

THE IMPACT OF ADOPTING A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING APPROACH  
ON MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY

by

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A DISSERTATION

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Schools in Oregon were shut down in March of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reopened to Distance Learning. Most districts in Oregon opened to Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL) and Limited In-Person Instruction (LIPI) in the 2020-2021 school year. In addition to navigating the pandemic, residents experienced wildfires and a windstorm that caused property damage and power outages which shut schools down for weeks. In the midst of all of these crises that threatened lives, property, and safety, educators were learning to teach their students in a new way and maintain relationships using virtual meeting platforms. How did they manage this? Did educators access the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies they teach? This study utilized a survey and focus group to gather information from middle school educators in the Pacific Northwest who have an established SEL program in their school. Educators endorsed support of SEL and belief that they can teach SEL competencies, though they expressed reservations about using a prescriptive SEL curriculum. Teachers noted the need for flexibility in addressing students' SEL needs as they are apparent, not as they are scheduled by the curriculum. Many educators reported symptoms of burnout, using coping skills, and applying SEL competencies in their own lives. Most respondents

reported indicators of burnout and all were considering a career other than teaching. Implications for school districts include the need for support and potential for teacher turnover. It is recommended that administrators consider strategies for relationship building as a priority for students and staff as they begin returning to in-person learning.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic in 2020-2021 resulted in protective measures that impacted schools across the country. In Oregon, public schools were closed before Spring Break 2020 and reopened to Crisis Distance Learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Teachers and students connected using virtual platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Google Classroom. The nature of the virtual format – utilized to keep school communities physically distanced to slow the spread of the pandemic – changed how teachers and students interacted. A new list of concerns developed for educators and school communities including equity in access to electronic resources and connections, family stresses around lost or reduced employment, student supervision during the day, students having new family responsibilities to care for younger siblings while parents worked, and the quality of education being delivered as educators were building the plane as it was flying to educate and meet student needs in a pandemic (Miller, Van Wing, & Sherwood, 2020).

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) released *Ready Schools, Safe Learners Guidance for School Year 2020-21* (RSSL), an iterative guidance in coordination with the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) outlining recommendations for a safe return to in-person instruction including social emotional support recommendations when health metrics allowed (2021). The 2020-2021 school year began with remote teaching/learning for most public schools under Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL) (ODE, 2021). Some programs were able to open under Limited In-Person Instruction (LIPI), allowing for in-person instruction for a few hours per day a few times

per week for small cohorts of students and teachers. LIPI limited cohort groups to no more than 20 students and was provided to address connectivity issues, provide academic support, access assessment, provide social emotional or mental health supports, and support ongoing attendance and engagement (ODE, 2021). Of the approximately 583,000 students enrolled K-12 in Oregon (Gill, 2020) around 32,153 students across the state of Oregon were receiving LIPI in January 2021 (Miller, 2021). LIPI requires contact tracing records and personal protective equipment such as face masking, social distancing, plexiglass barriers, frequent sanitizing, and hand washing (ODE, 2021). Even with LIPI, most students received instruction remotely. As the coronavirus vaccine became more available to educators, schools began working toward opening Hybrid learning programs, where students would come to the school campuses some days and access lessons remotely other days on a rotating schedule or use a half-day format (Miller, 2021). Under Hybrid, students and teachers continued personal protective measures as they did under LIPI.

The pandemic resulted in social and physical isolation for most Oregonians. Restaurant dining, movie theaters, gyms, and other gathering places were closed (Cline, 2020). In November 2020, Oregon Governor Kate Brown, ordered a controversial “freeze” order, or statewide lockdown, with strict limits on social gatherings in addition to the Oregon Health Authority recommendations that people cancel family gatherings for holidays and celebrations (Dake, 2020). School events (e.g., graduations, proms, and award ceremonies) were re-imagined as drive-through or virtual gatherings. Spectators were not allowed for the few sporting events that were still permitted, such as outdoor matches. Athletics were reduced or cancelled, music programs practiced remotely or

outdoors, and all regular school activities were closely evaluated and adjusted or cancelled to promote safety (Nguyen, 2020).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) produced a resource on trauma that notes that childhood trauma increases the risk for lasting mental and physical health problems (NASP, 2015). This list of types of trauma include (a) community, domestic, and school violence, (b) physical and sexual abuse, (c) neglect, (d) complex trauma (multiple traumatic events and severe impact), (e) early childhood trauma, (f) medical trauma, (g) natural disasters, (h) terrorism, refugee and war zone trauma, and (i) traumatic loss (NASP, 2015). Perception of trauma increases the likelihood that a person will be traumatized. Factors such as relationships with crisis victims, adult responses, the nature of the event, and personal vulnerability factors impact how threats are perceived. NASP further identifies trauma risk factors, or characteristics that are associated with increased risk of trauma. These are (a) proximity to a traumatic event, (b) past exposure to trauma, (c) mental health problems or the presence of a disability, (d) parental substance abuse or mental illness, (e) limited social support or isolation, (f) family stress, (g) loss or fear of loss of a loved one, (h) community characteristics, (i) developmental level, and (j) poverty level (NASP, 2015).

Pandemic safety measures and isolation were not the only potentially traumatic experiences that had an impact on how schools operated and how educators taught. In Oregon, some districts experienced wildfires at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year that resulted in air pollution, power outages, property loss, and evacuations (Manning, 2020). Storm damage later in the year resulted in power outages and property damage (Associated Press, 2021). Families that were already facing coronavirus impact

(e.g., isolation, sickness, loss of family members, loss of income) faced recurring crises from weather events. Political unrest following the presidential election added to feelings of stress and concerns about safety (North, 2021). The collection of these events created an environment that made teaching and learning challenging and increased the likelihood of trauma.

### **Learning Environment**

Students cannot be expected to make learning gains in an environment where they do not feel safe. Ruiz, McMahon, and Jason (2018) mapped Chicago schools based on socio-economic status (SES), violent crime, and student achievement and found that SES predicts academic achievement, and violent crime was a mediating factor. Students who felt safer were more able to make academic growth. Another significant predictor of academic achievement was school climate (Ruiz et al., 2018). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) advocates for comprehensive policies that include physical and psychological safety measures (2019). NASP advocates for integration of school climate development, practice of effective discipline, teaching social-emotional competencies, provision of mental health supports, empowered reporting of safety concerns, and increased connectedness between students and families and their schools.

### **State-Level Focus**

Oregon employs a holistic approach to school safety, offering consultation and technical assistance and promoting the Effective Behavioral and Instructional Support System (EBISS), which uses positive behavioral supports to promote positive climates in schools (Inglis, Buenrostro, & Wells, 2016). However, even with this support, Oregon schools are in a behavioral crisis (Roemeling, 2018) and not all schools receive this

support. The Student Success Act (SSA), passed in 2019, will provide investment in Oregon education over time and includes initiatives for mental health and wellbeing (ODE, 2021). The planned gradual rollout includes funds for promoting mental health in schools in the form of grants to districts.

### **Classroom Focus**

According to a recent survey by the Oregon Education Association, 32% of teachers reported concern about student safety, and 25% reported concern about their own safety (Oregon Education Association, 2019). Students in disrupted classrooms lose instructional time and do not feel safe, with some students becoming physically injured or traumatized (OEA, 2019). Educators report secondary traumatic stress (emotional impact from hearing of another's trauma) or compassion fatigue (responding so many times to others' suffering that one becomes indifferent) (OEA, 2019). Factors in teacher burnout include behavior management and combative relationships with students and colleagues (Garwood, Werts, Varghese, & Gosey, 2018). Bettini et al. (2020) connected teachers' feeling of emotional exhaustion with increased tendencies for teachers to seek a different job.

Hagenauer, Hascher, and Volet (2015) studied the quality of relationships between teachers and students relating to teachers' emotional experiences during instruction. They found that "closeness, reflecting the positive interpersonal relationship between students and teacher, was particularly important to teachers' experience of joy in that classroom" and lack of such closeness was related to teachers' anger and anxiety (Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015). Gu and Day (2014) found that positive relationships with students relate to teacher coping in their professional role. Lavy and



Bocker (2018) related teacher job satisfaction, relationships with students, and finding meaning at work. They concluded that “a sense of meaning is not only associated with increased job satisfaction in the present, but also holds the potential for long-term effects on teachers’ job satisfaction in the future” (Lavy & Bocker, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Emotional Learning**

The SEL model imbeds several assumptions in the framework, including variables that are difficult to control. The primary assumption of the framework is that SEL lessons will be delivered to students in the classroom with fidelity by teachers who are willing and qualified to teach them. The lessons are often prescriptive, so preparation of the lessons is already completed. However, teachers delivering the lessons need to have buy-in to the program. SEL lessons delivered by an individual who has a negative perception of the content or the requirement that instructional time be used for SEL are more likely to have low fidelity of implementation and are assumed to be less effective (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Some teachers may come into the classroom with their own preconceptions or trauma histories that may impact the delivery of the content. An example of the impact of SEL is Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) prosocial classroom model (Figure 1) that identifies the reciprocal nature of teacher and student SEL competence and well-being. They further identify teachers’ social emotional competency and well-being as important factors in effective implementation of SEL curricula, as well as establishing and maintaining supportive teacher-student relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Figure 1. The Prosocial Classroom

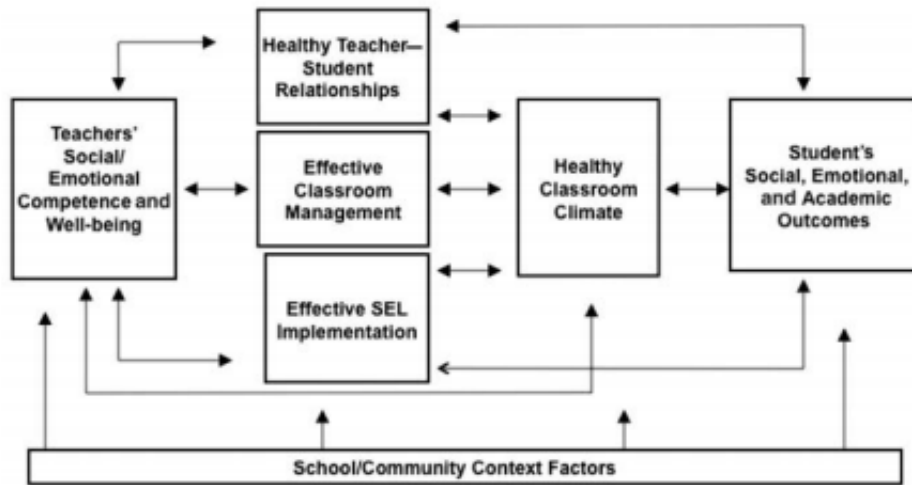


Figure 1. “A model of teacher social and emotional competence and classroom and student outcomes” by P. A. Jennings, and M. T. Greenberg, 2009. "The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes." *Review of Educational Research*, 79, p. 494.

To build SEL competencies, practice is required. A core assumption of the SEL framework is generalization of skills. A strength of using standardized curriculum is that the lessons provide common language around social and emotional problem solving. This common language can be incorporated into daily events in school such as reporting and problem-solving disciplinary issues, opportunities for relationship building, team projects, and goal setting. This language can also be applied at home and in the community. Several SEL curricula include a home component, such as pre-written letters to send home with students and suggestions for parental involvement (CASEL, 2018). SEL lessons include targeted instruction in the five competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018).

***Self-awareness.*** The ability to reflect on one's values, goals, and emotional state is considered self-awareness. Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, and Durlak (2017) include the ability to assess personal strengths and limitations and the possession of a mindset that recognizes growth potential as part of self-awareness. Those who are considered able to recognize their own thoughts, feelings, and actions and how those all relate are considered self-aware.

***Self-management.*** The ability to delay gratification, control impulses, manage stress, and persist through challenges are all considered self-management skills (Greenburg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). People who have these skills focus on and achieve long-term goals. Self-management does not come naturally to all people, and SEL proposes that it can be taught. There is precedence for teaching self-management in schools. For instance, strategies to break down bigger tasks and persist through challenges are often taught to students in special education.

***Responsible decision-making.*** This area of SEL competence requires the consideration of ethical standards and safety, evaluation of consequences for choices, and ability to consider personal and community well-being (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Responsible decision-making involves the practice of making decisions, not simply teaching rules that are followed. This skill can be applied in situations encountered throughout one's life, even when expectations are not pre-taught. Ross and Tolan (2018) connect responsible decision-making skills with reduction of depressive symptoms and delinquency in adolescents.

***Relationship skills.*** Competence in establishing and maintaining relationships includes listening, communicating, working cooperatively, negotiating conflict, asking

for help if needed, and resisting unhealthy social pressures (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Relationship skills allow people to identify and promote healthy connections in school, work, home, and community settings. Teaching relationship skills can affect life-long partner choices and relationships. Development of relationship skills also reduces depressive symptoms in adolescents (Ross & Tolan, 2018).

***Social awareness.*** The understanding of social norms for behavior, empathy for others, and awareness of different cultures and backgrounds all create social awareness (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). The ability to consider another's perspective can positively affect all other areas of SEL competency. These skills are also applicable in any workplace or relationship. Students who receive direct instruction around social awareness may gain understanding of social situations that may not be available in the context of a family. Ross and Tolan (2018) connect social awareness with reduction of risky behaviors, depressive symptoms, and delinquency while improving grades and school engagement.

### **SEL in the Classroom**

SEL programs require designated instruction time specific to SEL lessons and fidelity of implementation (CASEL, 2018). There is controversy around the success of SEL instruction and what can be viewed as a “cookbook-based” approach, when compared to other interventions such as changing teaching style to enhance classroom collaboration (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Additional criticism of the SEL curriculum approach includes that time which could be devoted to core curriculum is designated for SEL lessons, and therefore may negatively impact academic achievement. SEL

curriculums also involve considerable cost, depending on the approach to implementation.

As with all curricular choices, the students who will be engaging in the lessons should be considered as lessons are designed. For example, students who qualify for special education services may have unique needs for access to the content. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder often benefit from specific instruction about social skills and could benefit from a universal SEL intervention. Students with other disabilities may have difficulty accessing the curriculum. Consideration for students as well as teachers coming from backgrounds where they have experienced trauma should be built into any curricular choices. Finally, cultural and linguistic understanding is an important aspect of lessons taught broadly through a school district.

Martinsone, Ferreira, and Takic (2020) studied the impact of implementation of SEL lessons on teachers, and identified themes of personal and professional growth. Personal growth included shifts in empathy, self-reported social responsibility, emotional communication, and personal communication. Professional growth included the focus on devoting time to and prioritizing SEL, more purposeful cooperation with colleagues, and providing intentional feedback. Teachers also reported a growth mindset, taking small steps to bring change and considering themselves to be on the “right track.” During four months of intervention, the teachers reported being more aware of personal changes and self-regulation (Martinsone, Ferreira, & Takic, 2020). Barnes and McCallops (2019) reported teachers used the SEL tools that they taught to their students to manage their own personal and professional challenges.

## **SEL Program Data**

Outcome studies for SEL program implementations in school districts are limited. Studies are often short-term interventions with follow-up only weeks after the intervention ends. A study by Farrell, Mehari, Kramer-Kuhn, Mays, and Sullivan (2015) investigated whether middle school students applied the skills taught through a violence prevention curriculum. They found that use of the skills was influenced by beliefs and values, context, perceived relevance, and other issues surrounding the behaviors themselves. Positive Action, an SEL program, is reported to improve school climate by decreasing “school hassles,” or experiences with verbal, physical, and relational victimization or being treated with disrespect at school (Stalker, Wu, Evans, & Smokowski, 2018). It is not clear, however, that the intended outcomes of SEL curricula are achieved.

Student behavior is a significant contributor to teacher stress, which can be reported as feelings of emotional exhaustion (Aldrup, Klusmann, Lüdtke, Göllner, & Trautwein, 2018). Research on teacher stress and SEL curricula is difficult to locate. One study focusing on preschool expulsions by Zinsser, Zulauf, Mair Das, and Callie Silver (2019) found that teachers who use SEL supports are less likely to request expulsions from their programs, and that requests for expulsions are related to teacher stress. One interpretation of this finding may be that teachers could attribute some of their stress to specific students and their behavior. If student behavior drives teacher stress, then interventions for student behavior should have a positive impact on teacher stress.

Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salovey (2012) considered whether teacher beliefs about SEL shaped the learning environment. They identified three scales –

Comfort, Commitment, and Culture – to assess school readiness for the adoption of SEL programming. Collie, Shapka, Perry, and Martin (2015) identified three groups of teacher SEL beliefs including the SEL-thriver, the SEL-advocate, and the SEL-striver. SEL-thrivers tend toward more positive belief in SEL, SEL-advocates are comfortable with and committed to SEL but they function in a culture that does not support it, and SEL-strivers are not comfortable with SEL though they are committed. Each grouping was related to stress and job satisfaction, with Advocates experiencing higher stress levels and Thrivers experiencing higher job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015).

SEL programs come at a cost, both in time to implement and in funding for materials. It is essential that this expense is justified, given that public money is used to purchase and implement these programs. The CASEL website (2019) includes cost examples from several different school districts for comparison. When figured on a per student basis, the Wheaton Warrenville Community Unit School District 200 used a low-cost model that estimated \$3 per student served with an SEL curriculum. The SEL program in Austin Independent School District cost \$49 per student in year one. A different model used in Chicago was expected to cost \$700 in year one and \$1017 in year two per student. Clearly, there are different levels and intensities (in terms of personnel time, fidelity, and material cost) of curricular implementation.

### **Summary**

SEL programs aim to promote positive school climate, reduce stress, and motivate academic achievement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Positive school climate is associated with healthy social interactions and improved student outcomes. SEL programs are one approach in the effort to improve school safety and reduce the need for

disciplinary interventions. SEL programs require significant resources (e.g., training, materials, and instructional time) and may or may not be effective. Low, Smolkowski, Cook, and Desfosses (2019) studied the impact of an SEL curriculum over a two-year period and found that the Second Step SEL program reduced rather than prevented behavior problems, and most gains in emotional competence declined over the summer. They further noted that not all children responded uniformly.

### **The Current Study**

This study attempts to consider teachers at two similar middle schools – one that has formally adopted an SEL approach and one that is in the initial stages of building buy-in among teachers for implementation of an SEL curriculum. The current state of challenges and stresses lead one to wonder how educators are managing. Some schools had been delivering Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, focusing on skills that support self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, self-awareness, and social awareness. The current study addresses the following three research questions: How are educators who work in schools with an SEL focus managing the life-altering impact of the pandemic, wildfires, and storms? Is there evidence of teachers using coping skills based on SEL competencies? What do teachers identify as supports they need from their districts as they continue to work in these stressful times?



## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS**

In this chapter, I describe the methodological approach selected for this study. I then provide information about the setting and participants, sources of data, and procedures used for data collection and analysis.

#### **Methodology**

This study was designed as an exploratory comparative case study of two similar districts in the Pacific Northwest, but complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to conduct a true comparison. Thus, the study would more accurately be described as an exploratory descriptive study set in two similar districts in the Pacific Northwest. District A was in year three of implementation of an SEL curriculum. District B was in the beginning stages of SEL curriculum implementation, and focusing on teachers to build buy-in at the time this study was conducted. Surveys that focused on social-emotional coping and resilience in crises were delivered electronically to staff at middle schools in both districts. The surveys offered the opportunity to opt in to a focus group which was held virtually using the Google Meet platform and Google transcription software. Responses to the survey and focus group were voluntary.

#### **Setting and Participants**

This study included two middle schools in small Pacific Northwest districts. The districts were within 20 miles of each other and had similar demographics. District A had 3929 students enrolled, with 12% Ever English Learners, 14% students with disabilities, 8% mobile students, and 30% of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. There were 25 certified teachers at the middle school in District A, 14 of whom

completed the survey. District A implemented an SEL curriculum in the 2018-2019 school year after gathering information and preparing for the roll-out for a year. District A continued to devote resources to support delivery of regular SEL lessons in the years since their initial adoption. District A employed regular scripted SEL lessons using a purchased curriculum. The students received daily, scripted lessons following the adopted curriculum. Options Rooms and Respect Rooms were part of the program when students were attending brick-and-mortar school before the pandemic. Classrooms incorporated collaborative learning and classroom constitutions were written by the students to establish norms and advocate for their needs as learners and as a community.

Collaborative learning involved students working together to use strategies such as peer correcting and ‘turn and talk’ to increase the number of interactions with content and opportunities for students to be heard. Options Rooms and Respect Rooms were designed for students to have opportunities to calm, meet with mentors, and prevent dysregulation. Students were encouraged to write on a list when a classroom issue arose, with that list addressed during class meetings. The home connection included a weekly flyer sent home for families to have structured conversations, and then the students shared their discussions with their classmates during the classroom community time the next day. In District A, SEL lessons included targeted instruction in the five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018). Prior to the pandemic, SEL instruction was delivered by classroom teachers during scheduled lessons throughout the school year and supported by

administration at the district and school levels. Teacher and student evaluations were tied to the SEL curriculum.

District B had 2,689 students enrolled with 13% Ever English Learners, 15% students with disabilities, 12% mobile students, and 35% of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. There were 23 certified teachers at the middle school in District B, one of whom completed the survey. District B did not specify SEL interventions on their website. A recent Student Success Act survey indicated that for District B, the community concerns were mainly about class sizes and staff support, with the second priority being whole child well-being. At the time data were gathered for this dissertation, District B had not implemented an SEL curriculum for students, although they were in the process of building a framework for adoption. Teachers were supplied with a series of workbooks focusing on teacher SEL, and these workbooks were accessed infrequently during the school year.

Both districts dealt with similar crises in 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic resulted in schools across the region transitioning for safety to crisis distance learning in mid-March 2020, and CDL in September 2020. In mid-March 2020, the state began implementing requirements related to quarantining, social/physical distancing, face mask requirements, and necessary increases in hygiene. Families experienced the stress of isolation, job loss, and managing COVID-19 exposures, illnesses, and possibly deaths. Then, in September of 2020, the region was declared a federal disaster area in response to massive wildfires in the area that resulted in widespread evacuations in the community and air quality in the *hazardous* range for well over a week. As if that were not enough, in February of 2021, a storm brought damage to both districts, causing power outages,

water issues, downed trees and powerlines blocking roads, and other infrastructure issues to the local communities. Power outages continued for ten or more days in some areas.

Schools were shut down, even for CDL, due to power and internet outages.

It is important to note that District A had not delivered the SEL curriculum in person since March 13, 2020, when the schools shut down to in-person learning, though lessons continued under CDL and LIPI. Parts of District A and all of District B were in the Level 3 evacuation zone during the September 2020 Wildfires, and parts of District A were under Level 2 evacuation from the September 2020 wildfires. Level 3 meant that residents needed to “leave now,” and Level 2 directed residents to “get ready” for evacuation (FOX 12 Staff, 2020). Staff working in District A were likely under evacuation in neighboring towns. It is also worth noting that District A was in a county with one of the highest per capita coronavirus infection rates in Oregon (Oregon Health Authority).

### **Data Sources**

Information regarding district SEL implementation was gathered through multiple discussions with district Curriculum Directors. Surveys were delivered electronically through an embedded Qualtrics link to middle school staff (teachers, specialists, and classified staff) in weekly newsletters from principals, and promoted at virtual staff meetings by middle school principals. Survey respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in a focus group. The focus group was held virtually using the Google Meet platform.

## **Procedure**

This case study was approved by the Institutional Research Board at the University of Oregon following an application that included consents signed by both districts. Meetings with the curriculum directors for District A and District B took place over a year and a half. The curriculum directors connected the researcher with middle school principals, who supported the distribution of surveys. The survey was delivered to middle school staff, including licensed and classified employees, using a link in the Qualtrics survey engine. The link was embedded in the weekly newsletters for the schools by the school principals and promoted during virtual weekly staff meetings. District A requested a paragraph from the researcher to introduce the survey. District B requested a video introducing the survey, stating that educators were more likely to respond if they could “put a face to the project.” The principal in District B noted that staff were overwhelmed from the crises and not yet comfortable with SEL, so participation was not expected to be robust. An introductory video was recorded and posted on a private YouTube channel, which the principal shared with District B staff. Skip logic was embedded in the survey so that refusal of consent would not allow access to the survey questions.

Questions included general demographics, coping, and teachers’ belief in their ability to teach children to manage emotional wellbeing, and belief in their own ability to promote social emotional wellbeing. Additional questions addressed the staff’s general energy level, emotional energy, and if they had considered leaving education as a profession. Some questions were drawn from previous research. If the subject was interested in participating in the focus group, a trigger question would enable them to

include their email address. Respondents who agreed to participate in a focus group were sent invitations to a Google Meet session. In-person meetings were not allowed due to health and safety concerns associated with the pandemic. The focus group needed to be rescheduled when a wind storm caused downed power-lines and trees, closing the schools for a week, and making virtual connection impractical. A consent script was read before the group began discussion, indicating that continuing with the group would be regarded as consent. The focus group was limited to a one-hour time-frame. Focus group participants were sent a thank you gift to addresses they furnished via email.

Results of the survey were evaluated using SPSS software crosstabs and group sorting. Quantitative results were translated into percentages for comparison. Open-ended survey questions and focus group responses were evaluated for themes using guidelines from Creswell and Creswell (2018).

**CHAPTER III**  
**RESULTS**

In this chapter, I present the results of my study, beginning with the survey results and then presenting the results of the focus group.

**Data Analysis: Survey**

Responses to the Qualtrics survey included 21 consents to participate and 2 refusals of consent. Refusals of consent automatically brought respondents to the end of the survey where they were thanked for their participation. Of the 21 consenting participants, 17 were from District A, 1 was from District B, and 2 identified as “other,” which could mean contractors or ESD employees. The largest group of respondents were certified teachers ( $n = 14$ ), followed by both certified specialists ( $n = 2$ ) and non-classroom classified support staff ( $n = 2$ ). Of the 21 people who consented to participate, 18 completed the surveys. One response was registered from District B.

Table 1  
*Summary of Respondents’ Years as an Educator*

Scale	Current District	Professional Educator
0-2 years	4	3
3-5 years	5	3
6-8 years	4	2
9+ years	7	10

Eleven educators endorsed strong agreement with the statement, drawn from previous work by Davis et al. (2014), that “*Educators can help children learn to understand and manage their own feelings.*” Eight educators answered *somewhat agree*

and one indicated *neither agree nor disagree*. No responses indicated disagreement with the statement. When rating confidence in their own ability to promote children's social and emotional well-being, all respondents endorsed confidence, with eight (40%) reporting being *somewhat confident*, 10 (50%) reporting being *mostly confident*, and two (10%) reporting that they were *very confident* in their abilities.

People experiencing burnout often report they lack energy. When asked to indicate general energy level over the last month, most respondents indicated they were feeling *less energy than usual* (see Table 2). While some reported *the same* level of energy, most reported *slightly* or *much less energy*. No male respondents endorsed *much less* energy. More respondents who have been in education longer reported a change in their energy level. No respondents reported having *more energy* than usual.

All respondents to the survey endorsed confidence in their ability to support social and emotional wellbeing (Table 3). Two teachers reported being *Very Confident*. Specialists and Classified staff reported *somewhat* or *mostly* being confident in their ability to promote social and emotional wellbeing. Agreement with the statement that educators can help students learn how to manage their own feelings was indicated by all but one respondent. More than half of respondents *strongly agreed* with the statement. It is important to note that these questions were general and not connected to SEL curricula.

All respondents reported feelings of emotional depletion when working or thinking about work, with half (9/18) of respondents endorsing *often* feeling emotionally drained and 4/18 (22%) reporting *almost always* feeling emotional drained (Table 4). Those who reported an increase in feeling emotionally drained included classified and licensed staff. One teacher reported *much less* emotional stress and another reported



Table 2  
*Reported Energy Levels Over the Last Month compared to Usual*

	Same	Slightly Less	Much Less
Teachers	3 (21%)	6 (43%)	5 (36%)
Specialists		2 (100%)	
Classified	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
Years in District			
0-2	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	
3-5		2 (50%)	2 (50%)
6-8		3 (100%)	
9+	1 (14%)	3 (43%)	3 (43%)
Gender*			
Male	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	
Female	2 (15%)	7 (54%)	4 (31%)

\*One respondent identified as non-binary; this person’s data are not reported on the table to protect their privacy.

*slightly less* emotional stress. The majority of respondents indicated *more* emotional stress now compared with last year at the same time.

Sorting responses to the question about educators helping children understand and manage their own feelings for years of service (Table 5) did not reveal strong patterns. It is interesting to note that a long-term educator endorsed *neither agree nor disagree*. Early career educators tended toward *strongly agreeing* with the statement, though the sample is too small to identify any reliable indicators.

Of respondents new to the district, 3/4 (75%) reported considering a different career *sometimes* or *often* (Table 6). Respondents hired around the time of SEL implementation in District A did not report considering a different career *often*. They did

report *sometimes* and *almost never* considering another career. In all, 11/18 respondents (61%) reported considering changing careers *sometimes* or *often*.

Table 3  
*Confidence and Belief in Teaching of Social and Emotional Well-Being*

Prompt	Role	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Very Confident
	Teacher (n = 14)	5 (36%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)
How confident are you in your ability to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing?	Specialist (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
	Classified (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
React to the statement “Educators can help children learn to understand and manage their own feelings.”	Teacher (n = 14)	7 (50%)	6 (43%)	1 (7%)
	Specialist (n = 2)	2 (100%)		
	Classified (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	

Table 4  
*Reported Energy Levels*

		Same	Slightly Less	Much Less	
How would you rate your energy level over the last month?	Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 14)	3 (21%)	6 (43%)	5 (36%)	
	Specialists ( <i>n</i> = 2)		2 (100%)		
	Classified ( <i>n</i> = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
		Sometimes	Often	Almost Always	
How often do you feel emotionally drained when working or thinking about work?	Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 14)	5 (36%)	6 (43%)	3 (21%)	
	Specialists ( <i>n</i> = 2)		2 (100%)		
	Classified ( <i>n</i> = 2)		1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
		More emotional stress	Same emotional stress	Slightly less emotional stress	Much less emotional stress
If you were to compare your feelings about work now with how you felt at the same time last year, would you say you have ...?	Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 14)	10 (71%)	2 (14%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)
	Specialists ( <i>n</i> = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
	Classified ( <i>n</i> = 2)	2 (100%)			

Table 5

*“Educators can help children learn to understand and manage their own feelings”*

Years with district	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree
0-2 years ( <i>n</i> = 4)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	
3-5 years ( <i>n</i> = 4)	4 (100%)		
6-8 years ( <i>n</i> = 3)	1 (33%)	2 (66%)	
9+ years ( <i>n</i> = 7)	2 (29%)	4 (57%)	1 (14%)

NOTE: No participants *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*

Table 6

*How often in the last month have you considered a career other than teaching?*

Year in the District	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often
0-2 years ( <i>n</i> = 4)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	1 (24%)
3-5 years ( <i>n</i> = 4)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	
6-8 years ( <i>n</i> = 3)	2 (66%)	1 (33%)	
9+ years ( <i>n</i> = 7)	2 (29%)	4 (57%)	1 (14%)

All respondents indicated feeling supported by district administrators and colleagues (Table 6). All respondents also reported considering a career other than education. In this small sample, the numbers are similar between teachers, specialists, and classified staff indicating feeling supported and considering a career change. An example is that two teachers reported *almost always feeling supported*, and three teachers reported *almost always considering a different career*.

Table 7  
*Staff Support and Consideration of Alternate Employment*

		Sometimes	Often	Almost Always*
How often do you feel emotionally supported by your district (administrators and colleagues) when working?	Certified Teacher (n = 14)	5 (36%)	6 (43%)	3 (21%)
	Certified Specialist (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
	Classified Staff (n = 2)	2 (100%)		
How often in the last month have you considered a career other than teaching?	Certified Teacher (n = 14)	5 (36%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)
	Certified Specialist (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
	Classified Staff (n = 2)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	

\* No participants selected *Never* as a response

Open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey. Respondents were asked “What are some ways you have emotionally supported fellow educators and/or yourself during this time?” and “What are some additional ways that your school or district could support you?” Of 18 respondents, 15 answered open-ended questions. Some offered brief responses, and some wrote extended responses that spoke of the importance of support for the teachers during this time. The respondent from District B noted they were seeking support primarily from professional Facebook groups and organizations, while respondents from District A sought support from colleagues. Open-ended responses for teachers were evaluated for trends using guidance from Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) book on qualitative research.

Table 8 categorizes and summarizes the supports that teachers reported creating or accessing. Respondents noted the importance of feeling connection and support from

colleagues, including “lots of Facetime, outdoor gatherings, group texting/chats” and “just reach[ing] out via email or phone calls.” One respondent said that “random acts of kindness” were helpful. Another noted “I will offer to take some things off of other’s ‘plates’ to help lessen the work load, and sometimes others will do the same for me.” Some respondents wrote that they were making sure they were available “to listen when other teachers need to vent or ask questions” and share materials to “help them, save them time and mental energy.”

Respondents from District A noted that they were engaged in meet-ups, structured to meet pandemic safety requirements including physical distancing. These meet-ups included taking walks or exercising together or virtual meetings, “as long as they felt they were connecting.” Another respondent would connect by “emailing or texting jokes or simply things to let them know I am thinking of them” and “sending more positive, uplifting, and grateful comments via email and text.” Some reported that they simply “buy stupid hats on Amazon and FaceTime each other to laugh, use the filters for dumb pictures, and giggle. Then we talk about ways to make class funny.” Teachers who lived alone reported that they “do things together to try to increase our social time.” Respondents noted that it remained important to colleagues to continue with celebrating things big and small. One respondent reported, “When I was pregnant in the spring, my coworkers threw a virtual baby shower for me.” Among the few self-care strategies, exercise/walks, taking breaks, and drinking coffee were noted.

Table 8

*What are some ways you have emotionally supported fellow educators and/or yourself during this time?*

Type of Intervention	Strategies		
Connection	Email (x3)	Phone (x2)	Text/Chat (x5)
	Video Calls (x7)	Social Media (x1)	Socially Distanced Meetings (x5)
	Listening to others (x2)	Celebrating small things	“Venting”
Support	Jokes	Silliness (crazy hats, video filters)	Sharing work load when possible
	Sending “thinking of you” messages to others.	Virtual baby shower	Sharing ideas to save time and mental energy
Self-Care	Exercise/Walks	Take Breaks	Pots of Coffee

When asked about support needs from the district, teachers asked for training in online teaching, which was not generally available for teachers when entering the pandemic as evidenced by the ‘building the plane as we are flying it’ analogy. Regarding training for teaching virtually, a teacher said “We had none!” It is interesting to note that though some felt that they had no training, all respondents felt that they had support from their administrators. Teachers were concerned with increasing engagement in their online classrooms. “How do we maximize engagement in the online classroom? I would LOVE tips on how to do that! We have no systems to share ideas with other teachers.”

Additional responses to the question about further needs from the district fell into four main categories: (a) communication, (b) time, (c) other resources, and (d) compliments.

As the pandemic unfolded, plans were changed and adjusted at the state and local level several times, often right before a break when teachers did not have contract time to

plan for the changes. “The most stressful part of this has been the uncertainty of how the year is going to go,” wrote one respondent. Another put their needs more simply: “Have more answers.” One person wrote, “I need routine and schedule and the change up of that or the worry about what that change could look like is the most draining part of the year, not the actual online teaching.” One respondent suggested changes to “create grade level teams so we can discuss students with other teachers that have the same kids, and maybe even create some cross-curricular assignments.” Another noted that, “A check in from the principal would be great. Just an email to ask how we are doing would mean a lot.” Others wrote that the principals had been extremely supportive, and that “Our district is pretty great for the most part.”

Classified staff felt that they needed more help, and felt that they had “less than bare bones staff,” remarking that “for all the extra work we do, we certainly are not financially compensated.” Teachers noted needs for grading time and support for contacting students and their families. “It’s frustrating to spend so much time trying to get into contact with these families to be just brushed off. Maybe administrators will have more impact with them.” They also noted challenges with the adaptation to teaching in the CDL format. One noted,

I do not like to recreate lessons, assignments, or work that has already been created. We have a rather great text both in print and online. This year we do not have access to the online version of it directly. We have to go through our platform, link it, etc. to get it to link. This is difficult and you must link each piece separately. If I want to use 5 things from the online text, I have to create 5 different assignments to



contain one at a time. Poor use of my time, when it has always been there with a simple click. I wish I could just click, copy, and paste.

Several respondents complimented the district on their support and communication. One noted appreciation for the superintendent who “gave us all his phone number, and has a weekly meeting on Zoom for staff to come talk about things that they are struggling with.” Another noted that the “superintendent was able to work with the hospital [redacted] to offer vaccines for our schools, which was a huge relief.”

Table 9  
*Priorities for Support from District*

Communication	Uncertainty is stressful	There is a need for a system for sharing ideas with other teachers.	Grade Level teams for cross-curricular assignment planning and student supports
Time	Need for more time to prep, grade, and gather thoughts.	Need for more support for contacting parents and students who are not participating.	Access to more convenient online resources for curriculum would make it so lessons aren't being recreated.
Other Resources	Need for more support staff was noted by teachers and support staff.	More convenient online curricular resources.	More check-ins from Principal about specific classes and/or experiences.
Compliments	“We feel very heard as a staff and union. The superintendent gave us his phone number and has a weekly Zoom meeting for staff to come talk about things that they are struggling with.”	“Our principal has always been extremely supportive.”	“Our district is pretty great for the most part.”

### **Data Analysis: Focus Group**

The focus group met for one session and followed methodology established by Kitzinger (1995) with adaptation for the pandemic safety using the Google Meet virtual meeting platform. Participants demonstrated evidence of familiarity with the virtual meeting platform by muting microphones, taking turns, allowing response time, and turning cameras off at times. Sim (1998) noted that group composition could influence conformity of opinions. In this case, those who responded in the survey that they were interested in the focus group and also signed in to participate created a group composed of educational professionals with similar levels of education. Three licensed teachers from District A and one licensed teacher from District B attended. Themes that emerged during the focus group included feelings of failure, the need for building community, needs for specific groups of students, and criticisms of SEL curricula. Discussion focused on challenges the teachers were experiencing with distance learning and organically developed a supportive tone between participants.

Directing the discussion to teacher needs and coping proved challenging, as the teachers repeatedly re-directed the discussion to focus on student needs. Some shared their feelings about the current repeated crises by sharing stories about the difficulties their students were facing. Periodically, participants would use the option to turn their cameras and microphones off during the virtual meeting when they appeared to begin to cry during discussions of challenges with students, family, and work stresses. Each teacher had a different professional role (Special Education teacher, Music teacher, Core curricula teacher), yet there was significant agreement around student needs. Discussion

was evaluated for issues that had group consensus and dissent. Notably, the group did not identify areas of dissent and defaulted to supportive listening.

Participants reported different levels of access to students during CDL. Ability to connect with students, whether in-person or remote via video conferencing platforms, was important to all teachers. Teachers reported that some students would make remarkable efforts to attend classes using the virtual learning platform, while others were unreachable. The virtual platform design allows students to turn off their cameras and microphones, creating a space that teachers are unable to bridge at times. If a student is learning a new concept or musical instrument remotely, it is difficult for the teacher to see and hear how they are progressing. Some teachers reported feeling like they were teaching into a black box, because so many student screens were turned off. “I’m expecting that they are doing something on the other side (of the screen) because I can’t hear or see them,” one teacher remarked.

Responses were sorted into seven main themes: (a) feelings of failure, (b) need for building community, (c) criticism of the SEL curriculum, (d) need for support for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersex, Agender, Asexual and other queer-identifying community) youth, (e) teacher needs for support, (f) coping strategies, and (g) specific areas of stress. All educators were looking forward to more in-person time with students. As one teacher stated, “Contending with what the kids are going through at home and not being able to have them in the building for seven hours a day has been really challenging.”

Table 10 summarizes the Focus Group’s reporting on emotions including feelings of failure, coping, and stress. Feelings of failure include not being able to give the students what they need in the moment, lacking energy to deal with the repeated crises, and feeling frustrated. Coping responses indicate awareness of different kinds of coping and recognizing the importance of self-care. Areas of stress could be summarized by one teacher’s reflection that “Everything is stressful, but in a new way.” One teacher was clearly struggling with the death of one of their students the previous weekend. Teachers felt stress when thinking of the challenges their students were facing, as well as balancing support of their own families.

Table 10  
*Focus Group Emotional Reporting*

Feelings of Failure	Coping	Particular areas of stress
“These kids need more than we can currently give them.”	Recognition of coping skills, healthy and not healthy. Teachers report being more likely to say “I need to do this now.”	One teacher had a student pass away over the weekend before the focus group.
“...like I’m in a perpetual rollercoaster with an adrenaline hangover – like a crash and I have no energy to deal with anything”	Journaling, swimming, connecting with colleagues.	Teacher told a story about a student trying to learn in CDL while taking classes from a hotel hallway.
“I feel angsty and frustrated”	Somebody is usually checking in. Colleagues have been ‘tight.’  “I’m more aware of ... “bad” coping”  “We see our whole school as a family. That helps immensely because it means that someone’s usually checking in.”	“Everything is stressful, but in a new way.”

Table 11 summarizes responses of support needs. Teachers had difficulty identifying support needs for themselves, and tended to focus on their students. One suggested that resiliency training would be helpful. The need for additional social workers and school counselors was also noted. Teachers expressed the belief that there was a need for building community and establishing support for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students. They would like their educational expertise to be recognized without being concerned that their advocacy for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students would impact their job security.

Table 11  
*Focus Group Support Needs*

Teacher need for Supports	Need for Building Community	Need for support for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth
Resiliency training might be more effective than SEL lessons.	Interest groups: “You create a community around a shared interest that you stick with.”	Communities are resistant to formation of clubs or interest groups. Teachers feel that their educational expertise is dismissed.  They want to show students that no matter who they are, they are important. Students “need a place where they feel validated.”
Need for more FTE: school counselors, social workers, and support staff.	Students like to get a little time in “breakout rooms” in Zoom* so that they can talk and connect.	Some groups are considered “political” and not allowed. Teachers see it more as creating a family around a shared interest – like being an athlete that wants to be part of a sport outside of PE class.
Teachers did not want to talk about their own needs – they want to talk about student needs	“There is never enough time to make things relevant and applicable to student’s individual lives.”	Teachers fear pushing too hard – they have an idea that their jobs may be in jeopardy if they advocate too much.

\*Zoom is a virtual meeting platform that many schools used for delivering classroom content during the pandemic.

Table 12 summarizes commentary about the SEL curriculum. Criticisms of the SEL curriculum include the inflexibility of the curriculum and how it does not address the students’ needs as they come up. Teachers expressed concern that the SEL lessons may be hurtful to students who want to talk about the topics, while other students are not taking the lessons seriously. Teachers felt that the curricula do not do enough to address homophobia, sexism, or racism, and they need to supplement the lessons. Finally, challenges associated with the lessons include that the teachers who are good at connecting with students don’t need help with that, and the teachers who are not as strong with student connections have difficulty delivering the SEL lessons.

Table 12  
*Commentary on SEL Curriculum*

Criticism	Supplementing Lessons	Challenges
“I don’t want a canned curriculum. I want to be effective.”	Lessons do not address homophobia, sexism, or racism.	“I don’t need you to tell me how to connect with my kids.”
“Boxed curriculum works well for nobody.” “It’s not a one-size-fits-all experience.”	“There is a community building need that isn’t only academic and isn’t only athletic that is missing.”	“Kids need to feel safe to share and be willing to share for the benefit of others. Some teachers don’t know how to engage in that way, and that makes it so much harder for them.”
The lessons “can actually hurt the one kid who is interested” when the others are not engaged.	“We do a lot of SEL activities in addition to [the curriculum] based on the things that come up for the kids and kind of bridge those things.”	“We have an artificial roof that doesn’t reflect where every kid is on their social emotional journey and that makes it really hard to teach.”
It “doesn’t reflect where every kid is at on their social emotional journey. You will get one student who is really engaged and willing to be open, then the the other 24 or 27 give lipservice.”	Students will need support as they transition back into the buildings, and the curriculum is not designed to cover this.	“We have our buzzwords that we’ve been trying to teach.”  “A lot of lessons just feel hokey.”

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, I discuss the limitations of my study before summarizing the main findings, organized by research question, and linking them to prior research. I discuss the implications for practice and then suggest areas for future research.

It is important to note that this study should be considered a descriptive exploratory case study. Although I had originally hoped to be able to conduct a comparative case study, challenges related to the multiple issues of the COVID-19 pandemic, the wildfires that justified the communities where the study was set being declared federal disaster areas, the severe winter weather that required the re-scheduling of data collection efforts, and the very real burden under which educators were working during this study all likely contributed to a low response rate.

Responses from District A included 56% of certified teachers. It is possible that those who responded to the survey and focus group represent educators with higher levels of resilience, because they were able to devote the 10 minutes to the survey, or the hour in the evening to the focus group. If respondents were feeling less resilient, they may not have the energy or motivation to share their perspectives. Three educators who completed the consent portion of the survey did not follow through with answering the questions. One can wonder the reasons for this, such as the possibility that the potential participants were unable to add one more request to their day, they were exhausted, or perhaps they were not feeling like sharing their thoughts and feelings about teaching during crises. The reasons for partial completion are going to remain a mystery.

The response rate of District A, the district with the SEL program, was much higher than that of District B for both the survey and focus group. Before sending the invitation to participate in the survey, the principal at the middle school in District B expressed doubt that there would be much response because buy-in to the idea of SEL and teaching it had not yet been achieved. Perhaps not surprisingly, the one respondent from District B indicated no awareness of plans to implement an SEL curricula to students. Ultimately, despite my best efforts, District B submitted only one response to each data collection instrument. This lack of participation might relate to the district staff's general lack of comfort with the topic of SEL, in addition to the very real stresses the teachers and staff were navigating at the time I was recruiting participants and collecting data. Several educators started the survey, but did not complete it. These incomplete surveys might have been from District B, although there is no way to verify this. The principal from District B's middle school told me about concern about participation rates before the survey was released. The concern about response led to the suggestion of a video to "put a face" to the survey request to increase participation. Despite my providing a personal video introduction / participant recruitment attempt, there was insufficient participation from District B to enable any sort of meaningful comparison between the two districts.

Originally, this research project was designed to include student responses, school observations, and data drawn from disciplinary records, state benchmark testing, and climate surveys. The focus of the study was pivoted to teachers due to lack of access to students during the pandemic and the decision at the state level that benchmark testing would not be done in Spring 2020. Because of the pandemic and the move to Distance



Learning, climate surveys were also not conducted in Spring 2020. Discipline data were also not available due to CDL.

Despite these challenges, I worked to make participation in my study both accessible and relevant to educators. The survey was designed with a combination of questions drawn from research and questions developed to reflect the current time of repeated crises. The number of questions was intentionally kept low to keep completion time estimates below 10 minutes. Even with the brevity of the survey, five people who started the survey did not complete it. Two participants read the consent and refused to give consent, which took them to the end of the survey automatically, so they did not answer any additional questions. Three others answered some questions but not all. Responses to the questions they answered were included in analyses, but their lack of survey completion meant less data to analyze for some of the questions.

The focus group design was chosen as a complement to the surveys because surveys were kept as brief as possible to reduce demands on participants who were likely already feeling quite stressed from global socio-economic disruption caused by the pandemic and further disruption caused by repeated major storms. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend using focus groups when direct observation of participants is not available, when participants provide historical data, and to allow the researcher control of the questions.

I was hoping to draw more participants for the focus group than I was able to recruit. Some who indicated interest in participating were unavailable because the focus group was held in the evening, and they had family responsibilities. Another potential participant was unavailable because of factors relating to storm fallout. Three participants

originally signed in to the meeting, and the fourth participant signed in later, so the consent was repeated. The participants were all teachers, and all had strong perspectives on supporting students. There appeared to be instant camaraderie between the teachers, with the three from District A quickly welcoming the teacher from District B into the group. Shared experience appeared to connect the group, and comfort with discussing stressful events quickly developed.

Although the teachers in the focus group from District A were more likely to rely on each other for support, the SEL curricula did not seem to be the reason for this relationship that the teachers described as “tight.” One commented that “Boxed [curriculum] works well for nobody” and another commented that the students know SEL concepts “in the same way they know a simile is ‘like’ or ‘as.’” Criticism of the curriculum included that it does not address homophobia, sexism, or racism and feels “hokey” and “not genuine.”

Staff may have had very different experiences of the crises being considered in the survey. Pre-existing health concerns of students, staff, and their families may affect the level of stress individuals experience when considering COVID-19, as the mortality rate is much higher for older individuals with pre-existing conditions. Families with more financial resources tended to have fewer stresses than those who had less savings or job security. Those who live in District B experienced evacuation, while those in District A may have only experienced near evacuation. The levels of stress may have varied, though the SES of the districts is similar.

**Research question #1.** *How are educators who work in schools with an SEL focus managing the life-altering impact of the pandemic, wildfires, and storms?*

My study provides evidence that the challenges and stress of the pandemic, wildfires, and storms are causing higher levels of stress at work and at home. Teachers are focusing on supporting their students' academic and emotional growth through virtual connections. Virtual connections allow for visual and auditory communication, but change the quality of teacher-student interactions. Teachers noted that students in a virtual environment are less likely to speak freely when they are struggling with depression, anxiety, or lacking basic resources. They are simply more worried about their students because they cannot be in the same space. When teachers would normally be able to ask a student a question about their wellbeing outside of the classroom, they would now have to ask the student to stay signed on to class, or take them to a break-out room in the virtual platform to speak privately. This avenue of identifying student support needs is just not as available or comfortable for students in a virtual environment. A focus group participant summarized feelings about distance learning in the crises by saying "Yeah, I know you want to survive. Sorry I had to figure out my button so I can start instruction." Technology is both the means for connection and a frustration.

Educators are also balancing working from home with their own children attending classes through distance learning. Being at home to teach means interruptions, background noises, internet connection issues, and technology management. There is a dependence on technology and infrastructure that is unique and intensified. The pandemic, fires, and storms created a need for educators to protect their families' and pets' physical safety, while impairing their connection to their students. One teacher

characterized the year as feeling “like I’m in a perpetual rollercoaster with an adrenaline hangover – like a crash and I have no energy to deal with anything” (Focus Group response, February 23, 2021).

Emotional exhaustion, or feeling drained of emotional resources, relates to intent to remain in a teaching job (Bettini et al., 2020). Bettini et al. (2020) studied special education teachers and found that emotional exhaustion was more of an indicator of teacher attrition than stress. They reported that stress is a motivator, but emotional exhaustion causes burnout particularly when resources are low and demands are high. Because burnout is associated with depressive symptomology, “it is understandable that emotionally exhausted teachers would seek another job. (Bettini et al., 2020). Teachers in my study report increasing levels of stress, decreasing levels of energy, and increasing emotional exhaustion.

Feeling emotionally drained may lead to a loss of experienced educators. Of teachers who responded to the survey, 64% reported “*often*” or “*almost always*” considering changing profession. For comparison, the Economic Policy Institute (Garcia & Weiss, 2019) published a study pre-pandemic that found 13.8% of public school teachers were either leaving their school or teaching altogether, and that 36.2% of schools were finding difficulty filling teaching vacancies. If all respondents in my study were considering leaving education, and 65% were *often* or *almost always* considering leaving, this may create an even larger gap in staffing needs and availability of qualified teachers to fill those positions. Based on the responses to my survey, there is evidence to suggest a potential for significant turn-over of staff, which could have a financial and performance impact on the district. Bettini et al. (2020) identify administrative support

and workload manageability as mediating factors to stress and emotional exhaustion that impact a teacher's intent to stay in their current job.

Due to low response rate from District B, I was unable to draw any comparisons between the districts. Before the pandemic, educators were reporting secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue (OEA, 2019) and during the repeated crises in 2020-2021, they experienced unprecedented trauma and stress. A focus group participant said "Everything is stressful, but in a new way." Hagenauer, Hascher, and Volet (2015) studied 132 experienced teachers (a mean of 20.56 years of experience) and found that positive interpersonal relationships between students and teachers were important for teachers to have joy. Their study related student engagement, lack of discipline, and closeness of student-teacher relationships, to teacher emotions of joy, anger, and anxiety. They found that if the teaching experience was repeatedly negative, teachers would experience compassion fatigue and potentially experience deterioration of teacher-student relationships. This can increase the risk of developing burnout. CDL has put distance between the teachers and students, and teachers are experiencing reduced opportunities for personal connections with their students. Teacher job satisfaction, relationships with students, and finding meaning at work are all related (Lavy & Bocker, 2018). Teaching during the pandemic and other crises has made all connections more difficult, and may impact job satisfaction as indicated by the number of respondents who are considering leaving education as a profession.

**Research Question #2.** *Is there evidence of teachers using coping skills based on SEL competencies?*

Responses from the survey and focus group can be considered through the SEL framework demonstrated by teachers as they navigate one crisis after another. I mapped these associations after reviewing data from the survey and focus group, linking them to the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2018). Jennings and Greenberg’s prosocial classroom model (2009) links teachers’ social emotional competency with building relationships, effective classroom management and delivering effective SEL instruction. Teachers noted self-awareness by identifying their feelings of success or failure and made statements such as, “I feel angsty and frustrated,” and, “I feel like I’m in a perpetual rollercoaster.” The teachers were all managing high levels of stress from work, the global pandemic, health and family concerns, and storm-related property damage and loss. Even under all of this stress, the teachers were focused on educating students and supporting their personal growth, demonstrating self-management.

In addition, teachers were reaching out to students who they knew were struggling, planning for future supports of students, and making planning decisions while balancing personal and family needs. Teachers in District A all mentioned supporting and being supported by colleagues, providing evidence of relationship skills that were significant in coping with the crises. Teachers noted “venting” and listening, and trying to make each other laugh, being socially aware of colleagues’ needs. They were empathetic and offered to share resources, as well as share work. One change that teachers attributed to the SEL curriculum is that they used some common language around coping skills and felt comfortable advocating for things that they needed. They recalled saying “I need this now” whether it was a break or a venting session with a colleague. In spite of teacher

criticisms of the SEL curriculum, they noted applying the concepts to their own lives particularly in the area of self-care.

All educators had varying levels of confidence that they had an impact on student well-being. The distance created by the pandemic, with students mostly studying from home using virtual meeting platforms, made it difficult for teachers to connect emotionally with the students. Participating teachers expressed the belief that they can impact students' emotional well-being, but had concerns about the curriculum used for SEL development. Classified staff (including nutrition and custodial services) recognized their contribution to student well-being. There was concern from all educators that the SEL curriculum was not effective for students who were most in need of social emotional support. Educators wanted more time to connect with students, either in-person or virtually.

Collie, Shapka, Perry, and Martin (2015) studied teacher SEL beliefs and identified three categories: (a) *SEL-thriver*, with “high SEL comfort, commitment, and culture;” (b) *SEL-advocate* with high comfort and commitment, and low culture; and (c) *SEL-striver*, with low comfort and culture but high commitment. The lowest stress and highest job satisfaction were reported by SEL-thrivers due to confidence, support, and commitment to professional growth (Collie et al., 2015). Teachers responding to my study could be identified as “SEL Thrivers” based on the Collie et al. (2015) research, though they did not see the curriculum as the most effective way to teach SEL competencies. Teachers reported their confidence in their ability to promote children's social and emotional well-being, including that most strongly agree that educators can impact children's ability to understand and manage their own feelings. There is

administrative support for the SEL curriculum, and fidelity assurance since SEL is a domain for teacher evaluation. At the same time, there is a belief that the boxed curriculum is not flexible enough to be effective in meeting student needs, and that the prescriptive nature of it can be harmful.

**Research Question #3.** *What do teachers identify as supports they need from their districts as they continue to work in these stressful times?*

Teachers identified a need for more communication from their district and building administration because of the stress of uncertainty. They wanted more communication with each other to share ideas and support. Time to share and plan as teacher groups would allow the teachers to coordinate their efforts. Additional resources that teachers requested were time to prep, grade, and gather thoughts. Additional time or support was needed to contact parents and students who were not participating in Comprehensive Distance Learning. They also wanted more supportive check-ins from their administrators. It was mentioned several times that the teachers appreciated the support that they were receiving from their district administrators. Teachers in the focus group reported that there was a need for more mental health supports in their schools. Some suggested increasing the number of school counselors and social workers in the district to help meet the mental health support needs of the students returning to school after the pandemic. Training in student trauma and support was also requested. They noted that mental health support was a need before the pandemic, and anticipated increased need and opportunity as students and staff gradually return to normal activities as the pandemic becomes more controlled.



Gu and Day (2013) considered teacher resilience, noting that the work environment is a mediating factor in teacher retention. Collegial relationships and school leadership were identified as some factors of teacher resilience. Collaboration as part of school culture supports belonging, innovation, and collective strength amongst teachers (Gu & Day, 2013). Gu and Day (2013) state that teacher resilience should not be considered an inherited personal trait, and emphasize teacher preparation in preservice programs and continued support by leadership. Applying their study to the current crises, school leadership may be a key factor in teacher retention.

Lavy and Bocker (2018) connected relationships with finding meaning at work, as well as job satisfaction. While Lavy and Bocker (2018) do not establish predictive relationships, they do establish relationships. For example, having a good relationship with students cannot be a predictor of teachers having a greater sense of meaning or vice versa, though both are related. A sense of meaningful work can fluctuate from day to day and be affected by other factors. A teacher in my focus group who was providing LIPI noted feeling more stressed on the days that they have to reach students through a screen.

Relationships with students and staff may impact teacher burnout (Garwood et al., 2018) which in turn affects teachers' tendencies to seek different jobs (Bettini et al., 2019). Garwood et al. (2018) studied special educators and found that teachers who formed relationships with student who had emotional and behavioral difficulties and did not take the misbehavior personally were less likely to experience burnout. Bettini et al. (2020) found that administrative support "directly and indirectly predicted intent to stay" in a teaching job. All responses to the survey for my study indicate considering seeking a different job. Although my study design does not allow me to draw causal connections,

my findings suggest that both CDL and LIPI might be related both to teachers feeling disconnected to their students and their contemplation of leaving the profession.

### **Implications**

The districts may want to consider the teacher-identified need of time for relationship building activities with students and how that need could be met. An evaluation may include an examination of SEL approach, and if adjustments could be made to provide more access to time spent on relationship building activities. One approach could be examining the school schedule and determining if there is enough time available during breaks such as lunch, recess, and passing times to allow for social connections, bearing in mind that too much unstructured time can become problematic. Another option is incorporation of cooperative or peer learning as a teaching strategy. Cooperative or peer learning techniques build peer relationships and empathy and reduce bullying through group-based learning experiences (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2019). Van Ryzin and Roseth studied cooperative learning with a lense for decreasing bullying, victimization, and stress among marginalized students. Additional “salutary effects” of increasing peer relatedness, reducing emotional problems, and strengthening positive school climate factors were noted. Cooperative learning as a strategy for instruction and developing relationships may be useful as students return to in-person learning.

Districts may want to consider adjusting the balance of time spent with SEL curricula during crises, slowing down the pace of lessons and increasing the time allotted for relationship building and social support. This may be complicated when teacher evaluations have SEL curricular participation looped into performance evaluation. Considering adaptation of curricular delivery during crises appears appropriate. As

school staff support students in navigating crises, considering how adhering to a prescribed lesson plan might impact their performance review would be an added stress. Teachers noted that they want to be recognized as educated professionals who have professional judgment when it comes to identifying their students' needs.

Future research may focus on the return to in-person learning and the impact on students and teachers. All will be returning to in-person learning using protective measures against COVID-19, including physical distancing, cohorts, face masking, physical barriers, and scheduling adjustments. Given the trauma of the pandemic and weather events, ODE is requiring that school staff receive training in trauma and de-escalation. Student behavior has not been tracked during the pandemic in the same way that it was pre-pandemic. As students return to in-person learning, behavior data will be valuable. It will be interesting to note if students experienced a change the SEL competencies, frustration tolerance, or appreciation for the opportunity to be at school that may influence behavior. Before the pandemic, Oregon schools were considered to be in a behavioral crisis (Roemeling, 2018) and given the focus on behavior, data should be gathered to evaluate need for intervention and support.

During preparation for the surveys, an administrator half-jokingly asked why research did not address administrator attitudes or feelings about SEL. He mentioned that administrators are often overlooked in this type of research, and though there was a somewhat jovial presentation of the question, there was still a kernel of honest question there. Administrators are key in the implementation of any curriculum. Addressing administrator perspectives related to SEL adoption could provide an area for additional future research.

Considering the cumulative impact of the pandemic, wildfires, and storm damage, the fact that educators responded to the survey and request for a focus group is greatly appreciated. Ultimately, although my study did not provide as much data as I was hoping it would, it did provide a few useful insights. Most importantly, even though educators are demonstrating the SEL competencies that they teach, they are showing signs of burnout and considering alternate employment.

## APPENDIX A

### Teacher Survey

People living in Oregon have faced unusual stresses this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires. We are trying to better understand how the pandemic and wildfires are impacting our community. We want your input and hope that you will share your thoughts with us by completing this short survey.

There are no wrong answers, and responses are anonymous.

These questions will help with understanding how middle school teachers are managing during this time, and provide information that might help us identify support that may be helpful.

Please answer every question, and when you have completed the survey press submit.

How many years have you worked in this district?	0-2	3-5	6-8	9+
How many years have you been a professional educator?	0-2	3-5	6-8	9+
Please identify your gender	Male	Female	Other	
React to the following statement: “Educators can help children learn to understand and manage their own feelings.” <sup>1</sup>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Overall, how confident are you in your ability to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing? <sup>2</sup>	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Often confident	Very confident
Emotional exhaustion can make people feel physically and emotionally drained. How would you rate your general emotional energy over the last month?	Much more exhausted than usual	More exhausted than usual	Same as usual	Better than usual
How often in the last month have you considered a career other than teaching?	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
How often do you feel emotionally drained when working or thinking about work?	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
If you were to compare your feelings about work now with	More emotional	Same emotional	Slightly less	Much less emotional

how you felt at this same time last year, would you say you have...	stress	stress	emotional stress	stress
How often do you feel emotionally supported by your district (administrators and colleagues) when working?	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
What are some ways you have emotionally supported fellow educators during this time?	(open ended)			
If you could change one thing in your current situation of teaching during the pandemic (and other stressors) what would it be?	(open ended)			

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

<sup>i</sup>Davis, E., Corr, L., Ummer-Christian, R., Gilson, K.-M., Waters, E., Mihalopoulos, C., Marshall, B., Cook, K., Herrman, H., Mackinnon, A., Harrison, L., & Sims, M. (2014). Family day care educators' knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing : Baseline data from Thrive. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 66–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900309>

<sup>ii</sup>Davis, E., Corr, L., Ummer-Christian, R., Gilson, K.-M., Waters, E., Mihalopoulos, C., Marshall, B., Cook, K., Herrman, H., Mackinnon, A., Harrison, L., & Sims, M. (2014). Family day care educators' knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing : Baseline data from Thrive. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 66–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900309>

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