types of methodologies are supportive when analyzing data in a constructivist framework (Saldaña, 2016). The Elemental methodology employs descriptive and process coding and Affective methodology uses evaluative and values coding (Miles et al., 2014).

Elemental methods are a type of first cycle coding that provides both the description and detail of the process (descriptive and process coding) (Miles et al., 2014). Affective methods allow for the coding of the participants’ subjective experiences. This includes the values, attitudes, and beliefs associated with implementation (values coding) and the judgment and value that the participants have for the process, policies, and organizational structures associated with implementation (evaluation coding) (Miles et al., 2014).

The process of first cycle coding allowed me to summarize chunks of data into four contexts: 1) descriptive coding, which applied codes to describe data topics and nouns; 2) processing coding, which applied codes to actions; 3) evaluative coding, which applied qualitative judgment to description and process coding; and 4) values coding, which applied codes to values, attitudes, and beliefs of a participant’s perspective. Second cycle, pattern coding, allowed me to group the summaries into categories and constructs (Miles et al., 2014). The description and function of the codes can be found in the Table 3.3.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Function</b>
Descriptive	First cycle Elemental	Allows for the development of an inventory of topics, especially when a wide variety of data forms exists, such as interview data, documents, and physical records.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Function</b>
Process	First cycle Elemental	Often referred to as action coding, process coding allows the analysis of gerunds to identify chronological dynamics, procedures, and implementation processes.
Evaluation	First cycle Affective	Allows for grouping of data in organizational and policy studies. Evaluation coding can assign judgement of merit and significance of programs, procedure, and policy.
Value	First cycle Affective	Allows for the grouping of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Appropriate for studies that involve interpersonal participant experiences and their value and belief systems.
Pattern	Second cycle	Allows for grouping of first cycle coding summaries into categories, themes, and constructs. Pattern coding can reveal commonalities and relationships.

**Table 3.3** Table of Codes (Miles et al., 2014)

Subcodes of all first cycle codes were developed after all interviews were transcribed. Subcodes provided more specific qualitative analysis of the data. Analysis of the subcodes lead to the development of patterns, second cycle coding, that emerged from cross referencing values and evaluative codes with descriptive and process codes. As an example, data that were coded as chronological dynamics, or a process that were needed at a specific place and time, were also coded with a values code. This allowed for the identification of how teachers and administrators felt or valued certain processes or the value of certain resources. The subcodes are identified below in Table 3.4, along with the identified data points from each of the interview groups.

<b>First Cycle Code</b>	<b>Sub-Code</b>	<b>District Leaders</b>	<b>School Leaders</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Descriptive	Experience	21	25	14
Descriptive	Professional Development	19	26	22
Descriptive	Resources: Human	22	16	14
Descriptive	Resources: Technology	2	5	1
Descriptive	Resources: Financial	10	1	4
Descriptive	Resources: Information	3	7	3
Descriptive	Resources: Space	0	0	1
Descriptive	Resources: Time	3	10	5
Descriptive	Topics	0	0	0
Descriptive	Culture & Climate	6	47	59
Process	Procedures	2	15	12
Process	Chronological Dynamics	15	15	11
Process	Implementation Process	69	88	53

First Cycle Code	Sub-Code	District Leaders	School Leaders	Teachers
Process	Challenges	31	21	46
Evaluative	Evaluation	14	27	15
Evaluative	Critical Action	56	74	46
Evaluative	Organization	48	13	8
Evaluative	Frameworks	13	31	56
Values	Values	65	52	46
Values	Attitudes	10	18	26
Values	Beliefs	131	94	87

Table 3.4 Subcodes

Interview data was in first cycle codes and subcodes. An example of sub coded data can be found below in Table 3.5: Examples of Coded Data. An example is provided for each first cycle code. Pattern coding analyzed the coded and sub coded data to draw emerging themes from the data by comparing patterns that occurred within the first cycle coding.

Code	Examples of Coded Data with subcode distinction
Descriptive	District Level Administrator: “To develop our SEL framework, there are components of AVID and ACP. [They] both mesh with social, emotional learning of CASEL. Those are skills that students need to be college and career ready.” Coded as Informational Resource (RI)
Process	School level Administrator: We looked at restructuring our staffing. At that time, we had school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. The idea was to combine the role of guidance counselor and the social worker and create this new role that was a social emotional coach. Coded as a Implementation Process statement (IP)
Evaluation	Administrator: “SEL is becoming more important in this district, with the state moving in the direction of, and providing support for, a comprehensive school counseling model.” Coded as an Evaluative statement (E)
Value	SEL Coach: “My first impression [of the implementation plan] was thank goodness! We are finally going over the concepts, and really able to teach those concepts to all, to all students!” Coded as a Values statement (V)
Pattern	Allowed for Values coding to be applied to Process and Descriptive coding. The theme of high value being placed on SEL coaching emerged from the data

Table 3.5 Examples of Coded Data

## **Internal Validity and Triangulation**

Internal validity is a concern for case studies that make inferences (Yin, 2018).

Triangulation of data increased the accuracy of my findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process involved collecting interview data with different district and school leadership, and teachers. These data sources were semi-structured interviews. I built themes on converging data and perspectives given from participants. The coding of the interview transcripts generated rich descriptions and validated the reviewer's lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also clarified any researcher bias by engaging in reflexivity, and I discussed connections between emerging data and my past experiences and perspectives. By disclosing my biases and values, I added to the study's validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

One form of triangulation involved having two colleagues code two transcripts for the purposes of consistency. Both reviewers had doctorate degrees, one in psychology, and one in education. Their coding of data was very similar to my coding. While there was some variation, this exercise added to the trustworthiness of my coding for the remaining transcripts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

An additional form of triangulation involved collaborating with participants and seeking participant feedback with data analysis and coding of data. Participants were invited to respond to the coded data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three of the fifteen participants responded to the coded data with a sense of affirmation. There was no disagreement from participants with the coded data.

## **Study Limitations**

This study was limited to a medium-sized school district and participant selection in the Midwest. A further limitation was that the participants were selected from schools in a district

that had been identified as having implemented SEL. A further limitation was that the selected district may not include a diverse group of communities with diverse student populations or diverse staff members. This study focused on experiences of implementation of a known theoretical framework, highlighted in the review of the literature. Additional theoretical frameworks could exist outside of this review and implementation of such a theoretical framework is possible.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants received a statement of confidentiality, and participants were informed that the participant list will be confidential, with their general job description. The content of their conversations was confidential, as well. All necessary permissions were obtained before all interviews, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and participants determined the time and place of the interview. Electronic interviews reduced the chance of contagion associated with COVID-19.

### **Positionality Statement**

I have been a teacher for 28 years. Students have accelerated above the typical growth curve of learning through this duration, and students have dropped off completely. In my experience, it seems that these dynamic changes are not often related to the students' academic ability. I think these shifts, both positive and negative, are the result, or lack thereof, of established social, emotional growth. The inconsistency of SEL implementation is common. Such inconsistency should be replaced with an SEL framework. This study highlights several frameworks to choose from. I was conscious of my positionality throughout this study, and I acknowledge that my experiences shaped and influenced my positionality.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study focused on how a district implements Social Emotional Learning. Data were analyzed through two-cycle coding. Themes emerged from the data. The themes emerged are the focus of the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to understand how a district implements Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The case study focused on a single, medium-sized district in the Midwest that had implemented SEL throughout the schools in the district. Participants fell into three categories: (1) district-level administration, (2) school-level administration, and (3) teachers. This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative case study, which answered the following research questions: 1) How does a school district create or decide on a conceptual framework? and 2) How does the district's organizational structure manage resources for implementation?

### **How the School District Decided on the SEL Framework**

During the interviews, district administrators (high-level administrator, multilevel system support, and program directors and coordinators, school psychologist, and SEL coaches) provided insights on how the school district decided on the SEL conceptual framework. They explained that the SEL framework was selected for two conditions: (1) district existing programs were flexible enough to be integrated into the SEL framework, and (2) SEL framework was adopted by the state and aligned well with existing programs. There was no evidence that teachers and parents were directly involved in the decision-making process.

### **Existing Programs Integration into the SEL Framework**

The school district had four existing programs at various grade levels for improving behavior and preparing students for their futures. The four programs were Zones of Regulation (Zones), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), and Academic and Career Planning (ACP). Zones of Regulation was commonly used in the early elementary grades and PBIS was used at late elementary and middle school. Grades nine through twelve had an even use of ACP and AVID. AVID has a curriculum,

just like Zones, and ACP and PIBS are influenced by the Department of Public Instruction. These programs were flexible enough to integrate into the overarching SEL framework Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). One district-level administrator explained how the district selected the CASEL framework:

We wanted to ensure that we could grow the professional capacity of all of our employees and that our students were learning those skills and developing those attributes within their regular school day experience. [...] We went with CASEL. Some of the other options are not built to be integrated into existing lessons in other content areas. [...] The CASEL framework provides us with more flexibility in developing some of our own resources.

One district-level administrator explained that Zones of Regulation is a common approach to help elementary students maintain regulation in their district because it is “the most visible SEL language [used for] common lessons and strategies.” Zones has components of an existing SEL framework that can be integrated well with CASEL, as an SEL coach explained, “We looked at other curriculums. Teachers already knew Zones; students knew the Zones [...] it was more important to stay with what we were using and focusing on the Zones of Regulation and the social emotional thinking.” For district-level administrators, the CASEL framework provided more flexibility in developing the districts’ own resources.

CASEL was compatible with Zones of Regulation at the elementary level and allowed for integration at the middle and high school levels, as one SEL coach explained, “We’re looking for other resources within the same [SEL] framework that we can start building upon for the secondary level.” One school psychologist clarified this integration by saying that the CASEL “is not unlike some academic curriculums, we pick out some

of the key features from Zones, to be able to hit all of those CASEL competencies and do so in engaging, age-appropriate ways.”

During initial conversations about the CASEL framework, staff in administrative roles (SEL coaches, school psychologists, building principals, and district-level staff) discussed the potential overlap between Zones, PBIS, and CASEL, as one school principal explained:

...there was also the conversation about what does PBIS look like and where do those lines overlap and what should we be doing on all three buildings at the elementary, all three buildings kind of had their own flair for how they did social emotional. The district didn't want to uproot the zones structure, but we feel like we should frame it a little bit better. [...] I would say every year the CASEL framework becomes more focused in the kind of areas we [are] going to really pinpoint.

One advantage of the PBIS, as a building principal observed, was its usefulness for working with students needing interventions:

The implementation of PBIS supports the whole child and recognizes the different needs of students. I think [...] the one challenge that we face is fitting it all in and balancing the academics and all those SEL pieces, [...] CASEL is the one [framework] that we settled on pretty early. We felt it identified the main components of how we can best support our students.

The AVID program focuses on a college and career readiness program. A district administrator explained that “It's an actual elective class that our students in middle school and high school can elect to take.” In addition, to integrate the AVID program to CASEL, “We are trying to use some of those AVID strategies and embed [them] together so that [teachers] see this

as not one more thing, but a connection with all of SEL,” said the administrator. Another district-level administrator further explained that the AVID program is:

calibrated and consistent at all levels of [...] instruction and social emotional learning.

Those skills that students need to be college and career ready are very similar. Sometimes they are exactly the same as what CASEL would identify as their five competencies.

The academic side of AVID is called WICOR, which stands for Writing in Collaboration, Organization, and Reading. The collaboration in WICOR relies on relationships. A district-level administrator explained how the AVID program overlaps with social emotional learning:

AVID details and outlines the four stages of relational capacity that all teachers need to implement and address to some degree in their classrooms from the beginning of the year towards the end of the year. [...] I think that piece in and of itself has connections and overlaps with social emotional learning, and some of the tools and the strategies that our SEL coaches use to teach our students relationship building skills. I think that it's [...] intertwined.

Another program that overlaps with CASEL skills is the Academic and Career Planning (ACP), as this district-level coordinator described: “I think [...] ACP meshes with AVID obviously, and the skills that we've identified that our students need to graduate [...] can't untie from self-awareness and social awareness and all of those other [CASEL] skills.” Another district-level coordinator explained the connection between ACP and CASEL:

We identified certain skills that were important for our students to learn as an identified CASEL skill or strategy and make connections to our universal workforce readiness skills that we have through ACP and then make that third

connection to our AVID strategies that we know are important and tied to [...] research.

The district in this case study chose an SEL framework based on compatibility and flexibility. CASEL was the most compatible framework with the district's existing K-12 programs, which were Zones, PBIS, AVID and ACP. ACP had similar competencies of self-management and self-awareness. CASEL also proved to be flexible with district resources, which increased the usefulness of the existing programs when working with students.

### **SEL Framework Adopted by State and Aligned with Existing Programs**

The CASEL framework was selected because it aligned with the state framework and provided scope and sequence for integration into the district's current programs. Aligned scope and sequence allowed for strategic planning, classroom implementation, building an SEL curriculum that worked well with grade-level transitions, and implementation that worked with a diverse student population.

One district administrator put it simply: "In terms of state alignment, it just seemed to function in line with our existing structure." Another district administrator stated that scope and sequence allowed for the development of a strategic plan:

We have, as part of our strategic plan, a goal that's grounded in SEL. We need to have action steps and actionable items that we're going to accomplish as a result of setting this goal. Once the scope and sequence are established, then our next three-year strategic plan is beginning this work on creating goals and identifying tactics. That would be part of that strategic plan, looking at our SEL goals and identifying the data that we see as a result of implementation.

Scope and sequence were also considered important for classroom implementation, as one district-level program coordinator explained how SEL was integrated into the state standards: “My assistant superintendent really wanted to see a scope and sequence for what we're teaching. We took those [State] standards and we prioritized [SEL] standards in the same way that we've prioritized standards for reading and math.”

School-level administrators and coaches spoke to the need of a scope and sequence for implementation that works with grade-level transitions for students. One SEL coach said:

Right now, we're working on a scope and sequence for the district using CASEL. We know it's easier to implement some of these things at the elementary level than the secondary level. Our students are now moving up to the secondary level with all of this background and all of this [CASEL] language and we don't want to drop the language once they get to the secondary level.

A principal referred to the value of a scope and sequence as a catalyst to implement within a diverse student population:

We have found with our diverse student needs that we want to be able to access different resources to support their needs. [...] We did look at a number of different programs [...] looking at scope and sequence, that other states have created. CASEL is one that we settled on pretty early.

The scope and sequence constructed by the state provided advantages for the district to implement the CASEL framework into the classroom. One specific advantage was that the scope and sequence worked on a K-12 level, whereas existing district programs were limited to grade levels. This provided needed consistency for students and

staff. Additionally, the CASEL scope and sequence provided functionality in working with diverse student needs. These advantages of scope and sequence adoption led to the district selecting the CASEL framework for SEL implementation.

### **How the District's Organizational Structure Managed Resources for Implementation**

The second research question asked how the district's organizational structure managed the resources for SEL implementation. The literature (Greenberg et al., 2005) suggested implementation centers on five resources: financial, physical space, information, technology, and human resources. Three themes emerged from the second research question. All three focused on managing human resources that were critical for implementing the SEL conceptual framework: (1) creation of dedicated SEL coaches, (2) professional development for instructional staff, and (3) support for professional learning communities.

#### **Dedicated SEL Coaches**

The first key resource management decision to implement SEL in the classroom was to create new positions, specifically, dedicated SEL coaches. Both SEL coaches in this study had backgrounds in psychology and counseling. The SEL coaching position was a realignment of the school counselor role and integrated with student services. One innovative component of the role was to work with both students and teachers. The traditional school counselor role would be limited to only working with students. One administrator described the position:

It was important that we develop these positions as social emotional coaches.

Those individuals can support individual student needs as they're determined and they would help develop and grow the skillset of teachers, that can help our students grow their social emotional competence.

Another district-level administrator discussed how the SEL coaching role evolved:

The role of the school counselor was not the same as the role of the SEL coach. Creating that strategic plan initiated a domino effect. To accomplish this goal in three years, we needed to revamp our job description of what a school counselor is and transition that role to be an SEL coach. Then we need to hire these people and then we need to onboard these people.

The SEL coach position was an innovative move in human resources allocation for the district. One district-level administrator highlighted the importance of having a dedicated SEL coach as someone “...that is fully committed to the work of SEL and ensures that we'll continue to share the data and the importance of it with the district.”

### **Professional Development for Instructional Staff**

SEL coaches have several responsibilities. Professional development was a large component of their position and included providing professional development for both instructional practice and for the teacher’s self-management and self-awareness. Coaches were asked to analyze local survey data, specifically for school perceptions. Coaches were also asked to co-teach with teachers in the classroom.

Professional development started with the coaches’ training. Following their own training, the coaches provided professional development for the teaching staff. This process allowed teachers to integrate the SEL framework into the classroom, collaborate with other peers, and develop their own SEL self-awareness and self-management.

One district administrator described the SEL coach development: “We have relied on our SEL coaches for professional development who then would turn around and be the facilitators for their staff at their school building.” She continued with details of efficiency, “They provide lesson facilitation at minimal costs compared to professional development from CASEL who

would put the curriculum together in a sequenced manner. That makes sense to the SEL coaches.” This process provided personalization with coaching teachers. One SEL coach gave her impression of the approach:

We get trained and we bring it back. I think there's pros and cons to both. I think there's something to be said about us getting trained and coming back because we know how the systems work. We know how our teachers are going to respond. We know how to incorporate SEL into the curriculums that we're using. I think that's a win because we know how to fit [SEL] into our systems. We have good relationships with the teachers and we kind of collaborate with them to put it together.

### ***Professional Development and SEL Integration into the Classroom***

SEL integration into the classroom is facilitated through professional development. Collaboration was at the core of professional development. SEL coaches started with addressing competencies with classroom teachers and moved onto establishing a common SEL language for instructors to use.

One district administrator commented on the collaboration, which promoted professional development, saying, “I think that professional development is an important component of SEL integration, our three district-level specialists work collaboratively.” The district supported the human resource change and another district-level administrator elaborated on how that support occurs: “Our administration has absolutely embraced our school counselors and social emotional coaches’ capability of the professional development.”

Another district-level administrator stressed the commitment to professional development for SEL implementation stating, “We rely on our people. I would say probably 40% of my job is providing professional development to principals and to teachers. That's one of the big buckets of my job.” Collaboration of staff promoted the professional development required for SEL integration.

**Scope and Sequence.** Integrating SEL required a scope and sequence. The SEL coaches provided the integration for classroom teachers. One school-level administrator described the process, “The SEL coaches had to be involved in the day to day or the actual creation of the scope and sequence.” This professional development, according to a building principal, “...relied on our SEL coaches who then would turn around and be the facilitators for their staff at their school building, with individual lesson facilitation.” SEL coaches build the sequence for implementation.

One principal stated that the need for the professional development for teachers is significant as teachers are more centered on content:

Teachers are obviously very driven by the content. They want their students to be successful in their learning journeys. It takes a collective realization that the content really should come second because your students aren't going to learn anything if you're not taking care of their social emotional needs first.

Coaching increases the level of awareness for teachers on the instructional level. One coach explained that time was essential for that process:

Our school district is giving us time to work with the teachers and built-in time in advisory, which is huge to go into the classrooms and use the time to teach with

students. The teachers need [professional development] to respond to those questions, and they have many questions within those SEL areas.

With adequate time and an established scope and sequence for instruction, the coaches implemented CASEL into daily curriculum. One coach explained, “Once we got CASEL, and they did a good job of breaking it down to scope and sequence, I was able to coach my team and my staff members. We worked through it as a team.”

The specific training of implementation focused on the five CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. One coach explained, “They need to understand what the terms [and competencies] are, and examples of how these competencies are happening in the classroom, giving them a lot of examples.”

Professional development for SEL implementation started with identifying the need for understanding competencies. The transition for teachers was moving from a content-based model of instruction to identifying the needs of the student. Following the establishment of the SEL competencies, the next step in professional development for SEL implementation was to move toward a common language that would span K-12 instruction.

**Common Language.** Common language stems from the CASEL framework. One SEL coach described the goal of professional development around common language:

The [CASEL] common language that we're teaching [teachers] is from CASEL. There [are] five competencies. We want to make sure that we're all on the same page. We want to make sure that we can support each other and that the common language that we're using might help parents at home as well as it's helping in

school. Once the curriculum is taught, the staff use that common language to keep [SEL] going then throughout the years.

The SEL coaches developed a common language across grade levels. As students move through the grade levels, the teachers are on the same page with language. One elementary teacher said that this increases the likelihood of K-12 implementation:

So that [common language] is very helpful, especially speaking as the fourth-grade teacher at the upper end of the building, you can use that common language across the building, and they [students] can speak to any staff member, not just their classroom teacher. I think anytime you have that sort of a program, we're more on board.

A further advantage for SEL implementation is building a common language that can work for all students and teachers. This includes implementation with students with disabilities. A middle school teacher stated, "I can use that language with students who receive special education support. The general ed teacher can use that language. It's a universal tool to use. It's beneficial for the students to hear one common language throughout the school." The middle school teacher also provided a specific example of the assistance with classroom implementation:

I like the common language and expectations that are discussed in some of the [professional development] of social, emotional learning and [the expectation] of making sure that [SEL implementation] is carried out. Our principal checks in with us to make sure we're carrying out structures and common language and we're following the procedure of using the SEL coach.

Teachers were able to implement social emotional learning in their classrooms when the competencies of CASEL were understood and exemplified for them. The professional development continued with grade-level scope and sequence. The development of common language promoted implementation of scope and sequences for all students across grade levels. The process of implementing competencies and common language can integrate with content instruction. One district administrator described what it looks like:

As an elementary teacher, you have kids reading books, [and you have the] opportunity to talk about a main character's self-awareness or self-management. You have ripe opportunities for helping kids continue to grow and make connections to the other work that they're doing.

One teacher talked about their experience with SEL implementation:

I think it's kind of a slow integration. This is something that we're still growing every day. When we first started, it was small conversations, mostly about working with helping the teacher, who they were as an educator, their areas of [content], things like that. Coaches started working with the teachers first and then slowly integrated the building of [self] awareness within our students. It's a lot of growing pains at first, it does feel like additional work. Ultimately, the work that's being done comes more easily when you know your students best.

Professional development supported SEL implementation in the classroom. This district had SEL coaches deliver professional development to staff. The process started with developing understanding with the CASEL competencies, followed by scaffolded scope and sequence. The next step was developing and utilizing a common language for SEL instruction in the classroom that spanned the K-12 continuum.

### ***Professional Development for Teacher Self-Awareness and Self-Management***

One challenge of SEL implementation, stated by administrators and teachers alike, is the need for greater self-awareness and self-management of teachers themselves. This challenge was overcome through professional development completed by SEL coaches. One district-level administrator said, “When we talked about adding social emotional coaches, [...] we wanted to ensure that we could grow the professional capacity of all of our employees.” An elementary teacher stated, “We implemented SEL at the adult level.”

Developing the professional capacity of the staff began with self-awareness and resilience. One SEL coach described how the development would integrate with existing programs:

One professional learning opportunity that I have been doing with our AVID director is a professional growth opportunity for staff around educator resilience. That's one of the CASEL domains of implementation, staff learning [begins with the ability] to recognize their own emotions and their own feelings.

The lack of teachers’ self-awareness and self-management is a known limiting factor for SEL implementation in a school district (Oberle et al., 2016). This district initiated the professional development with SEL coaches for the specific purpose of teacher development.

The district chose professional development in the form of modeling and reflection. One principal spoke specifically about the modeling process, “We try to model [self-awareness] for [teachers] but it does take an open mind, you have to recognize that this is something that you as an individual need and find ways to work on.” Modeling gave the teachers an image of what the action of self-awareness could look like in the classroom. Reflection, according to a school principal, was needed for another step closer to implementation. Another principal had this to

say, “Reflection is something that I find extremely valuable. We try to incorporate some type of reflective question into every meeting that we have [...] and it takes vulnerability.” Reflection can be a difficult step for teachers as they are often thought of as the content experts. One principal felt that COVID allowed for a greater awareness of the need for reflection in both students and teachers. She explained:

That's something that I think is hard for teachers because they are so often viewed as the experts, the keeper of all the knowledge. I think COVID [...] brought to the surface [that] we were all vulnerable and [...] created different types of relationships within our building.

Modeling normalized the process of self-awareness, a crucial step for implementing SEL in the classroom. Reflection was important for teachers to become more vulnerable and in the process more self-aware.

One key point of developing self-awareness is knowing what one’s personal bias might be. One SEL coach described what that development would look like:

I would conduct training in SEL in two actions. One would be the teacher’s self-awareness and how they respond and their own personal bias. This includes controlling their own emotions and regulating their own thoughts and perspectives. This [happens when the] other training is learning about the SEL itself, learning strategies. We usually do it as a team.

Another school-level administrator added that coaching cycles increased the frequency of professional development, “We're in the stage right now where we're trying to develop [...] coaching cycles, and a teacher may be placed on a coaching cycle for teachers

needing some more support themselves.” That support could occur for many reasons and should not be considered in the negative connotation as a performance improvement plan.

One elementary teacher added her thoughts on her own journey through a coaching cycle:

Based on the professional development I've gone through, I'm definitely more aware of my own emotions and I think it's very important just like with academics that we have to model for the students. It's also important to admit to them that we're human and I can't tell you how many times we use the zones of regulation. And I can tell the students, “Well, guess what zone I'm in today? And here's why...”

Another middle school teacher shared her experience. While the professional development was productive in the end, the journey was difficult. This is a consideration for districts that plan on implementing SEL—the results of professional development are not immediate. That teacher said:

Collectively as a school and as a district, we have shifted [...] to social emotional learning for [...] ourselves, as staff members. That has come with a lot of transparent conversations, to do what's best for kids. You need to know yourself as an educator and you need to recognize when you might feel challenged as an educator and how you're going to respond to that with the idea that you're there for the children. You're not there for yourself. We've had a lot of very honest conversations about our areas of strength and our areas of growth and how we can build from our areas of strength into our areas of growth. [...] It isn't always comfortable, and I know we've done a lot of work with self-reflection and biases. I think the more upfront SEL coaches have been about our own professional

development, and not everyone is going to feel great about it, there is a lot of good that comes from that [professional development].

The experience shared above speaks to the difficulty of the process of developing one's own self-awareness.

Implementing SEL and the professional development that accompanies that work can be challenging. One middle school teacher stated that teachers can challenge the process. However, the effect of the pandemic provided a powerful experience for both students and teachers. This experience gave teachers an advantage of seeing the positive effect of SEL during the pandemic. The teacher said:

I think [SEL professional development] has the potential to die on the vine because louder teacher voices are overwhelmed in what we're trying to do to meet kids' needs. Yet, it seems like a pandemic and COVID, in particular, and a transition to being at home for almost an entire semester, and then last year with the nuance of people being able to elect in person or virtual, has the potential to really be a powerful thrusting point. I feel like COVID might have helped us with respect to understanding that kids' needs are beyond the four walls. I feel like educators might be able to [ask] now, [what are] our social and emotional learning responses to kids?

The experience of COVID-19 on educators and students increased the ability for teachers to develop their self-awareness. This pandemic increased the success of implementation among resistant teachers.

Not all teachers were resistant to their own professional development, one elementary teacher shared her experience of processing her self-awareness:

[The SEL coach] is someone who likes talking through situations and giving [SEL] advice of next steps and has been amazing. We call her our part-time therapist for educators because she has been an incredible therapist for all of us. Anyone who tells you, they haven't walked into [coach's] office and felt better about themselves leaving is lying because she's just amazing. From a social emotional point for staff, having someone who is just continuously supportive, but also very objective in her thinking, has been really nice.

This observation indicates that not all teachers will resist the professional development. In the above teacher's experience, she was grateful. The teachers' professional development was a key component to implementing SEL in the classroom.

One principal hypothesized that reduced suspensions and detentions were a direct result of teachers working on their own self-awareness and self-management. One principal said, "We started having an SEL gear that works with restorative practices as well. There's no way SEL just works in and of itself, building culture and just knowing that social emotional learning is critical for our students. An elementary teacher supported the same observation that teachers who underwent the professional development with fidelity could implement SEL into their classroom. She said:

At the end of the day or week, [teachers] have a wrap up where the kids can participate in an appreciation apology. They get to choose one of three things. They can say an appreciation for something in the week. They can make an apology if they need to, to have a fresh start the next week, or something that they learned from that week. You could truly see in a restorative circle. Other students in the class get a chance to express their feelings and how they felt about [the

apology or appreciation]. In one case, an apologizing student actually did hear what everyone had to say, and they are able to turn that page. After his turn, several students in the class were able to give him an appreciation for that. And truly we were able to have that fresh start.

Teachers had different journeys in their professional development of self-awareness. For some, the pandemic helped demonstrate the need for SEL. Some teachers had a positive experience with their development, and some were challenged by the process. Regardless of the experience, the effect of the professional development led to positive student growth in the classrooms that engaged in SEL implementation.

### **Co-Teaching Coaches**

SEL coaches co-taught with content teachers in the classroom. This practice solidified previous professional development of scope and sequence integration, common language use among teachers and students, and teachers developing their own self-awareness and self-management. Coaches as co-teachers helped the classroom teachers perfect their craft of SEL integration into the classroom instruction and ultimately, implement SEL in the district.

One principal described how co-teaching enhanced her professional development: Having [a coach] come in the class allowed the teacher to work through [SEL] with the students. I think SEL implementation [requires the teacher to] build a lot of empathy for the child. [Co-teaching] builds that relationship between the teacher and the child and the teacher and the coach as well.

The co-teaching model included working with students in large group instruction, problem-solving with students in the classroom, and working and planning with staff. One SEL coach

said, “co-teachers have a more proactive role with students and in SEL implementation in the classroom.” One school-level administrator spoke to the development of co-teaching for SEL implementation, saying, “I think our universal system wasn’t totally yet designed for [SEL coaches as co-teachers]. [Classroom] teachers really valued it. They made it happen and continue to make it happen. But it's been a long road for sure.”

The universal system is the pedagogy of one teacher in front of the classroom with a teacher-centered model of instruction. One SEL coach elaborated on the pedagogical shift that promoted SEL implementation:

[Co-teaching] has definitely been a mind shift. And one that I've happily made.

We're not just reactive and that's where the coaching part comes in because I'm in a building of 650 students. I do teach classes; I team teach with staff. Really, me doing one class is not going to support what students need, one 35-minute block? And if that's all we talk about, they don't learn how it incorporates it into the rest of their day.

Another SEL coach described that co-teaching professional development allows teachers to help students to integrate their social emotional learning into their life and subject learning. She made the point that one class or a stand-alone class will not support the students and teachers who are struggling with SEL implementation in the same way co-teaching supports the implementation. She further explained:

Teaming with teachers who are [struggling] at that, they're just like, “I don't know how I don't want to do this!” So, there’s more support on that end compared to the other end of the teachers who are all gung-ho and ready to do it. If you don't have that information and that capacity to run a group, please do not do it. Co-teaching

helps teachers to work with students and give [teachers] enough information [and] be more prepared when they want to talk about SEL. A lot of times, especially with middle-schoolers in the classroom, it can spin in 12 different directions. Co-teaching gives the teachers that capacity to keep it safe for the classroom and be able to get those responses or comfortable enough to talk about these responsible responses.

One school-level administrator added that SEL co-teaching coaches provided additional resources for teachers who are struggling with implementing SEL saying, “Teachers have linked up our social emotional coaches to make sure that there is common messaging, some teachers need more help with this and [they] don't know what to do.” In some cases, the co-teaching coaches are available to help as stated above, and in other cases the coaches bring a wealth of development for teachers to become more efficient. One principal described how that development and efficiency increased their confidence with SEL implementation within the academics of instruction. She said:

My staff has really valued [co-teaching]. I think the one challenge that we maybe face is fitting it all in and balancing academics and [SEL]. Teachers with students with more significant needs are not feeling confident. They want our coach to provide more intervention. So, it's really not different than the struggles that we faced from an academic lens. The coaches build the capacity of the rest of the staff. I think that's through professional learning, but it's also through coaching. We've taken the approach that when there is a situation with a student, it's not the coach coming in and removing the student. It's coming in and helping work through the situation, [...] in the classroom, in front of the teachers.

Another principal described this model as not necessarily being easier, however it is better for the student, “I think [there] are times when our teachers really don't like it because it's much easier to have someone come in [and] take care of [the intervention] while [the teacher] continues teaching a lesson. They know that that's a resource for them.”

Three of the five teachers spoke to their experience of the co-teaching advantage for SEL implementation. One middle school teacher said, “I think it's interesting from the coaching standpoint, the [coach] is an incredible resource. Like if we are struggling with students, [coach] spends so much time building authentic relationships with not only students, but also families.” This middle school teacher reinforced the concept of a coach being a resource. An elementary teacher added to the story of coaches as resources, “As a new educator, I received a lot of support from a social emotional coach, on the front end to be proactive with students.” Another middle school teacher valued the co-teacher coach as a resource that decreased antiquated procedures of working with students and behavior referrals:

For me, having the social emotional coach in the classroom is an important thing because they would be that buffer zone between the teachers and administration. It's a proactive approach of working with students with social emotional needs. Before co-teaching coaches, I have to go and talk to the guidance counselor, I have to talk to the principal, or it becomes an issue with the peers. I think our SEL coach just kind of blends with that student services office in a nice capacity.

Co-teaching coaches provided professional development for teachers. That development came in both SEL theory, as stated by some administrators, and also in personal development of self-awareness and self-management.

An innovative approach to human resource management provided professional development for teachers. That development included 1) professional learning of SEL integration, composed of CASEL scope and sequence, 2) professional development for their own self-awareness and self-management, and 3) coaching in the classroom with real-time professional development as co-teachers. The three layers of professional development provided the resources needed for SEL implementation across the district.

### **Professional Learning Communities Emerged from Professional Development**

Part of the district's organizational structure for managing resources for implementation was the development of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). The PLC had a focus on data assessment and support for implementation improvement. One principal described the PLC focus as a planning, serving, and learning team. She explained:

Conversations developed between our social emotional coach and grade-level teams. We have what are essentially professional learning community meetings. We call them co-planned to co-serve, to co-learn, or [also known as] C-3 meetings. We've had in the past assigned an [SEL coach] to [those C-3 meetings], once a month, to sit down with each of the grade-level teams. They're going to talk about the student data. They're going to talk about concerns. [The SEL coach] is a resource. And that's how the PLC really came out of those conversations. When we sit down and have kind of those big, broad questions for developing a goal of research and things like that, they're able to develop areas that [the coaches] have really spent time reading up on.

The PLC provided support for teachers. One teacher spoke of their experience of support and collaboration that occurred within the PLC:

I think it's nice to have coaches to support any questions referring a student or bringing concerns to team. It's also helpful to have those SEL coaches come to our grade-level meetings, like a collaboration time. I think that's a really important thing for schools to implement this, that they could have a coach and have that coach available for collaboration time. That's important.

### ***Data Assessment Teams***

Teachers and administrators referred to data assessment as a core function in their PLC. They spoke to their experience of an SEL-centered data assessment team, which included their SEL coach. Those teams and PLC meetings helped increase the productivity of SEL implementation of teachers by developing learner profiles from the data analysis of grade-level data and culture and climate surveys. One teacher described the functionality of the assessment team approach:

I was running into behavior management issues with students. They [SEL coaches] attended our PLC meetings about once a month at each grade level and give us updates on our grade-level data. We have data-driven decisions and can start more proactive activities, procedures, and incentives in place [for students].

We can see that the data [are] driving this. [...] We need to continue this practice. Some participants mentioned that the pandemic had increased their level of awareness of the importance of social emotional learning. Another teacher spoke candidly of his increased productivity while working with a data team. The relevance of the PLC become more evident as the pandemic added stress to teaching:

In the past, I didn't go in for data meetings [...]. I just want to work with kids. I guess 16 months ago, we were at the end of that 2019-2020 school year, when the

big buzz was thinking about how we do education. Now we have this opportunity to change what we're doing. And it was huge. I mean, everybody was on board and like, what's changed? Here we are, 16 months later, and really what's changed? We have a PLC. I think social emotional has become more prioritized in administrative talk, [that includes] scope and sequence data growth.

Learner profiles were a product of the data assessment teams. Students had a learner profile that was composed by the team from academic and SEL data. The profile had an action plan for the student. One teacher discussed the development of academic and SEL learner profiles:

The student learner profile starts with their skills. We use our map data for their academic skills, but then for their social and emotional health, [the profile] provides tips to continue to grow throughout the year. The list [of tips] expands throughout the year. When we get the incoming class, we kind of have a view what their needs are.

Learner profiles travel with the student and as the student moves onto the next grade level, the new grade-level teacher receives the learner profile. This process increases the productivity of implementing SEL.

The culture and climate surveys provided data for the PLC data teams. These data sets are used to assess growth of the program at particular grade levels. These data allow PLCs to determine the growth areas and areas of success that can be used across the district. One district-level administrator spoke of their observation of success with data teams:

We see [data] in a couple of different areas. In school, climate and culture surveys, [we see] if a student feels safe in their environment. In teacher referrals,

we see less referrals, especially with peer interactions and peer conflicts, because kids are developing skills to resolve conflict. I think [the data] show in school perception or pulse surveys that [students] feel that they belong, that they have self-management skills, and their social emotional aptitude or wellness is in a good spot. You [now] see kids demonstrating what they need and not feeling guilty about it, needing to take a breathing moment here and that they'd feel comfortable enough to be themselves.

Learner profiles and survey data added to the culture of continuous improvement. One principal spoke to the cultural change of staff being open to data analysis. That level of openness contributed to the culture of the PLC:

Everybody sees the data. If I am teaching fourth grade and my kids are not meeting their benchmarks [in] reading and writing, I see that data, but so do my other colleagues, right? And that's not to scare anybody or make them feel bad. It's just, this is the data now, what do we need to get better to help our students? So [our district] is very much a culture that's data driven with high expectations for our kids that in turn creates high expectations for our staff. We've had staff just say it's not the right fit for me, it is what it is. Some staff say "I would prefer to go to a district that is less [open]. So, they also have that self-awareness to identify and say, "Hey, this is the culture of the district. These are the things that are expected of me. I don't think I'm the kind of educator that maybe fits in."

The staff that stay in the district develop self-awareness and self-management that promotes continuous improvement. That process focuses on the data, the assessment of

the data, and the quality of instruction. That focus allows for successful management of resources required for SEL implementation.

### **Summary of Findings**

This chapter presented the findings of the qualitative case study. Two research questions were addressed in this study: 1) How does a school district create or decide on a conceptual framework? and 2) How does the district's organizational structure manage resources for implementation? The CASEL framework was selected for two reasons: (1) district existing programs were flexible enough to be integrated into the SEL framework, and (2) SEL framework was adopted by the state and aligned well with existing programs. The school district took advantage of existing programs and state adoption of the SEL conceptual framework and used human resource strategies to implement the SEL framework in the classroom. While the teachers were not involved in the framework decision-making process, the teachers were highly engaged in the SEL implementation process with SEL coaches by participating in professional development and professional learning communities.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

The implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) on the district level has been shown to provide significant benefits to students (Alexander & Vermette, 2019a). While there are many published strategies for implementation, the research suggests that implementation is complicated and highly dependent on resources (Greenberg et al., 2005). Further, the implementation process does not guarantee student benefits (Durlak, 2016). The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of how a district implements SEL. One school district in the Midwest was used as a case study to answer the following questions: 1) How does a school district create or decide on a conceptual framework? and 2) How does the district's organizational structure manage resources for implementation? Fifteen participants composed of district-level administrators, school-level administrators, and teachers provided their time and thoughts for interviews.

This case study found that the district chose the CASEL framework based on a variety of reasons pertaining to their organizational structure and external factors. The implementation of the CASEL framework was viewed through the lens of district resources. One innovation required a change in organizational structure from a human resource perspective, specifically, integrating SEL coaches within a new school counseling structure. This was an innovative approach to solving the implementation problem as the SEL coaches became the fulcrum for SEL implementation.

The findings relating to implementation are viewed through the lens of inner and outer contexts of conditions, resources (Greenberg et al., 2017), and limitations. From this perspective, bridging factors (Moullin et al., 2019) could be analyzed and became key components of implementation. One key factor was COVID-19, which became a catalyst for implementation.

In this chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the literature, study limitations are identified and detailed, and future research is proposed in three possible areas. Conclusions are drawn about the study and my change in perspective is discussed.

### **Discussion**

Implementation science is a continued area of study. Findings from this case study on SEL implementation can be compared to the works of Greenberg et al. (2005) regarding the identification of resources required for implementation and Aarons et al. (2011) regarding the identification of the inner and outer contexts of factors that influence implementation. As stated in Chapter 2, the inner context refers to the organization structures and resources of the school district. This would include structures such as district policies and practices, and resources such as financial, human, physical, technological, and informational. The outer context could refer to the same resources as one might find in an inner context, however, the outer context refers to any condition outside the school district. The outer context includes federal and state laws, educational policies that affect the district, research and development by outside entities, foundations, and the political environment that could include neighboring districts. There are many inner and outer contexts.

A review of the implementation science by Moullin et al. (2019) suggests that the relationship and interconnectedness, also known as bridging factors, of the inner context of implementation and the outer context of implementation have a greater influence on each other and the implementation process than previously thought. Further, the bridging factors between the two can have a synergy (Moullin et al., 2019). The resources required for implementation exist in both inner and outer contexts. This case study revealed key bridging factors, supporting the new research on implementation science. This case study also filled some gaps in the

research regarding how a district's organizational structure bridges the inner context of resources in regard to the outer context of the educational environment.

The following discussion is composed of five subtopics: 1) bridging factors, 2) SEL coaches as implementors, 3) SEL coaches as bridging factors, 4) informational resources, and 5) outer contexts of implementation. Bridging factors of implementation highlight the actions that exist between the inner and outer contexts. Moullin et al. (2019) hold these factors to be key components of implementation. SEL coaches are the fulcrum of SEL framework selection and implementation. This section discusses their role in that process. SEL coaches are bridging factors in the daily work of SEL implementation. This section discusses their work and application to informational resources. Subsection four focuses on the specifics of information resources required for SEL implementation. Subsection five focuses on outer contexts that influenced SEL implementation in this case study, most notably is the effect of COVID-19 on students and the K-12 system, and how that effect moved SEL implementation at a faster pace.

### **Bridging Factors**

One finding from this case study supported the importance of bridging factors of inner and outer contexts (Moullin et al., 2019). One outer context is the CASEL competencies of the framework. The CASEL framework informed the state standards. The influence of state standards is considered an outer context because it is outside the district. The outer context could benefit the district in the SEL framework integration because it aligns with existing programs within the district (Aarons et al., 2011). While the implementation was supported by the district administration and the SEL coaches, the coaches, an inner context of human resources, were the most active personnel in the classroom implementation. The coaches were the bridging factor as they developed the student-friendly language. In looking at Figure 5.1: Framework Selection

Contexts, the coaches were the grease between the inner and outer context gears. Without their presence and function, the gears of inner and outer context would seize, and implementation would not be possible as there would be no framework chosen to be implemented.

A second bridging factor of the inner and outer context in choosing a framework was the value of the research associated with CASEL held by the SEL coaches—the inner context being grade-level application and the outer context being the CASEL alignment with existing programs. This bridging factor aligns with research of Moullin et al. (2019), suggesting that SEL implementation will be more successful if there is a strong fit or compatibility between what the coaches and implementers value and the values that are reflected in the SEL framework to be implemented. The SEL framework, CASEL in this case study, the outer context, was highly valued based on the existing research supporting the growth of students. The work of Durlak (2016) expounds the value of the CASEL framework and the five competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) for increasing academic achievement and student well-being. The high value that the coaches and administrators placed on CASEL was a bridging factor. Moullin et al. (2019) supports the importance of valuing the work of implementation and becomes a bridging factor for the required work of the inner context for SEL implementation.

Moullin et al. (2019) supports the notion that the inner and outer contexts must work in unison, or in concert with each other. The coaches in this case study spoke to the high degree of reciprocating contexts in both program alignment (outer) and common language (inner), and state programs (outer) and grade-level application (inner). The bridging factor of synergy or reciprocation between the pair of factors provided the needed context in the classroom environment. CASEL offered this context. Other SEL framework types mentioned in Chapter 2,

such as applied practice programs, i.e., Habits of Mind or theoretical frameworks, such as Foundations for Young Adult Success, did not provide the context for classroom implementation. Those two other types of frameworks had shortcomings. The applied practice programs lacked the theory required for state standard development and would not provide the outer context. The theoretical framework types lacked the inner context of student-friendly language and grade-level application with existing programs. This lack of an inner context would not support classroom implementation but would support standalone programming. Unfortunately, standalone programming is far less effective than embedded implementation (Wigelsworth et al., 2016).

### **SEL Coaches as Implementors**

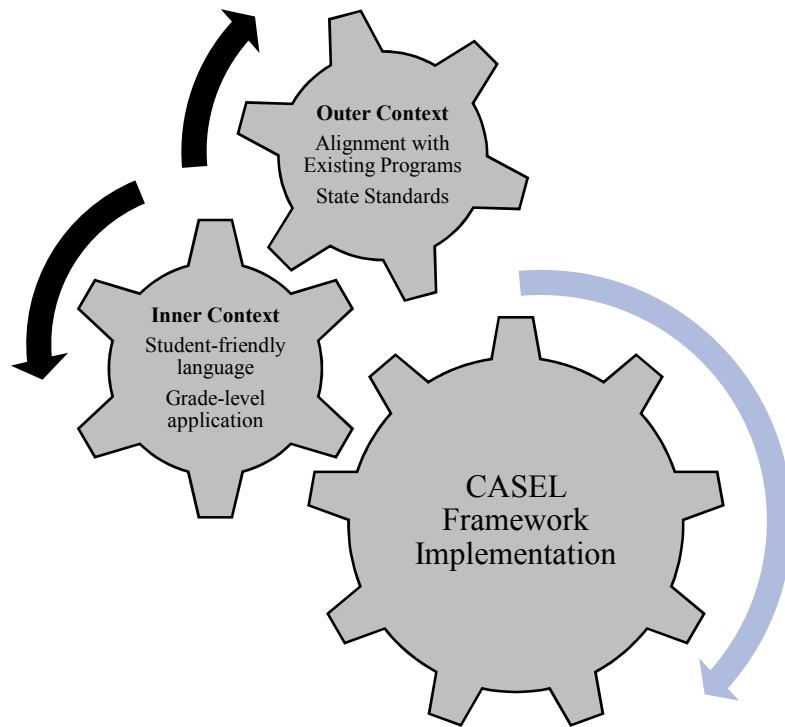
The functional role of the SEL coaches in this case study supports the research that suggests that implementors of SEL in the classroom often have professional degrees in psychology and experiences in a clinical setting (Durlak et al., 2015). The SEL coaches in this case study had those qualifications, outside of a traditional professional education background, and had expertise in psychology. The backgrounds of the coaches provided benefit for both professional learning of developmental psychology and the development of their own self-awareness.

In this case study, SEL coaches are at the center of the inner conditions of SEL framework selection and implementation. Managing the five resources of finances, human resources, information, space and technology, would be the traditional challenge of implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). The coaches did not manage financial, physical, or technological resources. Further, there did not seem to be a need for those three resources for implementation. This finding challenges the research of Greenberg et al. (2005), which assumes all five resources are necessary. With

little financial strain related to implementation, these findings also question the criticism that SEL is too costly to implement. McClelland et al. (2107) observed that the perceived financial burden of SEL implementation has fueled popular criticism. Both Durlak et al. (2015) and McClelland (2017) disagree with the notion of a financial burden related to SEL implementation.

The coaches in this case study integrated existing district day-to-day programs into the chosen SEL framework. District leaders recognized the overlap in both competencies and practice at the elementary and middle levels with Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Zones of Regulation. The scope and sequence provided by the state allowed for an SEL integration with PBIS and Zones. SEL coaches and administrators stated that this integration provided flexibility for the implementation process at the K-8 level.

The integration of CASEL with Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Academic and Career Planning (ACP) programming was a bridging factor (Moullin et al., 2019). The integration occurred at the 6-12 grade level. The competencies of both CASEL and AVID allowed for an embedded model within the classroom, as pointed out by district level administrators. The same integration occurred with Academic and Career Planning (ACP) and CASEL. The administration valued the alignment of ACP and CASEL. Further, the alignment promotes embedded SEL and is supported by the research of Wigelswoth et al. (2106), which states that embedded implementation is far more effective than standalone models (Wigelswoth et al., 2016). Integrating with existing programs further supports and deepens the understanding of what SEL skills are like when applied in the classroom (Walker, 2020). Figure 5.1: Framework Selection Factors lists the inner and outer factors.

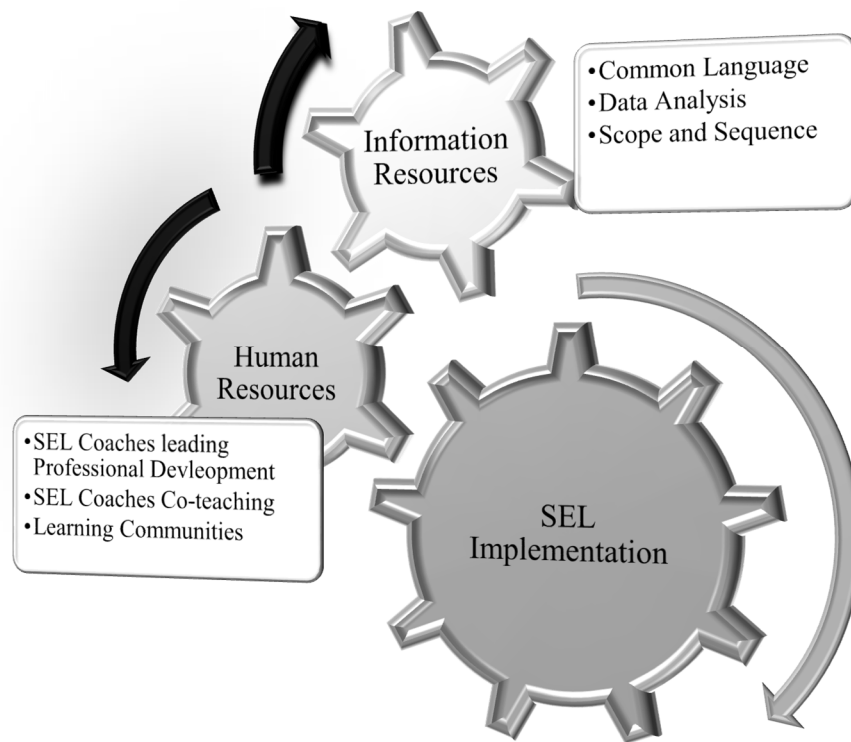


**Figure 5.1. Framework Selection Contexts**

**Implementation.** The informational resources were scope and sequence, common language, and data analysis. The human resources were SEL coaches, professional development, learning communities, and co-teaching coaches. Those components are represented in the gear figure below, Figure 5.2: Specific Resources for SEL implementation. The graphic represents the idea that human resources are the gear that drives and supports implementation. In addition, the information resources are important for implementation, it seems that implementation would not be possible with to implement SEL, as a single gear. It should be known that smaller gears need to turn faster than larger gears in order to turn the larger gear, SEL Implementation. In this case, both human and informational resources need to turn fast in order for the SEL implementation gear to turn moderately fast.

In this study, the designation of SEL coaches was an initial step for implementation. That district level decision was a bridging factor for the professional development of the instructional staff, co-teaching coaches, and the development of learning communities, which are dependent on SEL coaches.

The findings also suggest that the informational resources of common language are dependent on SEL coaches and professional development, exhibited by the idea of the cogs of the gears interlocking for implementation progress to occur. The scope and sequence of implementing the SEL framework through grade levels was an informational resource that was developed by the state and would be an outer context (Moullin et al., 2019). Data analysis includes student attendance, academic performance, behavior observations, and student survey results.



**Figure 5.2. Specific Resources for SEL Implementation**

The documented benefits of SEL implementation include increased academic success (Oberle et al., 2016). For sustained implementation, Durlak (2016) supports the need for integrating an SEL framework into the culture of the district. However, SEL implementation is a complex process involving informational resources (Alexander & Vermette, 2019a). The literature of case studies that supports how informational resources are used in SEL implementation is sparse. Allbright et al. (2019) describe a case that focuses on daily routines and classroom snapshots of SEL in action; however, there was no direction of how to integrate standards into common language or student survey data collection. Findings in my study indicate that an SEL framework needs to align with existing programs and the district culture that

supports those programs. Informational resources compose the scope and sequence, common language, and the use of data. The SEL coach was in the center of the learning and application of those informational resources.

Scope and sequence resources came from the state and were aligned with CASEL. The resources that originated from the state Department of Public Instruction were aligned with the existing programs that the district was using. The existing programs were Zones of Regulation, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, Advancement via Individual Determination, and Academic and Career Planning. These programs are also supported by the state Department of Public Instruction; however, the district is charged with integrating existing programs and an SEL framework, a requirement for implementation (Berg et al., 2017). The SEL coaches had the responsibility of integrating the scope and sequence into the existing programs.

Data analysis in grade-level teams was an ongoing information resource that guided the instruction for staff. The data analysis included student profiles, attendance data, student survey data, and classroom observational data. These data sets informed the teams of student progress within their classrooms and informed the team of the next steps for SEL implementation. Individual student intervention plans were also a product of the data analysis. My study suggests that data analysis is an integral component of the ongoing process of implementation.

### **SEL Coaches as Bridging Factors**

SEL implementation hinges on SEL coaches. The findings of my study suggest that without the coaches, professional development of teachers and the development of learning communities would not occur. Findings from my study supported previous research that stated the need for SEL coaches to have a background in the mental health field (Durlak et al., 2015). However, the literature is sparse regarding the use of SEL coaches or the processes of how to

develop coaches for the role of supporting the other human resource factors, and how those resources interact with the informational resources. Coaches became a bridging factor (Moullin et al., 2019) for the learning community and the informational resources (data analysis, scope and sequence, and common language) in my study.

Gorski and Dalton (2020) suggest that one limiting factor for SEL implementation is the limited self-awareness and self-management of teachers. Wigglesworth et al. (2016) identified the lack of self-awareness in teachers as a limiting factor in SLE implementation. The root problem lies in the teachers' inability to address ways to develop the self-awareness of students if teachers do not have their own self-awareness (Gorski & Dalton, 2020). This case study illuminated options for professional development for teachers in their own self-awareness by working with the SEL coaches, who had backgrounds in clinical psychology. This finding supports the research that SEL coaches with a background in psychology are more successful (Durlak et al., 2015). In addition, my study adds to that notion in how teachers can develop their self-awareness as teachers with individual coaching sessions. While professional development is often difficult for teachers (Durlak, 2016), the SEL coaches provided professional development to the teachers in a non-threatening and personalized manner. While the process was stressful for some teachers, there was no evidence of long-term stress on teachers.

Co-teaching coaches allowed for real-time coaching in the classroom and provided teachers the opportunity to use the language and integrate the scope and sequence with grade-level specifics. This practice gave teachers confidence. Smurr and Cano (2021) add that co-teaching English literature and social emotional learning provides a context for students, specifically, allowing students to understand the SEL competencies through character

development. Rabin (2019) adds that developing a co-teaching structure increases caring student-teacher relationships and provides a foundation for increased self-management.

Professional learning communities (PLC) have been in the literature for decades and many of the professional learning communities have a focus on social awareness (Durlak et al., 2015). This research aligns with the social awareness and responsible decision-making competencies of CASEL as the district worked through the challenges presented by the pandemic. Professional learning communities in the district addressed student needs associated with social awareness by developing empathy for students in their socially restricted lives. Coaching occurred in the PLC as teachers recognized the increasing needs of students. COVID-19 quarantines and isolations heightened the need for developing social awareness of students. This case study illuminated the organic development of the PLC with an SEL focus, and at the center of that development is the SEL coach. The SEL coach position provides both professional development for teachers and the teaching and learning of informational resources.

### **Informational Resources**

The informational resources were scope and sequence, common language, and data analysis. Integration of K-12 existing programs with CASEL required a student-friendly language that worked across the grade-level programs with seamless transition. District-level administrators spoke to the overlap of both ACP and AVID principles with the five competencies of the CASEL model. The SEL developed language was constructed by the SEL coaches. They worked to integrate that language into classroom instruction, data teams, and coaching. In that sense, the SEL coaches became a bridging factor and converged the outer factors with the inner factors and developed the compatibility of CASEL. Adopting a common language that is aligned with the programs and the SEL framework was the work of student services and the SEL

coaches. Integrating that language into the classroom was the work of the coaches through co-teaching and professional development. The coaches adopted the common language across existing programs and continue to work to maintain that language across the grade levels.

The district in this case study used multiple measures for data analysis. This practice supported research that suggested that multiple measures of social emotional competence of students within the context of the culture and climate would increase reliability (Berg et al., 2017). The district used multiple measures of student survey data, achievement data, and teacher observation data with co-teaching coaches. Data analysis occurred within the PLC team meeting. This case study supports the research in suggesting that using additional measures increases the ability to meet the SEL needs of the students (Berg et al., 2017).

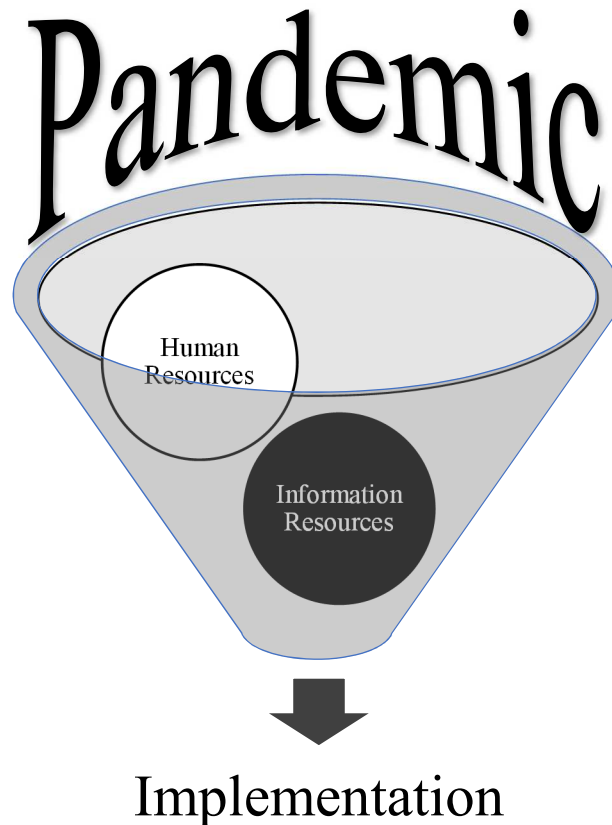
### **Outer Contexts of Implementation**

This case study highlights the benefit of working with a framework that is adopted by the state Department of Public Instruction. This finding is specific to the outer condition of implementation. For the district in this case study, an important factor in choosing an SEL framework was working with a scope and sequence developed by the state. This finding supports the research of creating a shared language of SEL goals (Berg et al., 2017). Berg et al. (2017) suggests that school districts should develop their own language, student surveys, and data assessments with their local culture and climate to meet the needs of students within that culture. Findings from this study support the importance of the outer factor of state adoption of the SEL framework for the development of common language. This outer context provided guidance or could be considered a gear that turned the development of inner factor of student-friendly language.

The findings from my study suggest that SEL implementation may not be dependent on all five resources as outlined by Greenberg (2005). The two required resources were human and informational. The three resources that did not seem to be a factor in SEL implementation were physical space, technology, and financial resources. Durlak (2016) labeled financial burden as a limiting factor, which suggests that implementation of an SEL framework other than CASEL, such as the Clover Model, could be more expensive (Borowski, 2019); however, some models aligned with state initiatives would not bring that expense. This is an important finding as proprietary frameworks become more popular for districts to initiate. It is evident from my study that districts can implement SEL without undue budget challenges, and human and informational resources are imperative for implementation.

My study revealed that human and information resources are intertwined in their relationship and importance to each other; however, those two resources did not exist in a vacuum, key bridging factors intertwined the resources and influenced SEL implementation. Coaches were a bridging factor for implementation. Another bridging factor was COVID-19, the pandemic accelerated the process of implementation. My study supports recent research regarding the effects of COVID-19 on K-12 education. Three effects greatly influenced the speed of implementation: (1) COVID-19 created isolation of students and staff through quarantines and isolation (Summers, 2020), (2) COVID-19 increased the perceived SEL need of students as they developed greater anxiety and depression (Rosanbalm, 2021), and (3) COVID-19 also increased the use and function of virtual learning, which required new ways of learning and new skills by both students and teachers (Kamei & Harriott, 2021). Figure 5.3: SEL Implementation During a Pandemic, shows an illustration of those two resources in a funnel. Funnels require

gravitation pull for an output. In this case study, COVID-19 provided a gravitational pull as the need for SEL became more evident as students and staff struggled through the pandemic.



**Figure 5.3. SEL Implementation during a Pandemic**

The effect of COVID-19 led to an increased awareness of the need for SEL implementation. This case study revealed that the level of awareness increased for teachers and school-level and district-level administrators. The findings suggest that the pandemic was a catalyst for teachers in developing self-awareness and self-management. Both coaches and teachers spoke to the pandemic as a factor that allowed the acceptance of professional development. The adjustment from face-to-face instruction to virtual learning increased the potential for social isolation. Increased isolation during the pandemic has promoted the

manifestation of stress and anxiety (Kamei & Harriott, 2021). The increased need for SEL implementation is supported in the research by Rosanbalm (2021) who found that the SEL needs will increase even with schools returning to normal. Rosanbalm (2021) suggests that the educational system has experienced considerable stress and anxiety and K-12 education will experience long-term negative effects. Teachers in this case study reported that student isolation was common, which highlighted the need for SEL integration into daily instruction. Additional research suggests that SEL instruction and coaching is the most likely process that could equalize the setbacks to students due to COVID-19 (Summers, 2020). In this case study, teachers became more focused on the necessity of implementation as the need became more evident.

### **Key Study Contributions**

The discussion of SEL framework selection and implementation focused on two conceptual understandings relating to implementation science, resource management, and inner and outer contexts of influence. First, the district in this case study illuminated the notion that not all predicted resources were needed as indicated by Greenberg et al. (2005, 2017). The second conceptual understanding of implementation science was investigating the inner and outer context of resources and the influence of bridging factors between the inner and outer contexts (Moullin et al., 2019). Three key contributions emerged from this case study: (1) the influence of inner and outer contexts in SEL framework selection, (2) the identification of key resources influencing SEL implementation, and (3) the influence of a pandemic on the SEL implementation.

The first key contribution of this study is the relationship between specific inner and outer contexts in understanding how a district decides on an SEL framework as is demonstrated in Figure 5.1: Framework Selection Contexts and how a district decides on an SEL framework.

Most important are the bridging factors between the specifics of the contexts, in this case, the alignment of the existing programs in the district with the outer context of state standards. Since education is a service industry, a bridging factor is who would do the heavy lifting of the implementation of the SEL framework, which in this case was the work of the SEL coaches.

The second key contribution of this study identified the key resources required for implementation and the relationship of the subparts of those key resources. These relationships, exhibited in Figure 5.2: Specific Resources for SEL Implementation, show the connection between human resources and information resources. Inherent in this figure is the importance of highly talented and functional SEL coaches with backgrounds in the mental health field. The coaches led professional learning communities, participated in co-teaching for SEL classroom integration, and assisted the teachers in learning about SEL, as well as professionally developing the instructional staff for their own self-awareness and self-management growth.

The third key contribution is the relationship between the human resources and informational resources in the time of a pandemic. Figure 5.3: SEL Implementation During a Pandemic exemplifies the catalyst of COVID-19. COVID-19 initially would be an outer context; however, the pandemic had an inner context influence in two ways. The pandemic drastically affected educational practice, including the minds of teachers and students with illness, quarantines, and isolation, and it affected the students and teachers emotionally with increased stress and anxiety (Rosanbalm, 2021), heightening the awareness and need for SEL.

### **Study Limitations**

This case study has seven limitations. First, all the participants worked for the same school district in the same geographical area in the Midwest. It may be the case that a different district structure, relating to human resources, may influence factors in different ways that lead to

a successful implementation. One example could be maintaining a traditional school counseling model and therefore not developing SEL coaches, which could influence how a district chooses and implements a framework.

Second, study participants shared an excitement and desire to implement SEL. The participants also valued the work and goal of SEL implementation. The literature suggests that there can be teacher resistance to SEL implementation (Chernyshenko et al., 2018) and that resistance can slow the process of implementation (Durlak, 2016). This may be the case for districts in the initial stages of implementation that may not have teacher engagement or excitement in the process. If this study were to occur in the early stages of implementation for this district, the participants may have provided different responses. This study occurred after initial implementation and the benefits of SEL implementation were realized by the district.

Third, this case study was limited to a school district with a moderately low poverty rate. A dissimilar composition of the student population within the educational environment may yield different results regarding important resources for implementation. Students living in high poverty experience greater gaps in academic and social emotional supports (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2019). Serving students in a higher poverty community may benefit from a different SEL framework and implementation practice that may not be represented in this case study.

Fourth, this study occurred in a suburban school district. A rural school district may exhibit a varying culture, which might require the consideration of other inner or outer contexts in deciding on a framework and resources for implementation. Current research suggests that cultural compatibility is a key component for teacher success in teaching SEL (Lee & Simmons Zuilkowski, 2021). An urban culture may also have a varying culture that would influence the decision of the SEL framework selection and resource allocation for implementation.

Fifth, this case study occurred in a medium-sized district. The size of a district may be a factor in SEL implementation. As an example, a smaller district of less than 700 students in an urban, suburban, or rural setting may have different conditions and limiting factors for implementation. As an example, parent involvement may become more important in smaller districts in smaller communities (Purtell et al., 2020). A Durlak et al. (2015) study regarding parent recruitment suggests that most substantial efforts for engaging parents rarely yields more than 30% of the parent population and therefore questions the return on investment. However, competing research by Miller et al. (2022) disagrees with this premise and highlights the benefits of deconstructing controversy prior to the implementation of innovative programs.

A sixth limitation is that this research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings may differ in the absence of stressors related to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and the following variants created stress for parents, students, and professionals in public education. Some participants spoke to the effect of COVID-19 as increasing the need for SEL implementation. Findings from this study suggest that the pandemic was a catalyst for SEL implementation.

The seventh limitation is that the district in this case study could redefine the school counselor model without increasing the counseling staffing. It may be the case that schools, with any of the above limitations, may not have the capacity to redefine the school counseling model with SEL coaches. Such districts may have greater needs due to economic constraints and would need to invest significant funds in additional positions to implement SEL. This could be especially true if the counseling department were resistant to additional duties or paradigm changes.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Four recommendations can be made regarding future research. The first recommendation is to focus on ways in which teachers or even teacher education programs focus on developing the self-awareness and self-management of future teachers, whether that is part of academic training or professional development training. One limiting factor presented in the literature, and confirmed by this case study, is the self-management and self-awareness of the teaching staff (Panayiotou et al., 2019). This case study revealed that teachers benefitted from their own professional development in area of self-management and self-awareness; however, it was challenging, and some teachers reportedly were not willing to do that professional development. The future research would benefit students by increasing the quality of future teachers.

A second recommendation for future research can be investigating methods of SEL training at the post-secondary level for preservice teachers. Current research suggests that preservice teachers are not prepared for SEL implementation into their content area (Cristol & Gimbert, 2021). SEL training can benefit future teachers in two ways: (1) preservice teachers can benefit from coaching structures themselves as college students (Knotek et al., 2019), and (2) their future students can benefit from their own self-awareness (Durlak et al., 2015). Teacher preparation can provide additional benefits for their own students in the areas of academic performance (Oberle et al., 2016) and the well-being of students at the K-12 level (Belfield et al., 2015).

A third recommendation for future research can be an investigation of the inner factor of parent involvement or forming parent teams for framework selection. Existing research suggests that parent involvement is an important component to parent and community support of implementation (Durlak et al., 2015). The involvement of parents led to increased parent support of SEL implementation (Durlak, 2016). However, current research suggests that political

learnings of parents may play a role in their support of SEL; 61% of parents who self-identified as being Democrats supported SEL versus 35% of self-identified Republican parents (Tyner, 2021). Current research also suggests that parents are most concerned about the term of SEL and are supportive of the increased SEL competencies of their children (Tyner, 2021). Future research could focus on how to involve parents in ways that lead to successful implementation with increased parent awareness of SEL competencies. Thus, parent involvement may lead to a different outcome in either framework selection or implementation strategy.

The fourth recommendation could examine how social emotional needs of students can be met with virtual instruction. Current research suggests that SEL instruction through a virtual means requires a different skill set for both teachers and students (Kamei & Harriott, 2021). The finding of this case study supports the research stating that new skillsets need to be developed for virtual SEL support of students. In addition, current research also suggests that the biological prevention and control of future pandemics will become increasingly challenging (Alamo et al., 2021). Future research in the area of SEL implementation through a virtual lens can benefit students that voluntarily select virtual instruction and those that are confined to virtual instruction due to factors out of their control.

### **Implications for Implementation of SEL**

If a district were to implement SEL, this case study suggests three implications for SEL implementation. First, the district office administrators, including student services, should adopt an SEL framework intended for practical application in a district that works in concert with local and state interests. Selecting an SEL framework would include an inventory of existing structures and a comparison of compatible characteristics outlined with a variety of frameworks. For the district in this case study, that inventory included a need for the SEL framework to be

compatible with AVID, ACP structures, and Zones of Regulation practices that were in use across the district.

Second, if a district were to implement SEL, they may consider restructuring the school counseling department and specifically hiring SEL coaches. The schools in the district would need to restructure the duties and roles of the school counseling department. Human resources at the school level would need to align or possibly restructure the school counseling department for coaching integration. This would include coaches that assist teachers in learning about SEL, coaching teachers in their own professional development and growth of self-awareness and self-management, and integrating coaches into the classroom for both assistance in teaching SEL lessons and modeling self-awareness for teachers to model to students. This professional development is key for leading SEL instruction in the classroom. Coaches would also be included in a co-teaching role. Co-teaching provides an opportunity for classroom teachers to become familiar with ways to include SEL instruction into their content areas (Smurr & Cano, 2021). The extra duties of the SEL coach suggest that other work and duties that would be typical for school counselors would need to be taken up by other staff.

Third, there are resource implications. Based on Greenberg et al.'s (2005) model, one would expect that five resources would be required for the implementation of SEL in a district. This case study showed that only two resources were required (human and informational resources). The financial investment was minimal; there was no documented requirement for technological resources, and no additional instructional space was required for implementation in the district case study. On the other hand, there is a requirement for professional development, which could include a redistribution of human resources and redefining of rules with a focus on SEL for staff and students. Further, there is a requirement for staff to understand the benefits of

SEL implementation and value those benefits. If there is not a shared understanding of value, resistance from staff is likely. Districts should identify which resources are most necessary for SEL implementation. This could result in less costly implementation by not having to invest in new technologies, learning spaces, or expensive proprietary SEL programs.

### **Conclusions**

Sande et al. (2019) suggest that students experience more success when their school district make SEL a priority. Success with SEL can be widespread for students and spans academics, personal development, and social and self-awareness (Weissberg, 2019). If a district is experiencing a decline in academic achievement and observing stressors having a negative impact on student mental health, regardless of the factors, then that district might significantly benefit from increasing their focus on SEL of students and staff. This case study suggests that implementation is dependent on choosing a framework that works with the district needs and implementation is dependent on human resources.

This study suggests that choosing an SEL framework and implementing the framework are two separate processes. Districts often have academic and college and career ready structures in place. Districts should choose an SEL framework that works with existing structures within the district. Implementing the framework could require a shift in allocated human resources and supporting professional development. One shift could center on the role of school counselors and student services, which would include the installation of embedded SEL coaches in the classroom. This study recognizes the need for reorganization of staff and a dedicated coaching structure, which benefits both students and staff. The reorganization can occur with little stress on financial and physical resources, and little or no financial stress should increase the likelihood of more districts implementing SEL.

I started this research before I became a superintendent. I was the principal of a health science charter school in the Midwest. I was not aware of the moving parts and organizational structures that worked with the resources of implementation (Greenberg et al., 2017), or how inner and outer factors influenced implementation (Moullin et al., 2019). This study gave me an understanding of how state-level structures can influence local decision-making. I also grew to understand how local innovation, specifically with human resources, can advance innovation in programming and implementation. At the heart of this study lies the key factor of SEL implementation: the SEL coaches. I was surprised that several key people were the fulcrum in the process of implementation. This challenged my idea that everyone had to be on board or aligned from the beginning of the process. Rather, key people at key times are what is most important in the management of resources within the organizational structure of a school district.

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## **Appendix A – Letter to Superintendents**

Dear Superintendent and District Office Administrators,

My name is Steve Plum; I am the new superintendent of Kettle Moraine School District. I am also a doctoral student in the Urban Education Doctoral Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

My research interest at UWM is focused on case study analysis of a district that has implemented Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The purpose of my study is to focus on the factors that are important in SEL implementation. This research could lead to policy and practice improvement, increasing the chance of SEL integration for other districts.

I obtained your district's name from a public list of districts that have implemented SEL at the district level. I would like to reach out to your administrators and teachers by email with your permission. I have two types of data collection: (1) semi-structured interviews and (2)

documents associated with framework selection and implementation. The submission of documents by participants is entirely voluntary. The interviews will be composed of three subsets: (1) district-level administration, (2) school-level administration, (3) and teachers. I'm hoping to have a middle school and an elementary school in the study.

District-level administration interviews would include the superintendent, and might include the director of curriculum and instruction, the director of pupil services, or other district-level administrators directly involved in the implementation of SEL. School-level administration would include the building principal, possibly the teacher in charge, assistant principal, instructional coaches, and school psychologists or guidance counselors, if applicable. The teacher group would include at least four teachers from each school. If your district is selected, all personnel will participate in individual semi-structured interviews lasting 40-60 minutes via Zoom. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Staff members' names will be substituted with a pseudonym to provide confidentiality. All interview transcriptions will be analyzed with first and second cycle coding.

This research will attempt to fill research gaps in how a school district implements social emotional learning. This study's results may benefit the policy and practice of social emotional learning implementation on the district and school level. It is possible that participants may benefit by reflection on their social emotional learning framework and implementation process and their professional growth as educators and administrators.

All identifying information will be removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms will protect the Teacher and the district's confidentiality. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Internal Review Board has approved this study, and supporting documentation is attached. All electronic data will be erased or destroyed by December 21, 2021.

Please let me know if you would like to discuss this further, and I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Stephen Plum  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Administrative Leadership  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education  
Tel.: 262-271-4902  
[sdplum@uwm.edu](mailto:sdplum@uwm.edu)

Simone C. O. Conceição, Ph.D.  
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IRB#: 21.274  
Approved: May 18, 2021

### **Appendix B – Principal Recruitment Email**

Dear School Principal and Building Level Administration,

My name is Steve Plum; I am the new superintendent of Kettle Moraine School District. I am also a doctoral student in the Urban Education Doctoral Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

My research interest at UWM is focused on case study analysis of a district that has implemented Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The purpose of my study is to focus on the factors that are important in SEL implementation. This research could lead to policy and practice improvement, increasing the chance of SEL integration for other districts.

I obtained your district's name from a public list of districts that have implemented SEL at the district level. Your superintendent has granted permission for this study to occur in your district. I would like to reach out to your building level administrators and teachers by email with

your permission. I have two types of data collection: (1) semi-structured interviews and (2) documents associated with framework selection and implementation. The submission of documents by participants is entirely voluntary. The interviews will be composed of three subsets: (1) district-level administration, (2) school-level administration, (3) school psychologists, guidance counselors, and teachers. I'm hoping to have a middle school and an elementary school in the study.

School-level administration would include the building principal, possibly a teacher in charge, the assistant principal, instructional coaches, and school psychologists or guidance counselors, if applicable. The teacher group would include at least four teachers from each school. If your district is selected, all personnel will participate in individual semi-structured interviews lasting 40-60 minutes via Zoom. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Staff members' names will be substituted with a pseudonym to provide confidentiality. All interview transcriptions will be analyzed with first and second cycle coding.

This research will attempt to fill research gaps in how a school district implements social emotional learning. This study's results may benefit the policy and practice of social emotional learning implementation on the district and school level. It is possible that participants may benefit by reflection on their social emotional learning framework and implementation process and their professional growth as educators and administrators.

All identifying information will be removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms will protect the Teacher and the district's confidentiality. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Internal Review Board has approved this study, and supporting documentation is attached. All electronic data will be erased or destroyed by December 21, 2021.

Please let me know if you would like to discuss this further, and I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Stephen Plum  
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IRB#: 21.274  
IRB Approval Date: 05/18/2021

## **Appendix C – Teacher Recruitment Email**

Dear Teacher,

My name is Steve Plum; I am the new superintendent of Kettle Moraine School District. I am also a doctoral student in the Urban Education Doctoral Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

My research interest at UWM is focused on case study analysis of a district that has implemented Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The purpose of my study is to focus on the factors that are important in SEL implementation. This research could lead to policy and practice improvement, increasing the chance of SEL integration for other districts.

I obtained your district's name from a public list of districts that have implemented SEL at the district level. Your superintendent and building principal have granted permission for this study to occur in your district. I am reaching out to teachers by email for permission to participate in this study. I have two types of data collection: (1) semi-structured interviews and (2) documents associated with framework selection and implementation. The submission of documents by participants is entirely voluntary. The interviews will be composed of three subsets: (1) district-level administration, (2) school-level administration, (3) and teachers.

If your district is selected, all personnel will participate in individual semi-structured interviews lasting 40-60 minutes via Zoom. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Staff members' names will be substituted with a pseudonym to provide confidentiality. All interview transcriptions will be analyzed with first and second cycle coding.

This research will attempt to fill research gaps in how a school district implements social emotional learning. This study's results may benefit the policy and practice of social emotional learning implementation on the district and school level. It is possible that participants may

benefit by reflection on their social emotional learning framework and implementation process and their professional growth as educators and administrators.

All identifying information will be removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms will protect the Teacher and the district's confidentiality. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Internal Review Board has approved this study, and supporting documentation is attached. All electronic data will be erased or destroyed by December 21, 2021.

Please let me know if you would like to discuss this further, and I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Stephen Plum  
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IRB#: 21.274  
IRB Approval Date: 05/18/2021

## Appendix D – Interview Confirmation Email

Dear (Public Educator/Administrator name),

Thank you for your participation in my study. I'm looking forward to our conversation. Please find the link to my appointment slots in my calendar and select a time that works for you. If there is not a good time, please respond to this email with a couple of options, and I will do my best to resend another schedule to you.

Stephen Plum  
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IRB#: 21.274

## **Appendix E – Interview Reminder Email**

Dear (Public Educator name),

Thank you for participating in this study. The interview will be confidential. I wanted to send you a reminder that our meeting will occur via Zoom at (time and date). If a conflict has arisen or you are no longer interested in participating, please let me know. Also, please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Stephen Plum  
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IRB#: 21.274

## Appendix F – IRB Consent Form



### Informed Consent for Research Participation

IRB #: 21.274

IRB Approval Date: 05/18/2021

**I.**

<b>Study title</b>	Understanding how a school district implements social emotional learning.
<b>Researcher</b>	Stephen Plum, Doctoral Candidate, Urban Education Doctoral Program Under the supervision of Simone C.O. Conceição, Ph.D., Professor of Administrative Leadership

I'm inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

### What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is implemented in a school district.

### What will I do?

At this point, I obtained consent from the superintendent to interview the district and school staff. This case study will include analyze data from district office personnel, building-level leadership, and teachers. This form will be used for your agreement to a one-on-one video interview and voluntary submission of documents related to choosing and implementing an SEL framework. Examples of Documents would include school board minutes and presentations and internal documents and presentations for professional development. Interviews will last about 40 to 60 minutes and will be conducted through Zoom and recorded. If you agree to the interview, you will be asked questions about your understanding and experience of implementing SEL in your school.

### Risks

Possible risks	How we're minimizing these risks
Some questions may be personal or upsetting	You can skip any questions you don't want to answer.
Breach of confidentiality (your data being seen by someone who shouldn't have access to it)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'll remove all identifying information and replace it with a pseudonym (a fake name).</li> <li>• I'll remove all identifiers after each interview is completed and a pseudonym has been assigned.</li> <li>• I'll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer.</li> <li>• I'll store all paper data in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.</li> <li>• I'll keep your identifying information separate from your research data, but we'll be able to link it to you by using</li> </ul>

	a study ID. We will destroy this link after we finish collecting and analyzing the data.
Risk of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The subject's decision to participate or not participate won't impact their employment or relationship to the school district.</li> </ul>

There may be risks we don't know about yet. Throughout the study, we'll tell you if we learn anything that might affect your decision to participate.

### Other Study Information

<b>Possible benefits</b>	You'll have an opportunity to share your experience with SEL implementation and help increase the body of knowledge in this field.
<b>Estimated number of participants</b>	16-18 public school personnel will be selected to participate in interviews
<b>How long will it take?</b>	Each interview will last 40-60 minutes.
<b>Costs</b>	None
<b>Compensation</b>	Interviews will take place outside of work time, and participants will not be compensated.
<b>Future research</b>	Your information and response data will not be used or shared for any future research studies.
<b>Recordings / Photographs</b>	The interview video will be recorded. The recording will be transcribed into a written record.
<b>Removal from the study</b>	You will be removed from this study if you have not participated in implementing social emotional learning in a school district.

### Confidentiality and Data Security

I'll collect the following identifying information for the research: name, teaching description, and email address. This information is necessary for contacting you for an interview.

<b>Where will data be stored?</b>	I'll store all electronic data on a non-networked, password-protected personal computer not affiliated with a school or company.
<b>How long will it be kept?</b>	All data will be stored for two years after the study is completed.

<b>Who can see my data?</b>	<b>Why?</b>	<b>Type of data</b>
Stephen Plum	To conduct the study and analyze the data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifiable data (your name, teaching description, and email address)</li> <li>Coded data (names removed and labeled with a pseudonym)</li> </ul>
The IRB (Institutional Review Board) at UWM	To ensure we're following laws and ethical guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifiable data (your name, teaching description, and email address)</li> </ul>

The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) or other federal agencies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coded data (names removed and labeled with a pseudonym)</li> </ul>
Anyone (public)	If we share my findings in publications or presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggregate (grouped) data</li> <li>• De-identified (no names, address, etc.)</li> <li>• If we quote you, we'll use a pseudonym (fake name)</li> </ul>

**Contact information:**

<b>For questions about the research</b>	Stephen D Plum	262-271-4902 <a href="mailto:sdplum@uwm.edu">sdplum@uwm.edu</a>
	Simone C.O. Conceição	414-251-7553 / <a href="mailto:simonec@uwm.edu">simonec@uwm.edu</a>
<b>For questions about your rights as a research participant</b>	IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)	414-662-3544 / <a href="mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu">irbinfo@uwm.edu</a>
<b>For complaints or problems</b>	Stephen D Plum	262-271-4902 <a href="mailto:sdplum@uwm.edu">sdplum@uwm.edu</a>
	Simone C.O. Conceição	414-251-7553 / <a href="mailto:simonec@uwm.edu">simonec@uwm.edu</a>
	IRB	414-662-3544 / <a href="mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu">irbinfo@uwm.edu</a>

**Signatures**

If you have had all your questions answered and would like to participate in this study, sign on the lines below. Remember, your participation is completely voluntary, and you're free to withdraw from the study at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (print)

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher obtaining consent (print)

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher obtaining consent

## Appendix G – Interview Protocol Guide

Date of Interview:

Pseudonym:

Name of Interviewer:

Meeting and recording platform:

Start Time:

End Time:

Introduction to interview:

Hello, and thank you for participating in this study. This interview will contribute to the understanding of how a district implements social emotional learning or (SEL). Your participation in your district’s SEL implementation plan and practice qualifies you as a participant. As you may recall from the consent form, this interview will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed via Rev.com, a transcription software program. Your privacy will be protected by using a pseudonym for your name, school, and school district. The transcription data will be qualitatively coded by myself.

### **For District Level Administration:**

Introduction and Demographics:

How long have you been in Education?

What positions have you had over that time?

How long have you been in your current position?

Deciding on a framework:

What was your first impression of SEL, and how important is it for student development?

Can you tell me about the process of how you decided to implement SEL in the district?

What were your initial thoughts regarding barriers to implementation?

Who was involved in the process of choosing a framework?

If a district decided to implement SEL, who should be at the table for framework selection?

Allocating resources:

What resources did you allocate for embedded SEL implementation?

Looking back, what turned out to be the most critical resources?

How much time does it take to implement SEL?

What would you have done differently, or did it go as planned?

I'm assuming there are implementation costs. Could you elaborate on the district cost?

Some research suggests that there is an 11:1 return on every dollar invested. What are your thoughts on that?

What are some examples of professional development for the staff?

Do you feel that the professional development was sufficient?

Implementation:

If a visitor walked into the school, what would SEL look like to them?

Were there times you feel like you were stuck as a district?

Did you ever wonder if it was too difficult to implement?

Who are the key stakeholders that make-or-break implementation?

How important is the expertise afforded by guidance counselors or other professional groups?

Can you share a story of the positive impact that SEL has had?

How did you know when you implemented SEL or when you achieved the goal?

Wrap up and concluding thoughts:

Thank you very much for your time, is there anything else you would like to share that we have not covered?

Your responses will be confidential. Would you prefer a gender-specific or gender-neutral pronoun and pseudonym?

Again, Thank you very much!

**For School level administration:**

Leadoff and demographics:

How long have you been in Education?

What positions have you had over that time?

Deciding on an SEL framework:

Tell me about the first time you heard about SEL, and what were your impressions of the idea?

What would a staff discussion look like when discussing frameworks or competencies?

Were there any outside influences or factors which affected the decision to go with a particular framework?

Did you have initial concerns about implementing Social emotional learning?

What advice would you give a school leader regarding the implementation process?

Implementation process:

What resources would you say are required for implementation?

Was there a perception of “building the plan while you were flying?”

What did the professional development look like for the staff?

Was the staff compensated?

Some research suggests that one limiting factor with implementation is the self-management and self-awareness of the staff. What are your thoughts on this?

Was there professional development to assist teachers with their SEL development?

All SEL frameworks have competencies. Can you tell me how you track student advancement?

What are your thoughts on students assessing and tracking their progress?

Interacting human resources:

Did you ever think that SEL implementation was too difficult?

If yes, what kept you moving? If no, would your staff agree?

Can you tell me if one particular thing led you to believe that you arrived at implementation?

Who were the key stakeholders that make-or-break implementation?

Can you tell me if teachers had concerns about additional work and responsibility, and if so, how was that addressed?

Many teachers talk about adding things to their plate, yet the research suggests that teachers find greater satisfaction in their job after implementing SEL. What would you say about that?

Wrap up conclusion:

Thank you very much for your time, is there anything else you would like to share that we have not covered?

Your responses will be confidential. Would you prefer a gender-specific or gender-neutral pronoun and pseudonym?

Again, Thank you very much!

**Instructional Staff:**

Leadoff and demographics:

How long have you been in Education?

What positions have you had over that time?

Deciding on an SEL Framework:

Tell me about the first time you heard about SEL, and what were your impressions of the idea?

What was the discussion like among staff regarding the framework options?

Can you tell me about the process of selecting a framework?

To what degree were teachers involved in the planning and framework selection?

If another district were to start the SEL implementation process, what should they know about framework selection?

Who are the key stakeholders when selecting a framework?

#### Allocating resources:

Did the teaching staff have all the resources initially, or was it a “build the plane while you are flying” situation?

What were the key resources that allowed the teachers to implement SEL?

Can you tell me how SEL planning is different from content area planning?

How much time were staff allowed for development? Was the staff compensated for their implementation work?

Can you tell me about the technology resources such as the learning management system software (LMS) specific for SEL?

Would you suggest something specific for tracking and reporting competency progress?

Some research suggests that one limiting factor with implementation is the teachers’ self-management and self-awareness. What are your thoughts on that?

Was there any professional development to assist teachers with their SEL development?

#### Implementation:

If a visitor, or an outside teacher, walked into your classroom, what would they see?

Were there times when you thought there was too much on your plate? If so, what helped you make it through those times?

How did you know when you had implemented SEL in the classroom?

If you were to advise a teacher just starting out with SEL, what would you tell them?

How important is the support of other leadership or counselors in the implementation process?

Can you share a story about the positive impact of SEL on students?

Wrap up and concluding thoughts:

Thank you very much for your time, is there anything else you would like to share that we have not covered?

Your responses will be confidential. Would you prefer a gender-specific or gender-neutral pronoun and pseudonym?

Again, thank you very much!