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The Effects of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy on Middle School Teachers' SEL Self-efficacy and Instructional Practices

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THE EFFECTS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY ON MIDDLE SCHOOL

TEACHERS' SEL SELF-EFFICACY AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

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THE EFFECTS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY ON MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECTS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY ON MIDDLE SCHOOL

TEACHERS' SEL SELF-EFFICACY AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Caitlin Anne O'Keefe

Dr. David Title, Ed.D., Dissertation Chair

This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice investigated the impact professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy had on teacher SEL self-efficacy and instructional practices in a middle school. Educators faced many new challenges with the onset of a global pandemic, increased political polarization, and social unrest fueled by system racism. In the blink of an eye, teachers adapted their instructional practices to teach in full remote, hybrid, and, eventually, in-person instruction with strict COVID-19 guidelines. Teachers noted a decrease in student connectedness and higher disengagement from school. Students' social and emotional needs grew, and classroom teachers became the triage nurses in education, working to identify students most in need of intervention. At P.T. Barnum Middle School (PTBMS), teachers lacked the confidence and competencies to address the SEL needs of their students in their classrooms. This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practices sought to identify the role that culturally responsive pedagogy had on a teacher's perception and SEL self-efficacy when RULER training was ongoing. The researcher developed a professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy and collected both qualitative and quantitative data to measure the impact of the intervention. Findings revealed that Culturally Responsive Pedagogy positively impacted teachers' cultural awareness, perception of the district's commitment to professional learning, SEL self-efficacy, and instruction. The implication of these findings is that to ensure that teachers

have higher SEL self-efficacy, districts must take steps to ensure that their teachers receive meaningful, ongoing professional learning in more than SEL alone. To support the changes occurring in districts, teachers need professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. This study found that such professional learning positively impacted students and teachers.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, middle school, student connectedness, teacher self-efficacy, SEL, instructional practices

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents and parents, who instilled in me a love of learning and a desire to make the world a better place. Both of my maternal grandparents were high school graduates; their daughter, a college graduate; and now their granddaughter, a doctoral graduate. Thank you for teaching me to work hard and seize every opportunity possible. A special thank you to my parents, who were my rocks, and second parents to Owen and Jameson when I couldn't be there.

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First, I would like to thank my committee members who worked tirelessly to support me through this process. Dr. David Title, Dr. Lee Morgan, and Dr. Christine Sipala, I can't thank you enough for all you have taught me. I'm grateful to have the strongest support system that pushed me to be better every step of the way.

Thank you to my colleagues for participating in my study and showing me how powerful the role of the teacher is for our students. Thank you to my administrators, Bryan Watson, Dr. Mary Fernand, and Jennie Taranovich, for their support throughout this process.

My sincere gratitude to my cohort for an incredible three-year journey; I have learned so much from all of you. You all continue to amaze me, and I am privileged to be a part of this program's inaugural class. I am in awe of the contributions you make and will continue to make to the field of education.

Finally, I'd like to thank Carlos Rivera. Carlos was our custodian for several years and always made connections with students. He was a role model to all of our students, but, in particular, our students of color. He jokingly would call me "Dr. Boles" years before I even thought about pursuing my doctorate. He was a shining light in our building, a fierce advocate for students, and an amazing person. The COVID-19 pandemic took so much from so many people, including our beloved Carlos Rivera. He will always be my reminder to stop and check in with students. It didn't matter how much work he had to do; he always put students first.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Student connectedness is the catalyst for many positive educational outcomes, including improvement in student motivation, positive perceptions of school, and academic achievement (Scales et al., 2020). While student connectedness is achieved through many avenues, the development of adult social-emotional competencies could be a potential opportunity to understand how those relationships are formed and maintained and their overall impact on students. Given the present societal and political circumstances, including a global pandemic, societal unrest, and political division, the need for meaningful social-emotional learning (SEL) is more important than ever. Jagers et al. (2019) assert the growing need for teachers to be trained in the core competencies of social-emotional learning, concluding that equity must be at the center. As educators return to the classroom in post-pandemic recovery, districts must provide meaningful professional development in SEL and increase staff cultural competency to ensure that all educators can build stronger relationships with their students to help them achieve more positive outcomes.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges to the field of education. Educators needed to pivot and change their instructional practices to a completely online learning model in twenty-four hours. Personal interaction and what makes a classroom a second home for students were no longer possible. However, one benefit of the global pandemic was the intensified spotlight on social-emotional learning. Once students were thrust into vacillating levels of

isolation from a few months to over a year, more districts were concerned with their ability to support students' mental health.

Additionally, the stress of the pandemic caused more academic and emotional struggles for students at all levels (Engzell et al., 2021). Given the varying learning models, teachers, administrators, and pupil services staff (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, and social workers) had to adapt their methods to meet the overwhelming student needs brought on by the pandemic. With many schools designing learning environments with less in-person instruction, student-teacher relationships were difficult to forge and, therefore, community-building was also challenging. One of the consequences of this learning model, defined as a full distance, or a hybrid model, where half of the students were virtual and the other half in-person, was a reduction in student engagement and student connectedness. Students and educators adapted to an increasingly stressful learning environment, including hybrid teaching and learning, new health guidelines, and the ever-present fear of exposure and quarantine. The continuous interruptions and ever-adapting learning environment prompted a focus on the need to support SEL, not only for students but also for adults.

The support of adult social-emotional learning is critical. Talvio et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of developing adults' social-emotional competencies to impact students positively. The study reiterated that building the core competencies of educators would equip them with the capability to handle challenging situations in the classroom through the formation of collaborative relationships and conflict resolution. Bird and Sultmann (2010) state that relationships were at the center of community-building and ultimately provided the foundation for information, beliefs, and critical discourse. If teachers build strong relationships with their colleagues and students, it creates a harmonious environment conducive to a positive learning

environment. Therefore, it is important to build the SEL competency of teachers to successfully build the community needed to successfully implement social-emotional learning for all students.

This study follows an Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) approach to research to identify the problem and its root causes prior to implementing a plausible solution. Before completing this mixed-methods, quasi-experimental study, the researcher conducted a root cause analysis to determine the most suitable change idea to implement, given the timeframe and the research. As part of the ISDiP, a Problem of Practice is validated, drivers are identified, and change ideas are implemented in a continuous cycle of improvement and adjustment (Perry et al., 2020). Improvement Science allows educational organizations to understand the problem more deeply and urges educational institutions to look at the problem from multiple perspectives and evaluate how their systems and other contributing factors work to positively or negatively impact the environment in which the problem exists. When armed with this information, Improvement Science allows for a comprehensive approach to understanding the problem thoroughly and stops jumping to a solution before understanding the problem and its impacting factors.

Social-emotional learning can act as a vehicle for positive change in promoting equity for students. While schools often reproduce the prevailing social constructs set forth by the Eurocentric norms, more work must be done to promote culturally responsive education for all students (Jager et al., 2019), particularly critical as most teachers are White. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant education as learning while using a student's culture as a springboard for that learning. A student's culture plays a critical role in the learning process. Jager et al. (2019) warn that omitting culturally responsive teaching "can result in culturally and linguistically diverse students being met with unwarranted low expectations, experiences of

cultural mismatch, discrimination, microaggression and implicit biases by peers and adults" (p. 164). Furthermore, Jagers et al. (2019) discuss how this bias could potentially cause severe trauma, negatively impact a student's ability to thrive and learn, and caters to the current Eurocentric societal structure.

Additionally, the National Education Association (2020) reiterates that culturally competent teaching is critical for all educators to use in their classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching increases student performance and helps teachers connect with their students. Tanase (2020) reinforced this idea by supporting the use of culturally responsive teaching to help teachers understand a student's culture's role in learning, specifically its role in building relationships between students of color and their teachers. Finally, Barnes and McCollaps (2019) discuss how the stark cultural differences between students and educators affect instruction in social-emotional learning and can impact how competencies are developed, particularly relationship skills.

The development of adult SEL and cultural competency is a critical starting point for implementing social-emotional learning at the district or building level. Dolev and Leshem (2016) discuss the importance of training to build teachers' adult emotional intelligence and its impact on the participants and their practices. The study further acknowledges the importance of building teachers' personal competencies and their relation to teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Furthermore, Zinsser et al. (2015) reinforce this idea, but focus on the skills of expression, regulation, and knowledge, finding that proficient teachers were more successful in the classroom.

The study's middle school serves a student population of 830 students in Grades 6–8 with 68 full-time teachers; it is the only middle school in this suburban town of over 18,000 people.

After 2010, increasing enrollment trends and changes in housing prices changed the town's demographics. The enrollment data reflects an increasingly diverse student population, specifically the Hispanic/Latinx population. The overall population increased while most surrounding towns had a decrease in population and school enrollment. With the significant increase in diversity, teachers received no professional learning opportunities to support students from various backgrounds.

Additionally, 33% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Our teaching staff is primarily White, with only two teachers of color. Despite experiencing shifts in student demographics, the staff demographic has remained. Table 1 shows the current demographics for this study's participating middle school.

Table 1

Current Demographics of Teachers vs. Students at P.T. Barnum Middle School 2021–2022

Race/Ethnicity	Number of educators by racial group	Number of students by racial group
American Native or Alaska Native	0	*
Asian	0	50
Black or African American	0	28
Hispanic/Latinx	2	164
Two or more races	0	32
White	63	481

Note * indicates data is not reported to ensure confidentiality

The demographics of teachers at P.T. Barnum Middle School (PTBMS) show a predominantly White staff, strongly contrasting the more diverse student population. Additionally, one of the two Hispanic/Latinx teachers is shared with the district's high school and does not teach full-time at PTBMS.

Statement and Definition

The problem addressed in this study focused on the lack of teacher efficacy in SEL and the need for more comprehensive professional learning. In addition, the study sought to enhance cultural competency, address the need to support an increasingly diverse population of students, and support growth in SEL competency and perception. At the end of the 2020–2021 school year, P. T Barnum Middle School—a pseudonym to protect the privacy of the participating school—chose RULER as its new core program for providing Tier 1 SEL instruction to all its students. As PTBMS embarked on its transition to becoming a RULER school, much of the first year of training centered around supporting adults and building adult SEL. In the 2021–2022 school year, the staff continued to teach explicit SEL lessons during homeroom and SEL strategies in the classroom. Research suggests that for SEL implementation to be effective in a school or classroom, the adults must model the SEL competencies they expect their students to demonstrate (Redding & Walberg, 2015).

Cultural competency also plays a critical role in the explicit instruction of adult SEL during professional learning. Warren et al. (2020) state that "advancing SEL goals must include contending with the influence of race, power, and place on a teacher's decision making, awareness, and emotional well-being" (p. 2). To explicitly teach social-emotional competencies, educators must not only have developed their own core competencies but must also grasp the

role of their implicit cultural biases or tendencies on their ability to model ideal student behaviors and strategies.

As P.T. Barnum Middle School prepared for reopening after the initial onset of the pandemic, many changes were made to support SEL for students. Prior to the start of the 2020–2021 school year, professional learning in restorative practices and the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) core competencies provided staff with an introduction to social-emotional learning. To better meet the needs of students, the schedule design changed to include a designated homeroom time to allow for explicit instruction in SEL, Advisory, and extra help, depending on the day of the week. Since teachers needed more planning time for the changes in the instructional model and to prepare for a year's teaching during a pandemic, much of the professional learning was abbreviated.

The building SEL committee designed a survey to help measure teacher perception and retrieve feedback regarding the SEL lessons provided during homeroom. After the first month of utilizing the homeroom lessons, teachers completed the survey measuring their perceptions of SEL and identifying any needs. The survey results showed a lack of understanding and self-efficacy in teaching social-emotional learning. Based on the responses to the survey, many teachers questioned how practical the lessons were and were unsure how SEL could be embedded into classroom instruction. Furthermore, teachers reported not benefiting from the restorative practices training, with 82% stating that they were not confident using restorative practices in their classroom.

Additionally, 68% noted that the lessons did not feel authentic, and teachers wanted more training in SEL because they were not confident in their ability to teach the core competencies to students. Shriver and Weissberg (2020) addressed these concerns in an article that responded to

SEL critics and highlighted similar resistance with every major educational initiative. While acknowledging that SEL is misunderstood, it also emphasizes the importance of accurately representing SEL. Meaningful professional learning opportunities must be provided to staff to support their confidence in their abilities to teach SEL in their classrooms.

In a survey, PTBMS teachers identified their lack of confidence in their abilities to teach SEL in their classrooms. When teachers lack the foundational understanding of social-emotional learning, they are less willing to actively engage in delivering the lessons (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). Without a developed understanding and perception of SEL, initiatives are more likely to fail. In the survey responses, teachers expressed the need for more professional learning opportunities and reported that the abbreviated SEL workshops given prior to the 2020–2021 school year were ineffective in helping provide strategies and tools to teach SEL in the classroom. The two workshops, a shortened restorative practices workshop and an introduction to the CASEL core competencies, were not seen as helpful or supportive to teachers' needs.

The need for additional professional development in SEL and culturally responsive teaching was evident because student connectedness among minoritized students was significantly less and a disciplinary audit of student referrals showed a higher incidence among Hispanic/Latinx students. Despite efforts to promote equity in the district, including changes in curriculum, diverse books in the library, and creating a diversity club at the Middle School and High School, some areas require further attention. An audit of the 2019–2020 disciplinary data indicated a higher incidence of PTBMS's Hispanic and Latinx students receiving disciplinary referrals than White students. While consequences were consistent, there was a higher incidence of referrals among some minoritized students, indicating that predominantly White teaching staff may need more professional learning centered around culturally responsive teaching.

Upon investigation of disciplinary data, as part of an equity audit, the researcher identified trends in the disciplinary referrals completed by teachers. As mentioned previously, the demographics of this school changed significantly over the last five years, particularly within the Hispanic and Latinx populations. This demographic shift may result from the town's proximity to an urban city and a neighboring district, also sustaining large enrollment increases (EdSight, 2021). Table 2 illustrates the disciplinary referrals for the 2019–2020 school year. It is important to note that schools transitioned to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so the data reflects September 2019 to March 2020. From the start of the year to March 2020, there were 234 referrals made by staff members to the administration for student behaviors. While the Hispanic population makes up 19% of the student population, their referrals account for 45% of the referrals, compared to 102 referrals for White students, who make up 70% of the enrollment and account for 42% of the referrals.

Table 2

Number of Disciplinary Referrals by Racial/Ethnic Group at P.T. Barnum Middle School 2019–2020

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Total Enrollment	Referrals	
		n	%
Asian	8	22	9
Hispanic or Latinx	19	109	45
Black or African American	2	10	4
White	70	102	42
Total	100	234	100

Several factors may contribute to this number, but it was worth investigating if the staff needs to take a more proactive approach in reaching out to those students who seem to get written up more often than their peers or if there is a bias that exists among staff indicating the

need for some cultural sensitivity training as a staff. This researcher determined that while there is consistency in the delivery of punishment, regardless of race, the inequity in disciplinary referrals may indicate a need for further training in culturally responsive classroom practices.

A secondary data point is the school's student connectedness data. At the end of the 2020–2021 school year, 92% of the school's student population indicated that they felt connected to or cared about by an adult in the building. Table 3 shows the number of disconnected students, disaggregated by race, with the Hispanic and Latinx respondents expressing the highest incidence of disconnectedness, followed by White students.

Table 3

Disconnected Students at P.T. Barnum Middle School by Race, Spring 2021 School Climate Results

Race/Ethnicity	Total Respondents	Disconnected Students	Disconnected Population
	%	n	%
Asian	0.4	3	6
Hispanic/Latinx	3	22	47
Black or African American	0.3	2	4
White	2.9	20	43
Total	7	47	100

Of the 47 students identified as disconnected, 24 are Black or Hispanic/Latinx, groups traditionally underserved in education. In addition to cultural barriers, there is an additional language barrier. Of the remaining 19 students, eight students have an IEP or 504 Plan. Overall, the data indicated a need for further professional development to help foster strong relationships between staff members and various subgroups in the student population, particularly in populations where there may be cultural, linguistic, or other developmental obstacles.

The percentage of disconnected students shows similarities to Table (#), reflecting the previous year's disciplinary referrals. The populations receiving the most disciplinary referrals are also the most disconnected. However, the difference is reflected in the total percentage of the population. According to the data, P.T. Barnum Middle School's Hispanic and Latinx populations are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals and have a higher incidence of disconnectedness, but they only reflect 19% of the total population.

While phase one of this ISDiP led to the Problem of Practice, it was evident that there is a great need for further professional learning opportunities that are both meaningful and ongoing. Additionally, it was necessary to bring the District's Strategic Plan elements together to achieve transformative SEL at P.T. Barnum Middle School. This middle school's demographic changes, coupled with the higher incidence of disciplinary referrals and student disconnectedness for Hispanic and Latinx students, prompted the researcher to evaluate the impact that increased adult social-emotional competencies (SEC) and cultural competency, or lack thereof, had on improving teacher self-efficacy perceptions, and teacher practices. The SEL and equity goals outlined by the School's Strategic Plan cannot be achieved without meaningful, ongoing professional learning opportunities in the core competencies and cultural competence for the adults responsible for facilitating social-emotional learning for all students. For these reasons, the trends in the school climate and disciplinary data all support the need to investigate the researcher's Problem of Practice.

Setting and System

Last year, the participating district drafted its revised five-year strategic plan, and social-emotional learning and equity became district priorities as part of that revision. As part of this process, the theory of action was developed, stating, "If we develop a strong system for social-emotional learning by: implementing an SEL curriculum aligned to a research-based framework and/or standards, assessing student progress and needs, and organizing our responses to student needs in a multi-tiered system of interventions, then our students will develop the skills necessary to regulate their emotions, interact positively with others, and succeed in school and in life" (Public Schools Strategic Plan, 2020). While the 2020–2021 budget allocated more funding for social-emotional learning and an SEL coach, that funding was quickly reallocated with the onset of the pandemic. However, with the grants given to school districts, the school became a RULER school in the 2021–2022 school year. With the adoption of a new core program and a greater focus on SEL, staff members received more training to address some of the concerns from the teacher surveys regarding social-emotional learning.

While the district's theory of action identified key components to help address student social-emotional competencies, it did not address the steps needed to develop the skills and provide professional learning opportunities for staff members. Additionally, it does not provide clear action steps that link SEL and promote student equity and social justice. The need to address adult social-emotional competencies and support the learning of culturally responsive teaching needs prioritization if the expectation is for students to see gains and success in their own social-emotional learning. Staff buy-in and SEL competency is a critical part of the process to help students to improve in the core competencies of SEL and build strong relationships.

In the first year of RULER, the focus of professional learning emphasized developing the social-emotional competency of the staff. Therefore, the action steps of this study include planning, creating, and executing various professional development workshops focused on culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). The researcher measured the impact of CRP professional learning opportunities on the staff's perception, self-efficacy of SEL, and teacher practices. The professional learning workshops developed the core competencies of staff members and provided strategies to deliver culturally responsive teaching strategies.

The Problem of Practice resulted from various factors that directly and indirectly impacted a teacher's SEL self-efficacy and instructional practice. Figure 1 illustrates the various factors impacting the overall problem at P.T. Barnum Middle School. In the center of the systems map is the problem with the contributing factors on the outside. The systems map then illustrates the anticipated proximal and distal outcomes for the study after the intervention.

During phase one of the Improvement Science process, it became clear that teachers needed more professional learning opportunities to support their needs and build social-emotional self-efficacy. While all staff at P.T. Barnum received training in RULER, it was clear that teachers may need more training in culturally responsive pedagogy based on the equity audit and student connectedness data. Unfortunately, the length of the study limited the researcher's ability to measure the impact on overall student connectedness, but there is potential for improvement in teacher SEL self-efficacy and instructional practices.

Figure 1

Systems Map
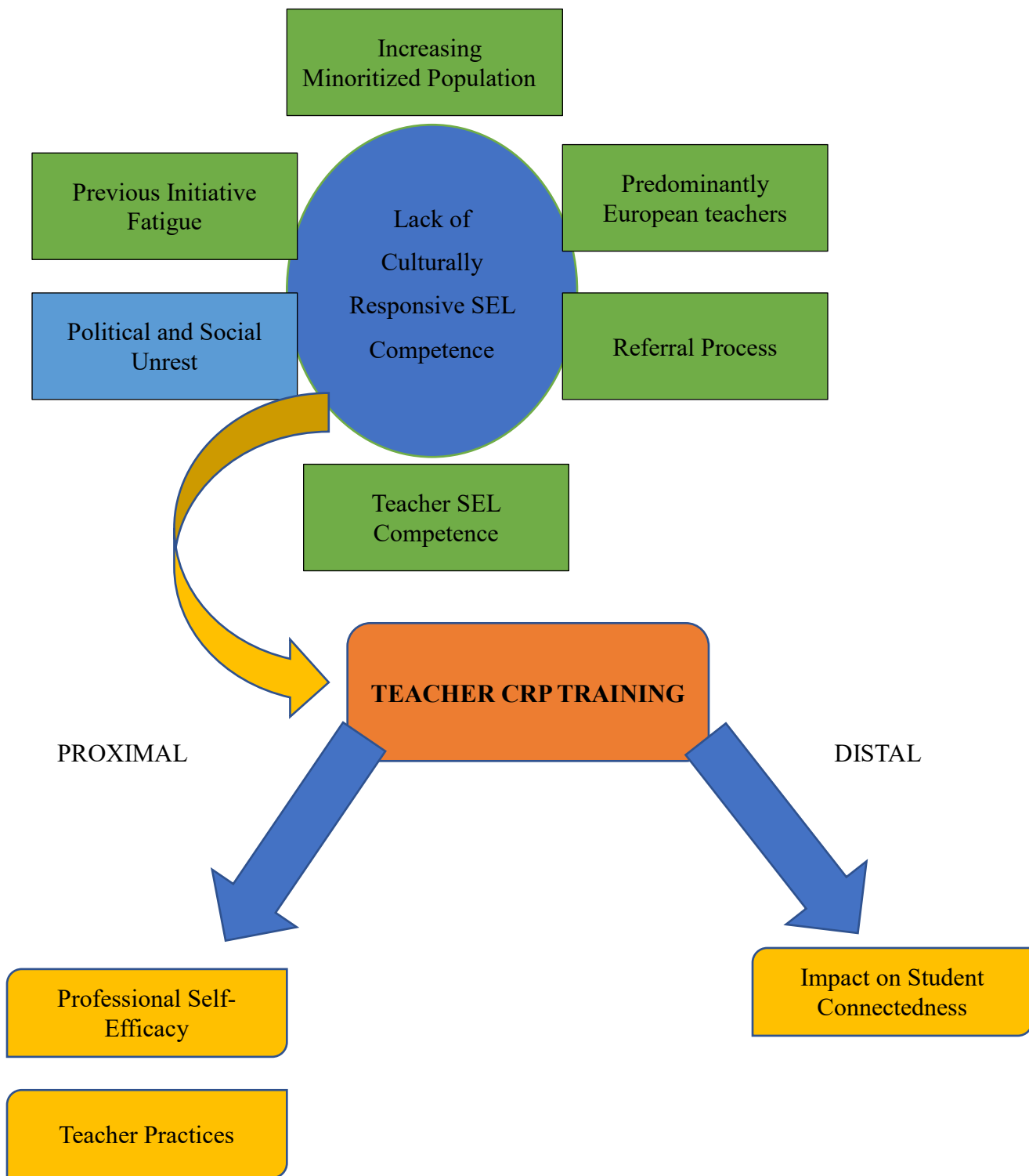
This study intended to provide meaningful and engaging culturally responsive pedagogy professional learning opportunities for staff members. All staff members completed the RULER training and received explicit professional learning to build adult social-emotional competency and understand the program and its accompanying strategies and tools. Additionally, some staff completed a professional learning series to increase their understanding of CRP. By building the staff's cultural and core competencies, the researcher sought to improve staff perception and self-efficacy in SEL. The researcher ultimately sought to improve student connectedness, particularly among the growing minoritized population.

Purpose of Study

The study investigated the role increased cultural competency had on staff perception, self-efficacy of SEL, and teacher practices when experienced in conjunction with RULER training. At the start of the school year, PTBMS staff received professional learning that included introducing the RULER program and building the adult core competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness). Additionally, participating staff received professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy to understand the impact of explicit CRP on teachers' self-efficacy when learning opportunities coincide with the RULER program. The study provided opportunities to support adult SEL and teach techniques to incorporate SEL into classroom instruction, including the use of culturally responsive teaching. Finally, the study attempted to determine the impact the culturally responsive pedagogy professional learning series had on teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy of SEL and their instructional practices.

This study is a critical component in investigating the impact of meaningful professional learning opportunities for educators and its impact on student outcomes. Previous research, such

as Monahan et al. (2010), emphasizes the strong relationship between school connectedness and student success outcomes, stressing that students have difficulty learning, especially when they do not feel safe or connected to their environment. Main (2018) concurs and stresses the importance of educators having a solid grasp of their own social-emotional competency, as it is critical to providing a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. Main also highlighted teachers' role in modeling those behaviors, not explicitly teaching them. However, the literature has a gap concerning the relationship between adult SEL competencies and their ability to connect with students. While many activities and programs are available to assist in building students' social-emotional competencies and community-building, the role of adults in student connectedness is a crucial component to explore, especially concerning the promotion of equity. While the impact on student connectedness was not measured in this study, the researcher anticipates that professional learning will positively impact student connectedness in the future. By building the cultural competency of the staff, educational institutions can potentially become a vehicle for equity. It is a critical step towards providing all students the opportunity to learn and feel represented and supported in education.

Jager et al. (2019) indicate that supporting adults' social-emotional competencies can impact students positively and promote equity in education. While research regarding the RULER program shows positive outcomes for students and staff, there is a gap in the literature demonstrating its role in promoting equity. Barnes (2019) found that few SEL programs and interventions incorporated culturally responsive strategies. The stark differences in demographics of students and teachers are evident overall but very evident at the participating school, with only two teachers identifying as Hispanic or Latinx. The rest of the staff is White, serving an increasingly diverse population. Additionally, the research emphasizes the need for SEL and

culturally responsive teaching to unite in a unilateral approach to support social justice (Stevenson & Markowitz, 2019).

Finally, the success of an SEL intervention often depends on many factors, such as fidelity, professional learning, and design. However, research by Warren et al. (2020) affirms that a teacher's cultural competency can significantly impact students, especially when working with boys of color. Graves et al. (2017) found that how teachers responded to students of color, particularly in stressful situations, was a significant factor when measuring the success of the SEL program. Warren et al. (2020) affirm that the "root causes for inequity," as characterized by Jagers et al. (2019), is a matter of perspective-taking that will provide great insight and inform one's own social-emotional competencies. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to have cultural competency.

<div align="center">**Root Cause**</div>

Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the district took steps to embed social-emotional learning into the Strategic Plan to provide Tier 1 universal SEL programming for all kindergarten to 12th-grade students and develop Tier 2 and Tier 3 protocols and strategies. At the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, all the PTBMS staff received training in restorative practices and the CASEL framework. However, by the end of the school year, it was determined, through survey analysis and focus groups, that most staff members (82%) responded that they were not comfortable providing SEL instruction in their classroom because of a lack of understanding.

The researcher reviewed various data points to fully comprehend the need for professional learning opportunities in this study. The investigation included school climate survey data, a teacher survey, focus groups, demographics, disciplinary data, public district data, and end-user interviews. At the end of the investigation, three root causes emerged: lack of SEL

understanding for staff, alignment in the scope and sequence of professional learning, and change in student demographics vs. teacher demographics, as shown in the following diagram.

Figure 2

Driver Diagram
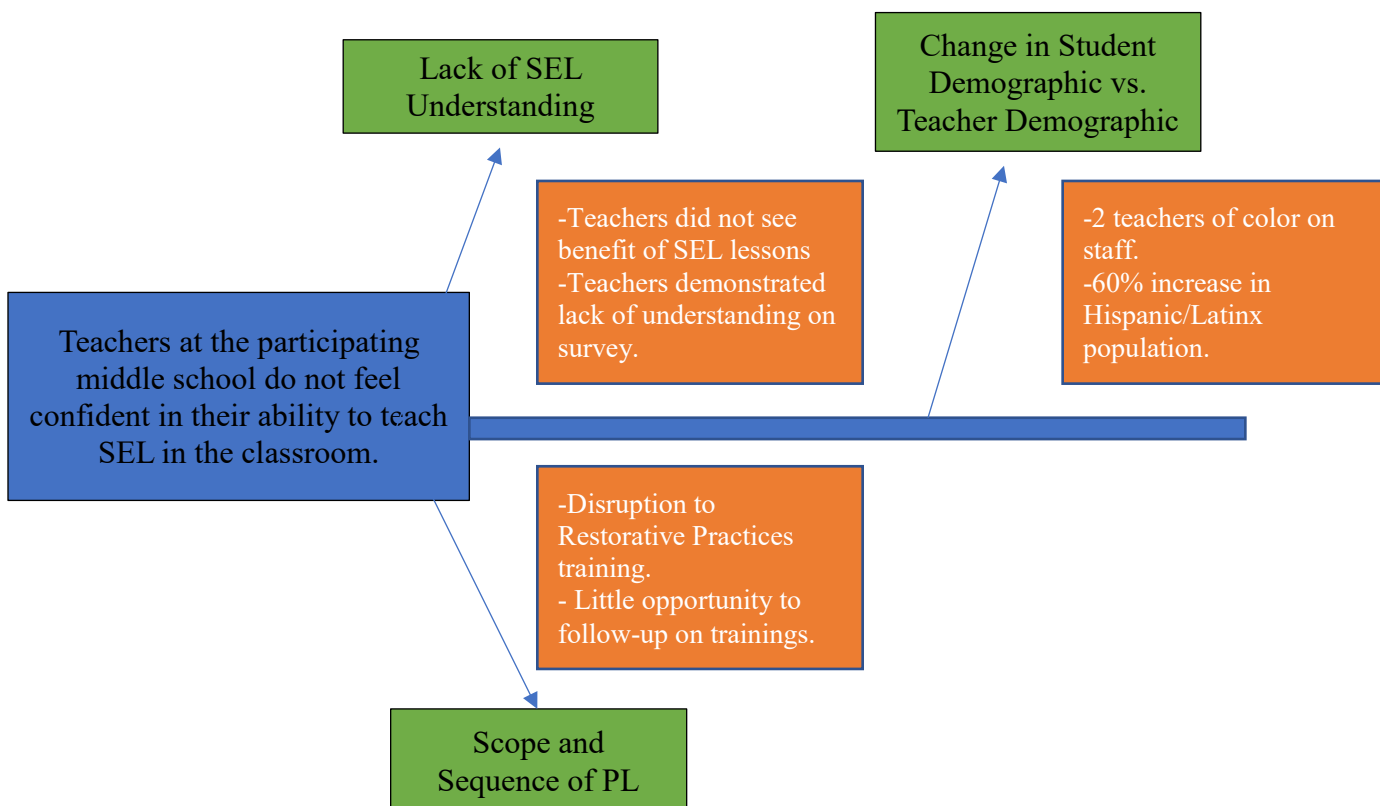
Root Cause 1: Lack of SEL Understanding

While staff understanding of SEL increased throughout this year, the growth did not occur at the whole-school level. With the onset of the pandemic and the shift to a different learning model, much of P.T. Barnum Middle School's plan for professional learning in SEL transitioned to other needs, such as planning for the school year under a new instructional model, including full distance learning, hybrid learning and in-person, with all teachers instructing students, both at home and in-person, simultaneously. Teachers were responsible for engaging students in SEL during the designated time or "Tiger 2" time. To assist teachers in this process, the SEL team used the SEL program, Accept, Identify, Move (AIM, 2020), to begin explicit instruction in social-emotional learning. However, building leadership did not provide training for this curriculum. Instead, they chose AIM because the Middle School's self-contained special education program used the lessons with students and experienced positive outcomes. The AIM curriculum includes mindfulness, acceptance, commitment therapy, and applied behavior analysis to help people navigate challenging situations (AIM, 2020). While the program was successful when used in the self-contained special education classrooms, there were additional challenges when used as a Tier 1 program with the entire study body. The AIM lessons were transcripted for all Tiger 2 teachers to read and support the facilitation of the lesson.

After the first month of implementation, Tiger 2 teachers took a survey to measure teachers' perceptions after facilitating the AIM curriculum to gather feedback regarding Tiger 2 time. When asked if teachers felt the Tiger 2 lessons benefited students, 65% responded yes. Additionally, when asked to rate their perceived knowledge of SEL, 83% of the teaching staff rated themselves a 3, 4, or 5 on the survey's Likert scale, indicating a strong perceived level of SEL pedagogy. However, when asked to share recommendations for SEL lesson topics,

responses lacked a common understanding of social-emotional learning. The question was: "Please provide feedback/recommendations for Tiger 2 lessons. What social-emotional skills should become a focus?" While there were various responses, many responses could not identify skills to emphasize. While teachers initially expressed understanding of SEL, they were not necessarily able to demonstrate understanding. Therefore, with the lack of knowledge of SEL, teachers could not understand their own SEL competency and, consequently, would struggle to teach SEL to students, directly contributing to the researcher's Problem of Practice.

Root Cause 2: Scope and Sequence of Professional Learning

Another root cause of this ISiDP is the lack of scope and sequence of professional learning for SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy. While initial training in the SEL core competencies was provided at the start of the 2020–2021 school year by the Director of Pupil Services, all P.T. Barnum Middle School staff attended an introductory professional learning workshop about Restorative Practices by Joanne Freiberg. Joanne condensed the three-day workshop into a one-day virtual seminar. Unfortunately, much of the learning applications did not occur during this workshop. The entire professional learning workshop occurred over zoom, with limited participant interaction. Participants did not role-play restorative circles or discuss how to incorporate restorative practices into classroom practices resulting in a problem in the 2020–2021 school year, as teachers did not feel comfortable using restorative practices in the classroom.

As part of the 2020–2025 Strategic Plan, the social-emotional programming's focus included adopting a new core program and developing staff awareness and skills related to the CASEL core competencies through a design of a professional learning program (Public Schools, 2020). While this initiative seeks to support the development of adult SEL competency, there is

no apparent connection to how this will provide pathways to promote equity in Public Schools. While promoting equity and social justice is a part of a separate section of the Strategic Plan, the connection is not made between the two.

Since the initial training, one follow-up professional development training focused on conducting circles in the classroom. The follow-up restorative practices professional learning workshop, designed by the researcher and the building SEL team, occurred in November 2020 and provided teachers an opportunity to tackle challenging scenarios and role-play restorative circles, as this could not be done in the abbreviated training at the beginning of the school year. Prior to and at the end of the workshop, the participating Middle School staff answered survey questions using an in-house survey designed by the SEL team to gauge staff understanding of restorative practices and assess the need for further professional learning. Before the training, 82% of the staff stated that they did not feel confident implementing restorative practices. After the training, the percentage reduced to 45%. Professional learning workshops must provide staff with the opportunity to apply learning continuously. Unfortunately, the historical pattern at Beekman Public Schools was introduced with little opportunity to follow up on prior learning, as many initiatives were presented within a school year.

At the start of the 2020–2021 school, this Middle School designed the schedule to support the use of daily social-emotional learning. Unfortunately, much of the planning and team collaboration time was impossible due to scheduling. During the 2019 school day, teachers had built-in time to meet collaboratively with PLC, their team, and for SRBI (Scientific Research-Based Intervention). Due to this fact, SRBI was suspended. Teams met and discussed students during team time, but only three times per month versus once weekly. Part of the SRBI cycle included professional learning. Since the planning of professional learning workshops is

scheduled months prior to their delivery, much of the professional learning centered around social-emotional learning occurred as part of the SRBI process. However, the topic of the professional learning sessions varied based on the needs of the grade-level SRBI team. While this supports the students' needs, due to the lack of scope and sequence of professional learning concerning SEL and the lack of foundational knowledge of SEL, teachers do not feel equipped with the required skills to address the needs of students—further compounding the situation directly related to the Problem of Practice.

Root Cause 3: Change in Student Demographics vs. Teacher Demographics

The demographics of Beekman Public Schools changed significantly from 2015 to 2021, according to EdSight (2021). While enrollment increased over the last six years, there were significant jumps in certain minoritized groups, including P.T. Barnum Middle School's American Indian, Hispanic/Latinx, and Black/African American populations.

Table 4

Percentage Increase of Racial Groups at P.T. Barnum Middle School over the Last Five Years

Race/Ethnicity	Total Enrollment 2015–2016	Total Enrollment 2020–2021	Percentage Increase
	n	*n*	
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	12	-
Asian	54	53	−1.85
Black or African American	*	28	*
Hispanic/Latinx	111	178	60.4
White	459	518	12.85

(*) Indicates that the number was not reported to maintain the confidentiality of students.
Note. From "Public School Enrollment Trend: Student Count by Race/Ethnicity and Year" by Edsight, 2021

As evidenced by Table 4, P.T. Barnum Middle School saw a 1200% increase (an increase of 12 students from zero) in American Indian student enrollments, an increase that cannot be

measured for African American or Black student enrollments, 60.4% increase in the Hispanic

and Latinx populations, and a 12.9% increase in White students. Enrollment of Asian students

remained the same with a decrease of 1.9%, or one student. Over the last five years, the

demographics of the building changed significantly while the teacher demographics remained the

same. Table 5 reflects the changes in staff demographics over the last five years.

Table 5

Percentage Increase of Teacher/Staff Members by Racial Groups at P.T. Barnum over the Last Five Years

Race/Ethnicity	Total Enrollment 2015–2016	Total Enrollment 2020–2021	Percentage Increase
	n	*n*	
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0	0
Asian	0	0	0
Black or African American	0	0	0
Hispanic/Latinx	1	2	100
Two or more races	0	0	0
White	62	66	6.45

Note. From "Educator Race/Ethnicity Trend Report" by Edsight, 2021

When examining educator demographic data, the researcher noted that, although there

has been a shift in demographics among students, it has not been reflected in the demographics

of the staff at P.T. Barnum Middle School. Table 5 indicates that PTBMS added one educator

who identifies as Latinx or Hispanic throughout the last five years and an additional four White

teachers. The staff and student demographics do not align. While there has been a steady increase

in minority groups enrolling at P.T. Barnum Middle School, the staff demographic is mostly

unchanged, with two teachers of color.

With these trends over the last five years, teachers have not received professional

learning to assist them in helping to meet the needs of its new populations of students.

Additionally, training was not provided to staff to support culturally responsive teaching. Therefore, the drastic change in demographics compared to the stagnant demographics of P.T. Barnum Middle School contributes to the researcher's Problem of Practice.

As the demographics changed over the last five years, so did the number of students who require English learner (EL) services. Table 6 shows the number of emerging bilingual students over the last five years.

Table 6

Percentage Increase of English Learners P.T. Barnum Middle School over the Last Five Years

English Language Learner Student Enrollment	Total Students 2015–2016	Total Students 2020–2021	Percentage increase
	n	*n*	
Number of English-language Learners	14	33	142.85

Note. From "Public School Enrollment Trend: Student Count of EL Learners by year" by Edsight, 2021

Additionally, English learners (ELs) increased from 14 to 33 students in the 2020–2021 school year. The mid-year teacher survey administered to assess needs was an area of concern for teachers, particularly in the Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics classes, where no push-in support is given to EL students. In addition, the EL teacher's caseload is larger, so they could not work with students in most of their general education classes. As a result, teachers expressed a need for additional resources and support to meet the needs of English learners. Table 6 reflects the growth over the same period as Table 5. From 2015 to 2020, the number of English learners receiving services at P.T. Barnum Middle School more than doubled.

As evidenced by the root cause analysis, a great need exists for meaningful and ongoing professional learning opportunities. Additionally, it was necessary to bring the district's strategic plan elements together to achieve transformative SEL at this school. The school's demographic changes indicated a need for increased adult professional learning in SEL and cultural

competency. The SEL and equity goals outlined by the strategic plan were not achievable without meaningful, ongoing professional learning opportunities in the core competencies and cultural competence for the adults responsible for facilitating SEL for all students. For these reasons, the data supported the need to investigate the researcher's Problem of Practice.

Research Design

Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018) stress the importance of carefully selecting a research design. This ISDiP is rooted in action research methodology, where the researcher works to improve the school's practice where they work. This study used a quasi-experimental design to determine how increased adult SEL and CRP impact teacher self-efficacy and practice for this study. A quasi-experimental design allowed the researcher to compare the intervention group to the remainder of the population at the participating school. In addition, the researcher used a pretest/post-test design to evaluate how the intervention impacted their responses to the survey. Finally, study participants worked with the researcher to understand the impact of increased culturally responsive pedagogy on the overall perception and self-efficacy of SEL and, in extension, their practices.

The study's research design incorporated a mixed-methods design. It evaluated the intervention prior to implementation, throughout, and after the intervention concluded to assess the impact of increased adult SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy on teacher perception and self-efficacy of social-emotional learning. In addition, this study utilized a treatment and control group for comparison purposes. Finally, the evidence-based professional learning workshops continued throughout the school year in various professional learning communities, team meetings, and the professional learning cycle of the SRBI process.

In the study's early stages, the researcher utilized preexisting school climate survey results to record the baseline student connectedness data and preexisting teacher SEL survey data to determine perceived competence in social-emotional learning. In addition, the researcher conducted surveys and focus groups throughout the data collection process to determine participant fidelity and experience and measure the impact of professional learning on pedagogical practices.

This study included qualitative and quantitative data in determining the professional learning needs of participants and self-efficacy regarding SEL. The researcher reviewed school climate and disciplinary data, administered staff surveys related to SEL professional learning and equity, and collected feedback from the professional learning workshops to determine how their perceptions of SEL changed over time. In addition to this quantitative data, the researcher conducted a focus group interview, identified the emerging themes, and analyzed the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative data. This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice focused on two research questions:

1. Is there statistically significant growth in teacher perception of a) Cultural Awareness, b) PL in SEL, c) PL in Equity d) teacher self-efficacy after receiving professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy? Why or why not?

2. In what ways, if at all, does training in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy impact teacher practices? What strategies were used and why?

Participants/Sampling

This study focused on the adult social-emotional and cultural competencies of adults. The design and delivery of professional learning allowed the researcher to measure the impact of CRP on the participants. The participants in this study included content teachers at a suburban

middle school in southwest Connecticut. Of 78 full-time educators at the participating middle school, 65 of the 78 teachers agreed to participate in the study. All 65 participants received training in social-emotional learning, while 20 of the 65 received the intervention in culturally responsive pedagogy.

While all teachers received professional learning, specifically in RULER, the intervention group received additional professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy and increasing cultural competency. For the second phase of the research, certain clusters or teams of teachers received the professional learning intervention while the remaining teachers acted as the control group. As this study was part of a school initiative, all teachers were participants; however, only volunteer teams received training in CRP.

This study utilized survey data, interviews, and focus groups, as part of the professional development series that the researcher conducted with teachers at the target middle school. The professional development series explored CRP and cultural competency. The focus groups occurred at the end of the professional learning series. The pre and post-tests provided insight into the level of growth regarding the participant's self-efficacy of SEL and cultural competency. Additionally, previous SEL survey data showed the participants' perceived levels of SEL knowledge, which informed the researcher in designing the professional learning intervention.

Data Collection

An in-depth review of the literature demonstrated the need to explore the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy of SEL. The researcher used multiple forms of data, including the school climate survey, Panorama (2021) teacher survey focusing on SEL professional learning and equity, disciplinary data, teacher focus groups/interviews, and professional learning series feedback surveys.

Data Analysis Plan

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used. Descriptive statistics were used to give an overall picture of growth. As self-efficacy of SEL was measured, a two-tailed *t*-test was used to isolate CRP's impact on the change in self-efficacy after completion of the intervention. Additionally, the researcher collected and coded the qualitative data to identify emerging trends in the focus group conversations. While the focus groups took place after the professional learning series, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasize the importance of using qualitative data to "identify key constructs that might impact the outcome of the trial" (p. 198).

Threats to Validity

While the researcher took steps to reduce threats to internal and external validity, potential threats were identified. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2019), many threats to internal validity involve the potential for response bias. As the researcher is an employee and teacher at the participating middle school, there was potential bias in the staff members' responses, particularly for the staff receiving the professional learning series. Additionally, the researcher used data collection methods to maximize internal and external validity. The Panorama (2021) survey used "assessments of convergent and discriminant validity…on a well-founded a priori prediction about which scales should correlate with a target measure more highly than others." The challenge to external validity is that the results of this study may not be easily generalized or applied to all middle schools.

Ethical and Cultural Competence Considerations

It was the priority of the researcher to ensure that all steps were taken to ensure that information provided remained confidential and resulted in the protection of participants'

identities. Therefore, no identifiable information was used. Additionally, the focus of this study was to support the growth of cultural competence; as part of the root cause analysis, the researcher obtained student data involving their identified race, so steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of those students.

The Researcher and the Problem

As a young child growing up, I always had the drive to make sure that people in my life felt included, appreciated, and respected—a direct result of my upbringing. As a daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and an Irish-Catholic father, they both emphasized the importance of learning about different cultures and celebrating and respecting our differences. These principles took on new meaning in my life when we uprooted our life in upstate New York and moved to Tokyo, Japan, and later Hong Kong at the age of eight. I spent most of my developmental years living abroad for the next eight years, only coming "home" during the summer. As the years progressed, the United States no longer felt like my home, but I also lived in a foreign country, which I also knew was not my home.

I am what Pollock and Van Reken (2001) call a "Third Culture Kid," or a young person who has spent most of their developmental years living in a culture other than their own. Third culture kids "build relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any." Finally, at 16, my family was repatriated to the United States and settled in Sandy Hook, Connecticut. Upon entering my new high school, I walked through the main entrance, and the scene was very different from my high school in Hong Kong. As I looked around the lobby, most of the students were White, the few Hispanic/Latinx students were sitting together, and the Asian students were sitting together. The following two years were characterized by feelings of not belonging. I was different, and it was tough for me to adjust. While I appeared a certain way, my

identity differed from most White students in my classes, and I was appalled by my classmates' comments and judgments of different cultures.

All I wanted to do was get back overseas, where there were at least other people like me. So I applied to college and chose a Political Science major focusing on International Relations. My goal was to live abroad so I would not feel the internal turmoil. Throughout college, I focused on taking courses that would inevitably have me living back overseas. However, that was until I volunteered to work in a public middle school. Then, in my final year of college, I fell in love with working with young people. In particular, I wanted to work with disadvantaged youth and help support them, so I went back to school and became a teacher.

While I have learned and experienced how inequity is ever-present in society, I did realize how much I struggled with this until I realized why. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) explain that third culture kids believe that people of all cultures, religions, and backgrounds are equal participants in all situations. I truly believe that cultural diversity unites differences, and while some may say that is extremely naïve of me, I cannot help but think that there is a possibility. Therefore, I think that it is critical that all teachers are culturally responsive in their approach to teaching.

As a social studies teacher, teaching multiple perspectives has always been the foundation of how I approach instruction. In addition to teaching multiple perspectives, I have always worked to improve cultural intelligence and make the learning visible to all students. While it promotes empathy in the classroom, it is also why I strive to make sure everyone finds their place in social situations and to help find commonalities between people to help bring them closer together. This deep-rooted commitment to building cultural intelligence in my students comes from my own feelings of being out of place, particularly when I returned "home."

Given my background of living overseas, I believe that culturally responsive pedagogy positively impacts teacher practices. I believe that CRP promotes a sense of safety and belonging for all students and helps to motivate and engage students, especially in my content area. I see diversity in a learning environment as a strength that can benefit all students. It helps to build social awareness and empathy and helps support the cultural intelligence of my students. As the researcher conducting the professional learning series, I attempted to remove my own opinions and beliefs from the workshops themselves; however, since I am a teacher in the building in which the study was conducted, it was evident to the participants that I support the use of culturally responsive and anti-biased teaching practices.

I believe that my own life experiences have brought me to this point where I want to support culturally responsive pedagogy in schools because I have experienced the benefit of having teachers who inherently understand the power of diversity and inclusion, and I want to ensure that this luxury is provided to all students. No student should ever feel out of place in the space designated for them to learn.

Definitions and Key Terms

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy—A student-centered approach to instruction that recognizes the importance of incorporating students' cultures in all elements of education and works to support teachers in understanding the diverse cultures in their classrooms.

RULER—SEL program designed by Marc Brackett from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. The program utilizes strategies to help adults and students become emotionally intelligent.

AIM—SEL program that uses mindfulness, applied behavior therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy to help students Accept, Identify, Move.

Restorative Practices—A method to help build healthy communities focusing on repairing and

    restoring relationships when harm has been caused to that community.

Student Connectedness—Student's perception of feeling connected or cared about by a member

    of the middle school staff.

Social-Emotional Learning—The process of learning that helps people learn and apply skills to

    help navigate various situations in life, including regulating emotions, achieving personal

    goals, making responsible decisions, developing healthy and supportive relationships,

    empathy, and establishing a strong sense of self.

Core Competencies—Refers to the CASEL framework and includes self-awareness, self-

    management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills.

Cultural Competency—The ability of a person to understand and respect opinions, attitudes,

    values, beliefs, and customs of different cultures.

Tiger 2 Time—Designated time in the participating middle school schedule to provide explicit

    instruction in SEL.

Panorama Teacher Survey—A research-based survey for teachers to help assess various needs

    related to SEL in education.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

A critical component of successfully integrating social-emotional learning with academics is the need for meaningful professional development for the staff responsible for delivering the content (Talvio et al., 2015). As many schools and districts work to adopt methodologies and programs to address the ever-growing needs of their students, many have turned to potential solutions for support. While some districts adopted new strategies and programs to support their students, such as Advisory and student-centered organized clubs and activities, other districts purchased evidence-based SEL programs, such as RULER or Second Step, to address concerns evident in their schools. This Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDIP) reviewed literature and professional knowledge of various strategies and root causes of the Problem of Practice.

The following literature review summarizes current literature and the result of an environmental scan in which the researcher interviewed educators in various districts throughout the state of Connecticut. The researcher chose to conduct interviews in districts and schools similar to the P.T Barnum Middle School and its district to determine what is being done to mitigate various factors contributing to the Problem of Practice. During these professional practice interviews, district leaders, building leaders, and teachers answered questions regarding current social-emotional programming, strategies, and emerging issues within those districts and schools. The literature and professional practice interviews are presented through the Student Lens, Adult Actions, and Strategies to address the researcher's Problem of Practice.

Student Lens

Review of the Literature

The research behind student connectedness and access to social-emotional learning in the classroom highlights how comprehensive SEL programming and instruction are critical. With growing concern for increased student engagement, particularly following a global pandemic, student connectedness plays a role in a school's ability to meet all needs of its students. Baron et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of student connectedness and relationship building with SEL implementation, stressing that having one without the other is difficult. Bird and Sultmann (2010) extend this idea further, asserting that "relationships establish the platform for human interaction and learning. They provide a foundation for the exchange of beliefs, values, skills, which, in turn, impact individual and community well-being and influence social activity" (p. 144).

The National Traumatic Stress Network (2020) also emphasizes the importance of student connectedness and students need to feel safe. In addition, research reiterates that student well-being needs to be the priority for students to feel connected to their school and the building's adults (Engzell et al., 2021). Barnes (2019) emphasizes this point as the author discusses the importance of student well-being and its impact on students of color, particularly in urban learning environments.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges to improving student connectedness. Engzell et al. (2021) highlight the importance of building strong relationships with students to help alleviate the impact of learning loss due to school closures. As Pate (2020) discusses in her brief on trauma-informed strategies to employ during distance learning, it is vital to build caring connections between the students, teachers, and community and provide the

necessary support to help reduce stress. While there is limited research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student connectedness, Engzell et al. (2021) discuss how the stress of the pandemic caused more widespread emotional struggles for students. Furthermore, they examine the vital role of student connectedness as a pathway to address students' needs, highlighting that students who feel more comfortable sharing their emotional struggles are often connected to their learning environment in some way.

Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the importance of relationships between students and teachers, particularly with students of diverse backgrounds and cultures. She further discusses the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and a teacher's ability to forge strong relationships with their students, citing that "teachers saw themselves as part of the community and teaching as a way to give back to the community" (p. 163). The study found that if teachers helped students achieve academic success, develop their cultural competence, and help students develop critical consciousness, the teacher had achieved culturally relevant pedagogy allowing student connectedness to flourish. Osher and Berg (2017) discuss the tie between SEL and school climate but highlight the significant role cultural competence can have on school climate. Jagers et al. (2019) warn that omitting culturally responsive teaching "can result in culturally and linguistically diverse students being met with unwarranted low expectations, experiences of cultural mismatch, discrimination, microaggression, and implicit biases by peers and adults" (p. 164). The literature supports the idea that it is essential to have developed cultural competency in schools in diverse learning environments to ensure that the school climate is positively impacted, leading to a higher incidence of student connectedness and greater development of the whole child.

Given the current social and political climate in the United States, there is increased concern regarding schools' abilities to meet their student's social and emotional needs. Touloukian (2021) highlighted the role of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism had on Black students' education. Participants in this study expressed concerns that schools are not equipped to address their student's social-emotional and academic needs, mainly due to the increasing trauma and violence in Black communities. This literature stresses the importance of understanding societal trauma's impact on minoritized students and the need to train educators to address the social-emotional needs of students.

The benefits of increased student connectedness include both increased academic self-efficacy and personal self-efficacy in students (Yuen & Datu, 2021). However, when they evaluated the impact of other connectedness dimensions, the only positive dimension that impacted academic self-efficacy was the connection to the school and when students had a clear understanding of the meaning of life. Monahan et al. (2010) also emphasized this point and stressed the strong relationship between connectedness and student success outcomes. They found that students struggling with increased emotional challenges were more likely to struggle academically, including limiting their ability to learn, and they stressed that if a student is not emotionally available to learn, they will struggle.

Over the last twenty years, the prevalence of depression and suicidal ideation have increased significantly (Mojtabi et al., 2016). As a result, districts and schools are looking for new ways to address their students' mental health, including providing more opportunities for a safe school climate to flourish, increasing student connectedness, and reducing the increasing trend of depression in young people. Joyce (2019) measured the impact that increased feelings of connectedness had on depressive symptoms in young people. The study found that a higher

incidence of connectedness to school and student perceptions of being cared about by the adults in the school significantly decreased depressive symptoms in students.

Review of Professional Practice

Several common themes emerged upon investigating student connectedness in various districts and schools in the immediate area of the location of study. First, student connectedness decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, educators identified several student behaviors that impacted academics and the school climate and reported an overall withdrawal from the community. These were experienced both by students and also colleagues. Finally, teachers reported feeling helpless when trying to help the students with the greatest needs.

Most districts noticed a significant decrease in student connectedness, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by anecdotal observations and responses to their school climate surveys. Districts and schools take many steps to increase student connectedness when students are physically present in the classrooms. However, the varied learning models presented challenges to student connectedness, with one middle school teacher noting that "connecting over zoom is very difficult when students are disengaged from learning and keeping their cameras off during instruction." Participants in other districts noted increased student anxiety and depression, requiring more referrals to pupil services staff.

Many participants noted that when students were not connected, there was a failure to thrive in the classroom. If a student did not want to be there, it would impact their academics and social interactions in the classroom. Many participants noted some consistent student behaviors, including a refusal to engage in a virtual or in-person learning environment, teacher-perceived apathy when turning in work, and an overall lack of participation in the classroom. Additionally, administrators interviewed also noted increased home visits and crisis calls.

Educators felt helpless in assisting students during this tumultuous time, notably because the experiences students and educators underwent were unprecedented. While educators expressed the need to support SEL before the pandemic, the number of students requiring support increased drastically, and teachers did not feel equipped to help. One respondent in a neighboring district stated, "It was like we were flying the plane while we were still building it, and the plane had caught fire, and we couldn't land the plane because there was no safe place to do so." Overall, educators alleged this was a turning point where they wanted to see more meaningful professional learning opportunities to support social-emotional learning instruction in the classroom.

During the environmental scan, one middle school principal noted that it was increasingly challenging to get many of their minoritized students to engage in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared, "many of our students of color were home alone or had to help siblings engage in distance learning. Their parents were called into work, and they were responsible for supporting their brothers and sisters." Additionally, participants noted minimal support for teachers who had emerging bilingual students in their classes. Due to the language barrier and the lack of professional learning, teachers struggled to engage their students in virtual learning.

Summary

This review of the literature and professional practice regarding student actions, or impact on students, highlighted the need for further research into the impact of professional learning on a teacher's ability to help improve student outcomes and connectedness. The COVID-19 pandemic provided additional obstacles to meeting the needs of students, particularly during a time when many districts noted an increase in the social-emotional needs of students. Students spent increasing time in front of their screens, prompting student disengagement from

school. The participants in the environmental scan noted this was particularly true with their Hispanic/Latinx populations. Based on the research, it is evident that the need for social-emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy can positively impact student outcomes, but there is limited research to measure the impact of both.

<div align="center">**Adult Actions**</div>

Review of Literature

As it applies to adult actions, this literature review is rooted in the need to provide meaningful, ongoing professional development as a critical first step to improving school climate and student connectedness. For example, Rivers et al. (2012) highlight the importance of professional learning opportunities for teachers to improve school climate and student connectedness. Shriver and Weissberg (2020) support this, writing that educators' lack of professional development is one of the greatest obstacles to meaningful SEL instruction.

While increased access to adult professional learning is critical to help teachers and school staff support the diverse needs of all students, Talvio et al. (2015) assert that there has been little to no research to measure the impact of increased social-emotional competency in adults, particularly teachers. While researchers reviewed the impact that various social-emotional programming had on students, more research is needed on the increased SEL self-efficacy of teachers. According to Chapman et al. (2013), after conducting a literature review of various SEL programs, "the majority of the interventions focused on widespread, whole-school system change, with many putting in place a framework for identifying needs and instituting change rather prescribing specific program elements" (p. 105). By design, the research calls for more structural change to institute positive change rather than using an SEL program as the prescription to the problem. Furthermore, Chapman et al. (2013) found that student

connectedness increased by focusing on whole-school change rather than simply executing a program.

Dolev and Leshem (2016) stress how critical increased emotional intelligence is in teachers and highlight the importance of explicit focused instruction in social-emotional learning. The study cautions people from assuming educators inherently have higher emotional intelligence and, therefore, can explicitly instruct students in social-emotional learning. Furthermore, this concern was particularly evident as increased stress on teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted students. Martinsone and Vilvina (2017) report that participants in their study acknowledge the importance of SEL and its role in the classroom but noted that more direct support and training were essential to maintaining long-term embedded social-emotional learning in the classroom.

Social-emotional competency in adults is critical, mainly when those adults are responsible for delivering SEL in the classroom and the home. Zieher et al. (2021) noted the importance of adult social-emotional competency and found that lower district and school support indicated a higher incidence of teacher burnout and self-judgment. The need for increased adult social-emotional learning is high as educators support the social-emotional competency of their students. Zinsser et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of climate and access to support for teachers and found that teachers who experienced higher levels of support were more likely to be less depressed, have greater job satisfaction, and felt better equipped to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom.

While SEL perception is often positive among educators, the challenge is providing a deep understanding when it is not explicitly taught to educators. Fereira et al. (2020) state, "Like academic skills, social-emotional competencies can be learned and practiced through

participation in meaningful activities in and outside of the classroom, fostering students'
progressive improvement and integration, helping them respond to more complex situations in
academic, social, citizenship and health terms" (p. 22). Main (2018) asserts that teaching pre-
service teachers to implement SEL in the classroom is critical to its lasting impact. It is not
enough that the teacher explicitly teaches social-emotional competency and skills; Main argues
that they should model them.

While the role of social-emotional learning can promote equity, Warren et al. (2020) urge
school leaders to adapt SEL programming to meet the needs of minoritized populations. The
impact of generations of racism and inequity on modern society has implored educational leaders
to take steps to address the needs of all students and provide a learning environment that benefits
all learners of all backgrounds. Jagers et al. (2019) emphasize that supporting the growth of adult
SEL competency can positively impact a school's environment while improving equity in the
academic and social environment.

Additional factors that contribute to the Problem of Practice are sometimes situational.
For example, one of the challenges to student connectedness and an overall improvement in
school climate is the fact that, in education, there is a lack of diversity in the educational
workforce. In schools, a predominantly White female educational staff teaches an increasingly
diverse population of students (Gay, 2013). Furthermore, Gay highlights that the lack of cultural
understanding and knowledge increases this impact, as a teacher's own experiences, biases, and
cultural upbringing impacts how teachers interact with their students. Bonner et al. (2018) argue
that this is perpetuated further as students do not develop their own cultural knowledge and
skills, impacting how they interact with different cultures and backgrounds.

Scott (2021) stresses the importance of identifying implicit bias in educators and seeks to minimize the disproportionate disciplinary practices in minoritized students and provide teachers with a framework focused on student successes within the classroom. To create a more equitable learning environment, teachers need to identify their own implicit biases and reflect on how their biases may impact their students. Quinn (2020) discusses the impact of implicit biases on students and found that when evaluation criteria were not clearly defined, teachers rated writing samples of Black authors lower than the White authors. While the study did not find evidence that this resulted from implicit biases in teachers, it shed light on the potential for negative effects due to unchecked implicit bias.

Anyon et al. (2017) explored the role that racial background had on office disciplinary referrals. They found that the perceptions and implicit biases of student behavior may be more influential in the instances of office disciplinary referrals rather than the data itself. Therefore the research called for more attention to "systemic bias and colorblind policies and practices in discipline disparities" (p. 390).

Review of Professional Practice

Social-emotional learning practices vary from district to district concerning the method and choice of programming. Many schools interviewed in the area use social-emotional programs such as RULER or Second Step. All schools interviewed began using their social-emotional programming within the last five years. However, the questions posed to the participants addressed specific professional learning opportunities and SEL competency.

Most districts reported that while a social-emotional program exists for the students, teachers had little to no professional development. Many expressed that although the SEL programs had professional development embedded within the training, it felt superficial and

surface-level. Participants in the environmental scan discussed how they did not feel effective in delivering social-emotional learning. Despite feeling that the programs positively impacted their students and the school climate, teachers felt that professional development did not address their social-emotional competency and self-efficacy.

Educators discussed the social-emotional programs and how they are implemented at the classroom level. While some teachers expressed that they felt an authentic classroom application of skill was occurring, others stated that the programming used by their schools felt like lessons taught in isolation. Schools who reported using RULER felt that there were many lessons available and resources provided in the online RULER institute but also felt that the pressure to stay true to the curriculum was an obstacle. Otherwise, schools with other SEL programs taught SEL lessons to their students during a designated advisory or homeroom time. As a result, skill application did not transfer to classroom instruction, whether because of curriculum or a lack of teacher confidence in embedding it into daily classroom instruction.

Enhancing adult social-emotional competencies is critical to strong SEL programming in schools. Almost all schools interviewed during this environmental scan of professional practice reported that districts did not provide professional learning opportunities to support the development of adult SEL. Of all interviewed, one school in their second year of RULER training cited that the online training platform addressed adult social-emotional competency.

The role of culturally responsive teaching or cultural competency was a common theme in this environmental scan. Several respondents to the professional practice review noted that they felt that their districts needed to become more culturally competent. Respondents noted an increase in emerging bilingual students, as well as a shift in the demographic with an increase in minoritized students. A social studies teacher from a local district stated that

The change in demographic in the last five years has highlighted the need for increased cultural responsiveness in our district. The change needs to be system-side, from curriculum to instructional practices and the recruitment of teachers of color. I feel like my district is not addressing the shifts in demographic. Rather than discuss the proactive approaches we can take, we are completely focused on being reactive and addressing their academic outcomes.

Another key takeaway from the environmental scan was how the current political environment impacted educators' perception of culturally responsive pedagogy. Due to political polarization, educators acknowledged that they felt uneasy. Several respondents noted that various stakeholders in their towns complained to their boards of education regarding fears that educators were indoctrinating students and teaching critical race theory in their classrooms. One respondent expressed concern over this recent shift,

I now have to fear that an irate parent is going to go to the board of education to complain if I teach my content in a way that they disagree with. The pressure of having parents attempt to impact my instruction has begun to take a toll on me. I feel like I am constantly running defense and found that it has made me more resistant to trying new things in my classroom. I'm ashamed to admit it, but it is truly exhausting.

Summary

The review of the literature and professional practices highlighted the importance of providing professional learning opportunities to staff. The role of the teacher is critical in successfully implementing social-emotional learning. An area that requires further investigation is culturally responsive pedagogy's role in supporting the SEL work in schools and districts. Ladson-Billings (1994) highlights the importance of an equitable learning environment to support the growth of the whole child, particularly minoritized students. A common theme throughout the research is the educator's importance in supporting students' social-emotional development, including the development of adult cultural and social-emotional competencies as districts and schools prioritize the SEL needs of their students.

Throughout this review of the literature and professional knowledge, themes emerged highlighting key factors that impact student connectedness and SEL. In addition, the impact on teachers, the role of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased political and social unrest on teachers' abilities to meet the needs of their students further compromised these root causes. Overall, the review of the literature and professional knowledge identified lack of professional development, lack of teacher self-efficacy of SEL, and cultural responsiveness to be areas that impacted student connectedness. Furthermore, the ongoing social and political challenges that society faces also impact a school's ability to meet the needs of students. Researchers cannot ignore the fact that historical events such as George Floyd, immigration, and Black Lives Matter directly impact an educator's work and students' lives. With ongoing political polarization in the United States, the tension can infiltrate school settings, making it increasingly challenging for educators and students.

Figure 3 is the Driver Diagram for this ISDiP. Based on the study's aim, there are several drivers, which are factors that the researcher hopes to influence to promote positive change. However, four primary drivers are based on the root cause analysis, literature, and environmental scan.

The primary drivers indicate several contributing factors to the Problem of Practice. The researcher identified secondary drivers within the four primary drivers, for which the researcher developed potential change ideas to address the problem. As part of the Improvement Science process, this led to determining what intervention to implement.

Figure 3

Driver Diagram for this ISDiP Study
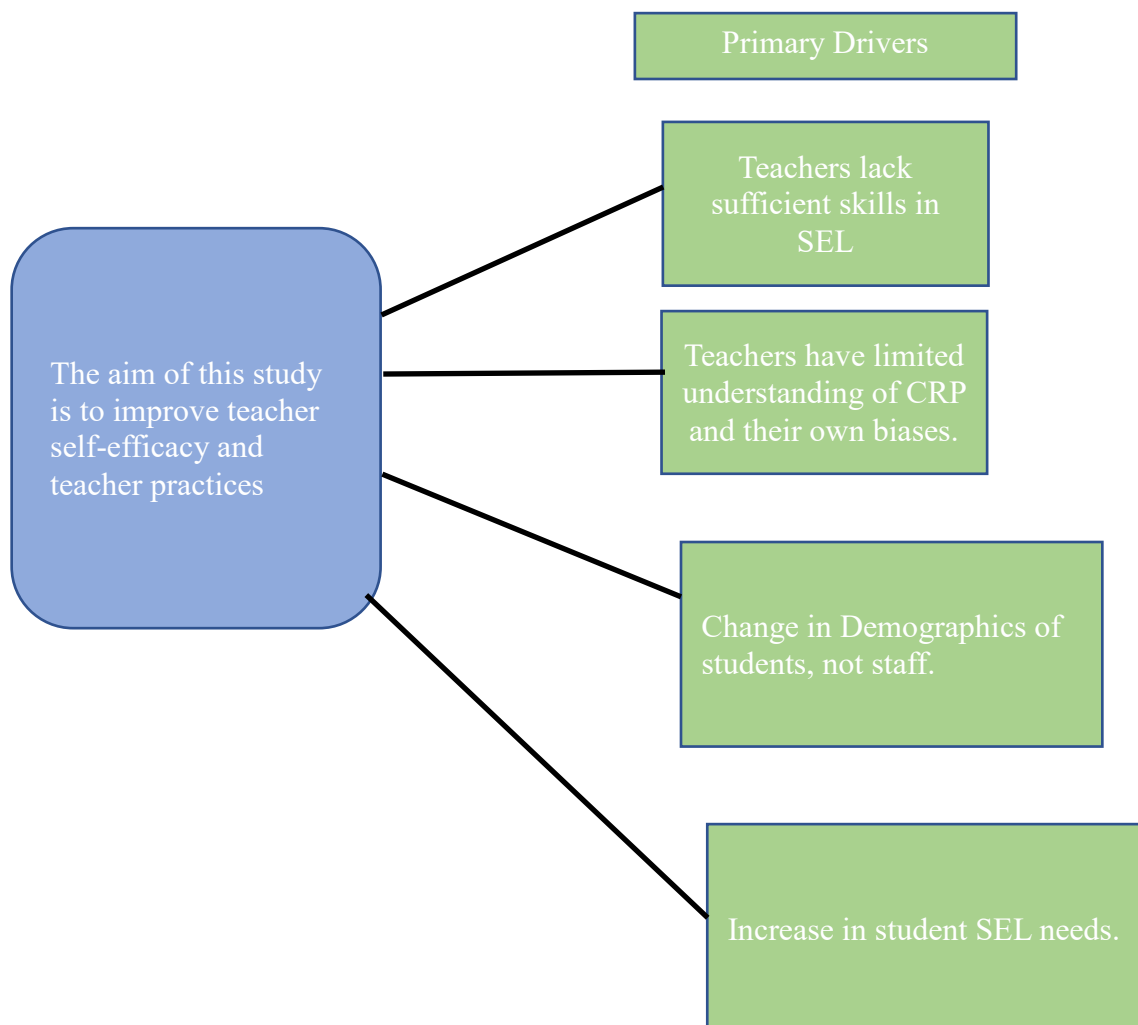
Working Theory of Improvement

The researcher conducted a root cause analysis and determined that transitioning from pre-pandemic teaching and learning to virtual to hybrid and returning to pre-pandemic in-person instruction negatively impacted student connectedness at the participating middle school. Teachers taught synchronously to both the students in the classroom and at home. While these measures helped protect students physically, they were not conducive to protecting students socially and emotionally. With the hybrid teaching model, addressing these students' social-

emotional needs when they are not always physically present in the classroom or isolated behind a single desk and plexiglass became increasingly challenging. This challenge was evident to all staff members. Teachers, administrators, and PPS staff expressed how challenging it was to maintain and build relationships with students throughout this process.

Additionally, the school climate survey results indicated a decrease in student connectedness. For example, in fall 2021, 83% of students expressed feeling connected to or cared about by an adult in the building. As a point of comparison, in fall 2019, 93% of students expressed feeling connected to or cared about by an adult in the building.

The researcher interviewed various stakeholders throughout this investigation to provide a multi-sided approach to this challenge. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection was necessary to give an accurate picture of this problem. The quantitative data included absenteeism, number of students requiring counseling, school climate survey results, and the number of times the school has made referrals to the CT Department of Children and Families (DCF) or had to call the crisis line. Additionally, the researcher conducted an equity audit of the disciplinary data. The qualitative data collected consisted of informal conversations and interviews with teachers, school counselors, and administrators. While several factors identified contributed to the issue, the root causes were lack of SEL understanding in teachers, the scope and sequence of professional learning for SEL, and the changes in the demographic of students vs. teachers.

Several secondary drivers emerged through this process. Based on the literature and environmental scan, three change ideas are outlined in Figure 4. All three of the change ideas are investigated in the literature review.

Figure 4

Diagram of Selected Root Causes Identified in the Study
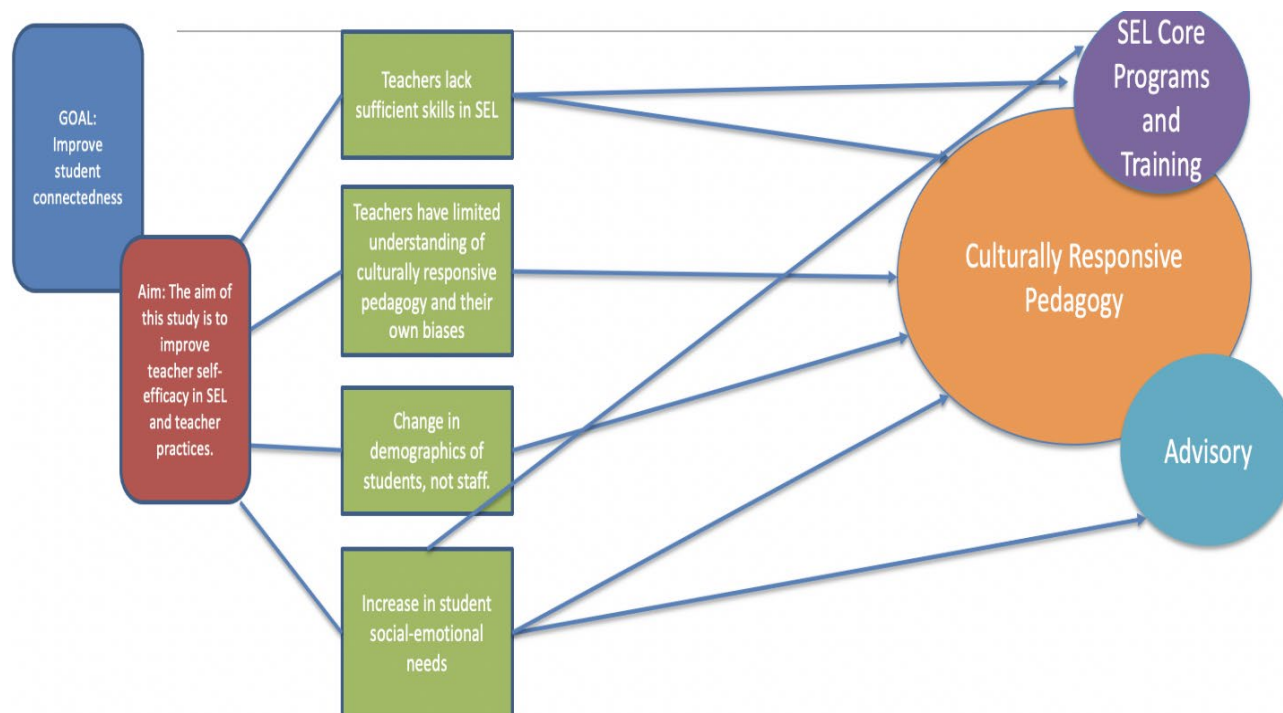
This working theory of improvement identified professional learning as an area for the school to work on to ensure that all educators feel increased self-efficacy and competency and that it would improve their practices. Teachers at P.T. Barnum Middle school expressed a desire for additional professional learning opportunities in the next school year since the present SEL self-efficacy levels were low. Teachers identified SEL as an area of concern and felt that more professional learning would benefit the staff and students. Teachers anecdotally expressed how they have noticed a reduction in connectedness and engagement and felt this should be the priority for professional learning.

Strategies

SEL Core Programs-Literature

Many districts and schools worldwide use SEL programming to support growth in their students' social-emotional competencies and support a positive school climate and culture to increase student connectedness. Programs such as RULER (2022), Second Step (2022), and Mind Up (2022) emerged to help schools address the growing social-emotional concerns in classrooms. While there are several programs to choose from, many programs designed for social-emotional learning in schools address Tier 1 or the whole school. In Hagelskamp et al. (2013), a study conducted using RULER as the core program, this program supported improving student outcomes and improved the overall structure of the classroom environment. The Tier 1 design of a program like RULER or Second Step provides a proactive approach to addressing the social-emotional needs of students in the classroom. While research suggests that student connectedness is essential to an improved school climate and positive student outcomes, Brackett et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of comprehensive training for staff members in social-emotional learning. They assert that RULER's implementation model "involves training for school leaders, educators, and staff; integrating SEL into the curriculum across grade levels; infusing SEL into schoolwide practices and policies; and engaging families and the broader community" (p. 144). Brackett and his team highlight the importance of including all stakeholders in the process to help students navigate various challenging situations. Rivers et al. (2012) found that schools were more likely to improve climate and student connectedness when implementing RULER. More specifically, "Teachers using RULER were more likely to report that they interacted with students in emotion-focused ways and created more opportunities for

students to interact through cooperative learning than did teachers in the comparison group" (p. 84).

SEL Core Programs-Professional Practice

All districts interviewed during the environmental scan adopted an SEL Core Program in the last five years. Of the seven districts interviewed, all but two had adopted RULER as their SEL Core program and were at various stages in their implementation. A middle school teacher expressed some concern over the leadership regarding RULER at her school. She reported that

> our leadership team seems to have different stances on the importance of social-emotional learning at our school. While our RULER team was trained and have provided training to our staff, our principal said 'it is optional' for us to implement in our classroom. This has really impacted staff buy-in, and many have chosen not to experiment with the core tools of RULER because they are so overwhelmed by everything else.

A high school teacher discussed their core program's impact on their school climate but noted the difficulties during the pandemic. They explained how it was initially challenging to implement their core program, as many teachers felt it was inauthentic and scripted, but just like any other program, it took time to build buy-in and allow teachers to make it their own. However, she noted,

> one thing that really made a difference with the implementation of our core SEL programming was providing time in PLC for teachers to create lessons aligned with the core competencies. Also, professional learning was really important. Our district made SEL a priority, but also gave teachers the opportunity to make the lessons their own.

Based on the environmental scan, it was clear that leadership and the design of the rollout of the new program were critical components and directly impacted the success of the implementation.

Advisory-Literature

A potential intervention widely used by many schools included in the environmental scan and the research was implementing a school-wide advisory program. Understanding that student connectedness helps improve student outcomes in schools, Shulkind and Foote (2009) determined seven characteristics in developing an effective advisory program. They maintain that the most effective advisory programs address community issues, allow for open communication, and promote an environment of problem-solving and advice-giving and open communication with advisors who care about their students, including supervision of academic progress. In addition, both students and advisors believe that advisory improves academic achievement and the students and staff believe that advisory promotes a community of learning for all.

Advisory-Professional Practice

The environmental scan indicated that advisory was commonly identified as a program to help build student connectedness and community within a building. One high school principal noted that

> advisory was something that was considered cutting edge, even ten years ago, but in my time in education, I have seen advisory implemented well and then not-so-well. It really comes down to the lesson design and purpose for advisory. If advisory becomes an unstructured time lacking any purpose, then it becomes less effective. However, I have also seen advisory lessons be extremely impactful and have helped improve the school climate of a school that I worked at for ten years.

A middle school teacher noted that advisory was not successful at her school because there was no common plan for each advisory. She stated, "Administration let the teachers plan the lesson for their individual advisory. Therefore, there was a great discrepancy between one advisory and the other."

Intervention-Literature

As the needs of students are different, approaches to improving one's social-emotional competency must be different and cater to what the child needs. While a Tier 1 intervention can be beneficial, overall, other students may require more, especially if a child has a higher incidence of trauma in their life or other underlying challenges that may impact a student's ability to thrive in the classroom. Anyon et al.'s (2016) study found that implementing a Tier 2 approach helped improve student outcomes using a program that has supported growth in SEL, literacy, and math for disadvantaged students (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). While some growth has been made in providing social-emotional intervention to students, Bierman and Sanders (2021) discuss the need to build a multi-tiered approach and build the capacity of educators to address those needs in the classroom.

> Intervention was a strategy that was not commonly used among districts interviewed during the environmental scan. In fact, of the districts/schools interviewed, one school had a formal social-emotional intervention in place. The administrator noted that the interventions designed for social-emotional learning were centered around the school counselor or member of the pupil services staff providing counseling to the student. He indicated that

> Tier 1 SEL intervention has not really been flushed out in our district. While we are trying to build competence within our staff, many of them are not comfortable addressing the SEL needs of a student in this setting. While I know that more needs to be done to support the SEL intervention program, it is important to note that most of our interventions are carried out by our pupil services staff.

High-Impact Strategy: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

While there is increased access to SEL programming and intervention for students, the literature supports the need for further development of these programs. Jagers et al. (2019) assert the growing need for teachers to be trained in the core competencies of social-emotional learning, concluding that this must be achieved through a comprehensive and equitable lens. While the research supports the fact that disadvantaged students benefit from social-emotional

programming in schools (Bierman & Sanders, 2021, Kaufman et al., 2016), there is limited research about providing a more equitable approach to teaching and providing professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy to impact SEL in the classroom. Simmons et al. (2016) reiterate how the integration of schools, both racially and socioeconomically, can have positive outcomes when educators are provided professional learning and use the strategies from the workshops in their classrooms.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a high-leverage strategy that supports growth in academics, as well as social-emotional learning, for example. Garcia and Garcia (2016) studied the role that increased CRP had on the academic performance of Hispanic/Latinx students, finding a positive relationship between CRP and growth in literacy. Many studies illustrate culturally responsive pedagogy in practice, sometimes under different terms such as multicultural, sociocultural, or social justice teaching and equity pedagogy (Dilg, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Santamaria, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007).

Barnes and McCallops (2019) discussed the role of cultural competency and pedagogy have on the environment with RULER as the initial program. They suggested that "to truly deliver an SEL intervention like RULER in a culturally responsive manner, the school environment must first be immersed in the use of culturally responsive practices" (p. 76). This study discusses how social-emotional programs in isolation may not be enough to deliver equity in schools. While programs such as RULER discuss the role their programs have in promoting equity, this research states that it may not be sufficient.

While CRP has shown promise in many studies, there is an element of caution before implementation. According to Ladson-Billings (2014), "What state departments, school districts, and individual teachers are now calling 'culturally relevant pedagogy' is often a distortion and

corruption of the central [original] ideas" (p. 82). This author stresses that culturally responsive pedagogy is commonly simplified and reduced to celebrations, trivializations, and superficial interpretations of students' and communities' cultural practices. In essence, teaching culturally responsive pedagogy and being truly culturally responsive are two different strategies, and as such, educators should be mindful of this distinction.

<div align="center">**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy—Professional Practice**</div>

During the environmental scan, many participants discussed the need for assistance in supporting learners of diverse backgrounds; however, none of the participants had culturally responsive training conducted at their schools. Indeed, there was not even a plan for that training to occur. In the 2021–2022 school year, many districts adopted an equity statement, but few had developed action steps to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at the building level. For instance, one district hired a new director of equity and inclusion, and another had just completed a curriculum redesign to reflect the changing demographics in their district. While all participants indicated that cultural responsiveness was critical, this was a strategy that few districts had employed.

Summary

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, social-emotional learning has become a focus for many districts surrounding the school where this study took place. The growing concerns such as lack of engagement, reduction in student connectedness, and an increase in the number of students needing mental health intervention prompted schools to look to various Tier 1 programs to help address the needs of their student communities. Rivers et al. (2012) highlighted that SEL programs, particularly RULER, improve the quality of classroom climate and social interactions within the learning community. Additionally, the study noted that schools using programs such as

RULER had increased connectedness between staff and students and positively impacted student development in and out of the classroom. However, some researchers are skeptical and believe these programs are insufficient if schools want to establish an equitable learning environment.

Throughout the literature review of this Improvement science dissertation in practice, it is evident that professional learning in both culturally responsive pedagogy and social-emotional learning can positively impact teachers, students, and climate. However, there is limited research about the teacher and student outcomes when educational staff is provided with professional learning in both CRP and SEL. Exploring this professional learning model and identifying the role of CRP on teacher self-efficacy and practices when paired with SEL training is critical information to uncover as districts seek to identify best practices in implementing professional learning and instructional strategies.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As this Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) progresses, the scholarly practitioner creates a working theory of improvement. Once the researcher synthesizes the literature and practical knowledge, they must "move from problem analysis to actually tackling the problem during the testing phase" (Perry et al., 2020, p. 90). The researcher established a working theory of improvement based on the literature and practical knowledge and applied it within the context of the suburban middle school used in this study. After identifying the problem, the researcher develops an understanding of the root causes, identifies the areas of influence, and designs action steps to address the problem. As Improvement Science occurs in various phases, once the problem is identified and the root causes are analyzed, phase two incorporates the design of the intervention or the "action phase."

Theory of Improvement

The root cause analysis identified various potential factors to explain an overall reduction in student connectedness at P.T. Barnum Middle School. While the review of professional practices indicated similar trends in participating districts, other potential causes warranted further investigation. Many contributing factors at PTBMS impact the Problem of Practice as the root cause analysis disclosed, professional learning, the differing demographics of students and teachers, and the lack of SEL understanding. End-user consultations showed a lack of SEL understanding and self-efficacy among PTBMS teachers. While teachers had a basic understanding of social-emotional learning, many expressed a lack of confidence in meeting the social-emotional needs of their students in the classroom.

After the onset of the pandemic, social-emotional learning became a critical component of the district's Strategic Plan and P.T. Barnum Middle School's school improvement plan. To prioritize social-emotional learning, PTBMS chose a core program to support the growth of social-emotional competencies at the classroom level. To improve teacher understanding and SEL competency, the committee chose RULER, a research-based approach to social-emotional learning focusing on emotion-based instruction. Due to the unique challenges presented by the pandemic, the district staff and SEL team moved quickly to train and implement RULER in the 2021–2022 school year. The first year of implementation focuses on building an adult understanding of the tools and critical SEL concepts. While the initial professional development was an important first step towards improving SEL at the PTBMS for adults and students, other factors may impact student connectedness.

The need for culturally responsive pedagogy emerged throughout the root cause analysis and review of professional practices in other districts. At the participating middle school, two root causes prompted a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy. The first factor is the contrast in demographics between students and teachers. Gay (2013) found that the cultural differences between students and teachers can pose significant challenges to connectedness, as well as teaching and learning, since most teachers are White and female. Further complicating this matter were teachers' and students' lack of cultural knowledge (Bonner et al., 2018). This finding, paired with the results of the discipline equity audit, the second root cause, highlights a growing need for comprehensive professional learning of culturally responsive teaching practices. For instance, the disciplinary referral audit showed a higher incidence of Hispanic and Latinx students receiving referrals when compared to the White students, who account for three times their population at PTBMS. Therefore, this Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice

aimed to increase student connectedness using a culturally responsive pedagogical professional learning series.

Using increased culturally responsive pedagogical practices in conjunction with increased SEL professional learning opportunities, this study analyzed the impact of culturally responsive practices on the overall SEL self-efficacy of teachers and ultimately aimed to increase student connectedness. The review of literature and practices revealed a need to provide learning opportunities around culturally responsive pedagogy to support student outcomes and improve student connectedness and school climate. In addition, the literature's recommendations were consistent with the patterns evident at P.T. Barnum Middle School.

Overall, the need for more culturally responsive teaching was a common thread throughout. Therefore, the researcher conducted a professional learning series for teachers where culturally responsive pedagogy acted as a vehicle to support the work done by the district to foster SEL skills in the classroom. In addition, to support increased student connectedness, teacher self-efficacy needed improvement. By providing greater access to culturally responsive pedagogy, the researcher measured the impact on teachers' overall perception of SEL and self-efficacy.

Purpose of the Study

While this study endeavored to improve student connectedness at P.T. Barnum Middle School, it sought to examine culturally responsive pedagogy's role in a teacher's SEL self-efficacy. The literature review and root cause analysis indicated the need for culturally responsive pedagogy and applying such strategies in the classroom. The overall goal of this Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice was to determine whether teachers' professional

learning of culturally responsive practices impacts teachers' self-efficacy and classroom practices in SEL.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

This ISDiP investigated two research questions to determine the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on teacher SEL self-efficacy.

1. Is there a statistically significant change in teacher perception of a) Cultural Awareness, b) Professional Learning in Social-Emotional Learning, c) Professional Learning in Equity, and d) teacher self-efficacy after receiving professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy? Why or why not?

H_1: There is a statistically significant change in teacher SEL self-efficacy and instructional practices when Culturally Responsive Pedagogy professional learning is paired with RULER training.

H_0: There is not a statistically significant change in SEL self-efficacy.

2. In what ways, if at all, does training in culturally responsive pedagogy impact teacher practices? What strategies were used and why?

The researcher hypothesized that teachers' self-efficacy and perception would improve when they received professional learning in both social-emotional competency and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Research Design

The study's design adhered to the Improvement Science approach and employed multiple phases. The first phase, which occurred during Chapters I and II, helped identify the problem and the contributing factors or root causes. The second phase of Improvement Science began in Chapter III and involved designing and implementing an intervention to address the problem and

determine its impact on improvement. Perry et al. (2020) stress that an Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice "is to report the consequences of a particular educational improvement effort" (p. 40). In other words, the purpose of Improvement Science is to understand the problem and the causes of that problem before attempting a solution.

The researcher used Action Research methodology to improve the teachers' instructional practices in the classroom. The purpose of action research is to inform the practitioner and researcher to change current practices in the future (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). The researcher seeks to improve teacher self-efficacy by implementing a professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy using action research to improve the practices of the participants in the intervention in the hopes that it impacts all teachers at P.T. Barnum Middle School. While Creswell and Plano-Clark highlight the importance of action research in improving current practices, Bennett (2019) also discusses its potential positive impact. Action research is a cyclical framework that seeks to improve practices by implementing change. While the researcher is responsible for the research, it is a collaborative process that encourages the participation of other participants and stakeholders.

As articulated by McDonough (2006), some key characteristics of action research include: a participant-driven and reflective process, collaboration, leads to change and improvement of practice, and context-specific. This study's professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy allowed participants to reflect on their own practice and growth throughout the process. As a result, this research determined how purposeful and comprehensive professional learning could improve teacher self-efficacy and practices. Since the researcher relies on participants' reflection throughout the process, it is inherently collaborative. Additionally, the research design allowed for necessary changes based on participant feedback.

Based on the findings, the study informed future professional learning opportunities for the rest of the target school's staff and staff in other buildings in the district.

To implement this ISDiP, the researcher used a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design with an intervention and a comparison group. Creswell (2015) emphasizes that an experiment needs to be designed to establish cause and effect between two variables if it measures whether practice or procedures influence the outcome. While experiments are traditionally quantitative, this study used a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design. A quasi-experimental design allowed the researcher to determine the role of increased adult SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy on educators' self-efficacy of SEL. Jagers et al.'s (2019) research support increased SEL in adults and its role in promoting equity in education. However, other research (Barnes & McCallops, 2019) also noted that for an SEL core program to be truly equitable, the environment needs to develop a culturally responsive climate and practices; otherwise, the program simply addresses social-emotional learning. Therefore, a quasi-experimental design was necessary to examine the impact culturally responsive teaching, or pedagogy had on teacher SEL self-efficacy when professional learning opportunities are in place.

The researcher utilized a between-group experimental design (Creswell, 2015) to examine culturally responsive pedagogy—the treatment—and compared two heterogeneous groups. The professional learning series explicitly taught culturally responsive instructional practices and called on the participants to come to terms with and identify their own existing biases. The literature (Bonner et al., 2018; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995) identifies this as a critical first step in promoting change in instructional practices, particularly when taking steps towards a more culturally responsive learning environment.

This study used both qualitative and quantitative data to determine the participants' professional learning needs and SEL self-efficacy. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously; thus, this ISDiP constituted a mixed methods convergent approach. As Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018) state, "the intent in using this design is to bring together the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods" (p. 68).

The researcher used the Panorama survey data focusing on cultural awareness and action, professional development about SEL, professional learning about equity, and teacher self-efficacy. The school SEL committee administered the Panorama survey to all teachers before and after the intervention. In addition, the researcher reviewed updated school climate and disciplinary data to inform this study further and used professional learning feedback surveys to inform the culturally responsive modules in the intervention stage. The post-module feedback supported the researcher's process throughout the study. Finally, the researcher conducted interviews to identify emergent themes and analyzed the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative data.

Target Population and Participants

This quasi-experimental study occurred at P.T. Barnum Middle School in southwestern Connecticut. The participants included all teachers, but the treatment group included one grade-level team from each grade. The teams chosen as treatment participants represented a diverse group of educators with varying years of experience, content area, age, and gender. All teacher participants received professional learning in RULER, but only the treatment group received the intervention in culturally responsive pedagogy.

The treatment group comprised 20 classroom teacher participants. All pupil services, administration, and paraprofessional staff are not included since the purpose of the study is to

analyze CRP's impact in the classroom. The intervention group was all team-based; thus, no unified arts teachers were included in the professional learning series; however, there were some in the control group, consisting of forty-one classroom teachers. Table 7 compares the demographics of the comparison population versus the participant population.

Table 7

Characteristics of Control Group vs. Participant Group

Characteristic	Control Population	Participant Population	Representation in Intervention
	n	*n*	%
White	40	19	48
Hispanic/Latinx	1	1	100
Years of Experience			
< 5	12	6	50
> 5	29	14	48
Gender			
Female	29	16	55
Male	12	4	33

Two teachers of color were at PTBMS; one was in the control group and one in the intervention group. The total years of experience among participants in both the intervention and control groups vary, reflecting the makeup of the school teaching staff. The participant population is reflective of the makeup of the comparison population. While the study would benefit from more male representation in the participant population, selecting participants did not allow for that.

Each team participating in the study comprises a teacher from math, science, English/language arts, social studies, world language, and special education; the one difference is the sixth-grade team with two English/language arts teachers and no world language teacher. The researcher employed convenience sampling to select the teams, and all participation was

voluntary. Although the researcher was the cluster leader of their team, during a cluster leader meeting, the administration asked the researcher to present the study proposal to seek volunteers. As a result, the cluster leaders discussed the study with their respective teams and participated. Having teams participate in the intervention ensured representation from all core content areas, and the teachers applied the strategies to the same groups of students.

The literature review highlighted the need to address implicit bias as part of professional learning; therefore, during the PL series, the researcher asked all participants to take the Project Implicit (2022) Biases Survey. While the data were solely meant to be informational for each participant, Table 8 shows the results of the intervention group's light skin vs. dark skin IAT (Implicit Association Test) survey. Please note that one participant felt uncomfortable taking the survey, so this table shows the results of the remaining 19 participants.

Table 8

Light Skin vs. Dark Skin IAT Results

Result	Number of participants
Strong automatic preference for light skin	1
Moderate automatic preference for light skin	2
Slight automatic preference for light skin	9
Little to no preference between skin tones	5
Slight automatic preference for dark skin	1
Moderate automatic preference for dark skin	1
Strong automatic preference for dark skin	0

While these data were a single measure, they provided great insight into the makeup of the intervention group and prompted great discussion among the group when they discussed the role that their own implicit biases might have on their interactions with their students. The results did

not surprise the researcher, but many participants shared concerns that their implicit biases could potentially negatively impact their students.

Intervention

The intervention provided participants with various strategies to support culturally responsive teaching in their classroom practice. The researcher presented the module's focus each week and provided strategies to the teachers. Once the participants understood the different types of strategies to support Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the classroom, the researcher tasked the participants with trying as many strategies as they liked in their classrooms. At the end of each module, participants reported which strategies they attempted and how often they used them. For example, during the first module, the researcher showed participants the results of the Equity audit and introduced what CRP is. The following module focused on identifying personal bias, and each module had a theme and presented strategies for the participants to implement with their students immediately.

Data Collection Instruments/Measures

This study investigated the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on teacher self-efficacy and instructional practices when a core program and professional learning are already in place to support social-emotional learning schoolwide. Various data points were used to determine the impact of the culturally responsive teaching strategies on a teacher's perception of social-emotional learning and their ability to teach them in the classroom. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to determine the relationship between the two variables. Table 9 shows the instruments and measures used to address each research question.

Table 9

Instruments and Measures used to Address the Two Research Questions

Research Question	Instrument	Type of Analysis
1. Is there a statistically significant change in teacher perception of a) Cultural Awareness, b) PL in SEL, c) PL in Equity, and d) teacher self-efficacy after receiving professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy? Why?	Panorama Survey Focus Group Interview	Quantitative: *t*-test Descriptive Statistics Qualitative: Coding/Themes
2. In what ways, if at all, does training in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy impact teacher practices? What strategies were used and why?	Interviews Professional Learning Exit tickets	Coding/Themes

The researcher used sections of an evidence-based teachers' social-emotional learning survey for the quantitative data analysis component. The Panorama (2021) survey was designed to target all stakeholders and help to promote "student voice, school climate, teacher and staff voice and promote family and community engagement." The SEL survey measures are reliable, with an average Cronbach alpha coefficient of .78 and a minimum of .68. The teacher survey includes various subcategories in totality or isolated sections based on the district or school's needs. For this study, the researcher employed four subcategories: Professional Learning about SEL, Teaching Efficacy, Cultural Awareness and Actions, and Professional Learning about Equity. After completing the professional learning series, the researcher administered the survey as a pre and post-test. All participants completed the survey, and the results between the two groups were compared, providing valuable insight into the teachers' perceptions of SEL, CRP, and overall teacher self-efficacy in teaching SEL. The complete survey is in Appendix A.

For the qualitative portion of the study, intervention participants answered a series of interview questions regarding culturally responsive pedagogy and its impact on the classroom practices of the participant teachers. After the professional learning series was completed, the researcher conducted these semi-structured interviews with the intervention participants, analyzed the responses, and identified trends over time. With participant permission, responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Then the researcher drew conclusions based on the participants' responses. No additional information was collected during the semi-structured interviews, such as gender or age, to ensure no potential identifiers were present. Instead, the researcher recorded the interviews and later transcribed them as part of the interview protocol.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative Analysis Methods

This study required the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to provide an overall picture of the growth sustained by the participants in both the treatment and control groups. Additionally, paired two-tailed *t*-tests determined the relationship and statistical significance of trends throughout this quasi-experiment. Multiple *t*-tests allowed the researcher to isolate various factors and measure the impact of culturally responsive teaching on teachers' SEL self-efficacy. Finally, the researcher reviewed and analyzed the data to determine whether the treatment had a positive or negative relationship with teacher-reported SEL self-efficacy.

For the quantitative data, the researcher uncovered a relationship between the treatment teachers' responses to the survey compared to the control group. The researcher disaggregated the data using the Panorama SEL survey responses, allowing the researcher to determine the

relevance and statistical significance of the relationship between the survey responses. The measures used included a *t*-test and descriptive statistics.

Qualitative Analysis Methods

The qualitative data analysis required the researcher to conduct a focus group interview with the 20 teacher participants in the culturally responsive pedagogy intervention. The researcher recorded and coded all responses and analyzed the data for evident trends. Focus group pulse checks where the researcher solicited participants' feedback highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention phase and informed the next steps in the intervention. After conducting the interviews, the researcher coded and identified themes within the interview data. Simultaneously, a peer reviewed a sample of the interview data and coded and identified existing themes in the data. Once both the researcher and the peer finished coding the data and developing the existing themes, they compared their results to ensure that the interview data was consistent and free of researcher bias.

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Threats to Validity

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Hawthorne Effect

According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2019), the greatest threat to internal and external validity is participants responding in a way that biases the results. Since the researcher was an employee of the Beekman District and a teacher working on the study, it was critical that teachers saw it as a separate professional learning opportunity and not simply a study run by their colleague to eliminate any potential bias. In addition, as the researcher was a teacher at the participating middle school, excluding her grade level team was critical to limiting the impact of the Hawthorne effect, and the influence of the participants' desire to please or support the researcher helped to mitigate the impact.

Additionally, it is important to note that six teachers chose not to participate in the study due to the content of the study and the sensitive nature of some of the questions. Therefore, while some teachers were excluded altogether, it is essential to note that the overall demographic of the study was not hindered, and the remaining participants reflected a diverse representation as far as gender and years of experience teaching are concerned.

Contagion

Another potential threat to validity is the potential for contagion. As the intervention group represents one grade-level team, there was a concern that contagion could occur in subject-based PLCs. At the start of the intervention, the researcher asked participants not to share what was taught in the professional learning series to reduce the influence of contagion. The most significant challenge to external validity is that the results of this study may or may not be easily generalized or applied to all middle schools.

Summary

The study aimed to inform educators' practices to increase teacher self-efficacy in SEL in the classroom. While research has been conducted to support the benefits of SEL core programming and culturally responsive pedagogy, there is a lack of research analyzing the impact of both strategies on teacher self-efficacy. In education, new initiatives often overwhelm teachers, as noted during the environmental scan interviews, so it is critical for teachers to continue to be supported through professional learning opportunities to improve their instructional practices that can benefit their students. This study intended to support classroom teachers at the middle school level to improve professional and classroom practices to help meet the needs of all learners.

This ISDiP provided greater insight into how culturally responsive pedagogy can improve teacher practices and, eventually, student outcomes. A quasi-experimental, mixed-method convergent design analyzed the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on overall teacher self-efficacy in SEL. Despite a six-week data collection period, the data collection methods included surveys and focus group data and provided a comprehensive look into teacher practices, perceptions, and competency. All data collected during phase two of this ISDiP is presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This mixed-methods ISDiP determined the impact of in-depth, ongoing professional development focused on culturally responsive pedagogy on a teacher's SEL self-efficacy and ability to implement CRP in their classrooms. After six weeks of intervention and data collection, the research offers insight into the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on instructional practices and provides important information to administrators and practitioners looking to incorporate these strategies into their practices. The results of this study are in response to the two research questions:

1. As a result of professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, is there statistically significant growth in teacher perception of a) Cultural Awareness, b) Professional Learning in SEL, c) Professional Learning in Equity, d) teacher self-efficacy after receiving professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy? Why or why not?

2. In what ways, if at all, does professional learning in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy impact teacher practices? What strategies were used and why?

Throughout the literature review, ample research showed the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. However, few studies discussed the overall impact on teachers' self-efficacy when paired with SEL professional learning opportunities. For this reason, the researcher designed this quasi-experiment to provide greater insight into culturally responsive teaching strategies' impact on classroom practices and teacher self-efficacy. This chapter outlines the sample and participants, data collection, and analysis. The data analysis is

organized to include the control vs. intervention groups. Additionally, the qualitative data from the focus group interviews are presented by the emergent themes.

Description of Sample

The study participants included the entire staff at the P.T. Barnum Middle School, where the intervention occurred. The participants in the intervention represented all content areas and grade levels, totaling 20 participants. In addition, the intervention group varied in years of service and gender, reflecting the demographic composition of the entire staff at the chosen middle school. For more information regarding the participants in this research study, refer to Table (insert number) in Chapter III.

Intervention

The timeline was December 2021 to March 2022, while the specific intervention occurred from February 2022 to March 2022. The participants in the intervention participated in a five-module professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy. Each module was approximately one weeklong and followed a hybrid model that included both in-person and online instruction. The researcher met with all participants during the in-person sessions and introduced a strategy to apply to their classroom instruction. As coverage concerns impacted the execution of the intervention, the researcher used Google Classroom to administer content remotely for participants to complete.

The first module addressed identifying the participant's implicit bias and an overview of the reasoning behind the study. The following four modules introduced various culturally responsive strategies, where participants learned about the strategy, reflected on how they could apply it in their classroom, and then attempted to execute it in their respective classrooms. Once

the participants completed the module, they answered questions about the strategy, including

how often they used it and how it impacted their instructional practices.

The intervention strategies provided to the participants fell into three different categories

to better serve the needs of each of the participants. The researcher designed the intervention to

include content-embedded, relationship-building, teacher-friendly, or more easily embedded

strategies. For example, the content-embedded strategies focused on providing strategies for each

content area, such as providing a participating math teacher with ways to be more culturally

responsive in the classroom specific to math. Relationship-building strategies focus on

establishing a stronger cultural bond between the teacher and student and the student and the rest

of their classroom. Finally, the teacher-friendly strategies allowed participants the opportunity to

embed culturally responsive practices into the warm-up or morning circle and were not a crucial

component of the content lesson.

Data Collection

Data included a pre-and post-test, ongoing written reflections, and focus group

interviews. Participants completed a pre-test of the Panorama survey prior to the December 2021

start of the study and completed the same survey in March 2022, once the intervention

concluded. The Panorama survey is a comprehensive survey that measures school climate,

focusing on social-emotional learning and cultural understanding and equity. For this study, the

survey given to the participants included Panorama's surveys on Cultural Awareness and Action,

Professional Learning about SEL, Professional Learning about Equity, and Teacher Self-Efficacy

(Appendix A).

Throughout the intervention, participants answered open-ended reflection questions,

which the researcher coded with the assistance of an additional coder. The additional coder

received training in qualitative research and how to code data. To avoid the potential for researcher bias in coding, the researcher chose this person, who works in education but not in the participating school, to ensure that coding accurately depicted the raw data. After the initial Level 1 coding, the researcher and other coder met to compare results, and again after Level 2 coding. Commonalities between the coding emerged as the themes, and the two coders discussed any discrepancies.

At the end of the five-module intervention, participants engaged in a one-hour semi-structured interview via focus group. The questions asked in this semi-structured interview tasked participants to reflect on the process and its impact on their instructional practices and SEL self-efficacy. The focus group was via Google Meet, as scheduling was a concern, allowing the focus group to be recorded

The researcher conducted member-checking over the phone and in person to ensure that the data and quotes accurately depicted the qualitative data. During the member checking, the participants identified any inaccuracies, clarified any questions, and added any additional information to their statements and responses. In addition, the researcher recorded all changes in her notes, and the participants verified those changes with the researcher.

Results

The researcher organized the results of this ISDiP by the two research questions, highlighting the quantitative and qualitative results separately. After a two-leveled coding process, the five themes emerged addressing both research questions: 1) relationship-building, 2) development of personal cultural awareness and understanding, 3) connections to RULER and social-emotional learning, 4) increased student engagement and classroom climate, and 5) improved perception and understanding of cultural responsiveness and SEL.

Research Question 1—Quantitative Results

To evaluate the extent to which culturally responsive pedagogy impacts SEL self-efficacy in teachers, the researcher performed a paired-samples *t*-test measuring any growth in teacher perceptions' on the Panorama survey. The pre-/post-test questions asked participants to evaluate their own abilities and the professional learning provided by the school regarding cultural awareness and action, professional learning about SEL, professional learning about equity, and teacher self-efficacy. Table 10 provides the control groups' pre and post-test survey results for the control group, while Table 11 highlights the same survey results for the intervention group. The intervention group received training in both culturally responsive teaching practices and RULER, while the control group received professional learning throughout the year in RULER only.

Table 10

Paired t-test Results for Panorama Survey Pre and Post-test for the Control Group

Test Category		*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*-value
Cultural Awareness/Action	Pretest	13.55	4.56	−5.8	0.55
	Posttest	14.13	4.55		
Professional Learning about SEL	Pretest	11.87	1.50	−8.76	< .001
	Posttest	13.62	1.28		
Professional Learning about Equity	Pretest	8.36	2.06	−10.88	0.71
	Posttest	8.24	1.49		
Teacher Self-Efficacy	Pretest	6.38	1.54	−11.99	0.47
	Posttest	6.6	1.36		

Note: n=45

As the control group's results show, there was growth in the areas of Cultural Awareness and Action and teacher self-efficacy, but average growth was minimal. On the other hand, there was a statistically significant increase in scores for professional learning about SEL.

Additionally, the post-test results indicated a decrease in average scores for professional learning about equity.

Table 11

Paired t-test Results for Panorama Survey Pre and Post-test for the Intervention Group

Test Category		*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*-value
Cultural Awareness/Action	Pretest	11.45	3.49	−5.8	< .001
	Posttest	16.1	3.16		
Professional Learning about SEL	Pretest	11	1.52	−8.76	< .001
	Posttest	18.25	3.82		
Professional Learning about Equity	Pretest	8.2	1.32	−10.88	< .001
	Posttest	12.7	1.87		
Teacher Self-Efficacy	Pretest	5.25	1.30	−11.99	< .001
	Posttest	8.95	1.29		

Note: n=20

The results of the pre-test and post-test analysis of the intervention group showed statistically significant growth in all four areas. Based on the survey data of the 20 intervention group participants, it appears that professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy positively impacted teacher perceptions of professional learning in SEL, teacher self-efficacy, and cultural awareness and action.

To determine whether we can attribute the growth in Table 10 to the CRP training, the researcher examined the changes in the pre-and post-test results of the control group next. There was no statistically significant growth in the control group's cultural awareness/action, professional learning about equity, or teacher self-efficacy. However, there was statistically significant growth in professional learning about SEL, which resulted in a *p*-value of <0.01. Evidently, there was a higher growth trend in the intervention group than in the control group; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Throughout the focus group, participants shared ways in which they felt that their own self-efficacy in social-emotional learning improved because of the professional learning series. For example, participants expressed how an increased personal cultural awareness, understanding of cultural responsiveness, and perceptions of professional learning all played a critical role in improving their confidence to deliver SEL in their classroom and meet the needs of their students. Table 12 supports this trend in the qualitative data with the mean scores from the two questions in the survey that specifically discuss teacher self-efficacy.

Table 12

Mean Scores from Survey Questions about Self-Efficacy from Intervention Group

Question		M	SD	t	p-value
How confident are you that you can help your school's most challenging students learn?	Pretest	3.05	0.83	−6.43	$< .001$
	Post-test	4.25	0.55		
How confident are you that you can address the social-emotional needs of your students at the classroom level?	Pretest	1.75	0.55	−17.09	$< .001$
	Post-test	4.35	0.49		

As shown in the table above, over the professional development series, the intervention group expressed higher confidence in helping the school's most challenging students learn and addressing the social-emotional needs of students in the classroom. In addition, the mean scores of the two questions on the Panorama survey grew significantly, as evidenced by the p-values. After the intervention concluded, teachers felt much more confident addressing their students' social and emotional needs in their classrooms.

Research Question 1—Qualitative Results

The purpose of the qualitative methods in this study was to better understand the perceptions and changes, if any, in the self-efficacy of teachers over time and how the professional learning series impacted teacher practices. In addition, the analysis of the participant's responses to the interview questions provided greater insight into the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on the intervention group. After a two-level coding process, three themes emerged: 1) improved perception and understanding of cultural responsiveness and SEL, 2) development of personal cultural awareness and understanding, and 3) connections to RULER and social-emotional learning. These themes were explored and illuminated an understanding of the data to support the recommendations made in Chapter V.

Throughout the focus group, participants answered questions but were encouraged to elaborate on their ideas and share any information they felt was necessary for the researcher to know or understand. Participants answered the questions after completing the implementation phase of the study. The themes are introduced individually, and for anonymity, participants are referred to by descriptors without risking identification.

Improved Perception and Understanding of Culturally Responsiveness And SEL

Though culturally responsive teaching is widely used and studied, districts incorporate cultural responsiveness into their schools with current social and political unrest, mainly rooted in racial differences. However, this can be a particularly challenging issue to tackle, given the strong opinions of various stakeholders in public education. To better understand the professional learning series' role in the participants' understanding of culturally responsive teaching, participants responded to questions regarding what they learned. Throughout the interview, 19 of the 20 participants expressed an increased understanding and perception of culturally responsive

teaching practices, social-emotional learning, and how the two overlap and interact. Prior to the professional learning series, one of the participants expressed some skepticism and said, "Well, I just treat all of the students the same." However, during the interview that took place after the professional learning series, this seventh-grade teacher said

> I realized that I may have been overly skeptical of this process. While I still feel that my biases do not impact how I interact with my students, I do think that there is value in becoming more culturally responsive and supporting my students' social and emotional development. For some reason, culturally responsive teaching and, to an extent, social-emotional learning have been politicized, and I think that this may have impacted my overall perception of what they are. Now that I have developed a deeper understanding of both, I see that there are many elements that can support the whole child. By making students feel safe and welcome in my classroom and providing them the skills they need to be successful, I have seen more of my students thrive.

A sixth-grade teacher emphasized this point:

> The very fact that we have had parents protest the use of an SEL survey really does tell you that this is an issue. There are so many people who don't really know what SEL or cultural responsiveness is; frankly, I really did not fully understand when our school started learning about it. Due to the amount of pressure we were all feeling as we started teaching this year, I was concerned that SEL was yet another thing that we would have to do, but I really have seen the benefit of authentically incorporating it into my classroom. Just like students have learning loss from the pandemic, they have a loss in many key social and emotional competencies.

Both participants emphasized how the external perceptions and understanding greatly influenced their initial desire to implement and educate themselves in culturally responsive teaching. While these pressures impacted participants initially, several expressed the increased importance and critical nature of these teaching practices. Additionally, many identified an increased cultural awareness in themselves, explicitly discussing the Implicit Biases Survey as reasoning for this shift. A sixth-grade teacher responded:

> Through this process, I have developed my own confidence in my ability to address these needs. I feel like we are always looking to administration to give us more time to absorb and learn new things. This professional learning workshop

provided me with an opportunity to do so. I feel that as a White teacher, it is my responsibility to ensure that all students feel safe and valued in my classroom. Through this process, I have learned so much about what it is to be culturally aware, and that cultural responsiveness should be a daily occurrence in my classroom, and that I should not be afraid to address racial issues in my classroom. I think I always felt that I was not a Social Studies teacher that it didn't fall into my realm of expertise, but it is critical that we all do it. The way in which I teach my content needs to be inclusive and needs to promote an equitable learning environment.

Development of Personal Cultural Awareness and Understanding

Participants answered, "How has the training if at all, impacted your own views of your students?" In addition, participants took an implicit biases survey as part of the professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy. This survey was the source of much conversation in response to the question. For example, a Grade 8 teacher reflected:

> I had never taken an implicit biases survey, and it really gave me a lot to think about it. We are all the products of our own experiences, cultures, morals, religions, and I realized as I took this survey that I could very well be projecting my own implicit biases and have no idea that I am. It made me think back to a time when I had a negative experience in school with a teacher. That teacher is the reason that I don't like math. It made me wonder if how I conduct myself or, for lack of a better term, how my "default settings" impact my students.

A Grade 7 teacher responded:

> The Implicit Biases survey also made me think about how I teach my content and how I choose to engage my students in such content. I am not going to know everything about who they are and what makes them the way that they are, but I can try to be more mindful of my own biases so that I deliver the content as free from them as possible.

Another Grade 7 teacher added:

> I always reiterate to my students at the beginning of the year that this room is a safe space for them to explore and uncover deeper meaning of what we are learning. I don't think I realized just how important that was until we worked through some of these culturally responsive issues. In my mind, it is not just that we can all learn from each other; it is that we must seek to learn more from each other and respect and develop an understanding of what makes us all different.

Connections to RULER/SEL

All participants expressed how the professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy complemented the school-wide work with RULER and overall social-emotional learning. Several participants felt it was critical for social-emotional learning programs and strategies to include cultural responsiveness. For example, one sixth-grade teacher noted:

> This workshop and the strategies that I used in the classroom really made me think more critically about SEL and how it should be implemented at the classroom level. When I looked at developing strategies to help students shift in the Mood Meter or emotionally regulate, I realized that those strategies might look different for some cultures. Just as students have different learning styles, we should also approach their emotional intelligence in different ways.

A seventh-grade teacher expressed:

> There are so many ways that these strategies would support the work that we are doing with social-emotional learning. Many of the strategies that involved getting to know the students on a deeper level would support the modeling of positive relationship skills and social awareness for our students.

Participants also discussed how their own perceptions of professional learning opportunities changed over time and benefitted from participating in this study. Participants discussed the variety of professional learning workshops they had participated in as educators throughout the years and how they contributed to their initial opinion of professional learning opportunities in social-emotional learning and equity. At the onset of the pandemic, district leadership expressed a clear desire to prioritize social-emotional learning in the next year, but many teachers felt that the district was adding to an ever-growing list of priorities for the classroom teacher. As a result, participants noted that their initial perceptions of professional learning were not as open-minded. For example, an eighth-grade teacher expressed that:

> Here we were entering unknown territory, and the district was putting yet another thing on our shoulders. It was not that I did not want to meet the social-emotional needs of my students, but I did not really know how to. I knew what social-emotional learning was, but I didn't know what it looked like in the classroom.

After sitting through the first few workshops, I was not convinced that I could do that and teach my content. And as far as providing equity? How? While we have taken steps to make our curriculum more inclusive and diverse, we have never had equity-based professional learning. It just seemed like the expectations were being piled on, but there were not necessarily supports in place to foster the learning. Therefore, I found myself feeling defensive during professional learning. This process has brought me back to the point where I see value in professional learning when it is done in a way that puts what is important first, the students.

Another sixth-grade teacher agreed and discussed how the professional learning series made them more open to the idea of incorporating culturally responsive strategies and social-emotional learning into their classroom:

When the district chose a new SEL program, we had heard about the benefits of social-emotional learning and Marc Brackett, but we didn't really know what it was going to look like in our classroom and what the role of the teacher would be. I think many teachers felt in this district, as they have throughout the past, that this was yet another initiative that we would have to take on. Some initiatives have lasted in this district, and others have not, so it is difficult to get invested in something when we keep having to adapt and change with every new innovative idea in education. The district talks about moving the equity needle forward, but rarely has it been explicitly discussed in professional learning. With COVID-19, I think we all found ourselves trying to survive, which does not make for an environment where equity or social-emotional learning can thrive. By addressing these issues specifically and providing clear strategies to us, we were able to learn more and incorporate these ideas authentically. I found the training to be very helpful in that sense.

All participants felt that the design and strategies must be student-centered and teacher-friendly. The emphasis on social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching strategies in society demonstrate how these are critical, and the participants agree, but initiative fatigue also impacts how educational professionals respond to professional learning.

Research Question 2—Quantitative Results

While the professional learning series investigated the improvement in perception and self-efficacy, the researcher sought to understand how culturally responsive teaching strategies impact teachers' practices within the classroom. Teacher self-efficacy is critical, but practitioners must be willing to use the strategies in their classroom for students to benefit. Throughout the professional learning workshops, participants expressed the need for meaningful and user-friendly strategies to use in the classroom. While all 20 teachers participated in the intervention, the level at which they completed the professional learning activities varied. As part of the professional development series, the strategies fell into three categories: 1) content-specific, 2) relationship-building, and 3) teacher-friendly (easily embedded). Content-specific strategies provided participants with opportunities to embed culturally responsive teaching seamlessly into their specific content area. The strategy could not be taught in isolation; it required planning prior to the lesson. For example, in a mathematics classroom, creating word problems about a cultural dish to have students calculate proportions in the recipe. Relationship-building activities allowed students with opportunities to share their own culture so that the students and teacher could learn more about each other. These activities usually required more time than the teacher-friendly activities: more icebreakers or warm-up activities. At the end of each module, participants tracked how many times they used the various strategies in their classroom and then reflected on the impact on their classroom in the weekly Google form.

Table 12 examines the output of strategies for each participant by type of strategy. The frequency of the strategies provided insight into how the participants utilized the strategies in their classrooms, prompting the researcher to ask participants what they believed to be the reasoning.

Table 12

Average Frequency of Culturally Responsive Strategies by Strategy-type

Type of Strategy	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Average
Content-Specific	1	2	4	3	2.5
Relationship-Building	8	10	12	19	12.25
Teacher-Friendly	12	8	8	7	8.75

While these data provided insight into the strategies chosen by the intervention group, it was important to investigate the reasoning why some participants used the strategies more than others and what those strategies were. For example, these data showed that teachers were more hesitant to attempt the content-embedded strategies and used those strategies that focused on building relationships. Additionally, the participants were more likely to attempt the strategies more easily that were embedded into the class in the first week, but the frequency decreased over time. Therefore, questions during the focus group focused on *why*. *Why did participants use strategies more frequently? Why did you choose those strategies?*

Research Question 2—Qualitative Results

As previously reported, the professional learning series focused on three different types of culturally responsive strategies. First, the content-specific strategies for each content area; second, relationship-building strategies; and third, teacher-friendly lessons that could be done in isolation and would not absorb too much instructional time. The researcher displayed the quantitative results for participants to reflect on during the focus group. As teachers began to reflect on the experience and its application in their classroom, two themes emerged: increased student engagement and classroom climate and better relationship-building between the teachers and their students.

The classroom teachers found that the strategies impacted their classrooms in two significant ways. First, as participants implemented the strategies in their classroom, they experienced increased student engagement and an improved classroom climate. Second, they noted their increased ability to build relationships with their students. During the focus group interviews, participants expressed a noticeable difference in how the students related to each other and the teacher in the classroom. Overall, participants identified the relationship-building and teacher-friendly strategies as what they used the most in their classroom. While there was variation in the reasoning behind it, many teachers felt an overwhelming pressure to maintain the progression in their content, and the strategies used required the least amount of planning and disruption from the teacher's perspective. Another teacher expressed a way in which they were able to use a content-specific strategy:

> I tried several strategies in my classroom. One of my favorites was taking a facilitator role in teaching. The most notable time was where students investigated two genre of literature and created their own criteria of each genre. They approached new text and, using their criteria, determined the genre. The students were driven by inquiry and curiosity. They rallied to come to a deeper understanding of the text in my classroom. This was a simple way for me to accommodate for this curiosity and provided opportunity for all students to feel successful breaking down complex literature. However, I do think that my content area and curriculum allow for me to do more activities like this.

Another participant discussed how they chose to create an opportunity to express genuine interest in the ethnic backgrounds of their students:

> I used the strategy during a research project. Students were able to create Netflix Documentary style presentations about their country of origin or heritage. I have never seen a classroom transform in such a positive way. Students were excited to share their culture and heritage with their peers. Peers were engaged in learning about the music, food, and culture of their peer's country of origin. Again, like (the first participant), I have more flexibility in my curriculum and was able to do something like this. These strategies really helped re-center myself and think about what is important in my classroom. I feel like I have sat through two years of teaching where students are bored, disengaged, and unmotivated, and, in an instant, I took the time for students to discuss their own culture, and it not only

changed the demeanor of the students, but it breathed life back into teaching for me.

It was evident that a discrepancy exists between the numeracy (math and science) and literacy (ELA and social studies) teachers regarding applying the content-specific strategies. Overall, the numeracy teachers were less willing to attempt content-specific strategies, whereas the ELA and Social Studies teachers were more likely to attempt using them. For example, a sixth-grade math teacher discussed choosing not to tackle content-specific strategies in their classroom:

> I felt a little overwhelmed with some of the content-specific strategies, as I found it to be challenging to implement some of them while doing the current content without having to re-write a lot of the pre-made activities we have in my content area. It is not that I do not want to try them, but it required more planning than I was able to in that time. As a (numeracy) teacher, I think that it is very easy to fall prey to the narrative that "we have to get through the content" or "we are a tested subject, and I can't afford to not do what I need to do." While that may be true in many circumstances, I think it is equally important that all my students feel successful. While I am stressed by the pressure from district leaders to ensure that my students show growth, I think it is also critically important for us to take a step back and prioritize what is important. Next year, I would really like to try more of the content-specific strategies, but I need to make sure that plan for it.

A seventh-grade science teacher agreed:

> I think I would need more time to authentically embed some of those strategies into my content work. While I am completely willing to do so, and I think that we should all make a more concerted effort to include CRP into classroom instruction, I would want to collaborate with my PLC partner or department and use some of that time to create assignments that include some of these strategies. The time constraint, along with the fact that I was not supposed to be sharing what I was learning with my PLC, made me more hesitant to attempt those strategies at this time.

Overall, participants in this study found that the strategies they chose impacted students in their level of engagement, relationship skills, and ability to connect with other students and adults in the classroom. However, there was a noted discrepancy between the literacy and numeracy teachers, as the numeracy teachers expressed that the pressure to complete their

content and prepare students for standardized tests made them more hesitant to try the content-specific strategies.

Increased Student Engagement and Classroom Climate

When asked how the culturally responsive strategies impacted their classroom and instructional practices, almost all participants agreed that they observed increased classroom engagement and improved climate. In addition, participants discussed how the various strategies help diversify content instruction and explicit instruction in social-emotional learning.

A seventh-grade teacher expressed how they noticed increased engagement in their content lessons:

> Using some of the strategies gave students more opportunity to express their understanding and learning of the content area. In addition to that, students who were normally disengaged from class found their voice and began to speak up. I didn't realize how much I was relying on certain strategies, and by making simple changes, students became more receptive to the content in my class. By getting to know them all better, they felt more empowered.

Many participants felt that the increase in student engagement and climate resulted from the complementarity of the strategies learned during the professional learning series, the strategies, and the introduction of RULER into their classroom. Several participants expressed how the professional learning series provided the opportunity to close some of RULER's gaps. An eighth-grade teacher discussed:

> RULER provides some great strategies, but sometimes I felt that some of the RULER curriculum did not provide a lot of student buy-in. The students saw that this was another social-emotional activity and that it felt forced, which made me feel that I was not doing a good job explicitly teaching social-emotional skills. When I began to incorporate these strategies, I was worried that it would feel the same way, but I found that students were more receptive, and it felt more natural to implement them. Since I had spent the time using these strategies, when I incorporated more of the RULER strategies, the students were more open to it and actively participated in the activities.

A seventh-grade teacher concurred:

> I completely agree with that assessment. While I think the professional learning in
> RULER has been well done by our RULER team, I think that I lack much of the
> foundational knowledge in SEL, and this impacted the way I approached its use in
> my classroom and, therefore, how my students received it. Once we developed
> our understanding of social-emotional learning throughout the year, I felt slightly
> more confident, but much of the work that we did in this professional learning
> series were some of the missing puzzle pieces for me.

Another seventh-grade teacher also noted major changes in the climate in their classroom:

> I really attribute much of what we have learned to some shifts in my classroom
> climate. At the beginning of each year, I always hand out a survey to get to know
> my students, and I review the responses, but often, students don't think to share
> about their cultural background. I'm now going to edit it to include some cultural
> information, but I think, as shown by some of the strategies that we did, that those
> conversations are more authentic and meaningful when they occur face to face.

A seventh-grade teacher discussed the impact on their emerging bilingual students. After discussing how so many students get lost in the classroom and how teachers sometimes accept that it may be student fatigue or apathy, they tried a strategy, and it changed their perception of their bilingual students:

> I decided to take a strict level of sensitivity to my students' language concerns.
> Emerging speakers take comfort in having directions and materials presented in
> both English and their primary language. This allows all students access to
> classroom texts and activities. In addition, using subtitles on classroom videos or
> selecting stories from a student's country of origin or heritage allows all students
> the opportunity to engage with and learn about other people's lived experiences.

Relationship-Building

Throughout the focus group, conversation about the importance of relationship-building was a common theme. In addition, many participants expressed how the culturally responsive strategies provided the teachers with opportunities to make meaningful connections with all students. For example, a Grade 6 teacher noted:

When I first started trying to use some of these strategies, I was skeptical, but it undoubtedly allowed for me to get to know some of my students that I had just assumed were stand-offish or did not want me to talk to them.

While several participants highlighted an improvement in the relationship with their Black and Hispanic/Latinx students, many noted that these strategies were effective with all students. Another Grade 6 teacher stated:

Once I embraced the idea that I, too, should be part of sharing more about myself and my culture, it became a safe place for students to share, who had never thought about sharing their experiences before. While I learned more about the diverse backgrounds in my classroom, several of these strategies to give voice to all my students, including my special education students who sometimes might feel inadequate or out of place.

A Grade 7 teacher expressed gratitude for these strategies, sharing:

Having to teach my subject area to students with various abilities is particularly challenging, meeting the needs of my ELL students has been especially difficult with the language barrier. Several of my ELL students do not like the share because they do not have the language base to get what they want to say across but using strategies where they get to share about themselves and their own cultures, I found that they were more willing to take those risks and that confidence transferred to the content. I always underestimated the power of storytelling, and there are so many students who learn through oral history.

Summary

The quantitative and qualitative data in this ISDiP suggest a relationship between culturally responsive teaching strategies and improved self-efficacy and perceptions of social-emotional learning. The data show significant growth in teacher self-efficacy, cultural awareness, and perceptions of professional learning in SEL and equity, as evidenced by the *t*-tests conducted during this study. In addition, the qualitative data supported the quantitative data, as participants expressed improved perceptions of professional learning opportunities, improved confidence in their overall ability to implement social-emotional learning, and improved teacher practice.

The quantitative data from the post-workshop surveys indicated that strategies focusing on relationship-building were more user-friendly and were most easily implemented in classroom instruction. Conversely, participants were more hesitant to try content-specific strategies, particularly numeracy, as there is increasing pressure to complete the curriculum. Further discussion of the findings, limitations, and implications for further research are provided in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC SUMMARY

This mixed-methods IsDIP aimed to understand how professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy has impacted teachers' perceptions of SEL and self-efficacy. Specifically, this study considered how teachers' cultural awareness and ability to use culturally responsive strategies in the classroom impacted their practices and overall understanding of social-emotional learning. One of the key findings that came from examining teacher perceptions and self-efficacy is the extent to which culturally responsive teaching strategies impacted teacher self-efficacy. Study participants reported a range of feelings about social-emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy at the beginning of the professional learning series. Some felt that the level of division in politics and racial issues made them skeptical or fearful of trying new strategies. Others expressed fear of coming to terms with their own "default settings" and what that would mean as a teacher to a diverse group of students. However, the participants showed a willingness to meet the needs of their students and were open to the new strategies.

This study used survey data as well as qualitative focus group data to determine the impact of the culturally responsive teaching professional development series on teacher practices, perceptions, and self-efficacy in social-emotional learning. As a building, the entire staff underwent training in SEL through Marc Brackett's RULER program. This study took place while all staff members completed the first year of the RULER training, which focuses on building adult social-emotional competency and introducing staff members to the core tools of the program. Once the researcher administered the pre-test survey, all participants in the study began the professional development series in culturally responsive pedagogy. The researcher

collected data throughout the process and used two-tailed t-tests to measure the statistical significance of the pre and post-test. Along with this initial overview of the summary of the results, this chapter discusses results, limitations, recommendations for practice, and further study.

Summary of Results

Overall, this study's results revealed a statistically significant relationship between the culturally responsive teaching professional learning series and its impact on teacher self-efficacy in SEL. The t-tests in the four focus areas of cultural awareness, perceptions of SEL professional learning, perceptions of equity professional learning, and self-efficacy all showed p-values of <0.001. The control group showed statistically significant growth with a p-value of <0.01 for perceptions of SEL professional learning, but that is consistent with the fact that all staff members received explicit training in social-emotional learning through the RULER institute while the study participants received instruction in both culturally responsive pedagogy and social-emotional learning. Additionally, the control did not show statistically significant growth in self-efficacy with the RULER training alone.

As part of the study, the twenty participants participated in a focus group to reflect on the professional learning series and discuss its impact on their own instructional practices and its level of influence on their classrooms. The qualitative data addressed areas related to both research questions. However, five clear themes emerged: relationship-building, connections to RULER/SEL, improved student engagement, and school climate, increased development of personal cultural awareness and understanding, and improved perception of cultural awareness and SEL. In addition, participants noted an overall increased understanding and confidence in their abilities to implement social-emotional learning and culturally responsive strategies in the

classroom. Of the 20 participants, 19 directly connected how the professional learning in SEL and culturally responsive teaching practices effectively added to the core tools introduced during RULER training.

As part of the deeper investigation into why teachers chose certain strategies and their impact on their classroom, teachers acknowledged that the strategies that focused on relationship-building and were most teacher-friendly were the strategies of choice. While teachers saw value in all the strategies, the duration of this study and limited prep time caused teachers to gravitate to and prioritize those strategies. Participants emphasized the importance of designing professional learning opportunities that prioritized adults' social-emotional health and did not increase stress levels.

Participants discussed the impact of initiative fatigue on teacher perceptions of social-emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result, some teachers admitted that they were weary of the new focus on social-emotional learning as a district, as there was a concern about how much they would be accountable for the social-emotional competency of their students and the amount of work that it would require.

Discussion of Results

This study sought to answer two research questions and determine the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy in SEL. First, social-emotional learning remains a prominent focus for the participating district, just as it has in many districts across the country. One finding of this study was that culturally responsive pedagogy, when combined with professional learning in SEL, in this case, RULER, improve teachers' self-efficacy and cultural awareness and understanding—evident from the statistically significant results of the t-tests from the pre and post-test scores on the Panorama survey. This finding is

consistent with previous studies, such as Barnes and McCallops (2019), which discussed that culturally responsive practices must first be in place before delivering a Tier 1 SEL intervention.

Furthermore, Barnes and McCallops (2019) discussed the importance of avoiding implementing an SEL program in isolation if the expectation is to promote equity. There is merit in providing meaningful, teacher-focused professional learning opportunities in culturally responsive pedagogy and social-emotional learning. Educators are on the front lines to help students navigate their lives and support their social and emotional well-being. Teachers constantly research and look for new strategies to support the whole child. This data supports the fact that teachers can improve their practices when provided the appropriate training and tools to support their students.

A concern evident in the data was that teachers in the control group who received professional learning in social-emotional learning did not have statistically significant growth in self-efficacy. A surprising finding as the RULER training provided to the teachers addressed particular strategies to support SEL use in the classroom. However, the RULER Institute provides professional learning through the online platform, indicating that teachers might benefit from in-person professional learning opportunities and have opportunities to discuss with colleagues. The only statistically significant growth was evident in the perception that the professional learning opportunities in SEL need to change to help support the growth in SEL self-efficacy in teachers so that they feel more confident in their ability to teach SEL in their classrooms—particularly important as the plan for Year 2 RULER is to implement the program with students. If the building administration wants teachers to successfully implement RULER and explicitly teach social and emotional skills in the classroom, they must develop teachers' opportunities to feel more confident in their SEL teaching skills.

Participants reflected on their improvements and overall confidence and perception of social-emotional learning and discussed their own perceptions of professional learning in SEL and Equity had on their abilities to address the needs of students. Participants initially shared that their perception and limited understanding of SEL impacted how they responded to the pretest Panorama survey. Consistent with the root cause analysis conducted in Phase 1 of this ISDiP, teachers felt they did not know enough about social-emotional learning to implement and teach in their own classrooms. Martinsone and Vilvina (2017) concluded that for educators to feel more empowered and comfortable teaching SEL, districts needed to provide ongoing support and training to teachers. In addition, participants in this study felt the need for more professional learning opportunities, which is consistent with the root cause analysis findings.

As the year progressed, teachers acknowledged a better understanding of SEL and the strategies needed to incorporate that learning into the classroom with their students. In addition, several participants indicated that the culturally responsive pedagogy proved to be a necessary supplement to the SEL work, as they believed that having a deeper understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy was critical.

A few participants spoke about how the current political and social issues surrounding racial issues can make teachers hesitant to try new strategies. Not all stakeholders know what social-emotional learning or culturally responsive pedagogy are, or they do not like or appreciate their use, which impacts a teacher's desire to try the strategies in their classrooms. This finding is consistent with the professional practice interviews conducted during the literature review phase of this study. Educators feel scrutinized by community stakeholders who may be misinformed about SEL or disagree with some of its use within the school buildings. Providing adequate support and professional learning opportunities for staff may not be sufficient for teachers to feel

confident teaching SEL in their classrooms. Addressing the understanding of multiple stakeholders throughout a community is critical. Brackett et al. (2019) discuss the importance of including community stakeholders in this process. Families, religious leaders, and community partners must all be a part of the commitment and process to support the social-emotional development of their youth. To address students' social and emotional well-being, the rest of the community must also see its value and understand what SEL is, which would help include other stakeholders in the process and, perhaps, alleviate some of the anxiety some teachers feel implementing something new.

The literature on culturally responsive pedagogy focused on the importance of improving personal cultural awareness. Many participants shared that they felt the Implicit Biases survey was a critical component of the professional learning series because it provided some insight into who they were as educators. Several shared how difficult it was to acknowledge their own biases, and one participant refused to take the survey as they were nervous about what it would reveal. However, several agreed that it was a critical piece of information for all educators because it is difficult to be self-aware of personal biases, mainly when individuals take steps to mask them. With a predominantly White staff and an increasingly diverse student demographic, the participating school faces a challenge in ensuring an equitable learning environment for all. According to Ladson-Billings (2014), it is not enough to teach culturally responsive strategies in the classroom; the teachers themselves must become more culturally aware and create a learning environment where all students feel comfortable. This finding is consistent with the participants' reflections on the importance of addressing their own biases and working to improve upon their cultural awareness as they implemented the strategies in their classroom.

Another purpose of this study was to learn more about culturally responsive pedagogy's impact on teacher practices and their classroom environment. Findings revealed that participants in the intervention group found the relationship-building activities and teacher-friendly strategies to be the easiest to implement at the classroom level. While several participants also incorporated content-specific strategies into their instruction, others expressed the concern that it required more teacher planning upfront and potentially took time away from their curriculum. While the numeracy (math and science) teachers generally concurred, the literacy teachers (social studies and English/language arts) supported more content-specific strategies. Participants noted that they would have done so if they had more time to plan for and implement content-specific strategies.

The final focus of this ISDiP was to investigate the role of culturally responsive pedagogy on teacher practices and the classroom environment. Participants reported increased student engagement and improved classroom climate. While this is consistent with implementing an SEL program, most classrooms have not begun to use RULER within their classrooms, as teachers are in Year 1 of the RULER institute, focusing on what RULER is and the tools of the program. This study found that participants who used culturally responsive teaching practices noted a positive impact on classroom climate and expressed that it gave voice to students who may not want to speak up or draw attention to themselves.

While there are several positive influences to note from this study, there is merit in investigating and implementing the general use of culturally responsive teaching practices. While SEL programs are beginning to address some of the needs of students, this research suggests a district and school need to be more culturally responsive if the goal is to create a more equitable learning environment for all students. It is also critical that districts provide teachers with

professional learning opportunities to build adult social-emotional competency and provide specific strategies to support the work at the classroom level. These data suggest a significant opportunity to support educators and provide professional learning opportunities to benefit student outcomes.

Educators must understand that their implicit biases can impact how they interact with and treat their students. Therefore, educators need to mitigate those biases; the first step is identifying them. While it can be difficult for many to do, as was one of the participants in this study, research (Devine et al., 2013) suggests that individuals cannot be culturally aware and responsive without first identifying their own biases and then working to reduce implicit race bias. The need to build cultural awareness is critical because it can help teachers understand their students better and their motivations for that behavior, impacting how the teacher responds. If teachers take the time to understand themselves and their students better, they help promote equity and foster a culturally responsive learning environment.

Just as the need to differentiate instruction and personalize learning has long been a topic that educational leaders promote to increase student outcomes, teachers must consider the different cultural needs of students. When supporting students' emotional intelligence, educators must note the cultural differences that may impact how students respond to various situations. Teachers need support and strategies to explicitly teach these skills at the classroom level. The findings of this study highlight the need for professional learning for staff, both in social-emotional learning and culturally responsive practices, as it improves teacher self-efficacy. This research shows that increased self-efficacy increases the chances of teachers taking risks and incorporating SEL into their practices.

The results of this study align with previous research regarding the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in addressing students' social and emotional needs. Participants noted a higher incidence of student engagement in the classroom. Barnes and McCallops (2019) found that SEL programs and instruction are only equitable when culturally responsive policies and practices support the schools' initiatives as they work to build the social-emotional competencies of their students, particularly in the areas of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Previous studies (Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Martinsone & Vilvina, 2019) conducted on social-emotional learning professional development and its impact on teacher perceptions and efficacy found that professional learning in SEL helped improve teacher self-efficacy and perceptions. While this ISDiP found that the perceptions of professional learning in SEL improved, teacher self-efficacy did not sustain statistically significant growth from the pretest to the posttest. The growth increased more dramatically with the inclusion of the training in culturally responsive pedagogy. This result may be because some participants expressed that previous SEL lessons felt inauthentic, so the teacher and student buy-in were limited. Furthermore, the results show that while the perception of SEL professional learning improved, teacher confidence was not transferring into the classroom.

Limitations

While conducting this study, the researcher acknowledged that they assumed there were great benefits to using SEL and CRP based on their personal experiences in the classroom and the educational research reviewed in preparation for this study. These factors contributed to the belief that there was a great need for social-emotional learning and culturally responsive

pedagogy in the educational setting. The researcher's bias may have impacted the results of this study.

Although the researcher supports the use of action research for this study, one of the primary limitations was the role of the researcher as a teacher in the building where the study took place. A positive effect of the researcher's role was that participants were open in their responses and truthful about their experiences. However, because the researcher is a teacher, not an administrator, conducting the study was more challenging since they did not have access to important information and did not have the flexibility to design and conduct professional learning within the schedule. The original design of the intervention required more in-person instruction, and due to some of those scheduling restrictions, some of the professional learning series was online.

Another limitation of the study was the demographic makeup of the intervention group. While the intervention group accurately depicted the staff population at the participating school, only one teacher of color was in the intervention group. Therefore, the results may not indicate what would occur if the researcher conducted the same study at a different school or district.

Additionally, as the researcher used a quasi-experimental design, the control and intervention groups were not randomized. As teachers work in teams of the ore subject areas, one team per grade level volunteered to participate in the culturally responsive pedagogy professional learning series, while the other team remained in the control group. If the groups were randomized, the data might be more representative of the entire building, as the intervention group resulted from teams agreeing to participate in the study. Therefore, most of the participants expressed interest in the topic of the study.

Due to the scheduling of professional learning, the unified arts teachers, including physical education, art, music, and computer science, were not represented in the intervention group. While including unified arts teachers in the intervention would provide a more accurate depiction of the entire staff, these teachers are the only teachers at P.T. Barnum Middle School who teach multiple grade levels and all students. Therefore, these teachers could have provided more data regarding the chosen strategies and their impact on different grade levels.

The final limitation of the study was the inability to conduct all professional learning workshops in person. Due to coverage issues and COVID-19, several workshops must be conducted virtually. At the same time, the researcher does not know how this change in the original methodology impacted how and what the participants learned from the workshops.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Study

This mixed-methods Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice builds on prior research showing the positive impact of both culturally responsive pedagogy and social-emotional learning on teacher self-efficacy and practices. One important finding is that teacher self-efficacy improved only for those who received the additional culturally responsive professional learning. Teacher self-efficacy did not improve with statistical significance when the RULER training was the only professional learning source. Therefore, one of the recommendations emerging from this study is the need for professional learning to incorporate both social-emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. In addition, the enrollment of the participating district is increasing and becoming more diverse, requiring a culturally responsive teaching staff.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the study's findings, the next logical step is to create a school-wide professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy and continue Year 2 of the RULER learning institute. As the purpose is to supplement RULER training with culturally responsive pedagogy, it is necessary to collaborate with the school's RULER team and ensure that the trainings complement each other. This process requires the researcher to meet with the RULER team, of which the researcher is a member, the building administrator, and the professional learning committee to ensure adequate time is allotted for the trainings. In addition, the trainings need to be ongoing throughout the year and ensure that both the social-emotional and culturally responsive trainings provide strategies to support teachers and allow teachers to provide feedback.

Additionally, because the findings of this study demonstrated improved teacher self-efficacy in SEL, the district should provide training in culturally responsive pedagogy at the other schools in the district. Although the elementary schools implemented RULER, along with the Middle School, while the High School has not yet chosen an SEL core program, the change in demographics justifies the need for increased cultural responsiveness at all levels within the district.

As this study found that there was a discrepancy between numeracy and literacy teachers regarding the use of content-specific strategies in the classroom, P.T. Barnum Middle School and its district should provide teachers the opportunity to embed culturally responsive teaching strategies into the curriculum, as well as create or purchase resources to support the use of these strategies in the classroom. The numeracy teachers were willing to use the content-embedded strategies if time allowed them to create the resources. By prioritizing these strategies and

resources, teachers could implement these strategies, and the curriculum would align with those strategies.

Research has shown that culturally responsive pedagogy can improve student outcomes, such as better literacy scores and graduation rates. Simmons et al. (2016) discuss the role of culturally responsive learning integration in schools and districts when embedded within the school community, curriculum, and policies. This research also discusses the role it can have on academic outcomes, in addition to school climate. Therefore, an additional recommendation is to continue the work of including culturally responsive teaching strategies and content in the district curriculum. Participants noted that it was more challenging to use the content-specific strategies, but if the district embeds them within the curriculum or provides teachers opportunities to create culturally responsive assignments, these strategies can be used more frequently.

While the results of this study cannot be generalized to other districts, the study provides a framework for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. The researcher recommends that district leaders design professional learning for all staff members to assist in the development of their cultural responsiveness. While districts must plan professional learning that meets the needs of their staff, students, and community, it is equally important to provide an equitable learning environment for all students. If districts adopt new SEL programs, district leaders need to realize that in itself, the program does not address all of the needs of their students and staff. Staff buy-in is an essential component; otherwise, as one participant described, "it won't feel real and authentic; it will feel more prescriptive." When districts provide professional learning opportunities, they must receive ongoing feedback; this supports a cycle of improvement throughout the training.

Recommendations for Further Study

During the study's root cause analysis and equity audit, a lower incidence of student connectedness and a higher incidence of disciplinary referrals in the Hispanic/Latinx population prompted the methodology for this study. While the findings showed an increase in teacher self-efficacy and perception of SEL, the ultimate goal was to measure the impact on students and to these two data points. However, given the study's timeframe, the researcher could not do so. In a future study, the researcher seeks to analyze the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on student connectedness and how it impacts student connectedness for various demographic groups. For example, with a predominantly White staff, does culturally responsive pedagogy mitigate implicit biases of staff and allow for student connectedness to increase?

Additionally, the researcher wants to measure the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy and training in cultural awareness on the total number of disciplinary referrals for students of color. The researcher would conduct a longitudinal study to measure the trends over multiple years. A critical component of the training is investigating personal implicit bias and taking steps to mitigate the impact of teacher biases on their interactions with various students.

Overall, this study took place in an isolated environment. To ensure that the findings can be applied to different schools and districts, the researcher wants to investigate the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse environments. However, whether the findings of this study could apply to different schools and districts is unknown. For example, would the results be similar if conducted in an environment with more teachers of color or more or less diversity among the student population? The answer would provide more information to districts hoping to implement culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools and districts and illuminate other factors that may impact the results.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy has on teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy of social-emotional learning. Participants in this study completed a professional learning series in culturally responsive pedagogy while simultaneously receiving training in social-emotional learning. After both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data, the findings showed that culturally responsive pedagogy training positively impacts teacher self-efficacy and perception of social-emotional learning. Additionally, participants noted increased confidence and positive change in teacher practices. Overall, this study supports previous research but builds upon current research, specifically on the impact that culturally responsive pedagogy has when supplemented with other SEL programming.

While the researcher hypothesized that culturally responsive pedagogy would positively impact teacher self-efficacy in SEL, an unanticipated result was that the control group would not see statistically significant growth in teacher self-efficacy while receiving the SEL professional learning. The participants in this study ranged in baseline perceptions of SEL and acknowledged that the present social and political climate and initiative fatigue all impacted their previous understandings and opinions of social-emotional learning. Therefore, it is critical that the person responsible for planning and delivering the professional learning opportunities is knowledgeable of the content and creates workshops that discuss the connections between SEL and CRP and ensure that the strategies are user-friendly.

Participants in this study noted the positive effects of the training itself and its impact on their classroom environments. Participants expressed how the strategies utilized in this study helped get more hesitant learners to participate and engage in the content because it helped the

class become a safe space for learning. While participants discussed the benefits of CRP in their classroom practices, they also noted that the amount of personal pressure they feel as educators do impact their confidence and self-efficacy. District leaders and administrators need to be mindful of this as they create and implement new initiatives.

While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic impact the field of education for years to come, it is now more critical than ever to train and retain high-quality teachers who work to put the needs of their students first—teacher stress and burn-out impact the perceptions of social-emotional learning and teacher self-efficacy. If educators do not feel confident or prepared to meet the growing needs of students, students will continue to struggle in these areas. Furthermore, if educators are not provided the opportunity to reflect on their own cultural and social-emotional competencies, the cycle will continue, and students will suffer the most. This study's findings suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy positively impacts teacher perceptions and self-efficacy when paired with social-emotional learning training. The researcher hopes that, in the future, there will be less need for studies of this nature, and schools will work to authentically embed social-emotional learning within their schools in a culturally responsive learning environment.

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APPENDIX A

Panorama Survey

1. How often do school leaders encourage you to teach about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?

   - Almost Never
   - Once in a while
   - Sometimes
   - Frequently
   - Almost Always

2. How often do you think about what colleagues of different races, ethnicities, or cultures experience?

   - Almost Never
   - Once in a while
   - Sometimes
   - Frequently
   - Almost Always

3. How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with each other about race?

   - Not at all confident
   - Slightly confident
   - Somewhat confident
   - Quite confident
   - Extremely confident

4. At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?

   - Almost Never
   - Once in a while
   - Sometimes
   - Frequently
   - Almost Always

5. How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your colleagues?

- Not at all comfortable
- Slightly comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Quite comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

6. When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with each other?

- Almost never
- Once in a while
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

7. How well does your school help staff speak out against racism?

- Not at all well
- Slightly well
- Somewhat well
- Quite well
- Extremely well

8. How easy do you find interacting with students at your school who are from a different cultural background than your own?

- Not at all easy
- Slightly easy
- Somewhat easy
- Quite well
- Extremely well

9. How comfortable would you be incorporating new material about people from different backgrounds into your curriculum?

- Not at all comfortable
- Slightly comfortable.
- Somewhat comfortable
- Quite comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

10. How knowledgeable are you regarding where to find resources for working with students who have unique learning needs?

- Not knowledgeable at all
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Somewhat knowledgeable
- Quite knowledgeable
- Extremely knowledgeable

11. If students from different backgrounds struggled to get along in your class, how comfortable would you be intervening?

- Not at all comfortable
- Slightly comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Quite comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

12. How easy would it be for you to teach a class with groups of students with very different religious backgrounds?

- Not at all easy
- Slightly easy
- Somewhat easy
- Quite well
- Extremely well

13. In response to events that might be occurring in the world, how comfortable would you be having conversations about race with your students?

- Not at all comfortable
- Slightly comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Quite comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

14. When a sensitive issue of diversity arises in class, how easily can you think of strategies to address the situation?

- Not at all easily
- Slightly easily
- Somewhat easily
- Quite easily
- Extremely easily

15. At your school, how valuable are the equity-focused professional development opportunities?

- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Somewhat valuable
- Quite valuable
- Extremely valuable

16. When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your practice?

- Not at all helpful
- Slightly helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Quite helpful
- Extremely helpful

17. How often do professional development opportunities help you explore new ways to promote equity in your practice?

- Almost never
- Once in a while
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

18. Overall, how effective has your school administration been in helping you advance student equity?

- Not at all effective
- Slightly effective
- Somewhat effective
- Quite effective
- Extremely effective

19. In terms of SEL in particular, how supportive has the school been of your growth as a teacher?

- Not at all supportive
- Slightly supportive
- Somewhat supportive
- Quite supportive
- Extremely supportive

20. At your school, how valuable are the SEL professional development opportunities?

- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Somewhat valuable
- Quite valuable
- Extremely valuable

21. When it comes to social-emotional learning, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your teaching?

- Not at all helpful
- Slightly helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Quite helpful
- Extremely helpful

22. How often do your SEL professional development opportunities help you explore new ideas?

- Almost never
- Once in a while
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

23. How relevant have your SEL professional development opportunities been to the content that you teach?

- Not at all relevant
- Slightly relevant
- Somewhat relevant
- Quite relevant
- Extremely relevant

24. Thinking of SEL in particular, how much input do you have into individualizing your professional development opportunities?

- Almost no input
- A little bit of input
- Some input
- Quite a bit of input
- A tremendous amount of input

25. Overall, how much do you learn about supporting your students' SEL from the leaders at your school?

    - Learn almost nothing
    - Learn a little bit
    - Learn some
    - Learn quite a bit
    - Learn a tremendous amount

26. How confident are you that you can help your school's most challenging students learn?

    - Not at all confident
    - Slightly confident
    - Somewhat confident
    - Quite confident
    - Extremely condiment

27. How confident are you that you can address the social-emotional needs of your students at the classroom level?

    - Not at all confident
    - Slightly confident
    - Somewhat confident
    - Quite confident
    - Extremely confident